

Comparing Arminianism and Open Theism on Theodicy: An Example of How Experience Affects our Preferences for Theological Systems

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While we might think that which theological system (such as Calvinism, Arminianism, or Open Theism) that we choose to align ourselves with should be based primarily on Biblical exegesis and systematic theology, in reality it is much more complex. In this presentation I will show that our personal experiences, beliefs, and preferences also affect which theological system we are most drawn to. This will be done by comparing the differences between Arminian and Open Theist approaches to theodicy, and showing what factors influence which system is more personally convincing.

Theodicy in particular is a good example to use to compare theological systems, as theodicy can be argued to be one of the most important aspects of any theological system,¹ and it is also one of the most relevant. I'm sure all of us have wondered about God's relationship to the evil and suffering in our lives. In fact, theodicy is possibly the area where our experience *most directly* influences our theology, as theodicy attempts to explain our experiences of evil and reconcile them with our faith in a good and loving God. Since each of us experiences different instances of evil and suffering in our lives, it makes sense that we will all approach theodicy from our own personal perspective, with our own sufferings most prominently in mind. And as we will see, our view of theodicy will influence our view of God.

On the surface, Arminianism and Open Theism have several features in common. Both Arminians and Open Theists agree that God can only act according to his nature, which is love, and thus God can never do evil or will evil. Both also make use of the "free-will defense" for theodicy, which explains evil as a misuse of God-given creaturely free-will. However, due to differing definitions of God's omniscience, there are significant differences in their implications

for theodicy. I will focus on three main areas where the differences between the Arminian and Open Theist approaches to theodicy are the most distinct.

However, before we can discuss this, we have to deal with a somewhat abstract philosophical topic, so please bear with me for now.

Main Differences Between Arminianism and Open Theism

The main issue that divides Arminians and Open Theists is on the issue of how God's foreknowledge relates to human freedom. Arminians say that God foreknows what we will freely do, but this does not force us to act in ways that God foreknows. Open Theists disagree, and believe that if the future is foreknown by God then the future is fixed and we have no real freedom to change it.

It is impossible to know who is right, and here is where our own philosophical beliefs can affect which theological system appears more credible to us. On the Arminian side it makes sense that we are still free even though God foreknows what we will do simply because *we* do not yet know what we will do. So when making any choice, it is free from our perspective because we do not know the future. For example, let's say God foreknows I will eat spaghetti for dinner tonight. When I am in the kitchen choosing what to eat, *I* do not know that God knows I will eat spaghetti, and God is not *forcing* me to choose to eat spaghetti, and so my choice does seem to be free as Arminians say, even though God foreknows it. In fact, if I *had* chosen soup instead, God's foreknowledge would have been different, and he would have eternally foreknown that I would choose soup.

But then let's think about another example. Let's say that God perfectly foreknows that I will be in a car accident next week. Since it is perfectly foreknown by God, and nothing can alter his knowledge, then *nothing* I do between now and then can prevent me from being in that

car accident next week *exactly* as God foreknew. I can't take a different route, or take public transit instead, or I would be *changing* the content of God's foreknowledge. Even prayers for God to protect me while driving could not change the future that God foreknows. So from this perspective it does seem that that if God foreknows something then the future is unchangeable.

Therefore Open Theists say that in order for humans to have real freedom and significant choices, God *cannot* foreknow what we will choose. At first glance, this would seem to be an un-Biblical idea, so to reassure you that it is not heretical, let me give a short overview of how Open Theists understand God's omniscience and omnipotence.

Open Theists say God's omniscience means that "God knows everything that any being can know. He knows everything that has ever existed, everything that now actually exists, everything that could possibly exist in the future, and everything that he has decided to do."² However, because of the conviction that God's foreknowledge of a future choice would remove our freedom, Open Theists believe that in order to preserve real human freedom, God either willingly limits his own knowledge of the future, or else perhaps the nature of the future is such that there are some things that even God cannot know for certain. (This is similar to the commonly-accepted idea that there are some things that even God cannot do, such as make a square circle)³. This does not mean that God loses all providential control, because God still knows a huge amount of information; he knows the present and past perfectly, he knows things that do not depend on free choice, he knows our hearts completely,⁴ and God knows what options are open to us and even how likely we may be to choose one option over another.⁵ (So if we take the previous example about choosing what to have for dinner, God could know there's a 70% chance I will choose to eat spaghetti, and a 30% chance I will choose to eat soup, but Open Theists would say God couldn't know for sure which one I would choose).

Regarding omnipotence, Open Theists say that God's omnipotence does not mean that he controls everything. Instead it means that God is *so* resourceful, flexible, and intelligent that he can achieve his purposes in a variety of ways. God can work around any good or bad choices we may make, and he can even work around those who directly oppose him in order to ensure that his ultimate goals are never defeated.⁶ Therefore, to Open Theists, God does not need perfect foreknowledge in order to still achieve his purposes. (And if you're wondering, I will get to how Open Theism handles biblical prophecy in a few minutes).

The Avoidability of Evil

So now, while this may seem to be simply an interesting abstract debate, it actually has important implications for how we understand God's relationship to evil, which has practical consequences for how we face evil in our lives. Depending on our opinions of these philosophical questions, we may be inclined more towards Arminianism or Open Theism. If one believes that God's foreknowledge of the future does indeed mean it is fixed and unchangeable, it would seem that the Open Theist approach may offer more motivation to oppose evil than the Arminian one. If we believe that we can actually change the future because it is *not* set in stone due to God's perfect foreknowledge of it, it can encourage us to do what we can to oppose evil and relieve suffering. Also, we can believe we are *not* doomed to experience any particular occasion of evil simply *because* God foreknows it will occur (such as the car accident example I mentioned earlier). The Open Theist view may also help encourage us that our futures are not predetermined by God's foreknowledge, which means we *can* change ourselves and the world around us for the better. This can be a very encouraging outlook on the world.

On the contrary, to preserve motivation to oppose evil, an Arminian would have to hold tightly to the conviction that God's knowing of the future does not remove our freedom and

responsibility to work against evil. If Arminians ever were tempted to think that because God foreknows something then it is unavoidable, or that God has pre-planned evil or allowed evil for some greater good, it could easily lead to apathy or complacency to work against evil. Therefore, depending on one's thought process and philosophical beliefs, Open Theism could possibly provide more motivation to oppose evil than the Arminian approach does.

The Problem of Foreknown Evil

There is another difficulty an Arminian may have with respect to theodicy, which comes from looking back at evil events that occurred in history. For example, if God perfectly foreknew what Hitler would do, yet created him anyway, then does that mean God is guilty for “unleashing” such a person on the world?⁷ Or did God know it was better to allow Hitler's actions than to not allow them?⁸ Thus, Arminians must find ways to justify why God allows the evil that he foreknows will occur.

Yet Open Theists have a similar problem. Instead of having to justify why God allows evil he foreknows will occur, Open Theists must explain why God allows evil that he is *quite certain will* occur based on his present knowledge. For example, even if God did not foreknow what Hitler would do, once God knew Hitler's evil intentions and saw the evil Hitler had already done, then why did God continue to let him live?⁹ Or, regarding the attack on the World Trade Towers, God would have known the plans of the terrorists and would have seen them carrying out each step, yet seemingly did nothing to stop them.¹⁰

To answer these problems, both Arminians and Open Theists can appeal to God's respect for human freedom. Both could argue that God does not prevent more evil because if he did prevent the “worst” evils, then because they did not happen, we would not be aware of them. Then we would demand that God prevent the next-worst evils which we do see occurring, and

this would continue in a cycle until we would demand that God prevent all evil in the world. Yet this would mean God would have to override all free will.¹¹ So if God desires that we exercise free will to love and obey him, then he must accept that since we are free, we will not always use our free will in the way he wants, and in order to honour the freedom he has given us, he must not override all the evil that results from the misuse of free will. Both Arminians and Open Theists could agree with Clark Pinnock who wrote, “God is moved by love to restrain the divine power, temporarily and voluntarily, out of respect for the integrity of creatures, even creatures whose activities fall short of God’s purposes.”¹²

However, there may be one case where Open Theism has an advantage, as illustrated by the story of Suzanne, as told by her pastor Gregory Boyd. Suzanne wanted to be a missionary to Taiwan, and had prayed that God would guide her to the right man to marry who would have a similar heart for missions. In college, she met a man who had the same goals as she did, and was compatible with her in many other areas, and so she felt it must have been divine providence that they met. But Suzanne wanted confirmation from God that this was indeed the man she should marry. She prayed intensely, and finally believed she had received this confirmation. Yet she was devastated two years later when she found out her husband had committed adultery. He appeared to repent, yet cheated on her several more times. He lost his desire for missions to Taiwan, and became physically and emotionally abusive. Finally, he filed for divorce and moved out, and just two weeks later Suzanne found out she was pregnant.¹³ Suzanne was angry at God because “if God knew exactly what her husband would do, then God bears all the responsibility for setting her up the way he did.”¹⁴

This situation could be hard for an Arminian to explain to Suzanne. Why would God tell her to marry a man who God *perfectly foreknew* would hurt her in such a deep way? Should we

appeal to the common explanations that maybe God has a greater good purpose for her suffering, or maybe he was trying to teach her something, or maybe she did not hear God's guidance correctly, or something else? Or is it easier to say, as her Open Theist pastor Gregory Boyd did, that maybe God did not know how Suzanne's husband would misuse his free will to hurt her? Boyd suggested that initially, God believed that Suzanne marrying her husband would have a high chance of having a happy marriage and fulfilling ministry. But when her husband decided to misuse his free will to commit adultery, it led to him becoming a different person than who he was when God had recommended that Suzanne marry him. This explanation comforted Suzanne, helped her love God again, *and* retained her faith in being able to hear God's guidance. So Open Theists have an advantage over Arminians here, because Open Theists do not have to believe that God may guide us into situations where he perfectly foreknows that we will experience evil.

In response, there are two main objections to the Open Theist idea that God does not know what evil may happen to us in the future.

The first objection is that, if there really is evil that God did not foreknow and is not part of God's plan, then does it mean that the evil we experience has no purpose? Often those who make this objection fear that removing the sense of purpose behind evil, pain, or suffering will remove the ability to endure it.¹⁵ Yet Open Theists reply that because God's omnipotence means he is very resourceful, flexible, and intelligent, we can still trust that God can bring some good out of the evil we experience, even if the evil was not intended for good, and even if God did not foreknow the evil would happen. It may even be that God is so capable of recovering good out of unforeseen evil that it may appear to us as if his backup plan was his original plan.¹⁶

The second objection is that if God does not foreknow the evil that will happen to us, then how can God give us useful guidance to avoid it? Open Theists can reply that God's present

knowledge is so complete, and God's wisdom so great, that in most cases perfect knowledge of the future is not necessary to give helpful guidance. For long term guidance such as who to marry, or which career to choose, Open Theists say that while God does care about these things, he does not have one set plan for our lives. Instead, what matters most to God is that we are conformed to the image of Christ, and this can happen in a variety of careers or with a variety of marriage partners.¹⁷ Thus, there may not be only one set plan for our lives, but many different good paths that we can choose, and God can work out his plans for us in many different ways.

So as we have seen, the story of Suzanne can show that to some people, it is more comforting to believe God did not knowingly guide them down a path that guaranteed they would experience evil and suffering, even if it means accepting a different perspective on God's omniscience and guidance. Others who are drawn to Arminianism might find more comfort in the belief that God knows exactly how their lives will unfold, and trust that God's foreknowledge means he has planned for good to come out of any evil they experience along the way. Some people might find the idea that God does not have one set plan for their lives *liberating*, while others might find it *terrifying*. And like Suzanne, we may change our views if something happens to us which is significant enough to make us question our previous convictions. Therefore, our personal perspectives on philosophy and theology, and our personal experiences, can certainly affect which theological system we are drawn to, and these factors can change over time.

The Problem of Prophesied Evil

However, I do think that at this point in time, there is one clear advantage for Arminianism in relation to theodicy, and that is regarding the issue of prophesied evil. Open Theists say that God can predict things that are likely to happen on the basis of his perfect present knowledge, and God can predict things that he plans to do in a specific circumstance.¹⁸ While this approach

may work for a large number of prophecies, there are still a few specific cases that are troubling, particularly the cases where God prophesies very specific evil events.

I have not yet read a convincing Open Theist approach to how God is able to prophesy Judas' betrayal of Jesus, or Peter's three denials of Jesus before dawn,¹⁹ or even the crucifixion of Jesus on the exact right date of Passover. We cannot say that God *caused* Judas to betray Jesus, or *made* Peter deny Christ in order to fulfill prophecy,²⁰ or we would be taking away Judas's and Peter's personal responsibility for their behavior, and making God responsible for evil. While God could have known that Judas was *considering* betraying Jesus, Open Theists cannot say that God perfectly knew that he would actually go through with it. If Judas had freely chosen *not* to betray Jesus, then God would have needed some other way for Jesus to be delivered to the Sanhedrin.²¹ And while God might have known that at that particular moment in time, Peter had the sort of character which made him *likely* to deny Jesus if he were pressured,²² it would have required God to coordinate all the circumstances that Peter was in that night in order to make sure he was asked by the right people at the right times to make it all happen. And what if Peter freely decided to go home and sleep after the first denial? A similar level of complicated divine coordination of people's evil actions would have been needed to ensure that Jesus would be crucified on the exact right date, not a week earlier or a few days later, in order to fulfill the Passover foreshadowing from the Old Testament. These are the sort of complicated explanations that Open Theists would need to have in order to explain these very specific prophecies. So at this point, it seems much easier to take the Arminian approach and say that God can prophesy about evil actions simply because he foreknows them, which means God does not have to have any involvement in coordinating evil events in order to make them happen as prophesied.

Therefore, if someone desires to have a more straightforward explanation for Biblical prophecy which keeps God from being involved in any coordination of evil events, perhaps Arminianism is more attractive. Yet if someone can tolerate a little mystery surrounding how difficult biblical prophecies work, perhaps Open Theism may be an option. This shows how there are many factors that are at work in our choice of theological system, and there are trade-offs no matter which system we choose.

Conclusion

So in conclusion, I hope this analysis has shown that our personal experiences and philosophical beliefs have a significant influence on which theological system we choose to align ourselves with. In particular, our experiences of evil can have a powerful effect on our belief system, which may cause some to hold even more tightly to their previous beliefs, while others may find that, like Suzanne, switching theological systems can provide the answers they need to continue loving God. There is a level of faith required in all cases. An Open Theist may need to have faith that Bible prophecy is true and accurate, even if it is not yet fully explainable by Open Theism, and have faith that God can still achieve his purposes and provide guidance to us even without fully knowing the future. An Arminian will need to have faith that there is some reason why God allows all the evil that he foreknows, and that despite God knowing the future, we are still responsible to do what we can now to oppose evil.

There are trade-offs in every theological system that must be weighed by the individual. Depending on their own beliefs, needs, and priorities, each person may come to different conclusions on which trade-offs are acceptable to them. Perhaps this is why multiple theological systems exist, despite having only one Bible. Despite some critics who argue that there is only one “right” system and label anyone who disagrees with them a heretic, this shows how

theological diversity is valuable in the church. Because at this time we all see in a dim and partial way (1 Cor. 13:12), our experiences and personal beliefs are currently an important factor in helping us make sense of faith right now, until the day when we all will see clearly. Therefore, because we are all different and have different experiences that influence our theological understanding, theological diversity among Christians is necessary in order to help as many people as possible find a place in a church which can encourage their faith, help them love God, comfort them in difficult times, and keep pointing them to Christ.

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- ¹ David Basinger and Randall Basinger, "Theodicy: A Comparative Analysis," in *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2003), 144.
- ² Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK; Grand Rapids, MI, Paternoster Press; Baker Academic, 2001), 138.
- ³ Bruce Reichenbach, "God Limits His Power" in *Predestination & Free Will*, eds. Basinger & Basinger (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity Press, 1986), 107.
- ⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 138; Paul Helm, *The Providence of God: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 45.
- ⁵ Richard Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning: Contemporary Responses to the Problem of Pain* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 93; Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 61.
- ⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 139; Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 127.
- ⁷ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 10.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 98-99.
- ⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?: The Current Controversy over Divine Foreknowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 193.
- ¹⁰ James Larsen, "When Bad Things Happen to Innocent People: Open Theism and the Problem of Evil" Master of Theology thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2006, 27.
- ¹¹ Reichenbach, "God Limits His Power", 122.
- ¹² Clark Pinnock, "Constrained by Love: Divine Self-Restraint according to Open Theism," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34, no. 2 (June 1, 2007): 150.
- ¹³ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 103-104.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ¹⁵ Paul Kjoss Helseth, "God Causes all Things," in *Four Views on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 52.
- ¹⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 106; Clark Pinnock, 'Systematic Theology,' in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 113.
- ¹⁷ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, Revised ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 286; Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 175.
- ¹⁸ Clark Pinnock, "Clark Pinnock's Response," in *Predestination & Free Will*, eds. Basinger and Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press: 1986), 139.
- ¹⁹ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 125-130.
- ²⁰ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 34.
- ²¹ Gregory A. Boyd, *Is God to Blame?: Moving beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 192.
- ²² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 35; Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 69.