

THE SUFFERING OF GOD AS AN ASPECT OF THE DIVINE OMNISCIENCE

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I. INTRODUCTION

On Super Tuesday of 2008, while presidential hopefuls were trying to take the country by storm, the states of Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky were experiencing storms of a more horrific kind. One center of destructive turbulence was Union University where I teach. The campus was devastated by an F-4 tornado, leaving behind a swath of rubble that stretched for miles. Students emerged miraculously from dormitories that were crushed almost beyond recognition. Though some serious injuries ensued, gratefully no human life was lost.

The mind-boggling devastation left in the tornado's wake and the fact that no life was lost caused everyone to grapple in their efforts to interpret the event. Why were lives spared on our campus when others were not so fortunate? The obvious answer to most people who experienced the event was that God protected the university. As persons of faith, we believe that God protected our students during the horrific devastation. References to divine providence were repeatedly made over the course of the ensuing months. Still reeling in the storm's aftermath, however, some of us were even then wondering why God allowed the storm to hit our campus in the first place. The word "providence" comes from the Latin *pro vide* meaning "to see before," but the English word connotes as well God's care of his creation physically as well as spiritually. Though there were no deaths, there were physical injuries, some of them severe, and requiring those who sustained them prolonged recovery stays in hospital.

The response of the majority of our community has been to praise God for his providential care of our students despite the persistence of stinging questions of theodicy. I affirm this as well, even though my philosophical and theological training force me to consider in what ways the wider context of suffering raises questions about such issues as the divine foreknowledge, God's providence, the omniscience of God, and the divine nature.

Over the past several decades, evangelicals have struggled with issues of divine foreknowledge in relation to the problem of evil and related issues. The theological perspective commonly referred to as open theism raised anew

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the question: What is the content of the proposition, "God is omniscient?" Open theists choose to qualify the proposition's content by arguing as follows: (1) God can only know that which exists. (2) The future does not yet exist. (3) Therefore, God cannot know the future. There are echoes in this view of process philosophy and its insistence that the "omnipotence" of the God of theism should be redefined in terms of God's persuasive power. Structural limitations are not only placed on the divine power by this alternative, but the process view also maintains that divine foreknowledge is limited and cannot extend to future realities not yet in existence. Also at the heart of the argument is a concern to affirm human free will, its consequences, and its benefits. If God already knows the future, it is reasoned, then human freedom is illusory, and human actions can have no moral significance. Human creativity is declared illusory as well. Neither can one consider real novelty possible in a universe where God already foreknows all things. God is re-envisioned as a God who is open to novelty and as a God who undertakes risks in his project of creation.

In their efforts to qualify the divine omniscience, open theists tried to extend the age-old debates over the problem of evil, human free will, and divine predestination, and the nature and attributes of God to new frontiers.¹ On the open theism side were scholars such as Greg Boyd, John Sanders, and Clark Pinnock, while John Piper, Millard Erickson, Bruce Ware, and others defended the traditional stance on divine omniscience affirmed by classical theism. Following streams of thought originating in nineteenth-century absolute idealism, open theists argued that God cannot know the future because the future has not yet happened, and they cited biblical texts in support of their position that seemed to suggest that God changes his mind. In contrary fashion, those defending classical theism argue in favor of the traditional understanding of the divine omniscience. After five years of controversy, the battle lines were drawn by the Evangelical Theology Society in 2001, the battle was waged, and open theism was rejected by a majority vote at the November 2002 meeting. The legitimacy of the membership of two ETS members who had held open theist views, Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, was challenged, but their membership was retained when the ouster failed.

It may not seem possible that a more all-encompassing perspective might be offered with any success at this late juncture, but this is what I propose to attempt here. One reason I believe I need to do this is that I spent three years working on a D. Phil. at the University of Oxford in an

¹ Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); Gregory Boyd and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) represent the movement known as open theism. Representative opponents of this view, who affirm the traditional emphasis on the divine omniscience, are Bruce Ware (*God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2001]); Ronald Nash (*The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983]); and John Piper (John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Helseth, eds., *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2003]). See also Millard Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

area of research that brought me for a time to consider open theism as an alternative, but increasingly I have become convinced that open theist views are deficient because they are arrived at by a method that is too cataphatic. Still, some of the insights I gained through the D. Phil. project were too significant to be entirely rejected, so I have returned to the drawing board in an attempt to find some kind of rapprochement. Can it be possible to respond to the logical conundrums that open theists have posed without retreating into fossilized theological systems that enclose God within some humanly defined formula that states exactly what God's omniscience entails, or without leaping into novel theologies that reduce God to the level of a fellow struggler who experiences reality in much the same way that we do?

I mentioned previously that open theism is hardly new but has clear origins in nineteenth-century absolute idealism. However, prior even to the nineteenth century, the seeds of this kind of thinking were sown in the High Middle Ages by such figures as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and Duns Scotus (1266–1308), and these seeds germinated and grew during the Reformation when issues of time and perspective came to the fore in discussions of the person and work of Christ.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE OMNISCIENCE IN CLASSICAL THEOLOGY

To understand in greater depth how suffering as a kind of knowing relates to the idea of divine omniscience, one should first realize how often theologians in the Western tradition have fallen into a trap that Aristotle (384–322 BC) anticipated in his own doctrine of God as “thought thinking itself.”² Aristotle could not conceive how God could know the world, since the world is an ever changing reality.³ Aristotle viewed God as a closed circle in which no distinction could be made between “thought” and “thinking.” Unlike human beings who think one thought at a time, God thinks every possible thought simultaneously. Following this line of reasoning, the dialectical process that characterizes human thinking must be excluded from God. Aquinas, influenced by biblical traditions as well as by the traditions of Augustine (AD 354–430) and Boethius (AD 480–524) concerning God's omniscience, could not accept Aristotle's idea that God could not know the world, but insisted that God's omniscience had as well to include comprehensive knowledge of the world—past, present, and future.⁴ Aquinas reframed the doctrine of the divine omniscience in the light of his conceptualism, asserting that all ideas that had ever been or would ever be thought existed *ante rem*

² *Metaphysics*, 12. 8.

³ *Metaphysics*, 12. 9.

⁴ Although Aquinas delineates four ways in which God knows: (1) by deciding by his will that they should exist at some particular time he has actual practical knowledge; (2) by knowing things without any intention of making them, he has virtually practical knowledge; (3) by knowing all things that can be known by human intellectual analysis; and (4) by knowing things that his knowledge cannot cause; for instance, evil (*On Truth*, q. 3, a. 3, c).

in the divine intellect.⁵ God's omniscience thus entailed a non-speculative objective "knowledge of" all things that could be described as science (*scientia*) in the broad sense of the term.⁶

Aquinas's understanding of the divine omniscience was nonetheless beset by a conundrum posed by Arabian theology. The Islamic philosopher Avicenna, whose ideas influenced Aquinas, suggested a doctrine of "eternal creation." Avicenna could not imagine a creator who was not always and forever creating, since creativity was considered by him to be an attribute of the eternal nature.⁷ Avicenna's emphasis upon God as necessary being seemed to make God's creativity dependent upon his act of creating and upon the creation as a consequence of that act. Of course, Aquinas, against what was considered these philosophers' errant doctrine of eternal creation, affirmed the traditional Augustinian belief that with creation time began as well (creation with time).⁸ Still, Aquinas's emphases upon the divine nature as necessary being, the aseity and simplicity of God, God as pure act (*actus purus*), God as the most perfect being (*ens perfectissimum*), and God as intellect (*Deus intellectum*) sparked questions about the freedom of God⁹ that would raise the ire of the English Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus. Indeed, Aquinas held that God as pure act is without potential.¹⁰ Potentiality is found only in the world of existence because existence, unlike the divine essence, stands out of non-being and participates only in imperfect and partial ways in essential substances.

Still, the difficulty posed for Aquinas by Avicenna's conception of eternal creation is similar to that posed by open theism; namely, how can God be conscious of the future if the future does not yet exist? Because the line of reasoning running from Avicenna's eternal creation doctrine tends to make the cause (God) dependent upon the effect (creation), Aquinas used the medieval approach known as conceptualism in an effort to surmount this obstacle. Aquinas asserted that God knows the future (*ante rem*) even though it does not yet exist for us (*in re*).¹¹ This solution, however, invariably raises the age-old question, how real is human freedom? To answer, Aquinas, in keeping with St. Augustine, comes down on the side of divine predestination. Still, God's foreknowledge does not override human freedom. The open theist will object here that human free will is here rendered illusory in the face of God's omniscience and its concomitant doctrine—the doctrine of predestination.

One can perhaps understand better how theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas believed that they could speak of human freedom in the face of

⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 14, a. 1–2.

⁶ Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 14, a. 16. 1 states, "*Scientia enim Dei est causa rerum, ut supra ostensum est. Sed scientia speculativa non est causa rerum scitarum. Ergo scientia Dei non est speculativa.*"

⁷ Soheil M. Afnan, *Avicenna, His Life and Works* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), 176–77.

⁸ On the Eternity of the World against the Grumblers.

⁹ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 14, a. 2; I, q. 4, a. 2; *Compendium of Theology*, c. 22.

¹⁰ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 14, a. 2.

¹¹ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 14.

the divine omniscience when one considers how indebted their theologies were to Platonic and Neo-Platonic concepts of how relative non-being (*mē on*) relates to the phenomenon of human free will. The association of the world of change with the world of illusion was posited even before Plato by Parmenides and Zeno of Elea. Both refuted the commonly held belief that motion is real.¹² Change, becoming, perishing, difference, and multiplicity all belonged to what Parmenides called the “way of seeming” (*doxa*), while “being” was discoverable only in the unchanging, indivisible One, the “It Is” that could be conceived of through the “way of truth” (*alētheia*).¹³ Despite Plato’s rejection of Parmenides’s idealistic monism, the former’s axiological assessment of the realm of “intermediate being” reveals that change, becoming, perishing, plurality, and difference remained for him distortions of the realm of “pure being” (*to ontos on*). Hence, “intermediate being” is inferior in value and not as real as the realm of “the really real” (*to ontos on*). For Plato, the perfect world of the forms was only dimly reflected in the world of copies or shadows. At the same time, the dynamic principle—the principle of change—had its roots in relative non-being. This had the effect of identifying being with form and perfection, and non-being with dynamism and change. There could therefore be no room in such a scheme for a dynamic kind of being or a formal kind of non-being. Rather, non-being as relative could only be understood in terms of the not-yet or no-longer of being conceived of as form.

III. RETHINKING THE CLASSICAL DOCTRINE OF DIVINE OMNISCIENCE

1. *The freedom of the will versus reason.* To understand more fully how the dialectical relationship between human freedom and divine omniscience found in Augustine and Aquinas operates, a brief analysis of Plato’s dialogue, *The Phaedrus*, is helpful. In this dialogue, the concept most closely parallel to that of the will is spirit (*thumos*). Spirit is that human faculty which is caught up in a tug-of-war between reason on one side and desire on the other.¹⁴ Plato illustrates the relationship of the human spirit to reason and desire by using the metaphor of a chariot drawn by two horses. One horse, which possesses noble qualities, stands for the faculty of reason. The other horse, being deformed and ignoble, represents desire. Yet, of paramount importance is the way that desire in Plato’s assessment of the aspects of the human soul correlates with the category of relative non-being (*mē on*). Only the human faculty of reason is capable of apprehending the realm of pure being where the perfect forms reside. Desire can do nothing but oppose the union of reason with the world of the forms. Thus, what is changeable and arbitrary in the will must be rooted in desire. The dynamic principle of the will thus has its basis in relative non-being as well.

¹² Parmenides, *On Nature*. 2. 1–4 and 8. 1–4. Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Zeno of Elea* 7.

¹³ Parmenides, *On Nature*, 2. 1–4.

¹⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246–47.

2. *Thinking versus sense.* The Platonic ontological distinction between being and non-being also has had significant consequences for epistemology, namely the distinction in epistemology between thought and sensation. The distinction itself, however, is not where the problem for Christian theology lies. Rather, it is the axiological baggage that is apparent in the way Plato privileges human thinking over sensation. Only thinking can lead persons to knowledge of the perfect world of the forms. Again the forms for Plato enjoy a state of *koinōnia*, a kind of fellowship in which no shadow of diversity appears.¹⁵ Knowledge gained through sense experience, however, is altogether another matter, for sense experience by its very nature is beset with the problem of disunity. This is seen in the fact that the senses themselves are diverse channels through which knowledge of the sensible world flows. Hearing is not seeing, and seeing is not feeling. Sense experience, for this reason, is categorized by Plato as that vehicle through which only opinion is available. Opinion at best is partial, fragmentary, and deceptive knowledge. As such, it is relegated to a status that must forever be inferior to thinking.

3. *Faith and suffering as ways of knowing—the Bible versus Plato.* No theologian who proclaims that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man can escape what the biblical material stresses concerning the experiential side of Jesus' development and his own expression of trust in the Father. How is one to reconcile Luke's statement that Jesus increased in "wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52) with the doctrine of the divine omniscience? Again, the Book of Hebrews designates Jesus "the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb 12:2), but how could he be so designated if he never had had to exercise faith? If he were omniscient, would faith even be possible? On the other hand, if faith is a way of knowing, how could a being truly be omniscient and not know what it is to have faith?

I am not arguing here that Jesus was wholly ignorant of the future path that lay before him despite the fact that faith by its very nature contains an element of what Augustine called "unknowing" (*agnosia*) and Nicholas of Cusa called "learned ignorance" (*docta ignorantia*). On the one hand, the element of unknowing must be an ingredient of faith if faith is to be faith at all, for in one sense faith involves trusting God in the midst of and in spite of the uncertainties and tensions of life. However, in the case of Jesus, this element of unknowing in one respect at least did not extend to the future he foresaw for himself, for he apparently had full knowledge that he was destined to undergo a horrific and painful death by means of crucifixion.

In the light of the influence Platonic categories have exerted on Christian theology, one can understand why the classical doctrine of divine omniscience also excluded suffering by relegating it to a purely human way of knowing. Insofar as suffering is rooted in the passions and in the world of sensation, suffering could not very well be attributed to the divine nature in any respect. One therefore could hardly attribute to God such an inferior form of know-

¹⁵ Plato, *The Sophist*.

ing as suffering. The doctrine of God's impassibility was thus a logical development in classical theism.

The element of unknowing mentioned with regard to the faith of Jesus does appear nonetheless to have been extended to the actual prospects and the actual reality of Jesus' endurance of suffering, for the element is evident in his anguished prayer in Gethsemane, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matt 26:39). The mere prospect of having to endure suffering is, of course, not tantamount to actual physical suffering itself, though it can involve the experience of psychological dread and in that respect entail psychological suffering. So if Jesus were omniscient in the classical sense (which is a difficult thing to assume on the basis of what the biblical texts say), one thing is certain: He did dread the prospect of suffering, and he was in no way immunized from knowing actual suffering when he underwent the Passion. If he had been so immunized, it is difficult to understand how he truly could have exercised faith in any real sense, or much less could have become faith's author and finisher (Heb 12:2). Nor can one affirm with any surety in the vein of the words of the writer of Hebrews that he was "tempted in every point as we, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15).

At this juncture, I believe we would be wise to reevaluate the Platonic contribution to the Western theological tradition. If thinking is valued above sense experience, then we would have to conclude that truths learned through human sense experience are inferior to those learned through thinking. Such inferior truths would include experiences of pain and pleasure. My main objection to this line of thought is the dualism it promotes, a dualism that adversely affects much of the Christian theological tradition. Mind is pitted against body, thinking against opinion, knowledge against sense experience—but another possibility is to see concord as well as discord between these pairs. Indeed, this dialectic makes much better sense in the light of the more Hebraic mindset that served as the original foundation of Christian theology. Instead of devaluing sense experience, one could then argue that pain and pleasure, at their most rudimentary levels, may be powerful indicators of value for the mind. Plato spoke of the innate ideas in the mind, but the presence of pleasure and pain receptors in the human body, which exist prior to all philosophical reflection about their meaning, provide a more convincing proof-positive of innate values that God has instilled into the physical creation even in its biological aspect. The fact that this innate value is imbedded in the human body is in closer agreement with the Hebrew doctrine of a good creation than that offered by Platonic dualism, which opposes the world of spirit to the world of matter.

One can also see how the undermining of sense experience in the Christian Platonic tradition had the effect of excluding this type of knowing from its doctrine of the divine omniscience. All analogies of God's omniscience start with the human mind, and human sense experience is automatically excluded as a possible starting point for any analogy of how God knows. As long as sense experience is viewed more as the absence of a higher form of knowing than as a legitimate way of knowing, the chance is slim that any analogy will be employed in an effort better to understand what kinds of

knowledge the divine omniscience entails. We then are justified in saying that God's omniscience excludes knowledge of what it is to suffer, for such knowledge is in fact not knowledge at all but an absence of knowledge. However, if we admit that suffering, as a kind of knowledge is a present something rather than an absent nothing—and this seems to be more in agreement with both Hebraic and early Christian understandings of suffering—then we will have to ask, how should suffering, as a way of knowing, be included in a doctrine of the divine omniscience? Knowing what it is not to know (faith) and suffering must be aspects of the divine omniscience.

IV. THE DOCTRINE OF OMNISCIENCE IN REFORMATION THEOLOGY: THE PROBLEM POSED BY TEMPORALITY

During the Renaissance, the pessimistic valuation of the dynamic principle in the soul as proposed by Platonic theology changed to an optimistic one when the philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) reassessed Plato's *Phaedrus* in the light of the humanism of that period. Ficino adopted a much more positive attitude toward this dynamic principle by viewing it as the impetus by which the frenzy (Plato's *manikē*) of the passions within the human soul could soar with the aid of reason to achieve works of prophetic, poetic, and artistic greatness as well as to ascend to the heights of love (*eros*) for the divine.¹⁶ As a result, Renaissance thinkers began to reassess concepts related to the dynamic principle—such as time, change, plurality, multiplicity, particularity, and perspective—and to view them in a more positive light.

Positive reassessments of such phenomena during the Renaissance bled over into issues affecting the Protestant Reformation in its understanding of God, Christology, and the work of Christ. At the heart of debates concerning the nature of the Lord's Supper, Christological doctrine was reformulated. In particular, the notion of temporality provided a context in which earlier Christological ideas about the nature of the union of the two natures (divine and human) in the person of Christ would have to be reformulated in the light of the doctrine of the two states (humiliation and exaltation).

Notions of time and perspective led to ways of re-envisioning how God was in Christ, and Reformation theologians such as Martin Luther (1483–1546), Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), and John Calvin (1509–1564) struggled to understand the exact nature of the intersection between the earlier rather static categories of classical Christology and the newer emphases on temporality, historicity, and dynamism as they related to Christological doctrine. Still, these theologians' conclusions could hardly have been more divergent when it came to expressing what this intersection should look like. I will attempt an overview as follows:

1. *Suffering and the divine omniscience: Luther.* On one side, Martin Luther, following Cyril of Alexandria (AD 378–444), adopted a Christology

¹⁶ Ficino, *Letter 7, On Divine Frenzy*.

that stressed the union (*henōsis*)¹⁷ of the two natures in the person of Christ. Cyril had first proposed his doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of properties) against Nestorius (AD 386–451), who had emphasized the division and separation of the human and divine natures. Cyril's refutation of Nestorius's "schizophrenic" Christ had stressed that the properties of the divine nature were communicated fully to the human nature. Because classical theism had attributed omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence to the divine nature, Luther assumed that the *communicatio idiomatum* doctrine had to imply that, since Christ was divine, he was at every point of his life omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.¹⁸ The baby in the manger is not only "God who suckles at the breast of Mary,"¹⁹ but he is also omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God.

Luther nonetheless encountered difficulties when it came to reconciling this belief with biblical assertions that raised questions about the extent of Jesus' wisdom. Luke 2:52, for instance, stated that Jesus "grew in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and man."²⁰ To cope with the difficulty posed by this passage for his understanding of Jesus as omniscient God, Luther invoked his famous doctrine of the *Deus Absconditus*, which stated that the omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient divine nature of Christ was obscured by or hidden within his humanity at the same time that they were fully present there.²¹ Paul Althaus writes concerning Luther's theological understanding, "Christ's emptying of himself consists in an on-going act of giving himself for sinful men in a particular situation."²² In Christ's assuming of human nature, Althaus reports of Luther, Christ retains fully the form of the divine nature at every moment during his incarnation, but Christ uses the divine nature not for his own sake but in order to serve us.

Luther's doctrine of the *Deus Absconditus* fails, however, to answer satisfactorily the central difficulty posed by Luke 2:52. Did Jesus really grow in wisdom, or did he merely seem to do so? The specter of docetism looms over Luther's formulation, though Luther's is anything but the type of anti-materialistic docetism espoused by second-century Gnostics. Luther, ever the theologian of paradox, deepens Cyril of Alexandria's concept of the *communicatio idiomatum* in order to accommodate the full reality of suffering and death not only into his Christology, but into God's very nature. That is

¹⁷ Nestorius spoke of a junction (*sunapheias*) of the two natures, which, according to Cyril, did not sufficiently signify the oneness of the person of Christ (Cyril, *Epistle to Nestorius*, in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees* [ed. Henry Percival, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2d series, vol. 14; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 201 [hereafter cited as *Ecumenical Councils*]).

¹⁸ Thus, the baby in the manger is all-knowing, and "God suckles at the breast of Mary" (*Luther's Works* 24:105).

¹⁹ *Luther's Works* 24:107; 22:492–93.

²⁰ *Luther's Works* 52:146.

²¹ In his commentary on Psalm 17 (18:12), Luther invokes the mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius to speak of "the hiding place of God" as "darkness" (*Luther's Works* 10:119–20). He then applies this to the mystery of the incarnation where God is "concealed in the humanity which is his darkness."

²² Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 195.

to say, while Cyril had imagined a one-way communication of properties—from the divine to the human nature,²³ Luther envisaged a two-way communication of properties—not only from the divine nature to the human, but from the human nature to the divine as well. This new understanding enabled Luther to speak of the suffering and death of God in Christ in a way that the earlier Eastern Orthodox theologians had not ventured to speak.²⁴

2. *The objective atonement and divine omniscience.* Another understanding of the intersection between the Christology of the two natures and that of the two states were proposed by Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. These Reformers steered (in the view of Luther, at least) perilously close to the Christological heresy that Cyril had opposed.²⁵ Following Cyril's cue, Luther railed against Zwingli's and Calvin's "Nestorianism."²⁶ Because Calvin believed that the "finite is incapable of the infinite" (*finitum non est capax infiniti*), he taught that the divine Logos, in becoming flesh, was at no point contained fully by the human nature but also existed outside the human nature. Luther lampooned this idea as "the extra-Calvinisticum."²⁷ However, in Calvin's opinion, viewing the two natures as distinct²⁸ helped him to account for such phenomena as Jesus' growing consciousness and his suffering. Calvin could then selectively attribute certain actions of Jesus—such as his miracles—to his divine nature, while attributing others—such as his suffering and death—to his human nature.²⁹ For Calvin, the divine nature in Christ does not therefore suffer. Only the human nature suffers.

However, while Calvin does not introduce suffering and death into God in such a way that these phenomena might have implications for ways in which God is omniscient, one may argue that Calvin does face a similar issue in the way he formulates the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement. Following Anselm, Calvin understood Christ's atonement as being objective

²³ "On this account we say that he suffered and rose again; not as if God the Word suffered in his own nature stripes, or the piercing of nails, or the other wounds, for the Divine nature is incapable of suffering, inasmuch as it is incorporeal, but since that which had become his own body suffered in this way, he is also said to suffer for us; for he who is himself incapable of suffering was in a suffering body" (*Cyril of Alexandria, First Letter to Nestorius in Ecumenical Councils* 198).

²⁴ Dennis Ngien, "Chalcedonian Christology and Beyond: Luther's Understanding of the *Communicatio Idiomatum*," *HeyJ* 45 (2004) 54–68.

²⁵ Zwingli thought Luther's understanding of the *communication idiomatum* was monophysite, especially in the light of some of the cruder illustrations Luther used (for example, sugar water or cake batter) to describe the union of the divine and human natures. Zwingli accepts Cyril's *communication idiomatum* with an important qualification: It is rhetorical rather than actual (see *Luther's Works* 37:206, n. 63). Zwingli spoke of the doctrine of the *alloiosis*. The divine nature in Christ did not suffer, only the human nature suffered. See Richard Cross, "Alloiosis' in the Christology of Zwingli," *JTS* 47 (1996) 105–22.

²⁶ *Luther's Works* 37:212.

²⁷ E. David Willis: *Calvin's Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-called Extra-Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 1966) 56–57.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.14.6. However, Calvin says, "Away with the error of Nestorius, who in wanting to pull apart rather than distinguish the nature of Christ devised a double Christ!" *Institutes* 2.14.4.

²⁹ *Institutes* 2.14.1–2.

and Godward in its primary efficacy. God in his righteousness cannot look upon sin. Christ, as the innocent and perfect sacrifice, assumes our sin in order to reinstate the Father's gracious favor toward us. In this way, Christ repairs the rift between sinful man and holy God. The point here is that an attitudinal change happens objectively in God because of the atoning work of God.

Several questions nonetheless come to mind with this consideration. First, if God is omniscient, how is it possible that he cannot look upon sin? Second, in what respect can the notion of a change in the Father's attitude and disposition toward his creatures through Christ's atonement be reconciled with the notion of his changeless omniscience? To answer the first question, one could appeal to the typical Neo-Platonic answer coming out of Augustine, namely that sin belongs to the privation of good and therefore possesses no positive ontological standing. This is tantamount to saying that sin has its orientation in non-being. Sin is thus a nothing rather than a something, and as a nothing it does not therefore need to be known by God for God to remain omniscient. However, the second question is more difficult to answer. How is it possible for an eternal omniscient God to "change his mind" regarding our status on the basis of an incident occurring in space-time, namely the crucifixion? Here one finds a version of the *causa non pro causa* logical fallacy, better known as the chicken-egg paradox. Christ, in averting God's wrath toward us secures God's love and favor toward us. Yet the very Christ who brings about this objective change in the Father's attitude is inexplicably sent by a Father who does not recognize us until the Christ sent by him secures the Father's favor toward us. God "so loved the world," but this only seems possible because the crucifixion of Jesus in time presumably sends ripple effects back into eternity past so that God could love the world in order to send his son in the first place.

3. *Unanswered questions and the future of theology.* One perhaps can see now in what respects Reformation theology did not satisfactorily answer, but really only framed, questions that continued to occupy the attention of Christian theologians for the centuries to follow. By the nineteenth-century, issues raised by Reformation Christology for an understanding of the divine omniscience still had found no resolution. Various degree Christologies, which proceeded from "below" to "above," in effect reduced the element of "God" in Christ either to a superior intuition of God (Schleiermacher)³⁰ or to a superior morality (Ritschl).³¹ Kenotic theologians, by contrast, appealed to the words of the Christological hymn recited by Paul in Phil 2:7 in an effort to explain how the second Person of the Trinity, in becoming fully human, had relinquished his independent exercise of the relative attributes of divinity

³⁰ F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928) 425–34.

³¹ Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine* (3 vols.; 2d ed.; trans. and ed. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902 [1874]).

(omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence).³² One attempt at rapprochement between the “below” to “above” and “above to below” approaches came in the form of absolute idealism.

V. CATAPHATIC EXTREMES: HEGEL AND HIS LEGACY

In the larger philosophical context of the nineteenth century, absolute idealist philosopher G. W. F. Hegel suggested that God developed consciousness through a dialectical movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis.³³ This, in effect, resulted in a collapse of the divine transcendence into the phenomenological realities of historical process. In a similar manner, F. W. J. Schelling and his successors (among them, Alfred North Whitehead) adopted notions of God as a cosmic individual whose consciousness dawns and progresses as it experiences the movement of the dialectic.

At this point, I suggest that the notion of a God who is not fully omniscient but develops over time is an understandable consequence of increasingly cataphatic³⁴ tendencies that have been part and parcel of the Western theological tradition from its inception.³⁵ If one thinks in an overly cataphatic way, the nineteenth-century absolute idealist philosophers' arguments make perfectly good sense. After all, how can God be conscious of something that does not exist? For consciousness to be possible, must not there first be an object of consciousness? Moreover, if the future does not yet exist as an object of consciousness, how can God be conscious of it or know it? These questions are not unlike those posed to Aquinas in his day by the Arabian doctrine of eternal creation. With regard to the Hegelian tradition, the cataphatic method leads one to a parallel conclusion, namely, that God is in some respect conditioned by that element of temporality we call “future.” Since from the human standpoint, the future belongs to the category of the “not yet,” the principle of analogy can be employed in such a way as to argue that God cannot know the future either.

An example of another thinker who I believe employs an overextension of the cataphatic method is Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann, whose ideas have been of no small importance in influencing open theist perspectives. Appealing to the social analogy of the Trinity, Moltmann stresses the distinction between the Father and the Son when he expresses the “different” ways in which the Father and the Son relate to the event of the crucifixion.

³² Examples are Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891) 170–75; P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 293–320; and Gottfried Thomasius of Erlangen, *Christ's Person and Work, Part 2: The Person of the Mediator, in God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology* (ed. Claude Welch; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) 31–88.

³³ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (trans. J. B. Baillie; New York: Harper Torchbook, 1967) 789–808. See also *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (ed. Peter C. Hodgson; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 430–81.

³⁴ The belief that God can be known positively or affirmatively.

³⁵ *Mystical Theology* 3–4.

“The Father,” Moltmann states, “suffers the death of his Son,” while “the Son experiences dying” in his forsakenness.³⁶ Moltmann somehow suggests that the Father does not know what it is to experience the plight of the abandoned and oppressed of earth until the death of Jesus becomes the means by which God is able to sympathize with those who are victimized.

VI. RETHINKING OPEN THEIST PERSPECTIVES IN THE LIGHT OF CLASSICAL THEISM

The *non causa pro causa* fallacy mentioned in connection with Calvin’s doctrine of the atonement again appears with Moltmann, who is offering a revision of Calvin’s atonement doctrine. As with Calvin, so with Moltmann, the death of Christ (the cause) influences the perspective of the Father (the effect). Still, understanding what the Father’s motivation might be for sending his son to be a victim seems problematic. In one respect, one gains from Moltmann’s insights the idea that God is not so much the supreme victim as he is, to use the words of Paul Fiddes, “the supreme self-executioner.”³⁷ Fiddes uses the term “self” here, which may be a bit problematic when one remembers that Moltmann employs the social analogy of the Trinity. Still, one does get the impression that the Father allows the Son to be executed just so that he can know what it is like either to be executed himself or else to have his child executed.

Notwithstanding the residual Hegelianism that haunts Moltmann’s thought, he does interject an interesting point about kinds of knowledge in God. A parent’s experience of a child’s death is one kind of knowing. An individual’s own experience of dying is an altogether different kind of knowing. Though these two types of experience are “different,” they are, however, both significant ways of experiencing the phenomenon of death. If such is the case, then how is one to relate such different sorts of experience to the reality of the divine omniscience? Does the divine omniscience entail the definition that God knows all things simultaneously? If so, then how is it possible to attribute these different ways of knowing to an omniscient God?

When it comes to speaking of God, the main obstacle we encounter is in finding the happy (or perhaps unhappy) medium between cataphatic and apophatic language. Classical theology, in veering in the apophatic direction, also tends to negate all univocal language in favor of the transcendent. On the other hand, much modern theology, in veering in the cataphatic direction, tends to collapse transcendence into natural, psychological, social, and historical processes. Both of these approaches admittedly have their attraction, but they also have their limitations. Here, appealing to the apophatic tradition of Eastern Orthodox theology would be tempting if it were not for the fact that this tradition often tends to negate or exclude particularity in favor of some concept of a static super-essential unity (*hyperousia*).

³⁶ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden; London: SCM, 1974) 243.

³⁷ P. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 137.

A healthy dose of Hebraic thinking can help us to affirm instead what I shall now, for want of a better term, call “dynamic hyperphaticism.” Regarding the question of what the divine omniscience entails, one must ask, could a God who does not know what it is not to know truly be an all-knowing God? Speaking in a dynamic hyperphatic way one would have to say that a God who could not know what it is to suffer could hardly be omniscient if suffering is admitted to be a kind of knowledge instead of a deficiency of knowledge as the Platonic tradition suggests. In this respect one can certainly understand Hegel’s problem with the idea of a God who has not yet experienced the “serious otherness” implied in the existence of the material world as other-being radically opposed to God’s being. Hegel nonetheless fell into the same trap of tacitly buying into Plato and Aristotle when he excluded serious otherness from the original principle of the divine reason and spoke instead of “playing love” within the Trinity, the love of like for like. This is why Hegel’s God “needed” the world to become conscious, for a God who had not yet experienced the infinite pain of the negative is an unconscious being.

Instead of accepting Hegel’s overly cataphatic way of speaking of God’s coming to consciousness through historical process, I want to offer a dynamic hyperphatic alternative to his reasoning by turning his model upside down. Instead of assuming that God grows in consciousness, let us assume as a proposition that God in his omniscience is always and eternally the most conscious entity that is, and that God’s consciousness entails what would be from our perspective not only unimaginable joy and ecstasy, but also unimaginable pain and suffering. The crucifixion of Jesus can illustrate this at one level. Jesus refused to partake of the vinegar mingled with gall that would have dulled his pain (Matt 27:34). On this note, Henry Mabie long ago in his book, *The Divine Reason of the Cross*, observed that Christ chose to be in complete possession of his faculties in order to secure the real atonement.³⁸ One must not anesthetize God (negate the aesthetic or sense element) by removing the experience of joy and suffering from his divine omniscience. On the contrary, the most intense kinds of human sensation must grow pale in comparison to the brilliance of the divine consciousness. From the divine vantage point, one might speculate that knowledge of the eternal purpose—of what the world can be—is always juxtaposed to what the world in its various states of unconsciousness chooses to be and decides to become. In some cases, the decision of the creature is to reunite with the creator. There is, however, also the reality of those who choose not to reunite. If the proposition that there is an eternal hell is true, then entailed in this proposition could be a doctrine of the eternal divine suffering as well. In another way, one can view the suffering of Christ upon the cross in time as a reflection of God’s eternal suffering. Here time-bound language and notions of cause-and-effect fail to express what is entailed in the relationship between time and eternity. We view God through the lenses of time and space, knowing full

³⁸ Henry C. Mabie, *The Divine Reason of the Cross: A Study of the Atonement as the Rationale for Our Universe* (New York/Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1911) 73–74.

well that these lenses belong to the finite created being that the Creator radically transcends.

Moltmann's introduction into the doctrine of the Trinity of a kind of multiperspectivalism can also be rescued by a dynamic hyperphatic approach if it is related to the idea of the divine omniscience that I am proposing. The Father's experience of the death of the Son, and the Son's experience of dying, can be used in an analogical way to speak of the fact that God's omniscience somehow is always including and at the same time always transcending all possible ways of knowing. The unity of the divine omniscience is thus affirmed through the "more than" of the divine complexity, instead of a doctrine of divine simplicity based on the "less than." The content of the proposition "God is omniscient" could then also entail the fact that God's ways of knowing are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts, but this proposition should also be stated in a way that affirms particularity and places its meaning in the widest possible context rather than annulling it.

By thinking in a dynamic hyperphatic way, we can affirm that "God knows" in a way that not only gives assurance to the mind that God's providence will prevail. The proposition "God knows" can assure us that God embraces with his own ecstatic joy all creative human enterprises that are in concord with the divine meaning and purpose. The statement "God knows" can also encourage the hurting heart when it experiences and has to endure testing and evil in its multitudinous forms.

There are, however, a couple of further points that should be made in concluding. First, how does a dynamic hyperphatic approach relate the dimension of the finite to that of the infinite, and relate dialectical affirmations about God to paradoxical ones? When speaking of the faith of the incarnate Christ as involving the element of not-knowing or *agnosia*, one cannot help but be faced with the dialectic between knowing and not-knowing, a dialectic that works itself out in the stories about Jesus. Finitude serves in these stories, as it does in our own, as the hinge on which the doors of dialectical process constantly open, shut, and reopen. Dialectic is a phenomenon worked out in the realm of finitude through a continuous process of conflict and resolution as Hegel proposed. However, dialectical realities that are rooted in finite realities should not be projected onto the dimension of the divine in univocal ways. The God whom we view through the lenses of dialectical reality must not be made to conform to the lenses themselves with the result that there remains no transcendent surplus of meaning. Viewed rightly, however, finitude, and the dialectical processes that hinge upon it, can serve as lenses through which we can view something much more profound; namely, the reality of the paradoxical, which, unlike dialectic, is rooted in the infinite. Understanding the relationship between paradox and dialectic is therefore crucial, for just as the infinite must by virtue of its definition include the finite if it is to be infinite, so must the paradoxical include within itself the dialectical while at the same time radically transcending it. The proposition "the paradoxical entails the dialectical" is therefore a non-convertible proposition.

Second, considering the fact that human sense experience has in the Christian tradition been demonstrated to be that faculty of knowing most

vulnerable to deception and temptation, and most prone to give in to sin, how can a dynamic hyperphatic approach help us to contextualize this kind of knowledge and to do so in such a way that God is not reduced to the level of what is merely instinctual or rudimentary such as can be found in the pleasure and pain receptacles of creatures? The answer to this must be a revised understanding of the divine simplicity, as entailing a unity that, while embracing complexity, does not judge it all as equal in significance or meaning. To illustrate, it would be ridiculous to assume that somehow the father of the prodigal son vicariously enjoyed his son's prodigality in some kind of perverse way. Though the father of the prodigal understands fully what the prodigal is engaged in doing, the father's experience of the son's pleasure-quest, far from being enjoyable, is more like the dagger that strikes pain into his heart. The father does not experience the son's pleasure from the son's point of view because the father understands the son's behavior from the vantage point of the fuller context of life experience. In a similar way, the divine wisdom and nature always serve as the contextualizing criteria by which all God's ways of knowing are assessed and judged. This means that correlations between human experiences of joy and suffering, and the joy and suffering entailed in the divine omniscience, are inexact at the same time that they are complex. What must be the case, however, is that all things that can be known are contextualized in the omniscient divine intellect in ways that transcend our own ways of experiencing through the five senses. The divine ways of experiencing may often run counter to our ways of experiencing, which are ways that are in many respects unconscious because they lack the clarity that the principle of contextualization can afford.

Perhaps the closest analogue is the way in which human wisdom contextualizes the experiences of life, and, in doing so, provides a sense of wholeness that enables us to assess our experiences as ranging in value from the affirmative to the negative. However, even this sense of wholeness is but an analogue and not an exact correspondence. This means that in one important respect God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. In the final analysis, while we may say *that* God knows all at the highest and deepest levels conceivable, the question of *how* God knows all lies wholly beyond our capability to grasp.