

1 Introduction

“Open theism,” as it is now standardly called, is a monotheistic model of God and of divine providence that goes back at least 1,600 years. It remained a small minority position until the publication of Pinnock *et al.* (1994), which generated a firestorm of controversy, particularly in the North American evangelical community (Schmid, 2021: 1–9). That book and the controversy it generated brought open theism to the wide attention of philosophical and theological scholars. Within the contexts of philosophy of religion and analytic theology, open theism is now recognized as a major player alongside other competing models of God and divine providence, such as theistic determinism, Molinism, and process theism.

Roughly stated, open theism holds that the future of creation is open-ended, not just from a creaturely perspective, but from God’s as well. Open theism thus challenges the widespread theological idea that God has “exhaustive definite foreknowledge” (EDF).¹ Exhaustive definite foreknowledge has two components. First, EDF says God has exhaustive and infallible knowledge of the future. This is about the *nature* of God’s knowledge, namely, its scope (exhaustive) and quality (infallible). Second, EDF says that the future as God knows it is exhaustively definite. In other words, there is a unique *future* – a unique and complete linear extension of the actual past and present – that shall come to pass. This is about the *content* of God’s knowledge, namely, that the future God foreknows includes or specifies a fully determinate future timeline, the “unique actual future” (UAF). Open theists reject EDF by denying one or both of its components, with some open theists saying there is no UAF but rather a future of branching possibilities and others saying there is a UAF, but that God does not and perhaps cannot know it. In either case, open theists hold that the future is open-ended from God’s perspective and by God’s design to facilitate two-way interrelationality between God and free creatures.

As this is a short Element about open theism and because I have much to say on the topic, I have to be selective in my focus. Because I am a philosopher by training and not a biblical scholar or systematic theologian, I focus on open theism as a philosophical model of divine providence. My primary goal is to provide a philosophically rigorous articulation and defense of open theism. Due to space constraints, I have skipped over some issues (e.g., open theism’s practical relevance for religious life) and treated other issues (e.g., open theism’s relevance for the problem of evil) more briefly than I would have liked.

In Section 2 I explain what open theism is. I define its core tenets, distinguish its most important variants, contrast it with other models of divine providence,

¹ The EDF phrase was coined by Boyd (1997: 49–50, 304).

and finally summarize the history of open theism in relation to the great monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In Section 3 I develop a systematic case *for* open theism over against its main competitors. I start by surveying six categories of biblical passages that suggest God faces a providentially and/or epistemically open future. I then present a philosophical case for future contingency and creaturely libertarian freedom (*pace* theistic determinism), culminating in reflections on the problem of moral evil. Finally, I target models that attempt to combine EDF and future contingency (Molinism, simple foreknowledge, etc.) by arguing that the mere existence of a UAF is incompatible with future contingency. This implies not only the falsity of EDF (given future contingency) but also the untenability of UAF-affirming versions of open theism.

In Section 4 I discuss and rebut four common objections to open theism. First, that it conflicts with perfect being theology and thus “diminishes” God (Ware, 2000). Second, that open theism is too risky for, despite the best intentions, an open theistic God could “bodge” things up quite badly (Mawson, 2019). Third, that open theism cannot make adequate sense of scriptural prophecy. And fourth, that it is too radical a departure from the mainstream theological tradition. In rebuttal I argue that open theism is compatible with perfect being theology and that arguments to the contrary are unconvincing, that reflections on the ethics of risk-taking and God’s resources for managing creation effectively defuse the charge that open theism is too risky, that open theism can plausibly accommodate scriptural prophecy, and that open theism should qualify as an admissible theological opinion even on a robustly normative view of the early Christian theological tradition.²

2 Open Theism Explained

Open theism is (a) a monotheistic version of *theism*. What makes open theism *open* is that it affirms both (b) the open-endedness of God’s creation and (c) the intrinsic openness or responsiveness of God to that creation. This, however, is only a rough characterization. We need to flesh out (a)–(c) to make it precise enough for assessment and comparison with competing models. To that end, I begin by articulating open theism’s hard core, which I call *mere* open theism (cf. Rhoda, 2008). Following that, I distinguish several important variants of open theism, compare open theism with other models of divine providence, and finally give a brief historical overview.

² I thank Elijah Hess, Ryan Mullins, John Sanders, Patrick Todd, and two referees for generous comments.

2.1 Mere Open Theism

Proponents and critics of open theism frequently generalize about what open theism is or entails. Very often these generalizations lack precision and accuracy. For example, while the claim that the God of open theism “lacks comprehensive foreknowledge” (Anderson, 2019: 121) aptly describes what *some* open theists believe, many open theists would emphatically deny it, holding instead that God does have comprehensive foreknowledge. They would just add that the *content* of God’s foreknowledge is not what EDF proponents suppose. The issue, they say, is not *whether* God has comprehensive foreknowledge but *what it means* to have comprehensive foreknowledge. Similarly, many discussions about God’s knowledge of “the future” assume this refers to a unique actual future (UAF), which begs the question against open theists who deny there is any such thing. It’s not that they deny that anything can properly be *called* “the future.” Rather, they take “the future” to refer to a branching array of possibilities (Rhoda *et al.*, 2006). To have a productive discussion of open theism – its variants, merits, and challenges – without different sides talking past each other, it is necessary that we define the essentials of open theism before diving into polemical matters.

For starters, open theism is a version of *theism*. More exactly, it’s a version of what I call *minimal monotheism*:

- (1) Minimal monotheism =_{def.} There is exactly one God who is personal, who exists necessarily, and to whom all other beings ultimately owe their existence. God is essentially maximally excellent with respect to goodness, power, and knowledge. God freely created the world *ex nihilo* and can unilaterally intervene in it.

This is a standard monotheistic account such as would be endorsed by nearly all Jews, Christians, and Muslims who have thought carefully about God. Most such theists would want to say quite a bit *more* about God, but nearly all would agree with this *as far as it goes*. By “exists necessarily” I mean merely that God never began to exist and cannot cease existing. By “essentially maximally excellent” I mean that God essentially excels in goodness, power, and knowledge to the greatest metaphysically possible degree given only the need for internal consistency (Nagasawa, 2017). In the final sentence I specify creation *ex nihilo* and God’s unilateral power to intervene to *exclude* process theism, which standardly holds that God and the world process always coexist in a metaphysically necessary symbiosis, with God only able to influence the world process “persuasively” and never “coercively” or unilaterally (Cobb & Griffin, 1976). In contrast, the founders of the modern open theism movement have been clear that, while open theism sits somewhere between the classical

theism of high medieval orthodoxy and process theism, they mean to stay squarely on the classical side with respect to God's power over creation.³ As I put it elsewhere, "open theists have generally seen their view as a relatively *conservative* modification or correction of the classical tradition . . . for the purpose of resolving what they see as otherwise irresolvable . . . tensions within that tradition" (Rhoda, 2008: 226).

The next five tenets are what put the "open" in open theism. Three of them belong to the hard core of mere open theism. The other two would be endorsed by *most* open theists, but I leave them out of the core to accommodate versions of open theism that might not affirm them.

These tenets define five types of openness using the concept of a "future" (note the indefinite article), that is, a complete, linear extension of the actual past and present. An *abstract* future is a logically consistent *proposition* fully describing a complete, linear way events could unfold from the present on.⁴ A *concrete* future is a complete, linear sequence of post-present *events*. Normally I have abstract futures in mind. When I need to speak of concrete futures, I describe them as such. Further, when I speak of *the* future (note the definite article) I mean the collection of futures compatible with all future-relevant facts, where a "future-relevant fact" is anything actual that bears upon what happens subsequently. This conception of the future is *neutral* with respect to whether there is a UAF. If only one future is compatible with all future-relevant facts, then there is a UAF; otherwise, there is no UAF. Whether there is a UAF, therefore, depends on what future-relevant facts there are. When I do need to speak of the future in a way that implies a UAF, such as when describing views that contrast with open theism, I make that clear by speaking of "the UAF" or "the unique actual future" rather than simply "the future." Finally, when I speak of the future as "open" or "settled" in some particular way (e.g., causally), I mean to *restrict* the scope of future-relevant facts to those of the specified type (e.g., the causal ones).

³ I take the *founders* of modern open theism to include the five coauthors of Pinnock *et al.* (1994) – Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger – and Greg Boyd. Influential works on open theism by these authors include Boyd (2001), Pinnock (2001), Sanders (1998; 2007), Rice (1985), and Hasker (1989). For their views on divine power over against process theism, see Pinnock *et al.* (1994: 138–141), Cobb and Pinnock (2000), Basinger (1988), and Boyd (2001: 31).

⁴ When I speak of *the* present, I'm deliberately sidelining Einsteinian relativity, for the issues of open theism have to do with *God's* perspective on time, not that of human physicists. Einstein posited the relativity of the *empirical* present because the finite speed of light prevents *us* from experimentally identifying an objective *metaphysical* present. But an essentially maximal knower like God doesn't face such limitations. If God exists temporally and thus has a temporal perspective, then I see no reason not to equate God's present with the objective metaphysical present. For further reasons why Einsteinian relativity does not preclude an objective metaphysical present, see Craig and Smith (2008).

In the first place, then, *all* open theists hold that the future is *causally open*:

- (2) Causal openness of the future. The future is *causally open* as of time $t =_{\text{def.}}$ There are multiple causally possible futures relative to t .

By “causally possible futures” I mean those compatible with all explanatorily prior *causal* constraints on what can happen after t . Such constraints include the conditions at t , stable natural laws, and any supernatural causal factors bearing upon the future. My notion of causal openness is intended to include *both* primary (supernatural) and secondary (natural) causation. To say that there are *multiple* causally possible futures is to say that causal determinism is false at both the natural and supernatural levels and that causal indeterminism is true at both levels. It is also to say that there are *future contingents*, that is, causally possible events that occur on some causally possible futures but not others. For example, if the occurrence of a sea battle tomorrow is, as of now, a future contingent, then there are causally possible futures in which a sea battle occurs tomorrow and causally possible futures in which no sea battle occurs tomorrow. Both outcomes are causally possible, neither is causally necessary, and the future is thus causally open with respect to whether a sea battle occurs tomorrow. If, however, at 11:59 p.m. tonight circumstances change such that a sea battle tomorrow is now causally inevitable (e.g., the admiral has given the order to attack in such a way that it cannot be rescinded in time), then it would no longer be a future contingent. The set of causally possible futures relative to *that* time would not include any without a sea battle tomorrow.

Now, while (nearly) all open theists believe the most important source of causal openness is creaturely *libertarian* free will, I do not consider libertarian free will to be part of the hard core of *mere* open theism. Libertarianism entails causal openness because it is *incompatibilist*. That is, libertarianism holds that the sort of free will necessary for grounding moral responsibility is incompatible with causal determinism and therefore requires causal indeterminism, which entails causal openness.⁵ But I see no reason to think a minimal monotheist couldn't be an open theist for reasons concerning causal indeterminism in general. In short, even if one thinks creaturely free will (of the sort necessary for grounding moral responsibility) is *compatible* with causal determinism, one could still be an open theist provided one thinks some events (e.g., quantum events) are *not* causally determined and satisfies the other requirements of mere open theism.

⁵ Some self-professed libertarians, for example, McCann (2005), affirm causal openness at the secondary causal level but not at the primary causal level. Against this I simply *stipulate* that I take libertarianism to imply causal openness at both levels. One cannot, as I use the term, be both a libertarian and a theistic determinist.

In the second place, *most*, but not necessarily all, open theists hold that the future is *ontically open*.

- (3) Ontic openness of the future. The future is *ontically open* as of time $t =_{\text{def.}}$ No unique concrete future relative to t exists.

The italicized “exists” in (3) is to be understood in the *unrestricted quantifier* sense. (3) says that, if we consider the full inventory of reality from an absolute or “God’s eye” perspective, it includes all present events, and perhaps all past events, but does *not* include a unique and complete sequence of future events. Consequently, the ontic openness of the future entails that the eternalist or “block universe” view on which a unique and complete sequence of past, present, and future events tenselessly *exists*, is false. Most open theists hold to a *presentist* ontology of time according to which only present things exist, some hold to a *growing block* model according to which only past and present things exist, and an open theist could, in principle, hold to a *branching block* model according to which past and present events and *all causally possible concrete futures* exist, but no *unique* concrete future exists (McCall, 1994).

In the third place, *most*, but not all, open theists hold that the future is *alethically open*.

- (4) Alethic openness of the future. The future is *alethically open* as of time $t =_{\text{def.}}$ No future relative to t is such that it is *true* that it is or shall be the unique actual future relative to t .

In other words, there is no such thing as a complete, true, linear “story of the future.” The story of the actual past and present is finished and “published,” so to speak, but the story of the future is unfinished. Some aspects of that story – the causally determined parts – can be inferred from what has already been written, but the future contingent parts are yet to be decided.

In the fourth place, *all* open theists hold that the future is *epistemically open*, not just for us, but even for a maximal knower like God.

- (5) Epistemic openness of the future. The future is *epistemically open* as of time $t =_{\text{def.}}$ No future relative to t is *infallibly* known by God (or anyone else) to be or to be going to be the unique actual future relative to t .

This aspect of open theism has generated much controversy. I save defense of it for Sections 3 and 4. For now, it suffices to note that *if* (4) is true, then (5) is true as well because knowledge presupposes truth. This justification for (5), however, is not available to open theists who deny (4). Obviously, if (5) is true,

then EDF is false for, as far as God knows, there remain *multiple* futures that could in due course become actual.

In the fifth place, *all* open theists hold that the future is *providentially open*. The future is causally open and epistemically open (and perhaps also ontically and alethically open) because *God wants it that way*.

- (6) Providential openness of the future. The future is *providentially open* as of time $t =_{\text{def}}$ No single future relative to t has been selected by God (or anyone else) to be the unique actual future relative to t .

In other words, when choosing to create, God didn't actualize a *token* possible world with a complete, determinate history.⁶ Rather, God set up a certain *type* of world by establishing its initial conditions, its causal constraints, and God's interaction policies with creation, but deliberately left *some* details of world history unspecified, *delegating* those details to creatures.

Of the five types of openness discussed, (2), (3), and (4) concern the openness *of the future*, whereas (5) and (6) concern the openness *of God* to creation. In terms of both knowledge (5) and will (6), God approaches the future as a somewhat open-ended project and looks to creation to fill in the remaining details. I only include (2), (5), and (6) – causal, epistemic, and providential openness – as parts of *mere* open theism, however, because some versions of open theism explicitly reject (4) (alethic openness) and others theoretically could reject (3) (ontic openness).

To finish articulating *mere* open theism, we need to reconcile an apparent conflict between (1) and (5). Statement (1), recall, says God is essentially maximally excellent with respect to *knowledge*. This creates a strong presumption that if something is knowable, then God knows it, and knows it as well as it can be known. So, for the future to be epistemically open for God, there must be a principled reason why EDF – infallible knowledge of a unique actual future – is not available to God. But given that God is also essentially maximally excellent with respect to *power* and creates the world *ex nihilo*, the open theist is committed to the idea that God *could have had* EDF simply by creating a causally determined world. In such a case, knowing the initial conditions and

⁶ Following Plantinga (1974) and Lewis (1986a), it is often assumed that “possible worlds,” or complete ways things could be, must include a complete, determinate history because they are *tenseless* entities that either determinately include or exclude every possible state of affairs, past, present, and future. But, as Seymour (2015) has shown, the notion of a “time” defined by Crisp (2007) qualifies as a *tensed* possible world because it determinately includes or excludes every possible state of affairs. Crispian times are, in essence, complete ways things could be *at a time*. One can therefore take the “actual world” to be the current total way things are *now* rather than the total way things (tenselessly) *are* throughout all of history. In so doing one replaces a *static* conception of the actual world with a *dynamic* one – which possible world is *the* actual world continually changes as the total way things are *now* changes.