

# PERSONALISTIC THEISM, DIVINE EMBODIMENT, AND A PROBLEM OF EVIL

CHAD MEISTER  
BETHEL UNIVERSITY

**Abstract.** One version of the problem of evil concludes that personalistic forms of theism should be rejected since the acts that one would expect a God with person-like qualities to perform, notably acts that would prevent egregious evils, do not occur. Given the evils that exist in the world, it is argued, if God exists as a person or like a person, God's record of action is akin to that of a negligent parent. One way of responding to this "argument from neglect" is to maintain that there is a good reason for the *apparent* neglect—namely, that God could not intervene even once with respect to suffering (the "not-even-once principle") without thereby incurring the responsibility of doing so on every occasion, which would be deleterious. So God never responds to evil. It is argued in this paper that a profoundly integrated, personalistic model of God and the God-world relation— one that is reflected in a soul-body analogy— provides a way of addressing the argument from neglect without affirming the not-even-once principle.

## I. PERSONALISTIC THEISM AND DIVINE EMBODIMENT

The problem of evil provides perhaps the most serious challenge to the reasonableness of the belief that God exists. The problem focuses on the fact that there are states of affairs in the world that are bad, harmful, or in some way undesirable and that their existence disproves or provides evidence against the existence of a perfectly beneficent, all-knowing, and exceedingly powerful deity. The problem can be formulated in a number of ways, and the version of the problem that will be addressed in this paper has been dubbed "the argument from neglect."

In addressing this argument, or any of the various problems raised by the reality of evil, there is an additional difficulty; namely, there is no uncontroversial account of the meaning of the term "God." Thus, when it is argued

that, given evil, it is unlikely or impossible that God exists, it is not immediately obvious what is at issue. Indeed, some versions of the problem of evil may not provide much, if any, evidence against some versions of theism, such as those in which God is understood not to be a person or person-like.<sup>1</sup> Before examining the argument from neglect, then, clarification will be offered of the meaning of the word “God” as it will be used in this paper.

In Anglophone philosophy of religion, the term “God” is commonly taken to mean the God of the monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But within this form of monotheism, one can distinguish two different approaches: classical theism and personalistic theism.<sup>2</sup> A standard list of descriptions of God within the confines of classical theism includes that God is simple, non-temporal, immutable, impassible, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. Personalistic theists, on the other hand, generally deny that God is simple, non-temporal, immutable, and impassible. They do generally affirm that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, though they often use these terms in ways that are different from those used by classical theists. One reason that personalistic theists deny that God is simple, non-temporal, immutable, and impassible is that in affirming them God appears not to be anything like a person, certainly nothing like human persons. Consider impassibility. According to the classical doctrine of divine impassibility, God cannot be modified or affected in any way by any external agent. God is not altered or affected by our prayers or pleas, for example. This, argue personalistic theists, is a lesser view of God

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1 See, for example, Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (Continuum, 2006).

2 Classical theism has a much longer history than personalistic theism. Classical theism was endorsed by virtually all of the leading thinkers of the medieval monotheistic traditions, including Augustine (354-430), Avicenna (980-1037), Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). The basic tenets of classical theism are also included in the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Personalistic theism, on the other hand, is a post-Enlightenment development, and within the last century or so, it has become popular among theistic philosophers and theologians. Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (OUP, 2004), 1–19 provides a concise delineation of classical theism and personalistic theism (or what he calls “theistic personalism”). For another description of classical theism, see the entry on the subject by Brian Leftow, “God, concepts of: Classical theism”, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/god-concepts-of/v-1/sections/classical-theism>.

than is warranted.<sup>3</sup> Persons are affected by what they encounter. If they were not so affected, they would be lifeless—more akin to a statue or a column than to a person.<sup>4</sup> Personalistic theists maintain that God is a person insofar as personhood is taken to entail rational agency, including having feelings and desires (or something like feelings and desires) and having the ability to perform intentional actions that generate states of affairs; making choices and acting over time; and being affected by encounters with others. Of course, God's knowledge, power, goodness, and so on are vastly greater than those of human persons. Nevertheless, for personalistic theism, God is a person, or at least God is not less than a person in the senses just described.

Both classical theists and personalistic theists also generally affirm that God is omnipresent. There is an ongoing debate in the philosophy of religion and analytic theology literature about the meaning of "omnipresence," debate about what classical theists such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas actually meant by the concept, and about what is the most plausible way to construe the concept today.<sup>5</sup> In recent decades some philosophers of religion have taken the notion of personhood to be basic for God, and, given what we know about human persons, it is suggested that God is a person in a way that is similar to human persons in that God is fully present in the world ("omnipresent") in a manner akin to the way our souls are fully present in our bodies. Our only experience as a person is as an embodied one. Thus, given our deepest understanding of personhood as entailing embodiment, it may be beneficial in thinking about the relation of God and the world to be one of embodiment, or something like embodiment.

There are four primary models of embodiment in western classical philosophical literature: (a) *physicalism*, in which it is held that the mind and the

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3 There are different reasons that can be given for this claim. One reason is that many scriptural depictions of God are person-like descriptions, so arguably the personalistic view of God more accurately portrays God as revealed in the scriptures. Another reason that can be given is that to be a person, or person-like, is simply greater than not being a person. For a sustained argument that God is a non-physical person or person-like reality, see Charles Taliaferro, *Consciousness and the Mind of God* (CUP, 1994).

4 Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (State Univ. of New York, 1984). In Question 13 of Part I in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas uses the analogy of a column in reference to God.

5 See, for example, Hud Hudson, "Omnipresence", in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (OUP, 2009).

brain (or some aspect of the body) are identical; (b) *epiphenomenalism*, in which it is held that mental events are caused by the brain, but that mental events have no causal powers; (c) *mind-body parallelism*, in which it is held that, while mental events may appear to cause physical events given their temporal conjunction, and vice versa, mental and physical events are causally unrelated; and (d) *mind-body interactionism*, in which it is held that mind and body (or mental events and physical events) are ontologically discrete but causally influence one another. None of the four, argues William Wainwright, provides a model of the God-world relation that is satisfactory for classical theism.<sup>6</sup> The first view implies that God is contingent and spatially and temporally divisible; the second and third imply that God does not act on the world; and the fourth disallows the radical dependence of the world on God, a dependence relation which is inherent in most forms of historic theism. Wainwright suggests a more plausible model for classical theism that can be traced back to Neoplatonism and Vishishtadvaita Vedantin thought. While these views will not be assayed here, a key feature of this fifth model of the mind-body relation is that just as “the body depends upon but does not affect the soul, so the world depends upon but does not affect God. God’s absolute sovereignty and complete causal dependence is preserved.”<sup>7</sup> This model avoids the relevant defects of the other four, he maintains, for God is not identical to the world, or contingent or divisible, or causally dependent on the world, and God remains unaffected by the world. Thus while the world is fully dependent on God, and he<sup>8</sup> is sovereign over the world, God can remain perfect in himself despite the defects or deficiencies of the world.

While this Neoplatonist, Vishishtadvaita Vedantin view of embodiment may work as a model for classical theism, it is insufficient for personalistic theism.<sup>9</sup> For while on the Neoplatonist, Vishishtadvaita Vedantin view, God

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6 See William Wainwright, “Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnipresence”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, ed. Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister (CUP, 2010). See also William Wainwright, “God’s Body”, in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (OUP, 1987).

7 Wainwright, “Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnipresence”, 55.

8 While the male personal pronoun will be used of God in this paper, as is common practice, this is not intended to imply that God is male.

9 I say “may work,” though contrary to Wainwright’s view I think it does not actually work as a model for classical theism, for Neoplatonism and Vishishtadvaita Vedantin thought entail forms of pantheism that are in conflict with classical theism in various respects. Also, the

cannot be altered by anything in the world and is thus unstained by its evils, personalistic theists maintain that such a God would not be suitably affected by the goods and evils which occur in the world. Consequently, a personalistic theist would reject that model of embodiment. But let us consider another model that resembles the interactionist one in crucial respects (i.e., there is a causal interaction of soul and body) and that also utilizes a soul-body analogy, but which affirms a deeper unity of soul and body than some versions of the interactionist model.

Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) offered a notable response to the classical concept of God.<sup>10</sup> Replacing an Aristotelian metaphysics with a Whiteheadian one, he formulated a process-based conception of God and the world that he dubbed “neo-classical theism.” On his view, God is a participant in cosmic evolution, a supreme *becoming* rather than a static, unchanging *being*. God is in the world, for Hartshorne, and the world is also in God. In utilizing the “in” metaphor, Hartshorne developed a view of God and the God-world relation in which, as he put it, “The world consists of individuals, but the totality of individuals as a physical or spatial whole is God’s body, the Soul of which is God.”<sup>11</sup> Hartshorne’s concept of God is a panentheistic one in that, while God is not identical to the world, he is identified with the world and is also beyond the world.<sup>12</sup> As the soul-body analogy intimates, and as he argues at length, God is also a person. In particular, God is affected by other entities; he experiences joy, for example, when we thrive, and he suffers when we experience pain.

One need not affirm the panentheism of Hartshorne, however, to utilize a soul-body analogy of God and the world. For example, while they disagree with his panentheistic concept of God, Richard Swinburne and Charles Taliaferro agree with Hartshorne that while God can act on the world, the world can also affect God. Swinburne notes that, with respect to human embodiment, persons perform types of “basic action,” such as raising one’s

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view raises other concerns with regard to the reality of evil, but that discussion lies outside the purview of this paper.

10 See Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes and The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (Yale Univ. Press, 1976).

11 Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes and The Divine Relativity*, 94.

12 A historical overview of various expressions of panentheism, including that of Charles Hartshorne, is provided in John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Baker Academic, 2006).

arm, in which no additional action is required. And they can acquire “direct knowledge,” such as knowing that one is seeing a pink image, which is neither inferred nor dependent on some causal chain. Analogously, God’s having unmediated control over any object, and his knowledge of all qualities manifest in any region at any time, entails a “limited” form of embodiment.<sup>13</sup> It is limited, on Swinburne’s view, in that God exists as an immaterial spirit and is not ontologically identified with the universe.

Charles Taliaferro affirms a form of divine embodiment that is on the whole in agreement with Swinburne’s account but advances beyond the latter with respect to personalistic theism. Taliaferro develops what he calls “integrative theism,” a profoundly integrated view of God and the world in which God is deeply affected by the world in ways similar to how human persons are deeply affected by their bodies.<sup>14</sup> This view of divine embodiment insists that God experiences the pains, sufferings, goods, and joys of the world. It is thus integrative in that the unity of God and the world is akin to the unity of soul and body, not God’s body insofar as he is not *sensorially* affected by cosmic processes (an exploding star does not give God pain), nor in a way that his power of agency rests upon cosmic laws the way we depend on our bodies. Neither is the world God’s body in the ontological sense that, say, Lacantius argued against in his *Divine Institutes* when he rhetorically asked: “Is plowing possible without tearing the divine body?”<sup>15</sup> This view resists an ontology in which God is strictly identical to the world. Yet the world is the focal point of divine agency, so the world is akin to the body of God in a causal sense.

There is also a sense in which the moral well-being of the universe does affect God, so the world is also akin to God’s body in a moral sense.<sup>16</sup> Consider the analogy that when someone harms her body it does harm to her. The analogy is imperfect because in the case of harm to the human individual the effect on her is directly causal, whereas in the case of God the effect is by way of his affective concern for the creation. Nevertheless, God’s affective love of

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13 Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (OUP, 2016).

14 Taliaferro, *Consciousness and the Mind of God*. Taliaferro and I develop the view further and respond to several objections to it. See Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister, *Contemporary Philosophical Theology* (Routledge, 2016), especially chapters 1, 6, and 9.

15 Lacantius, *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (Paulist Press, 1979), 31; as quoted in Taliaferro, *Consciousness and the Mind of God*, 334.

16 See Taliaferro and Meister, *Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, chapter 9.

the world does support a sense in which it functions as his body. For example, when the innocent are treated with cruelty and injustice, this may be seen as an act that violates God's will and purpose; it is a source of divine sorrow (and perhaps rage). When we come to realize the profound harms we are inflicting on ourselves, other life forms, future generations, the planet itself, and other cosmic entities, these actions may also be seen as ways in which ecological upheaval counts as harm to God. Thus, this view rejects the classical notion of divine impassability and insists that God is passable insofar as he is affectively and ceaselessly responsive to the goods and ills of the world. What it means for God to be present to the world, then, is for him to be causally connected to it and to be affectively responsive to it, experiencing the pleasures and the joys of others, and feeling sorrow for its woes. God is thus subject to passions; his pleasure and sorrow are elements of what is involved in his loving and experiencing the creation, and of the very life of God.

With this view of the integration of the life of God and the life of the world, one is able to explicitly renounce the charges of distance and remoteness that some have launched against theism.<sup>17</sup> One can affirm the urgency and importance of care for all living things, and indeed ecological concerns more broadly. The view also avoids certain challenges facing pantheistic models of the divine, for while God's life permeates creation, it is not identical to it. God is infinite, and the world is finite; God sustains the world, and the world is sustained by God; God influences the world, and the world affects God.

The above examples are possible ways of construing divine embodiment that utilize a body-soul analogy of God and the world. The views of Hartshorne, Swinburne, and Taliaferro and I each take the personhood of God to be fundamental and assume that the way in which a person relates to his body offers a useful analogy for the way that God is related to the world. For the model to be beneficial, it is not necessary that God be related to the world in precisely the way our minds are related to our bodies. But what are important for our purposes are the personalistic aspects of God and God's relation to the world that can be drawn from these embodiment models. How this is relevant to the argument from neglect will be clarified in section III.

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17 See, for example, Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993).

## II. THE ARGUMENT FROM NEGLECT

One reason for the disinclination by some to embrace a personalistic view of theism is the apparent absence of divine action in the world with regard to pain and suffering. If God is omnibenevolent, omniscient, exceedingly powerful, and akin to a person in having intentions, feelings, purposes, goals and desires, then why does God permit the ongoing, widespread suffering in the world? The actions that one would expect to occur if there were such a God are those that would eradicate the most appalling cases of evil--evil, for example, whose effect is dysteleological and widely destructive. It is the reality of these sorts of evils that are particularly perplexing for those who embrace personalistic forms of God.

Wesley Wildman has argued that, with regard to the problem of evil, the concern is not so much *that* evil exists as that God, if there is a God, seemingly *does nothing about it*. For Wildman, it is the idea of a *personal* God that creates the difficulty, for, on the view that there exists such a divine reality, he is evidently indifferent to, or ineffective in responding to, situations about which a loving, caring God should be so engaged. The apparent lack of divine response is one reason why some have rejected theism altogether and why others, such as Wildman himself, are theists of a *nonpersonalistic* sort.<sup>18</sup>

Wildman summarizes the problematic:

Of course, it is not actually the existence of suffering that is the problem for personal ideas of God. That is a shared challenge for all religions and all theologies. It is what a supposedly personal active God doesn't do about it that is the problem. Consider the following analogy. When my children endanger themselves through their ignorance or willfulness, I do not hesitate as one trying to be a good father to intervene, to protect them from themselves, to teach them what they don't know, and thereby to help them become responsible people. I needed to do that a lot more when they were little than I do now but I believe that my love for those children can be measured as much by my interventions as by my allowing them space to experience making their own decisions independently. They do need to experience the effects of their choices, whether good or bad, but I would rightly be a negligent parent if I allowed them such freedom that they hurt themselves or others out of ignorance or misplaced curiosity or wickedness.

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18 For more on non-personal conceptions of God, see John Bishop, "The Divine Attributes and Non-Personal Conceptions of God", *Topoi* 36, no. 4 (2017).



To the extent that we think of God as a personal active being, we inevitably apply these standards. Frankly, and I say this with the utmost reverence, the personal God does not pass the test of parental moral responsibility. If God really is personal in this way, then we must conclude that God has a morally abysmal record of inaction or ineffective action. This I shall call the *argument from neglect*, and I take it to be the strongest moral argument against most forms of personal theism. It applies most obviously to versions of personal theism in which God is omnipotent. But the argument from neglect also applies to views of personal theism that deny omnipotence, such as process theology, because the argument establishes that God's ability to influence the world is so sorely limited as to make God virtually irrelevant when it comes to the practical moral struggles of our deeply unjust world.<sup>19</sup>

One response to this argument has been developed by Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp.<sup>20</sup> They maintain that to meet the objection, the defender of personalistic theism is obligated to respond to two charges:

- (1) to demonstrate that there may be a good reason why God is either unable to act in the manner that one would expect a benevolent God to act, or that God chooses not to carry out such acts; and
- (2) to avoid constraining divine action to the extent that it is no longer relevant.

They attempt to meet the objection by moving beyond offering the mere *logical possibility* that there is a good reason (or set of reasons) for what appears to be divine neglect while also claiming not to *know* what reason or reasons God actually has for it. Rather, they seek to provide an account of divine motive and action that constitutes a plausible and consistent *explanation* for what seems to be divine neglect — plausible, at least, to the relevant community of inquiry that is open to a personalistic view of God. Their hypothesis, to which we can refer simply as the Clayton-Knapp hypothesis, is summarized as follows:

Suppose the purpose, or at least one purpose, of God's creating our universe was to bring about the existence of finite rational agents capable of entering

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19 Wesley Wildman, "A Review and Critique of the 'Divine Action Project': A Dialogue Among Scientists and Theologians, Sponsored by Pope John Paul II," unpublished manuscript, page 3, as quoted in Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief: Science, Philosophy, and Faith* (OUP, 2011), 45. For Wildman's developed views on the subject, see Wesley Wildman, *Science and Religious Anthropology: A Spiritually Evocative Naturalist Interpretation of Human Life* (Ashgate, 2009).

20 Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*.

into communion with God. Suppose the way God achieved that purpose was by creating a universe in which events would be consistently governed by regularities of the kind described by the laws of physics or, more broadly, the laws of nature. Because the universe operates according to its own regularities, beings who evolved through the operation of those regularities are not simply the direct expression of the divine will (as would be the case if they were directly created by divine fiat) but partake of the (relative) autonomy with which God has endowed the universe as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

As stated, the Clayton-Knapp hypothesis leaves a central question unanswered: Why could God not *occasionally* intervene to override physical regularities where such interventions would prevent tremendous suffering? Intervening in order to prevent a minor mishap may well be unwarranted, but surely acting to prevent a catastrophic event, such as the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 that brought about the deaths of approximately 250,000 Indonesians, would be. The reply offered by Clayton and Knapp is that in creating and sustaining a universe with free creatures, “A benevolent God could not intervene *even once* without incurring the responsibility to intervene in every case where doing so would prevent an instance of innocent suffering.”<sup>22</sup> They call this the “not-even-once” principle.

Why is God so constrained by the not-even-once principle? What sort of necessity would compel the consistent inaction of a benevolent, personal deity with regard to pain and suffering? For Clayton and Knapp, it is not a *forensic* necessity whereby God would have to explain to others why he did not act in a particular situation, for God is not accountable to anything less than God. Instead, they suggest a combination of ethical and metaphysical responses. With regard to the former, they are not suggesting an ethic whereby God would need to obey a policy of proportionate intervention as human agents do, for he ostensibly does not have the limitations of resources or compassion that humans do. For most theists, personalistic or otherwise, God’s resources are unlimited, and God experiences compassion in a far more intense manner, and sees the immediate need of amelioration of the human condition far more clearly, than humans do. Human beings can act to ameliorate suffering without thereby being obligated to act in every instance because humans are so limited by their finitude. God ostensibly has no such

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21 Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, 46–47.

22 Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, 49 (italics in original).

limitations. For God, then, responding one time to suffering would obligate God to act on all or virtually all occasions of suffering. But doing that would preclude preserving a universe in which conscious moral beings such as us could develop morally and rationally.

Furthermore, the evolution of rational and moral agency would likely not be possible in a world which does not follow natural laws — one in which, for example, bullets turned to flower petals and bombs turned to bursts of perfume. Science as a discipline would likely not evolve in a world in which there was no basis for developing the appreciation of the natural regularities requisite for knowledge acquisition. Why is the development of science so important? Because “science is merely one institutional expression of the more general human project of individual and collective self-definition and self-determination, which proceeds by our interacting with a reality that we can understand, in no small measure because it is *not* subject to arbitrary alteration by human — or more than human — fiat.”<sup>23</sup>

Metaphysically, could not God have created human beings *de novo* in possession of all of the desired moral and intellectual virtues rather than having to acquire them over the arduous struggle of life on earth? Not if the following principle holds: “[V]irtues that have been formed within an agent as a hard-won deposit of right decisions in situations of challenge and temptation are intrinsically more valuable than ready-made virtues created within her without any effort on her on part.” This principle, proffered by John Hick, indicates a value judgment that cannot be proven yet that seems as plausible and compelling to me (and, it appears, to Clayton, Knapp, and many others) as it did to Hick: “[A] moral goodness that exists as the agent’s initial given nature, without ever having been chosen in the face of temptations to the contrary, is intrinsically less valuable than a moral goodness that has been built up over time through the agent’s own responsible choices in the face of alternative possibilities.”<sup>24</sup>

In their attempt to provide a plausible and consistent explanation for what appears to be divine neglect, it may seem that Clayton and Knapp have shown that God is unable to act at all in the universe, and thus that the *per-*

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23 Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, 49, (italics in original).

24 John Hick, “An Irenaean Theodicy”, in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 43.

*sonal* dimension of God is irrelevant to human life and experience. This is not the case, they maintain, for God *is* able to perform actions that bring about events in the universe that would not have occurred otherwise. How so? They argue that within an emergentist framework, divine influence at the non-nomological mental level is possible and does not demand an exception to any natural laws, avoiding undermining the conditions necessary to make scientific explanations possible, and thus avoiding the negation of finite rational agency.<sup>25</sup> God can and does act, on their view, to lure conscious creatures into conformity with the divine nature and will, and God does so without incurring a moral obligation to prevent any evil whatsoever.

### III. DIVINE EMBODIMENT AND THE CONSTRAINTS OF CREATION

In their response to charges (1) and (2), Clayton and Knapp's explanation for why God does not perform the actions that one would expect of God does provide a rigorous and consistent account for why, though it may seem that God is like a neglectful parent with respect to pain and suffering in the world, yet he is not. Yet it seems to have constrained divine action to the point that it is no longer relevant with respect to evil, a concern they were attempting to avoid. For on their account, God does not respond *at all* to the egregious maladies and horrors in the world. How, then, is divine action relevant to evil? If a parent were constrained in such a way that she were unable to respond at all to the pain and suffering of her child, one would surely claim that her parental actions are no longer relevant with respect to her child's suffering. If Clayton and Knapp are correct with regard to the ethical and metaphysical constraints noted above, then it would provide a good explanation for why God never responds to evil, though divine action would seem to have lost much of its relevance to the human condition. Perhaps there is another explanation that avoids this conclusion. Let us, then, further examine their argument.

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25 Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, 53–66. Clayton also assesses the case for emergent phenomenon in Philip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness* (OUP, 2006). See also Philip Clayton and Paul Davies, eds., *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion* (OUP, 2008).

As noted, according to the not-even-once principle, if a benevolent God intervened on any occasion in response to pain and suffering, he would incur the responsibility of doing so on every occasion. Why would God incur such responsibility? Because he does not have the limitations that humans do, limitations that require a policy of proportionate intervention. Since God has no such limitations, he would be morally obligated to intervene in most if not all cases of suffering, but this would preclude the regularities requisite for creating moral and rational beings, argue Clayton and Knapp.

While it is surely true that when it comes to human agents, given our finitude and limitations, a policy of proportionate intervention is needed based on scarce resources, compassion fatigue, inaccessibility, and so on. But perhaps something like a policy of proportionate intervention is also necessary for God. Such a policy would not be due to insufficient physical resources or limitations on divine attributes such as love and compassion. Rather, it would be due to the limitations of the nature of those with whom God is working to bring into spiritual and moral maturity. This nature is one of finitude, free and creative agency, and moral capacity and culpability. If God is to permit and promote the existence and flourishing of such free and autonomous creatures, then the actions of these creatures will likely not always be in agreement with the divine will. There may be universes in which God's nature and purposes are expressed in different ways, and they may well reflect different goods and goals than God has for our universe. But whatever the universe, given the parameters and possibilities of that universe, and the nature of the divine reality as manifest in that universe, there will be limitations on divine action which are rooted in that particular expression and the natures and purposes therein. God need not therefore be bound by the not-even-once principle in order to be morally consistent. To the contrary, as the embodied, affective, compassionate, loving divine presence, God would be ceaselessly responding, as far as divinely possible, to the ills and evils of this world.

But we are still left with the problem of neglect. Wildman, Clayton, and Knapp have aptly demonstrated that the constraints on divine action must be profound on a personalistic account of theism, for if God exists he does not act in the world in ways that a personalistic theist would *prima facie* suppose that such a God should act. Yet, it will be argued, the personalistic theist need not conclude that God is so constrained as not to be able to respond even once to evil. Let us consider, then, constraints on divine action given an em-

bodied personalistic form of theism that may provide an explanation for why it seems that God is behaving like a neglectful parent.<sup>26</sup>

One type of divine constraint is rooted in the overall purposes God has for the universe, as Clayton and Knapp point out. Though such purposes may not be easily discernable, the structure of the universe, including its laws and regularities, would be established by a personal and benevolent God in order to have the best chance of achieving the goals and goods that he desires for that universe. God could modify the structure, but if he desires to achieve the goals and goods he has in mind in establishing the structure, he will be constrained by it unless he changes the goals or goods he had in mind in creating it.

With regard to the specific purposes God might have for this universe, one could also agree with the Clayton-Knapp hypothesis that the purpose, or a purpose, of the universe was to “bring about finite rational agents capable of entering into communion with God.”<sup>27</sup> If this is the case, then it may be that those agents will likely experience a certain amount of suffering given the structure of this universe. This would be so if God could not bring about his overall purpose or specific purposes without persons experiencing suffering in some manner. God would thus be limited in his actions with regard to suffering. Consider the following example. Suppose that someone, call her Aaiza, was in an automobile accident in which her left leg was completely crushed and had to be amputated. Suppose further that Aaiza belongs to a religiously devout family who prays regularly and believes in miracles. Would it be reasonable for Aaiza and her family to ask in prayer for God to grow her a new leg? Such a request seems wildly unreasonable, even to those who believe that God can and does act in the world. But why is it wildly unreasonable to pray for the growing of a new leg and not wildly unreasonable to pray that, say, one’s lung cancer goes into remission? After all, there are many alleged cases of healing in response to prayer.<sup>28</sup>

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26 For extensive treatments of divine action that have influenced my own thinking on the matter, Keith Ward, *Divine Action: Examining God’s Role in an Open and Emergent Universe* (Templeton Foundation Press, 2007), John Polkinghorne, *Faith, Science, and Understanding* (Yale Univ. Press, 2000), John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (Yale Univ. Press, 2003) and John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Physics and Theology: An Unexpected Kinship* (Yale Univ. Press, 2008).

27 Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, 46. The major monotheistic religions all have in mind something like this as a primary purpose of the creation.

28 As Craig Keener demonstrates in his extensive two-volume study on miracles, Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Baker Academic, 2011), hun-

The answer will partly have to do with how we understand the universe to be structured. If it is a tightly closed and mechanistic system, then any act of God would be an intervention, a breaking into the natural order and a violation of its laws and regularities. But if instead the universe is a system of open potentiality, one which follows probability laws rather than strictly deterministic ones, then God would not be violating those laws if he did bring about certain events in the natural world that occurred within the physical limitations allowable by the overall structure.

Clayton and Knapp argue against this idea. Metaphysically, they maintain, God's acting in the world in this way would undermine the regularities of the natural order. But could not God perform "hidden interventions" in which his actions are not "humanly distinguishable" such that the world continues to operate on the regularities demanded by the regularity point raised earlier? No, they maintain, for doing so would raise two further difficulties. First, God would be acting in ways that are inconsistent, for he would be ameliorating pain and suffering in some cases and not in others. Second, it would seem to sabotage the natural regularities in question, for God would be frequently impinging on those regularities in a manner that is humanly undetectable. To sabotage the regularities would undermine science and rational agency.

In reply to the first point, it simply does not follow that if God does not act in the same way on every occasion, he is being inconsistent. There are likely numerous good reasons for acting or not acting in any particular situation relevant to suffering. We may not be privy to many or perhaps any of the actual reasons God has for acting or not acting in any individual instance, yet it does not follow that there are no good reasons. The soul-making theodicy proposed by John Hick, for example, would provide one kind of reason for God's allowing suffering in some cases, at least.<sup>29</sup>

In reply to the second point, it is not clear that it would *sabotage* the regularities of the natural world if God acted in ways that are humanly undetectable. Clayton and Knapp claim that to believe that God acts in this manner is "to believe that the natural order is in fact laden with irregularities, however lawlike it may appear to us in practice."<sup>30</sup> But why refer to them as "irregu-

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dreds of millions of people today claim to have experienced miracles.

29 See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

30 Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, 52.

larities,” and why refer to divine acts as “sabotages” in such cases? Suppose the physical laws of the universe operate within a probabilistic structure, as most physicists maintain, and that God works within that structure to choose a particular trajectory that would not have followed without his so acting (though the *possibility* of such a trajectory would exist without God so acting). It would certainly follow that the physical laws themselves would not provide an *exhaustive* explanation of the occurrences in the universe, though we could still maintain that they provide a *complete* explanation.<sup>31</sup> As such, the natural order would still be nomological in structure, and calling events that occur within this structure (however they are brought about) “irregularities” and “sabotages” seems to utilize misplaced dysphemisms.

If God does act in this way, his actions in most cases would be restricted by the limits of the probabilistic laws that are set by the stochastic patterns of quantum mechanics.<sup>32</sup> While quantum theory can be interpreted deterministically or indeterministically, the majority of quantum physicists take quantum probability to be an intrinsic property, and this allows for there to be ontological openness that permits the function of additional causal principles at work in the natural world. This interpretation of quantum theory thus allows for the purposive direction and guidance of God to be in play.<sup>33</sup> We need not know *how* God works in this causal junction to accomplish his desired ends, only that it is metaphysically possible for him to do so within the laws and regularities as we currently understand them.<sup>34</sup>

Consider the example of the probability of someone surviving five years after being diagnosed with stage IV-B non-small cell lung cancer. At the time of the writing of this paper, the probability is less than one percent. While the

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31 On whether physical laws are exceptionless regularities, see Nancy Cartwright, “Do the Laws of Physics state the Facts”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 61, no. 1-2 (1980).

32 For a concise account of quantum ideas, see John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2002). Polkinghorne expounds on the relevance of quantum theory to theology in a number of works, including Polkinghorne, *Faith, Science, and Understanding* and Polkinghorne, *Quantum Physics and Theology*.

33 This causal input could be, for example, in the form of new information included in the “causal joint” between divine providence and the created world. See Polkinghorne, *Faith, Science, and Understanding*.

34 In John Polkinghorne, *Theology in the Context of Science* (SPCK, 2008), 79, Polkinghorne notes that though we are not in a place where we can “identify uniquely and exhaustively the causal joints by which agency might be exercised,” that does not rule out the possibility or plausibility of their being an open space in which providential agency might be exercised.



chances of surviving five years are extremely low, some people do survive this amount of time and more. If someone were diagnosed with this form of lung cancer, it seems that God could work within that small probability range of survival to bring it about that the cancer cells in this particular individual go into remission. Again, one could never be sure that God had in fact acted, nor could one be sure of the reasons he had for acting in this particular case and not in another. But it does not follow that God could not or would not do so.

But would not such divine action be an intervention into and violation of the natural world? Not necessarily. On the limited embodiment views of Swinburne and Taliaferro, one could maintain that God works within those open spaces as noted above, and that doing so is no *violation* of the natural laws. It is just what it means for the universe to be open to the purposes and plans of providence. If one affirms the panentheistic embodiment views of Hartshorne, Clayton, and Knapp, then the criticism of external divine intervention or interference into the natural world loses its force completely. For on their views the world is not ontologically external to God such that the actions of God are “outside” interventions into its order and functioning. Instead, its very laws and operations are mere expressions of divine agency, will, and purpose. The natural regularities of the world are thus in a sense divine regularities. Interruptions of the regularities would not then be external violations, but internal (and sometimes focally intentional) actions. They would be the actions of the divine mind exemplified in the divine body, just as the actions of a human mind on a human body are not interventions or violations of natural law.

The autonomic system of the human body, which regulates bodily functions in a largely unconscious manner, provides an (imperfect) analogy. My breathing rates are regulated by my autonomic nervous system. Yet I can increase or decrease that rate at will if I so choose (for purposes of meditation, for example). On the view of embodiment affirmed by Hartshorne, Clayton, and Knapp, the regularities of the natural world are an ongoing feature of the created order in which the acts of God occur in the natural processes themselves, though in a non-focal manner.<sup>35</sup> As Clayton puts it:

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35 In the words of Arthur Peacocke, who also affirms this form of divine embodiment: “the inorganic, biological, and human worlds are not just the stage of God’s action — they *are* in themselves a mode of God in action.” Arthur Peacocke, “Chance and Law”, in *Chaos and Com-*

[T]he actions of God can be much more coherently conceived if the world bears a relationship to God analogous to the body's relationship to the mind or soul. . . . As an opening hypothesis, [this panentheistic soul-body analogy] appears to suggest that there is no *qualitative* or ontological difference between the regularity of natural law and the intentionality of special divine actions.<sup>36</sup>

Returning to the example of someone growing a new leg after amputation, in this case the probability is virtually zero (at least, that is, given current scientific capabilities).<sup>37</sup> For God to cause a new leg to grow, it would likely involve an event or set of events beyond the strictures of physical nomological explanation, even granting possibilities allowable within quantum laws.<sup>38</sup> It would involve, that is to say, a miracle.<sup>39</sup> It is not that it would be metaphysically impossible for God to grow the leg, but the regularities and patterns of the natural world would likely preclude such action by God, unless perhaps there was an overriding reason for God to do so. An event of this sort, a miracle, would need to be a very rare anomaly, otherwise it would destroy the functional integrity of the overall physical system that God had established. And it would be scientifically inexplicable. From a theological perspective, natural laws would thus be seen as reports of regular and predictable patterns of divine activity and creativity, but that could, with certain limitations, be further influenced by divine will.

Whichever model of divine embodiment one employs, only God could fully know the parameters, possibilities, and purposes of any given universe and the limits of the functional integrity of the system he created. And we cannot always infer from the *general* constraints of creation what *specific*

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*plexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, and Arthur R. Peacocke (The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1995), 139.

36 Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1997), 100–101.

37 However, regenerative medicine has in recent years made significant strides toward the growth of new organs.

38 It may be, however, that one day in the future advances in regenerative medicine will bring about growing new limbs. In that case, God could work through scientists and surgeons to bring about the growth of a new leg without engaging in *miraculous* activity.

39 By “miracle” I mean an extraordinary and astonishing event that points toward the presence or purpose of God. A relevant example to consider is the Christian belief about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This is an event which, if true, involves an act of God that goes beyond the regular operations of natural laws. On the Christian view, bringing about the resurrection of Jesus pointed to the presence and purpose of God in salvation history.

limitations might apply in any *particular* situation. Yet it seems reasonable to affirm at least this much about the moral and metaphysical constraints on divine action with respect to our universe given the existence of the God of personalistic theism. God can respond to evil on this account, working with the open spaces allowable by natural laws, and (very rarely) working even beyond those spaces.

#### IV. CODA

While the constraints of creation are many on an embodied, personalistic model of God, and thus the limitations of God's actions with respect to suffering are profound, the not-even-once principle seems an unnecessary posit. If God has a good reason or set of reasons for responding to evil and does respond in a particular instance, it does not follow that he is then morally compelled to do so in every case. We may not be privy to many or perhaps any of the reasons God has for acting or not acting in any given situation, yet it seems that there are general metaphysical, moral, and scientific reasons why God does not act more in the world than he does with respect to evil. Thus, one can reasonably believe that God is acting to ameliorate pain and suffering, perhaps even in response to prayer, though praying for the growth of a new limb would likely be, at least at this point in history, ineffective and silly.

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