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Comment on William Hasker's "The Goodness of the Creator: An Open Theist Perspective"

Bill Hasker deserves thanks for his thoughtful reflections on two Christian doctrines: the doctrine of the goodness of God and the doctrine of the goodness of creation, and issues arising from the relation between these two doctrines. Hasker writes from an Open Theist Perspective. I appreciate Hasker's asking me to be a commentator—especially in light of the fact that he knew full well that my sympathy for Open Theism would be quite limited.

Here's what I intend to do. First, I want to summarize the paper as I see it. Then, as a philosopher is expected to do, I'll present some questions and disagreements—both substantive and methodological—with Open Theism. Finally, despite the fact that I am an outsider, I want to comment on the debate over Open Theism within certain evangelical circles.

I. A Summary. I'll present the summary as a series of questions and answers.

Q. Granting that God is good, is God's goodness necessary or contingent?

A. Necessary; otherwise, we would have to suppose that there are moral principles that God would be tempted to violate, and such principles would have to be "independent of God in a way that it makes sense to suppose God might deviate from them." (p. 2)

Q. If God's goodness is necessary, then it's not intelligible that God could be tempted by evil. In that case, how could God's goodness be *moral* goodness?

A. The divine version of libertarian free will is a *holy* will. A holy will is like a libertarian free will except that it never does evil and is never tempted to do evil; it's not subject to moral struggle.

Q. Even if God's goodness is moral goodness, two more questions arise: First, A morally good God (with the divine analogue of a libertarian free will) would have created the best of all possible worlds, but how could "this actual world, with all of its suffering, sin and general disarray" be the best that is logically possible? (p. 6)

A. There may well be "no single best world." Hasker argues that an endless progression of better and better worlds would still be compatible with God's perfect goodness. A better possibility is that there is no "single scale of measurement" that could rank different valuable properties. In that case, there is no single best possible world, because different worlds have incommensurable values.

At this point, Hasker turns to a discussion of psychological determinism in the case of human beings, according to which, "actions are said to be determined by the 'strongest motive' (or combination of motives) (p. 15) Noting that the "strongest motive" can only be identified retrospectively, Hasker takes libertarian free will to be plausible in the case of human beings. He concludes that it is also "plausible to apply [the account of libertarian free will] to the theological case." (p. 16) Thus, God, like us, makes choices that are neither random nor resulting from the "strongest motive."

Hasker takes it that in creating us, God “created agents possessing libertarian free will,” and that God lacks middle knowledge, and hence does not know exactly what his libertarianly-free creatures will do. In that case, God does not have foreknowledge of all the details of the world. So,

“God’s initial creative decision is not a decision to actualize a particular possible world, considered as a maximal consistent set of states of affairs. Instead, God’s decision is to create a world-type or kind of world, where world-types are distinguished by the actions taken by God prior to the appearance on the cosmic scene of libertarian free agents. God decides, so to speak, what sort of a start to give his creation”—a start that “leaves open the details of the actual history.” (pp. 18-19)

Thus, we have Open Theism: God and his creatures have libertarian free will; so, God lacks knowledge about certain aspects of the future. Hence, in creating the world, God was taking a risk.

So the first question—Assuming that a morally good God (with the divine analogue of a libertarian free will) would have created the best of all possible worlds, how could he have chosen *this* world?—is answered by challenging the assumption that there is a single best possible world. There is no best possible world. God “brought into being a world type which had potentialities that were not inferior to those of other world-types he could have created instead.” (pp. 19-20)

Q. The second question raised by the necessary moral goodness of God is this: Is it possible for God *not* to create? If not, then Open Theism threatens to collapse into pantheism or emanationism, or process theism, which holds that “apart from

creation, God's life would be greatly impoverished," (p. 21; fn25). But if so, why would God "bring about the existence of a realm of imperfection," in light of the fact that "without creation there is only the perfection of the divine life itself?" (p. 22)

A. It is possible that God had created no world, or rather that among the best world-types, there is the null-world. Admitting that this position is a "hard sell," Hasker says that we are hindered in our understanding of this possibility by "a poverty in our understanding of the pre-creation situation," just as we are in understanding the Trinity. So, it may well be that the null-world is among God's options, in which case, it is not necessary that God created anything.

In sum, (1) God is necessarily good. (2) There is no single best possible world, owing to the fact that there are incommensurable values. (3) God, exercising something like libertarian free will, chooses one of the best world-types (which may include the null-world); (4) God creates human beings with libertarian free will, and hence (5) God does not fully know the future and takes a risk in creating this world.

Now I'll turn to some questions and disagreements with Hasker.

II. Some Questions and Disagreements

Let me begin with a question about one of Hasker's questions: Was creation necessary? Could God have not created anything? This is a very difficult question that Thomas Aquinas wrestled with. (See Norman Kretzmann, "A General Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create Anything At All" in *Being and Goodness*, Scott MacDonald, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991): 208-228.) Hasker's answer to this question

is that creation is not necessary, but is freely willed by God—but we can't understand how. But isn't there a problem internal to Hasker's view here?

Hasker says that different worlds have different incommensurable values, and in choosing to create a world, God sets in motion values that would not have existed if God had chosen differently. "Creatable worlds" are "world-types which had potentialities for good that were not inferior to those of other world-types he could have created instead" (pp. 19-20) Among the creatable worlds, according to Hasker, is the "null-world." The null-world would add no values to reality, but according to Hasker, the world that God actually created did add values to reality—values that wouldn't have existed if God had chosen instead to create nothing. Here's the problem: If the world that God actually created added values to reality, then the null-world, which would add no values to reality, would seem to have been inferior to the actual world. So, how, given the characterization of creatable worlds, could the null-world be a creatable world?

Now let me turn to a methodological qualm. Hasker seems to assume that we can meaningfully debate about what God is like in terms of our concepts of willing, creating, freedom—as if they univocally applied both to human beings and to God. But if God created the world *ex nihilo*, his causal powers are quite different from ours. And if God sustains the world by his will, his willing is quite different from ours.

Although at one point Hasker speaks of "a poverty in our understanding of the pre-creation situation," he often sounds rather confident in univocal predication. My mind reels at his offer to "sketch a plausible general account...of the divine creative choice." Hasker does stress that the account is "extremely tentative and only somewhat plausible and may possibly bear some slight resemblance to the truth of the matter." (pp.

17-8) But I simply don't know how to evaluate such an account; indeed, I have no confidence in any concrete claims about how the mind of God works.

Although I do not think that "proof-texting" actually proves anything, I have always been struck by the words in Isaiah 55: 8-9: "My thoughts are not your thoughts; my ways not your ways, so says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts higher than your thoughts." Such passages suggest that we should be modest in our claims to understand God's mind. Whether Thomas Aquinas's account of analogical use of language for God's attributes is adequate or not, I believe that we should be hesitant to suppose that our concepts can apply univocally and unproblematically to God.

In addition to my methodological qualm, I also have a substantive disagreement. For reasons that I have given elsewhere, I do not believe that we human beings have libertarian free will. Hence, I think that it is a mistake to use human libertarian free will as an analogy for God's will. (In view of what I just said about method, I would not be quick to take what is true of us to be true of God anyway.)

Much of the motivation for libertarianism, I believe, stems from an understandable reluctance to suppose that God, who is perfectly good, has a hand in the evil of the world. (For example, Hasker remarks that with a libertarian account of free will, "[M]uch of the world's evil can be ascribed to [human] agents." (p. 18)) I think that the existence of evil is a poor motivation for libertarianism for two reasons: First, even if we had libertarian free will, very little of the evil in the world could be chalked up to it: Evil has sources not only in malice and greed, but also in self-deception and ignorance, in negligence and carelessness, in poor training and poor timing. Our best intentions, not just our worst, misfire: It's a cliché that the road to Hell is paved with *good* intentions.

Second, since God is sovereign of the universe, evil (along with everything else) is under God's control. We just have to bite the bullet and admit that evil is a profound mystery. I see no alternative—with or without libertarianism—no alternative to taking on faith a belief (hope?) that somehow, in ways we cannot conceive, the evil in the world is compatible with God's goodness.

One glaring substantive difference between Open Theists and more traditional believers lies in the conception of God. The traditional believer sees God as Sovereign of the universe, who knows everything. The Open Theist sees God as an agent who takes risks, who can be made to suffer by his creatures—creatures who are capable of “bringing grief and suffering into God's own life” (p. 22). On Open Theism, God seems more a good friend or a conversation partner than the Almighty Creator. Although I am a more traditional believer, I see the appeal of the Open Theist's conception.

Since the views at issue here require serious and complex argument, this is not place to try to convince anyone. So, I'll just enumerate my disagreements with Hasker: With respect to human beings, I disagree with Hasker's views that we have libertarian free will and that we are capable of “bringing grief and suffering into God's own life.” (p. 22) With respect to God, I disagree with Hasker's views that God lacks foreknowledge and that God takes risks.

Before turning to the debate about Open Theism, let me express a deep conviction: I do not believe that *any* conception of God—the traditional believers' any more than the Open Theists'—has any soteriological implications. Being theologically right or wrong has nothing to do with salvation.

III. The Debate About Open Theism

On reading Hasker's paper, I had the feeling that I was overhearing a conversation that was well underway. Although Hasker's paper was subdued, in the appropriate academic way, the debate among certain evangelicals over Open Theism, I am discovering, is anything but subdued. Indeed, there is more at stake here than genteel disagreement. Open Theism is taken by its more traditional opponents to be close to heresy. (Opponents of Open Theism use inflammatory titles like "Why You Should Be Concerned," and I understand from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Nov. 26, 2004)—OK, not an inside source—that Open Theists are being drummed out of their institutions.)

Since I have just taken issue with some key tenets of Open Theism, I'd like to comment on this intramural debate. Even if the Open Theists are theologically mistaken—as I think they are—they may well stand morally on the right side when they aim to bring more openness (and concomitantly, less oppressiveness) to Christian institutions.

Sincere and intelligent people can agree on the core doctrines of the faith (as expressed in, say, the Nicene Creed), and yet deeply disagree on further theological issues. The evident honesty and intelligence with which people profoundly disagree on theological matters should give us pause. No matter what side we are on, can we really be so sure that we are right that we will *harm* those who are "wrong" in order to preserve what we consider to be purity?

Although theologically I am on the so-called "Calvinist" side of the Open Theism debate, a proper understanding of orthodoxy and of our fallen state should alert us to the likelihood that we are all in error and that our hearts are not pure. We all are subject to self-deception and a false sense of our own righteousness (which, as we know from

Isaiah, is just “filthy rags” in God’s eyes). Given our cognitive and moral limitations (along with our liability to self-deception and self-righteousness), surely the wisest course is the modest one of tolerance.

Moreover, from a “Calvinist’s” point of view, our leaders, ecclesiastical as well as political, are just as fallen as we are; this makes Calvinist views well-suited for moral and social progressivism. Indeed, all Christians are called to be more compassionate and less censorious, more tolerant and less judgmental, more loving and less rejecting. Doctrinal purity is not even in the same league with these demands.

So, to the extent that Open Theists turn away from the crabbed and cramped morality wrongly associated with Calvin, they are doing Christianity a service. And traditional believers should recognize the service, even as they disagree about doctrine.¹

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