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Untamed God or Reckless Risk-Taker? A Reply to Hasker's Natural Order Theodicy

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Introduction

In philosophy of religion, omniscience continues to be a lively and controversial topic. While some debates have come and gone, the topic of divine foreknowledge continues to be wrestled over by very capable scholars. The rise of Open Theism in the past twenty years has caused many people to question their assumptions about divine foreknowledge. One formidable defender of Open Theism is William Hasker, who has written several books and many articles on the subject. In 2012, he wrote an essay proposing a new theodicy for natural evil. He attempted to show that Open Theism better accounts for natural evil than Molinism or Augustinianism. In this essay, I will show why Hasker's theodicy can also be utilized by the Molinist, and why Open Theism's denial of divine foreknowledge turns God into a reckless risk-taker. I will begin by explaining his terminology; then I will summarize his natural order theodicy; subsequently, I will detail the implications of his theodicy and argue that Molinism is the preferable position.

Preliminaries

To understand William Hasker's theodicy, we must understand the definitions and concepts he introduces at the beginning of the essay. First, he defines the term "theodicy" as

> a response to an argument from evil, an argument that claims that in view of some evil that exists in this world it is incoherent or unreasonable to believe in the existence of the theistic God. A theodicy replies to such an

> argument by giving a justifying reason for the existence of the evil in question; a reason such that, if it indeed obtains, the permission of the evil by God is morally justifiable and does not constitute a reason to disbelieve in God's existence or his goodness (Hasker 2012, 281-282).

Subsequently, he sets forth two categories of theodicies: *general-policy theodicies* and *specific-benefit theodicies*. General-policy theodicies attempt to explain evil by proposing some overarching plan that God has for the universe. An example of this would be the free will theodicy, in which God allows moral evil to occur because intervening would violate someone's free will. By contrast, specific-benefit theodicies attempt to give reasons for God allowing specific events in history to occur. For instance, if someone were to ask why God allowed his or her mother to go through cancer and suffer a painful death, the specific-benefit theodicist would attempt to give specific goods produced or evils averted that resulted from God allowing this person's mother to die.

Following this delineation, Hasker categorizes two different models of divine providence under the terms *risk-free* and *risk-taking*. By the term risk-free, Hasker means that God knows the consequences of his own choices and the decisions of his creation. He places Molinism and Augustinianism in this category, as both views support divine foreknowledge. In both views, God knows the decisions that people will make, and how those decisions will impact the future. The difference between the two positions is that Molinism views God's middle knowledge as being acquired before His divine creative decree; Augustinianism

views God as either lacking middle knowledge or acquiring middle knowledge after His divine creative decree. In the second Augustinian option, God acquires middle knowledge by choosing what people would do when placed in certain circumstances. Yet in both Augustinian options, God remains the causal power behind every event in nature.

By the term risk-taking, Hasker means that God does not know the far-reaching consequences of his actions or the actions of his creation. Under this category Hasker puts Open Theism and simple foreknowledge. In Open Theism, God does not know the future, and therefore makes decisions based on probabilities and the present conditions; whatever has the greatest probability of resulting in a good action or effect, God chooses to help bring it about.[1] In simple foreknowledge, God does know the future, but he cannot affect it in any meaningful way. The unchanging nature of the future results from God's infallible belief: if God were to know something prior to its occurrence, and an action or event occurs which contradicts God's foreknowledge, then He would hold a false belief. Since the standard definition of omniscience holds that God knows all true propositions, His beliefs cannot be false, and thus God cannot change the future. The implications of

1. The consensus among Open Theists is that God does not have knowledge of the future because he created humans with libertarian freedom. Open Theists argue that divine foreknowledge is logically incompatible with libertarian freedom; since libertarian freedom is required for moral responsibility and genuinely loving relationships, God creates humans with this freedom so that he can have relationship with his creation. Depending upon the person's defense of Open Theism, God either 1) cannot have knowledge of the future because the future is unknowable, or 2) the future is knowable, but God restricts his knowledge out of love for humanity.

simple foreknowledge are clear: if God created a world, and upon creating the world he foreknew that a man would be brutally murdered, He could not prevent that murder due to His own nature. In this way God can be called "risk-taking"; he created a world knowing that evil could potentially occur that He could not stop.[2]

Drawing from these categories, Hasker argues that certain models of providence can only use certain types of theodicies. In the case of risk-taking models of providence, a general-policy theodicy is the only option available. This makes sense, as the Open Theist would never be able to give specific goods produced or evils averted, since God does not know what will happen in the future. Hasker also argues that risk-free models of providence can only use specific-benefit theodicies. Hasker claims that

> the God of Molinism or Augustinianism has decided to permit the evil in question *in the light of full knowledge of the evil itself and its specific consequences.* It seems, then, most implausible that God would permit the evil simply on the basis of general policies, while *ignoring the particulars surrounding the occurrence of the evil and its consequences* (284).

Using his terminology, Hasker's theodicy may be described as a general-policy theodicy combatting the claim that natural evil disproves the existence of God.

Hasker's Natural Order Theodicy

2. This is the analysis given by Hasker and other Open Theists. David Hunt, who is a proponent of simple foreknowledge, has argued against this conclusion. See his article "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge," *Faith and Philosophy 10*, no. 3 (June 1993): 396-416.

Now that the groundwork has been laid, Hasker's actual argument can be examined. He begins by describing five good structural features of a world. He says that "if it is good that a world should exist with these structural features, it is also justifiable that the natural evils should be allowed to exist; they are, so to speak, the price of admission for the existence of such a world" (288). First, he claims that it is good that there should be a world. The term "world" here means "the sum total of concrete things that exist, other than God if there is a God" (ibid.). This first assertion gives minimal value to existence itself and denies the nihilistic claim that existence has no value. Second, he claims that it is good that there should be a complex, multi-leveled natural world. By this, he means that many different entities and kinds of entities exist, each with varying levels of internal complexity and causal powers, and these entities act within their own causal powers, without interference from a higher power. This great variety would allow for the third good: that a world contains beings that are sentient and rational. Hasker thinks that a good world should be appreciated by its occupants: "…if the world is good, then it is desirable that it be found to be so by its inhabitants, and surely their appreciation of it will require extensive sensory capacities as well as reason, which is needed to enable the evaluation" (290).

Fourth, Hasker believes it is good that the creatures in the world should enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy. If a being has inherent causal capabilities, is sentient, and is rational, then Hasker believes it should have some form of

personal autonomy. Hasker thinks that "to the extent that this is done, the intrinsic worth of the being is more clearly exhibited than it would be were this degree of independence not allowed" (ibid.). Fifth, Hasker thinks that "it is good that there should be an evolving world, a world in which the universe as a whole as well as its component systems develop from within, utilizing their inherent powers and potentialities" (291). While he does not explicitly explain why an evolving world would be good, he quotes Henry Ward Beecher to get his point across:

> If single acts would evince design, how much more a vast universe, that by inherent laws gradually built itself and then created its own plants and animals, a universe so adjusted that it left by the way the poorest things, and steadily wrought toward more complex, ingenious, and beautiful results! Who designed this mighty machine, created matter, gave it its laws, and impressed upon it that tendency which has brought forth almost infinite results on the globe, and wrought them into a perfect system? Design by wholesale is grander than design by retail (Beecher 1885, 114).

Once he establishes these five structural features, Hasker attempts to explain why natural evil must occur in a natural world. He begins with volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis, which all originate from plate tectonics. While these catastrophes do produce massive amounts of destruction, the shifting of tectonic plates creates effects that are necessary for life on earth. These effects include the strong magnetic fields surrounding the earth, and the key transitional points within the evolutionary process that result from volcanic eruptions.

Additionally, Hasker discusses hurricanes, tornadoes, and drought, which are caused by changes in our natural weather system. In response, he says that these

events are natural parts of our ordinary weather cycle. It does not matter if they are detrimental to our overall way of life; nature is indifferent to our wants and desires and does not adapt to our needs. If it did so, then these would not be *natural* laws.

Finally, Hasker tackles the general pain and suffering that animals and humans experience. He responds by concluding that pain and suffering are natural parts of the evolutionary process and help us survive. Death and pain are necessary for evolution to occur:

> Admittedly, great pain is sometimes suffered when the harm is already beyond the point where anything can be done about it. But to insist that pain ought to be present only when it is possible for the harm it signals to be alleviated is to make a demand that surpasses the engineering limitations of the organism (Hasker, 295).

While answering questions about different kinds of natural evil, Hasker also attempts to answer questions about the world as a whole. As an example, a skeptic might ask why God could not make a better natural system than this one; in this proposed system, pleasure would outnumber pain and give us a better overall existence. Hasker gives two different responses. He first claims that we cannot compare the real world to alternative worlds with different natural laws because we don't know what those worlds would be like. The questioner can ask if God could do better, but we don't really know what better natural laws would look like.

Secondly, due to fine-tuning, it seems unlikely that a world that had different natural laws could exist. Fine-tuning shows us that many physical

conditions must occur within an extremely small range of variation; if these values changed a miniscule amount, the universe would not be able to exist. Based off this fact, the idea that a world could contain vastly different natural laws seems extremely unlikely.[3]

With his initial claims being rebutted, the objector may try to shift the blame onto God for the seeming cruelty of nature:

> But if nature can be neither kind nor cruel, should we conclude that cruelty is rather to be attributed to the one who planned and created such a system? Not unless, reversing the judgments we have made up to this point, we are prepared to say that the existence of the world is a bad thing overall—that it would be better that nothing at all should exist (or nothing other than God) than that such a world as this one should be (296).

Because many people are not nihilist, few would say that it would be better that nothing should exist rather than something; thus, this objection seems to fall flat. To conclude the argument, Hasker summarizes his Natural Order Theodicy in syllogistic form:

1. The actual universe is a complex, multi-leveled natural world, containing creatures that are sentient as well as some that are intelligent. The world has developed to its present state through a complex evolutionary process, and enjoys a considerable amount of autonomy in its functioning.
2. The universe so constituted makes possible a large amount of good, both in the order and beauty of the physical universe and in the development and flourishing of a myriad of living creatures. It also unavoidably contains a great deal of suffering and death.

3. One example of fine-tuning would be gravitational forces. If these forces were increased or decreased by even the most miniscule amount, gravity could either crush us or cause us to float off the surface of the earth. There are over 100 different examples of fine-tuning widely recognized by scientists today, which makes this response particularly compelling.

3. There is no good reason for us to suppose that some alternative order of nature, capable of being created by an all-powerful God, would surpass the present universe in its potentiality for good or in its balance of good versus evil.
4. In virtue of 1–3, it is good that God has created this universe; there is no basis for holding God morally at fault for doing so, or for supposing that a perfectly good Creator would have acted differently (298).

Implications of Hasker's Theodicy

Using his theodicy as a foundation for a further point, Hasker asks an important question: due to the non-moral nature of evolution, who is responsible for the gruesome circumstances we find in nature? He points out a National Geographic documentary, where a pack of wolves forms a blockade around a rival pack's den and starves the young cubs to death. How is this kind of brutal behavior allowed to occur? For Hasker, Molinism and Augustinianism provide an insufficient answer:

> For both Augustinians and Molinists, the answer is entirely clear: this particular sequence of events, like every other, is the consequence of God's intentional, specific, and minutely detailed choice of a world to make actual … God, then, *specifically planned and intended* the spider's capture of the moth, the blockade and starvation of the wolf cubs, and many, many other such 'trivial details'. Nothing could be clearer than this, however chilling the consequences as we contemplate the fate of the wolf cubs (300, original emphasis).

Conversely, the God of Open Theism seems to escape the scenario where he intends the suffering of his creation:

> God has planned and brought into being the universe with all of its inherent laws and structure, and has permitted the natural course of events to proceed, but God has *not* specifically 'planned, ordered, provided for, and ensured' each and every event that takes place, including the capture of the

> moth, the starvation of the wolf cubs, and a great many even more unsavory events that disfigure human history. God, indeed, is deeply grieved at many of these events, yet in his gracious wisdom he grants to the creation the degree of autonomy needed to act according to its own nature, and refrains from frequent, intrusive intervention into the course of earthly events (ibid., original emphasis).

Because God does not know the future, he cannot intend the consequences of his actions, which in this case would entail the starvation of young wolf cubs. Therefore, Hasker thinks that Open Theism provides a better fit for his Natural Order Theodicy, and thus has the advantage over Molinism and Augustinianism.

While I do believe that Hasker's critique proves difficult for Augustinianism, I disagree with Hasker's evaluation of Molinism. Instead, I will argue that Molinism provides a better answer to the problem of natural evil and gives real substance to the Natural Order Theodicy.

Which Position Best Handles the Problem of Natural Evil?

To begin, Hasker's insistence that Molinism and Augustinianism cannot use general-policy theodicies seems misguided. To recall, Hasker thinks that the Molinist or Augustinian God could not permit evil based on general policies and "ignore the particulars" (284) surrounding an evil event. However, the Molinist or the Augustinian never says that God would "ignore the particulars"; he merely thinks that God might have a general principle that, in full view of the specific circumstances surrounding a situation, would still justify God permitting that evil. Nothing inherent in Molinism or Augustinianism contradicts this idea.

Furthermore, Hasker never gives evidence as to why God's use of general policies seems "implausible"; he just states his opinion and moves on. Based on this lack of support, the Molinist should be perfectly justified in using general-policy theodicies to defend God's permission of an evil event. Kenneth Perszyk even proposes how God might use middle knowledge when deciding between general strategies:

> By his middle knowledge, he sees which strategies are and aren't open to him … He sees what would result on the condition that he pursue each strategy … He sees what would result from various combinations of natural laws, or from different sets of laws of varying complexity; he sees which ones would allow for the emergence of significant finite free agency, and which would not. He compares the results and picks one or more of them. Far from middle knowledge being incompatible with following general strategies, it's arguable that it gives the notion real substance (Perszyk 1998, 171).

At this point it might be beneficial to clarify middle knowledge and its impact on human freedom. While this paper focuses primarily on Open Theism, Molinism, and natural evil, the laws of nature can impact the circumstances which humans find themselves in, thereby affecting God's middle knowledge. When a Molinist mentions middle knowledge, he or she is referring to God's knowledge of what person P would choose to do in circumstances C. William Lane Craig explains this concept using Peter's denial of Jesus as an illustration:

> By his natural knowledge God knew in the first [logical] moment all the possible things that Peter *could* do if placed in such circumstances. But now in this second [logical] moment he knows what Peter would in fact freely choose to do under such circumstances. This is not because Peter would be

> causally determined by the circumstances to act in this way. No, Peter is entirely free, and under the same circumstances he could choose to act in another way … if it is true that Peter would sin if placed in certain circumstances, it follows that even though a world with identical circumstances in which Peter does not sin is [logically] possible, nevertheless it is not within God's power to create that world (Craig 2000, 130).

God could not create the logically possible world where Peter did not sin because it was not *feasible*. Feasibility denotes whether a world could be actualized based upon a person's free choice; if someone would not choose to perform an action given certain circumstances, then the possible world containing that action is not feasible. Under this definition of feasibility, the future free choices of persons are not causally determined by the circumstances; the circumstances themselves are causally irrelevant to the decision of the person. This means that God's knowledge of these circumstances, called *counterfactuals*, is contingently true:

> [person] *S* could freely decide to refrain from [action] *a* in [circumstance] *C*, so that different counterfactuals could be true and be known by God than those that are. Hence, although it is essential to God that He have middle knowledge, it is not essential to Him to have middle knowledge of those particular propositions which He does in fact know (Craig 1991, 238).

The contingent truth of counterfactuals also provides a rebuttal to theological fatalism. While God does know via middle knowledge what we would do when placed in certain circumstances, this knowledge does not constrain our freedom in any way. If we were to act in a way that contradicted God's knowledge, then He would simply know that we would act that way instead of what He knows now

(Craig 2000, 66-67). On the Molinist scheme, what we choose to do determines God's middle knowledge, and then God's middle knowledge determines what feasible worlds are available for God to make actual.

Moving to the Natural Order Theodicy itself, no part of the argument seems to prohibit the Molinist from adopting it and using it for her position. Indeed, premise 3 seems to gain even greater support on the Molinist scheme, as it can be argued that the actual world is the best feasible world.[4] God, by his middle knowledge, would ensure that the actual world's laws of nature provide the best balance of good versus evil. Of course, this "best balance" would still allow for the free will of human beings, meaning that the only feasible option for God in some situations would be to allow evils to be committed. However, one of the good structural features of a world discussed previously was personal autonomy, and it seems that sacrificing libertarian free will is not a viable option for someone who wants to uphold the idea of moral responsibility. Consequently, if this notion of "best balance" is in fact the case, then premise 3 is much better supported on the Molinist scheme.

4. This should not be confused with the best possible world, as this is a separate notion. A best possible world is the best logically possible world; a best feasible world is the best world God is capable of actualizing considering the free choices of human beings. In a series of lectures at Aalborg University on the Problem of Evil, William Lane Craig gives a good distinction between these two ideas.. A video of these lectures may be found at www.reasonablefaith.org/media/the-problem-of-suffering-and-evil-aalborg-university.

Additionally, the defenses which Hasker uses to rebut potential objections could be adopted by the Molinist. The Molinist could insist that natural events which cause destruction of human and animal life are necessary for the improvement and progression of life on earth. Additionally, the Molinist could argue that logically possible worlds with different sets of natural laws were not feasible for God, thereby bolstering Hasker's fine-tuning argument. The only defense that would not work is Hasker's denial of foreknowledge, which directly contradicts the Molinist's acceptance of divine foreknowledge.

Finally, we move to Hasker's primary critique of Molinism. Throughout his essay, Hasker particularly emphasizes the idea of the Molinist God intending evil events to occur. He thinks that Open Theism removes any hint of God's intentions being involved with evil, and thus he escapes criticism. Ironically, it seems that Molinism actually gives the intention/permission distinction real meaning, and that Open Theism leaves God with no intention or permission. With deterministic positions like Augustinianism, it becomes exceedingly difficult to argue that God does not intend each occurrence of evil, as on this view God "ordains" all things to occur.

In the Molinist scheme, due to the acceptance of libertarian free will, the distinction between intention and permission may still be intact. The Molinist can argue that

> God's general concurrence is intrinsically neutral or indifferent; it's rendered inefficacious (in the case of an evil effect) by the free secondary cause. At the time of action, Molinists will insist that it's really possible *for us* to refrain (freely) from the evil action, even though it's not possible *for God* that we do otherwise than he foreknew (Perszyk, 169).

If this neutral support does allow for libertarian free will, then God can truly be said to not intend evil, but simply permit evil to occur. Thus, if a Molinist can show that the intention/permission distinction holds in moral evil, then this same distinction should hold in cases of natural evil as well. The Molinist could argue that some natural evils are the result of free secondary causes. This way, God could permit these secondary causes to run their course due to a general strategy or specific benefit resulting from the event.

In the Open Theist scheme, however, God seems to lack both intention and permission of evil:

> Being able to say that God permits evil implies that God could have prevented it. Being able to prevent evil, in turn, implies that one had sufficient knowledge about it and power to prevent it. If God's omniscience doesn't (or can't) include foreknowledge of free human actions, there may be a sense in which God cannot even be said to permit our evil free actions (Perszyk, 170).

If God does not intend or permit evil events, it seems that God is just an ignorant deity who waits for bad things to happen, and then rushes in to clean up the aftermath.

A Fatal Dilemma for Open Theism

From these previous critiques of Hasker, it seems that Molinism is, at the very least, on the same playing field as Open Theism when responding to the problem of natural evil. Additionally, Perszyk provides what may be a decisive point in favor of Molinism. He suggests that Open Theism is in a fatal dilemma in relation to God and his probability-based decision making.[5]

As a test case, imagine the God of Open Theism. He has perfect knowledge of the past and present, but can only know what would probably happen in the future. Hasker argues that God cannot know the future because it is logically impossible for anyone, including God, to know the future. Suppose God thought it was highly likely, due to present conditions and His probability calculations, that a devastating hurricane would strike the coast of Florida in the near future. If God permitted that hurricane to occur or brought about the circumstances in which that hurricane would likely occur, then Open Theism would be more vulnerable to Hasker's own critiques of Molinism.[6] Because humans can predict weather patterns with good accuracy, even though we are finite creatures, God could have known with confidence that this hurricane would occur, especially when He has perfect knowledge of the past and present. In this case it seems that God at least permitted, if not intended, the evil to occur, which Hasker wants to avoid. Moreover, suppose

5. My argument is an adaptation of Perszyk's argument in "Molinism and Theodicy," 174-175. In his article, he addresses moral evil; I've used his core critique but substituted in an example of natural evil.

6. Even though God's permission of evil seems questionable on the Open Theist model, I will give Hasker the benefit of the doubt here.

the probabilities were lower than 50 percent, but still "non-negligible," to use Perszyk's term (174). Even then, God might still be blameworthy for taking an unnecessary risk, considering the likelihood of the hurricane.

To avoid his own critiques of Molinism, Hasker would have to decrease, if not entirely eliminate, God's ability to make probability calculations. If God did not know as much about the future, then Hasker could avoid the charge of God intending evil. However, the less God knows about the future, the more it looks like God is blindly making decisions. If God is choosing to act without the proper information, then God seems increasingly reckless and our confidence in His providence will dwindle away. It seems then that Hasker has two choices: either accept that his conception of God is closer to the Molinist conception than he would like to admit and accordingly provide a clarified concept of the intention/permission distinction, or accept that God recklessly risks the well-being of humanity for what He thinks is a better future. If he accepts the first option, then he must show how God can accurately be described as "permitting" evils if He does not have divine foreknowledge. If he accepts the second option, then the God of Open Theism is not worthy of worship.

At this point, Hasker might feel cheated by my argument. He might think that I have glossed over the controversy surrounding Molinism; this is understandable, considering Hasker has been a well-known advocate of the

"grounding" objection to Molinism.[7] I think he would be partially right, in that a discussion of the objections to Molinism goes beyond the scope of this paper. Yet I think this response would also miss the point of my argument. The thrust of my critique has been the following: assuming Open Theism and Molinism have no fatal flaws in their understanding of divine foreknowledge or providence, which position provides the best response to the problem of evil? Given that assumption, I think Hasker must face the dilemma I explained above. Of course, he could argue that counterfactuals of freedom are ungrounded, and consequently that Molinism is false; nevertheless, this would do nothing to dismiss the dilemma I presented above. Thus, given the assumption that neither position is fatally flawed, I think my conclusion still stands: Molinism provides a better response to the problem of natural evil.

Conclusion

In this paper, I began by expounding William Hasker's Natural Order Theodicy, starting with his definition and categories of both theodicies and models of providence. I then moved on to Hasker's actual argument, explaining how a structurally good world can give God justification for allowing natural evil to occur. After dealing with potential objections and presenting Hasker's critique of

7. The "grounding" objection is the argument that counterfactuals of freedom do not have any ground which causes them to be true. For Hasker's original formulation of this argument, see "A Refutation of Middle Knowledge," *Noûs 20*, no. 4 (December 1986): 545-557. For the revised version of the argument, see "Middle Knowledge: A Refutation Revisited," *Faith and Philosophy 12*, no. 2 (April 1995): 223-236.

Molinism, I proceeded to show that Molinism readily adopts Hasker's argument and provides it with further support. Subsequently, I showed that Open Theism has real problems in its conception of divine foreknowledge while simultaneously arguing for Molinism's substantive intention/permission distinction. In the end, it seems that the God of Open Theism is a reckless risk-taker, while the God of Molinism is sovereign, powerful, and untamed.

Yet this should not be the end of the discussion; more nuance is needed in the Molinist response to natural evil that reaches beyond the scope of this essay. Should the Molinist promote a "best feasible world" argument? Can one prove that there are free secondary causes in nature? If so, how similar are they to freedom found in human agents? These questions could have a serious impact on discussions of the problem of evil, and deserve to be answered. Hasker presumptuously sounded the death knell on Molinist responses to the problem of evil; in reality, there is much fruitful discussion yet to come.

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