

**Thomas Jay Oord. *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*.  
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Elijah Hess  
University of Arkansas

Two vehicles—a station wagon and a semi-truck—approach each other, traveling in opposite directions on the road. In the first vehicle, a family is returning home from vacation. In the second is a driver who, like every other day, is simply going about his work. As they are about to pass, a small rock that has been stuck between the tires of the semi-truck comes loose and hurls toward the windshield of the oncoming station wagon. It crashes through the glass and strikes the mother in the head, killing her instantly. In a single moment lives are forever changed. How could this happen? If God is in control, where was he?

Questions such as these lay at the heart of Thomas Jay Oord's latest book, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*. For those who wonder why a loving and powerful God doesn't prevent this and many other evils from occurring, Oord offers a startling answer—God *can't*. The overall argument is this: Any adequate solution to the problem of evil will need to show that God is not morally culpable for what Oord calls "genuine" (i.e., unnecessary) evil. Such evils, we are told, "are events that, all things considered, make the world worse than it might have been" (65). If God allows genuine evil that he could have prevented, Oord goes on to claim, then God is not perfectly loving. "After all," he says, "a perfectly loving individual would do whatever possible to prevent—not just fail to cause—genuine evil. A person does not have to cause evil directly to be morally culpable for failing to prevent it" (67). The latter point can be illustrated by imaging a scenario in which someone stumbles upon a drowning baby and, despite being within easy reach of the child, stands by idly and watches her drown. Although this individual didn't cause the baby's death in any direct way, this person's failure to act on her behalf is something most would nevertheless find morally reprehensible. In other words, we'd consider such a person to be morally culpable. Similarly, a God who could stop a rock from flying through a windshield but doesn't would be morally culpable for *allowing* it and, hence, not perfectly loving. But according to Christian tradition, God's nature is perfect love. And yet, rocks continue to go through windshields. Oord's conclusion, therefore, is that if God is love (1 Jn. 4:8), then God must not be able to prevent tragedies such as these.

While power without love is, as Martin Luther King Jr. once put it, surely reckless and abusive, one might wonder how a love without power—which King deemed as "sentimental and anemic"—can act providentially in a world that appears

to be (at least partially) characterized by randomness and chance.<sup>1</sup> For Oord, the answer lies in the idea that a loving God can only ever act cooperatively with entities, never coercively. Unfortunately, just what exactly would count as an act of coercion on any given occasion is left unclear. After rehearsing a number of ways one might conceive of this notion (181-182), Oord reveals that, when it comes to coercive activity, what he is most concerned about is a sort of metaphysical control. As he explains it,

In the metaphysical sense, to coerce is to control entirely. This involves unilateral determination, in which the one coerced loses all capacity for causation, self-organization, agency or free will. To coerce in this metaphysical sense is to act as a sufficient cause, thereby wholly controlling the other or situation (182-183).

But what does it mean to “control entirely” or be “wholly controlling” in a *metaphysical* way? There’s a vagueness in Oord’s analysis at this point that leaves his proposal open to a variety of criticisms. For instance, imagine a situation where God takes control of my arms and legs, rendering me a virtual marionette. Suppose further, however, that in this situation I retain total control over my normal mental states and processes, i.e., I’m free to form beliefs in the usual way and generally think whatever I like. One might even suppose that I have full sensory-motor control over my mouth, face, fingers, and toes. All we’re supposing in this little fiction is that God controls my limbs. Given Oord’s characterization above, it would seem that such a scenario would not count as coercive. After all, because I’ve retained a level of agency and freedom with respect to my extremities and conscious life, the control being exerted over me is neither physically nor metaphysically complete. But such a conclusion would be detrimental to Oord’s overall explanation for why evils occur. If God’s control over me in the aforementioned situation isn’t coercive, then it looks like God has a way whereby he could stop the murder, the rape, the child molestation, and a host of other evils besides.

What Oord must mean, then, is that control over one’s agency in *any* respect is ultimately coercive on God’s part. But even if this were so, there would still be other categories of entities that God could conceivably control in a non-coercive manner. In particular, God could stop an entity like a rock—which, as Oord acknowledges, has no agency or freedom to speak of (53)—from crushing a mother’s skull. But we’re told that God can’t stop it. Why? Because of love. Well, okay, but (to quote a familiar song) *what’s love got to do with it?*

As it turns out, love has everything to do with it for Oord. Oord’s model of divine providence—indeed, this theologian’s very vision concerning the God-world relation—is what he calls *essential kenosis*. Here, “kenosis” means “self-giving, others-empowering love” (159). To Oord, such love is essential to who God is *qua* God. The core of Oord’s solution to the problem of evil can be found in his repeated

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Where Do We Go from Here?” in *Say it Loud: Great Speeches on Civil Rights and African American Identity*, eds. Catherine Ellis and Stephen Drury Smith (New York, NY: The New Press, 2010), 42.

assertion that an essentially kenotic God necessarily gives the gifts of freedom, agency, and self-organization to entities capable of expressing them because doing so is a part of divine love (162, 170-171, 180, 187). “For instance,” he says,

God could not have unilaterally prevented the rock that killed the...woman whose story we encountered earlier. Because God necessarily gives existence to all creation—including rocks—and because existence is characterized by lawlike regularities, God alone could not have averted this tragedy. To prevent unilaterally the rock killing the woman, God would need to forgo loving interaction with some portion of creation. Contradicting God’s nature and thereby failing to love creation—even failing to love rocks by not endowing them with existence—is something a necessarily loving God cannot do (175).

Despite his intentions, I’m not convinced that Oord’s essential kenosis account of providence provides a compelling answer to the problem of evil as he’s construed it. In the first place, although he spends an entire chapter arguing that essential kenosis is compatible with miracles (chapter 8), it’s not at all clear that Oord’s model of providence is compatible with the biblical and contemporary evidence for such events. So-called “nature miracles” are especially difficult for Oord’s proposal. One such miracle that Oord never discusses is the wedding miracle at Cana where Jesus is reported to have turned water into wine (Jn. 2:1-11). Now, either Jesus performed this miracle or he didn’t. If he did, then Oord’s suggestion for why God could not stop the rock collapses. For surely, the turning of one substance into another completely different substance would involve the sort of divine unilateral action that Oord finds so offensive. By transforming the water’s molecular structure God would presumably have to “forego loving interaction” with that portion of creation, upsetting the law-like regularities that allow for its existence. But if God *can* do such a thing, then Oord’s explanation for why God can’t even divert the trajectory of a rogue rock is unconvincing. On the other hand, if Jesus didn’t perform the miracle at Cana, then one of Christianity’s most well-known and beloved miracles didn’t happen—an unwelcome result in the eyes of many theologians. Either way, then, the essential kenosis model of providence is an unattractive answer to the problem of evil for Christians wanting to uphold a biblical account of miracles.

A further problem with essential kenosis, at least from an orthodox Christian perspective, is that such a conception of the God-world relation rejects the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* in favor of what Oord elsewhere calls *creatio ex creatione a natura amoris*.<sup>2</sup> On this view, God has always been creating out of a previous creation and each act of creation is motivated by love. “In each moment of God’s everlasting life,” Oord explains, “God creates something new from what God created in the past. God’s creating has always been occurring in the past and will always occur in the future.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, because kenosis—which, in Oord’s sense, necessarily involves self-giving and loving empowerment to non-divine, material others (159-160)—is thought to be essential to the divine nature, an essentially kenotic God *must* create. As Oord puts it, God “expresses kenosis inevitably” (161). Whereas traditional

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Thomas Jay Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2010), 133-137.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

Christian accounts of the origin of the cosmos have generally thought of God as *voluntarily* creating a world, Oord takes issue with such proposals, arguing that, if God chose to create out of nothing, then God's sovereign power is more fundamental to his nature than love and God may just as easily choose to *stop* loving us one day. But, as Oord stresses, that gets the relationship between divine love and power backwards (149, 160-161).

But why should anyone think such a thing? Specifically, why think that God's nature of love for others *requires* God to create? Arguably, God's nature of love for others is first and foremost manifested within the Trinitarian relations. The Father has "other-oriented" love for the Son and Spirit. The Son has other-oriented love for the Father and Spirit. And the Spirit has other-oriented love for the Father and the Son. This is (part of) what makes each member of the Trinity a distinct person; they each stand in a unique loving relation to one another.

God has no choice but to love in the above intra-Trinitarian sense since it is a part of his Triune nature. But one will search Oord's essay in vain for an argument that gets us from there to the idea that God therefore *has* to create. In other words, why think that the "others" in the other-oriented love of essential kenosis have to be concrete, material creatures? Of course, one can define essential kenosis in such a way that this is required, but the question remains: why think this is required? In fact, if we simply borrow Oord's apt insight that God, while not being able to choose whether he loves, can nevertheless choose *how* he loves (162), we can see that the prevailing orthodox Christian position that God was free to choose to create a world out of nothing makes perfect sense. For, *pace* Oord, love does not precede power. This is because love is, itself, a sort of power. Whether given or received, love is primarily an ability or capacity. Thus wherever love is found, there too is power. Hence while love may be the *reason* and guiding force *behind* God's exercise of power, the two notions needn't be pitted against one another. Oord's worry aside, then, we needn't think that God, in choosing to create a world of free creatures with whom he could share his (already) other-oriented love, would be choosing arbitrarily whether to love or not. Instead, he'd simply be choosing how he continuously loves. In addition to being intra-Trinitarian love, he'd be choosing to love a world too. There would seem to be no compelling reason, then, to suppose that God's other-oriented loving nature requires him to create, let alone continuously create out of an infinite series of creations that came before.

Still, Oord worries that if it were up to God whether to create a world where evil and suffering *could* occur then, whenever tragedy strikes, God is ultimately to blame. The bulk of his complaint at this point is against "general sovereignty" models of providence—i.e., models of providence wherein God, though neither intending nor causing evil, nevertheless voluntarily decides to create a universe with freedom, structures, and processes that allow for the possibility of evil. On these views, Oord says, "God's creational project makes possible the structures and existence in which evil and suffering could occur. But according to [general sovereignty advocates] God does not directly intend or cause...particular evils" (138). From Oord's perspective, however, this is a distinction without a moral difference. "If the God who could control others permits something to occur," Oord contends, "God must want that occurrence—at least more than the alternatives" (93).

But isn't this demonstrably false? For example, imagine that God has the ability to determine that I do some action *A* and also the ability to determine that I do not-*A*. But suppose that, rather than *determine* that I do one of these actions, God would rather leave me free to decide which action I will perform. In that case, God may be able to simply decree the disjunction either "*A* or not-*A*" without thereby decreeing or endorsing *which* disjunct obtains.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, it would seem that God can have preferences among possible alternative outcomes and may permit a non-preferred outcome because he has a stronger preference not to determine that outcome.

To illustrate the point another way, suppose that Oord is right about the kind of world we live in. That is, suppose that ours is a world where evils are often caused by indeterministic freedom and processes. If so, then this is a world where some of our actions are, as Alvin Plantinga says, "significantly free." This means two things. A person *P* is said to be significantly free with respect to a particular action *A* if (i) *A* is morally significant, and (ii) *P* has libertarian freedom over the instantiation of *A*. On a libertarian conception of freedom, if *P* freely performs *A*, then (a) *P* could have refrained from performing *A* and (b) no prior conditions were causally sufficient for *A*'s occurrence. Furthermore, *A* is morally significant for *P* if it would be wrong for *P* to perform *A* but right to refrain (or vice versa).<sup>5</sup>

Now, what makes a choice "wrong" or "right" for creatures like us is just this: a right action is an action that aligns with God's moral will; a wrong action is an action that does not. This kind of freedom is unique to finite creatures and does not apply to God. When God was alone there was only one will, namely *his*. And although God can be free with respect to being able to choose *A* or not-*A* (when *A* or not-*A* simply represent an infinite variety of different goods), he cannot will one thing, *x*, and it be true that, at the same time, *x* is out of sync with his own will. That is to say, God's will cannot be out of line with itself.

But when God creates individuals with significant freedom (as defined above), he creates beings with their own centers of consciousness, desires, and wills. So, if God creates *P*, and *P* is significantly free, then *P* can will something that is either in line with God's will or not. When *P* chooses evil therefore we needn't suppose that God intends or directly causes this choice since it is something that is, by definition, out of step with God's moral will. Thus, contra Oord, God's allowance of evil is *not* the moral equivalent of his intending or causing evil.

Of course, even if God does not directly intend or cause the evil that obtains, the fact that God willingly *permits* evil on the general sovereignty account is still, for Oord, enough to reject it as an adequate answer to the problem of evil. For, in allowing evils to occur, it is not clear that God is acting in a loving manner. In fact, Oord thinks it is obvious that he is not. To drive this point home, Oord invokes a parent-child analogy. The God of general sovereignty, he claims, fails to act like a loving human, let alone a perfectly loving God. A loving mother would prevent pointless harm to

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Van Inwagen, for instance, develops just such a proposal in his essay "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God" in *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 30.

her child if she were able. She would not stand by and allow others to assault her youngster. Loving parents prevent evil when they can (138).

This analogy, however, seems to presuppose that if God can sovereignly decide to create a world of free creatures and processes, then God can sovereignly decide to intervene and prevent any and all instances of evil *in the actual flow of history*. But that's not a safe assumption given the account of freedom outlined above. Given the logic of significant freedom, while it may be within God's power to prevent any and all evils at *some* time or other, it does not follow that it is solely within God's power to prevent evil at *all* times. If God, from the foundation of the world, sovereignly grants a creature significant freedom with respect to some action at a time *t*, then God has freely granted that creature the ability to either act in accordance with the divine moral will at *t* or to refrain from doing so. Thus God can't just unilaterally revoke that ability at *t* should a creature decide to choose evil since, *ex hypothesi*, that would mean he didn't grant the capacity to exercise significant freedom at *t* after all. Moreover, all we need to say to justify God in allowing for significant freedom and, hence, the possibility of evil is to suppose that such a world in which it was possible (though not inevitable) for creatures to choose to be outside of God's moral will was judged by God to be a more valuable world overall than one in which this wasn't possible. Indeed, when asked to compare, say, a perfectly benign world in which everything is completely determined and a world where there is genuine freedom but, also, the potential for suffering as a result of that freedom, we often judge the world that includes freedom to be a better, more valuable world than the one that doesn't. So it would seem that we need to distinguish between a world where evil is *possible* and a world where evil *occurs*. The actual occurrence of evil may or may not make the world a worse place than it would have been had something else been chosen instead, but allowing for the mere possibility of evil does not necessarily make the world a worse place. On the contrary, such an allowance may be required to achieve any relation worth having between creation and its Creator (e.g., free, loving relationships). It would appear, then, that a God of perfect love is neither culpable nor any less loving for choosing to create a world where love between the Infinite and the finite requires an element of risk.

We can see a similar concept at work when thinking about parents who freely decide to have children. As Oord himself recognizes, while the parents of a rapist are causally responsible for bringing him into the world, "Assuming these parents did an adequate job of teaching their son right and wrong, we would not consider them morally culpable when their son freely chooses rape. We blame the rapist and regard him as culpable, not his parents, although the parents are necessary causes for his existence" (171). But note: if these parents can be considered loving individuals, despite their son's activities, then the main premise of Oord's overall argument against general sovereignty views of providence is falsified, namely that a perfectly loving individual would do whatever possible to *prevent*—not just fail to cause—genuine evil. After all, couples like those just described *could* prevent any and all evils their future offspring may face or commit. They could do so, specifically, by choosing not to have any children at all. By choosing not to have kids, these would-be parents could forgo a myriad of uncertainties and avoid any tragedy that may befall their hypothetical offspring. It must be remembered that children needn't be introduced

into this world's environment, an environment that, while stable and nurturing, can also be dangerous—as the accident recounted above makes so vivid. But if parents can be considered perfectly loving despite the fact that they choose to have kids that may encounter or cause suffering, then it is hard to see why God, despite sovereignly choosing to create a world of significantly free creatures and processes that *could* go wrong, can't be considered perfectly loving as well.

Despite being an extremely affordable and readable book, the overall argument of *The Uncontrolling Love of God* fails to convince. Though Oord admirably presents his thesis with humility and grace, it's not clear that the essential kenosis account of providence is needed to solve the problem of evil. And, given the unorthodox implications of such a view, it's not clear how many Christians would want it even if it were.