

Human Nature in Theistic and Evolutionary Perspectives

with Michael L. Spezio, “Social Neuroscience and Theistic Evolution: Intersubjectivity, Love, and the Social Sphere”; David Fergusson, “Humans Created According to the Imago Dei: An Alternative Proposal”; Thomas F. Tracy, “Divine Purpose and Evolutionary Processes”; Thomas Jay Oord, “The Divine Spirit as Causal and Personal”; and John W. Cooper, “Created for Everlasting Life: Can Theistic Evolution Provide an Adequate Christian Account of Human Nature?”

THE DIVINE SPIRIT AS CAUSAL AND PERSONAL

by Thomas Jay Oord

Abstract. Theists in general and Christians in particular have good grounds for affirming divine action in relation to twenty-first-century science. Although humans cannot perceive with their five senses the causation—both divine and creaturely—at work in our world, they have reasons to believe God acts as an efficient, but never sufficient, cause in creation. The essential kenosis option I offer overcomes liabilities in other kenosis proposals, while accounting for a God who acts personally, consistently, persuasively, and yet in diversely efficacious ways. We can reasonably infer that the love, beauty, and truth expressed in creation derive from divine and creaturely causation.

Keywords: causation; Christ; coercion; creation; divine action; intervention; kenosis; love; nature; open theism; process; relational; Alfred North Whitehead

Most Christians believe Jesus Christ provides the clearest revelation of God’s nature. Jesus reveals these clues in his life, teachings, miracles, compassion, death, and resurrection. Although Christians believe other clues about divine action are present in creation because God acts as initial and continual Creator, they try to be especially attuned to the revelation of God manifest in Jesus and recorded in Scripture (e.g., Deane-Drummond 2009).

In a biblical passage familiar to many Christians, Jesus says the following: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John

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3:8 NRSV). Following this, Jesus tells an inquiring scholar he must be “born again.” When the scholar asks how an adult could return to its mother’s womb, Jesus says this second birth derives from the Spirit. Bible translators render the Greek word, *pneuma*, as “wind” or “Spirit” in this passage. The word refers to moving air (wind), to the divine Spirit, or both.

This passage about wind/Spirit might contribute to constructing a theory of divine action consonant with Christian scripture and much twenty-first-century science. I offer the outlines of such a theory in this essay. While the Christian tradition greatly influences my thoughts on these issues, adherents of other theistic traditions will find my proposals applicable to their own work, at least to some degree. The action of the wind/Spirit offers clues to how we might best conceive of God’s action in the universe.

PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

Research in science and theology is full of philosophical presuppositions. Unfortunately, many scientists and theologians fail to identify these presuppositions explicitly or examine them carefully. Very few engage the discipline of philosophy of science and the metaphysical issues pertaining thereto. Exceptions do exist, however (e.g., Clayton 2006; Dodds 2012; Murphy 1990). While a fully adequate engagement of philosophy of science is beyond the scope of this paper, a few brief comments seem necessary.

Philosopher of science Imre Lakatos is a favorite of some who think about presuppositions and philosophy of science (e.g., Clayton 1989; Murphy 1990). While some appreciate the particulars of Lakatos’s work and others do not, the main idea Lakatos (1978) advances pertains to the guiding principles of what he called “research programs.” Such programs identify presuppositions and hypotheses both essential and nonessential to the scientific work they support. Research programs are to be judged by their fruitfulness, in light of their essential hypotheses.

Lakatos’s work reminds scholars that scientists make assumptions about the world, and many of those assumptions cannot be proven. Scientists often unconsciously adopt assumptions *a priori*. For instance, the vast majority of scientists presuppose some metaphysical view of cause and effect, but they do not think it necessary to prove this causal metaphysical presupposition before doing their scientific work. Scientists also presuppose that some explanations are better than others, but they do not usually attempt to prove in advance the values that support their claim about what is “better.” They simply assume it is appropriate to think some explanations are better than others, based on various criteria.

The Lakatos research program also helps us avoid attempting the impossible: to prove with certainty one’s metaphysical presuppositions. Alfred North Whitehead points out the problems with such certainty:

Philosophy has been haunted by the unfortunate notion that its method is dogmatically to indicate premises which are severally clear, distinct, and certain; and to erect upon those premises a deductive system of thought. But the accurate expression of the final generalities is the goal of the discussion and not its origin . . . Metaphysical categories are not dogmatic statements of the obvious; they are tentative formulations of the ultimate generalities ([1929] 1978, 8).

Metaphysical presuppositions, in other words, are tentative formulations even when explicitly noted. And everyone either tacitly or explicitly adopts some set of metaphysical presuppositions (Polanyi 1962).

I refer to Lakatos and Whitehead to justify my endeavor to talk, in general, about the relations between science and theology and to speculate, in particular, about divine action. While I think theists can offer convincing arguments for why it is plausible God exists, I set aside such arguments for this paper. Instead, I assume God exists and proceed as if this is so.

Perhaps more importantly, I offer tentative formulations of what *kind* of God exists and *how* this God acts. I speculate about God's nature and how this nature and God's relation to creation influences God's actions. I hope to secure greater plausibility for particular ideas about God that I find fruitful for the science-and-theology interface. I believe the result is a research program potentially fruitful for thinking well about contemporary science and divine action.

In what follows, I argue for a particular formulation of divine causation. Some aspects of this proposal draw from what Jesus said to the scholar, when he described the divine Spirit's action as analogous to wind. Others rely upon inferences from particular biblical passages, creaturely experience, scientific theories, and attempts at rational consistency. The results are, as Whitehead might put it, tentative formulations attempting to give accurate expressions to ultimate generalities.

GOD'S CAUSAL ROLE IN THE WORLD

Identifying the Spirit's causal activity is difficult for a number of reasons. Those who believe in God but wish to sidestep these difficulties sometimes argue we should not regard divine action an efficient cause in the world. Some worry this "reduces" God to the status of a creature (e.g., Dodds 2012). God acts as a formal or final cause, some conjecture, and science does not deal with such causes, at least explicitly (e.g., Yong 2011). Some suggest divine causation is an entirely separate category that bears little or no resemblance to creaturely causation (e.g., Dodds 2012). And some Christian theologians even argue God causally influences our present circumstances proleptically from a future in which God resides (e.g., Pannenberg 1969). I find these theories about divine causation implausible or incoherent.

By contrast, I argue God acts causally in many ways. But I especially intend to argue God acts as an objective, efficient cause in the world, in the sense of a prior event concretely influencing the coming to be of a subsequent event (e.g., Russell 2008). This argument moves the discussion more squarely into the realm typically reserved for scientific explanation. This move seems advisable, in my view, not only for what it means for discussions about the relation between scientific and theological explanations. It also helps us make better sense of the biblical witness to God's activity (and the witness found in other sacred texts), which seems at least sometimes objective and not merely subjective. Referring to God's efficient causation seems advisable when accounting for testimonials of those who experience God's activity in ordinary or extraordinary ways.

The particular way God acts as an objective efficient cause distinguishes my proposal from others. The following sections briefly describe my proposal.

Causation, Divine Causation, and Sensory Perception. The passage attributed to Jesus about the Spirit/wind points to at least three general issues important for my proposal: causation, evidence, and perception. Jesus uses the wind analogy to describe how we might have evidence of causation but not know adequately the efficient causes at play. We hear the wind, says Jesus, even though we don't perceive precisely its origin or future. In experiencing the wind, we may feel its impact on our bodies. And we may see objects swirling around us presumably stirred up by the flow of air. This evidence is perceptible with our five senses, and we can plausibly infer the wind is a causal force at play. But we cannot perceive causation itself with our senses.

Philosophers of science have often admitted we cannot perceive causation—not to mention divine causation—with our five senses. David Hume famously said we perceive “before” evidence and “after” evidence as constant conjunction ([1748] 1975). We may feel compelled to infer a causal link between the two, but we cannot perceive causation directly with sensory perception. Interestingly, Hume's claims about causation fit what Jesus says about the wind having causal force and yet our senses being incapable of perceiving this causation directly.

The use of wind also fits what Christians (and many other theists) have said about God as Spirit: our five senses cannot perceive God. In light of God's spiritual composition, theists throughout the centuries have sometimes called God “the soul of the universe,” “the holy Ghost,” “a spiritual being,” “the Great Spirit,” etc. Both causation itself and the divine Spirit, therefore, are imperceptible by our five senses.

Theists influenced by John Locke and the empiricist philosophical tradition have sometimes proposed ways to talk about God's direct causal activity through perception not based upon the five senses. Theologian

John Wesley, for instance, argues that at least humans (and perhaps all creatures) have a sixth set of senses: spiritual senses. God as Spirit can directly communicate to creatures that have spiritual sensory apparatus ([1743] 1987, 56–57).

More recently, scholars influenced by Whitehead argue creatures possess the capacity for nonsensory perception of God in what Whitehead calls “the mode of causal efficacy” ([1929] 1978, 169). All aspects of the human body and all creatures perceive God nonsensorily through creaturely “prehension” ([1929] 1978, 21). This argument relies on an ontology speculating that all entities have some measure of perceptive capacity, because all entities have at least some modicum of experience (Griffin 2000, 2001). Speculation about nonsensory perception offers attractive possibilities for theists trying to account for direct experiences of God and attractive possibilities for philosophers of science trying to account for self-causation in creatures (Oord 2010a, ch. 6).

In sum, we do well to remember the following: (1) the widely held view that causation itself is not perceptible by our five senses; (2) we must make inferences about causal forces based on events we perceive with our five senses; and (3) theists believe God is a Spirit whose spiritual composition as an entity (most Christians would say “person” or “Triune person”) is not available to sensory perception. It should be noted that this third claim does not discount testimonies by those who say they have “heard” from or “tasted” God. But it does mean these testimonies use sensory words in nonliteral ways in the attempt to account for God’s causal influence, or what theists typically call “revelation.”

God Present to All and Causally Influencing All. Like many theists, most Christians argue God is present to all creation. God is omnipresent. Divine omnipresence need not be construed as pantheism, however, because God can be present to all others without literally *being* all. Christians typically distinguish between the Creator and creation, and the phrase, “being present to all,” helps overcome the pantheistic connotations of the more popular phrase, “God is everywhere.” God being present to all, of course, includes being present to the most and least complex creatures. We might say that in God, creation lives and moves and has its being (Acts 17:28), because God is directly and immediately present to everything.

I propose that God is not only present to all, but God exerts causal influence upon all in various ways. To use contemporary terms, God exerts direct, indirect, top-down, lateral, and bottom up causal influence. This multilevel causation comes in many forms, because it is multifaceted. But multilevel efficient causation does not need to be construed—and I do not construe it—as entailing sufficient causation. Theories of multilevel efficient causation are compatible with creaturely freedom, agency, and

indeterminism, so long as efficient causation is not understood to entail unilateral determination.

Affirming God's omnipresence and omni-influence helps overcome key problems in contemporary science and theology discussions. One common problem, known as the "God of the gaps," has an epistemic and ontological form. The epistemic form says that, except in some cases, we can explain particular events entirely through scientific statements. We only need refer to God to plug gaps in our knowledge when we encounter events science cannot completely explain. The ontological form of the God of the gaps argument says that, except in some cases, creaturely forces alone cause events to occur. Divine causation in the natural causal gaps is occasionally necessary, however, to cause events. The problem for theism arises as what were once regarded gaps are given plausible naturalistic explanations.

To say that God is present to and exerts causal influence upon all creatures overcomes both forms of the God of the gaps problem. Because God is a causal influence upon all, explanations purporting to be sufficient but that do not include divine causation are erroneous. A sufficient explanation would need to account for all causal factors, with God being one such factor. In principle, therefore, all fully adequate explanations of events will include reference to divine causation. Both epistemic and ontological accounts of creaturely causality require divine and creaturely activity.

In sum, I believe we should regard God's causation as involving God being present to and influencing as an efficient cause all entities that exist.

God as Nonintervening and Noncoercive. The question of divine intervention persists in the science and religion dialogue. An impressive number of scholars explore the possibility of noninterventionist, objective divine action—"NIODA" (Russell 2008; Wildman 2004). What is meant by "intervention," however, is often not clarified by less-involved participants in the conversation. The word, "intervene," suggests coming into a situation from the outside. When used in reference to God, "intervention" suggests that God enters a situation from the outside, a situation previously devoid of God's presence. This view is problematic for several reasons (Oord 2010c).

My claim in the previous section—that God is always present to and always influencing all others—rejects this understanding of divine intervention. God never intervenes from the outside, because God is directly present to all, all the time. God never "interferes," as if God would not have always, already been influential. Thinking about the universe as causally closed—a universe purportedly persisting without divine influence—fuels much interventionist and interference language. I reject such notions of causal closure. God never intervenes from the outside, because God is always present to all. And the universe is never causally closed to divine action.

Some also use “divine intervention” in a second way. This sense has more to do with God acting as sufficient cause or unilateral determiner. This use of “intervention” refers to God’s total control—ontological coercion—as a sufficient cause of some event. Those who talk about God intervening, in this second way, are saying God determines unilaterally—absolutely and completely—a creaturely outcome or entity.¹

I propose that God is best conceived as never acting in this second kind of interventionist way. In this, I join a growing number of scholars in the science and religion discussion who reject interventionist coercion (e.g., Barbour 2002; Clayton 2008; Griffin 2001; Keller 2003; Murphy and Ellis 1996; Polkinghorne 1996; Russell 2008). God does not coerce, if “coerce” is defined in the ontological sense of total control, unilateral determination, or sufficient cause. As one always present to and influencing others, however, God acts as a necessary cause in the coming to be and persistence of all things. Nothing can exist without God’s creative influence, and all creation depends upon God’s providentially causal care. But God never—and, I believe, cannot ever—coerce creatures.

One of my presuppositions is that all creatures are, at a minimum, ontologically indeterminate. To say it another way, no creatures are entirely controlled by external forces, agents, or laws. I believe complex creatures are more than indeterminate; they possess libertarian freedom. Such freedom is constrained, of course, by the creature’s environment, genetics, and other factors. But it is genuine freedom nonetheless. The degree of freedom among the least complex creatures is difficult to infer. But I claim that even less complex creatures possess agency God provides, because God provides at least some agency to all creatures. Neither laws, nor genes, nor God can entirely control such creatures by overriding their agency completely.

In other published writings, I provide extensive arguments for why I think we best think of God as incapable of coercion, in the ontological sense (Oord 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). My argument says that God’s essential nature is love, and God always acts lovingly. Divine love involves granting freedom/agency to others. Because God’s nature is love, God cannot fail to grant, override, or withdraw this freedom/agency at any time. I call this view, “essential kenosis,” because it says God’s self-limitation derives from God’s eternally unchanging nature.

My view differs from what many in the science and religion discussion call “divine self-limitation” (Moltmann 2001; Murphy and Ellis 1996). This voluntary form of kenosis, or what might be called “conditional kenosis,” views God’s self-limitation as chosen or arbitrary. Voluntary divine self-limitation says God freely chooses to be self-limited, but God could choose otherwise (Wildman 2007). Whether God gives freedom and/or agency is not determined by God’s nature, says this form of divine

self-limitation. Instead, God's giving of freedom is conditioned only by God's free choice.

Essential kenosis, by contrast, affirms *involuntary* self-limitation, whereby any constraints God may have derive from God's essential nature. This theory is rightly deemed "self-limitation," because external forces do not impose constraints on God. Essential kenosis agrees with John Polkinghorne that robust theology affirms "nothing imposes conditions on God from the outside" (2001, 96). But essential kenosis is involuntary, in the sense that God's loving nature compels God's loving gifts of freedom and/or agency to creatures. Essential kenosis says God necessarily loves creation, because God's nature essentially includes the attribute of love for creatures. God must love, and God cannot do otherwise.

I find support in the Christian scriptures for the essential kenosis notion that God cannot do some things. God cannot lie, for instance, says the writer of Hebrews (6:18; also see Numbers 23:19 and Titus 1:2). God cannot be tempted, says James (1:12). God cannot gather us when we are unwilling to be gathered (Luke 13:34). These and other biblical passages fall under the Apostle Paul's more general claim that God "cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). Biblical authors say God cannot do some things.

Essential kenosis says God's limitations derive from God's own nature. To put it in popular vernacular: God must be God and cannot be other. My own addition is that God's nature of love means God necessarily gives freedom and/or agency to others. Because God is love, God must do this. This gift derives from God's own nature, and God "cannot deny himself." God cannot fail to provide, withdraw, or override the freedom and/or agency God lovingly provides.

This view of kenosis overcomes the theoretical aspect of the problem of evil, an aspect that plagues theologies affirming voluntary divine self-limitation. God is not culpable for failing to prevent genuine evil, according to essential kenosis, because even as an efficient cause God is unable to prevent such evil. Essential kenosis also rejects interventionist language in the first sense noted above, because no explanation of a phenomenon can be complete if reference to God's action is missing. It rejects metaphysical naturalism, while providing an alternative to methodological naturalism that is not supernaturalistic, in the sense of God superseding all creaturely causation (Griffin 2000).

In sum, the notions that (1) God does not intervene because God is always already present and (2) God cannot coerce because God is essentially loving provides key elements in a theory of divine action suitable for reconciling theoretical conflicts between theology and science.

Personal and Various Efficacious. The final piece in my argument for God's causal role in the universe builds upon my previous proposals. I have

argued thus far that God acts as an objective, efficient cause in the world. We cannot perceive this causation with our five senses, because we cannot perceive causation itself, and we cannot perceive an immaterial Spirit with our sensory perception. God is like the wind. The divine Spirit is present to and influences all entities in the universe—from the most complex to the least. Out of love, God gives freedom and/or agency to all creatures. As a necessary and efficient cause, the Spirit neither intervenes from the outside nor coerces by acting as a sufficient cause. God cannot do so, because God's eternal nature is love.

What I have argued thus far might fit to some degree with the view that God is an impersonal force field in the universe. This God might be called, to use Paul Tillich's words, the "ground of being" (1948, 57) or "being itself" (1951, 205). This impersonal causality might be what Whitehead early in his career called the "principle of concretion" (1960, 157). I believe Christians can affirm much more than what Tillich and Whitehead do with these terms.

I affirm the classic Christian view that God is personal. By "personal," I do not mean the divine Spirit has a localized body similar to humans. I mean God both influences others and others influence God. Many theologians call God "relational" to describe this view, because God *moves* others and others *move* God (Montgomery et al. 2012). In short, God is personal, because God gives and receives in relation to others.

I propose that being personal for God means causally influencing others, in each moment, by calling them to actualize possible ways of being. God does this as an efficient cause involving aspects of what Aristotle says comprise final, formal, and material causes (McKeon 1941). God calls for and seeks creaturely response. While God provides all relevant possibilities in this call when causally influencing creatures, God encourages creatures to choose those possibilities that contribute to the good of the whole. God cares supremely about the common good, and creatures are called to join in promoting that good. Choosing what is good leads to what Jesus calls "eternal life" in John 3:16, following the verse about the Spirit/wind I noted earlier. "Eternal life" refers more to a high quality of life here and now and less to a quantity of life in the future.

God's calls to creatures take many forms. Which forms God presents is determined in large part by what creatures have done in previous moments. God takes into consideration the moment-by-moment actions of all others when deciding how best to encourage creatures to act for the common good (*agape*) (Oord 2008). God's calls are influenced by what is actually possible, given each creature's inherent capabilities and relations with the external environment (*philia*). God encourages creatures to actualize possibilities that reflect God's primary desire (*eros*)—promoting overall well-being (Oord 2010a).

The efficacy of God's activity hinges upon several factors. One is the appropriateness of creaturely response to God's calls. Creaturely response plays a central role in determining how effective God is in the world (Yong 2012). God's persuasive causation is highly effective when creatures respond well. Positive responses express love, beauty, and truth in their fullest possible expressions, given the circumstances and actors involved. But divine causation is less effective when creatures respond poorly. Sin and/or evil result from poor responses.

The effectiveness of God's activity also hinges upon the diverse forms of God's calls. Complex creatures, given particular circumstances, encounter more sophisticated forms of possibilities than less complex creatures. The forms offered more complex creatures vary widely from those God offers less complex creatures. This relative diversity accounts for the uniformity of action occurring at the molecular level, for instance, and also the wide diversity of actions humans and other complex creatures express.

The possibilities God offers Mother Teresa, for instance, differ greatly from the possibilities available to a garden worm. While worms in large numbers can greatly affect the good of creation, no single worm has the capacity for goodness (or evil) Mother Teresa possesses. The possibilities at the atomic level are even less wide, accounting for the acute consistency of action at that level. In sum, the effectiveness of divine action is determined not only by how well Mother Teresa and the worm respond to God's efficient causal calls. It also depends on the particular forms—among the possible relevant forms—God offers relative to the past and present situation and that God encourages creatures to actualize (Oord 2010a).

Although God offers various possibilities to creatures, God always exerts the greatest influence possible to persuade creatures to act in ways that promote overall well-being. God does not willingly decide to be more or less influential, because God's nature of love involves God steadfastly loving all to the maximum possible. God's love always runs full-throttle, to use an engine analogy. God never completely controls others, but God never takes a holiday from expressing love to the utmost.

The diversity of efficacy—along with the uniformity of God's intentions to promote love—account for the miracles we see today and that are reported in Scripture. The miracle of second birth, which Jesus describes to the scholar in John's gospel, is possible because of God's loving, diversely formed, efficient causation and appropriate creaturely responses. So-called "natural" miracles can also be appropriately described as God exerting efficient but never sufficient causation at various levels of creation. Acts of "special providence" do not require God to act as sufficient cause. Even in these special miracles, God does not intervene coercively to determine outcomes unilaterally. The novel or unexpected forms of these events may surprise us or strike us as extraordinary, however, as creatures cooperate with God's loving causal influence (Oord 2010c).

SUMMARY

In this essay, I have argued that theists in general and Christians in particular have good grounds for affirming divine action—understood as I have briefly outlined—in relation to twenty-first-century science. Humans cannot perceive with their five senses the causation—both divine and creaturely—at work in our world. But the love, beauty, and truth theists witness can reasonably be inferred to derive from both divine and creaturely causation. Theists can rightly rejoice when creatures respond well to the efficient, causal calls of the Spirit—present in both ordinary and extraordinary events—to express love, beauty, and truth in diverse ways.

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NOTES

1. Although I do not have space to develop my thoughts here, I believe what we typically call “laws of nature” are compatible with the theological notion of divine providence. My view says God does not act providentially or provide laws of nature on an entirely voluntary basis. Instead, I think God’s diverse providential working and any laws of nature express God’s eternal nature of love. This is also part of my essential kenosis proposal (Oord 2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

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