A Kenosis Theodicy

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Paper for the Systematic Theology Section of the
2007 Wesleyan Theological Society Meeting,
Olivet Nazarene University

Although the problem of evil has been an obstacle to faith for several millennia, the emergence of evolutionary theory has raised the issue in a new way. Polls show, in fact, that contemporary atheists cite the problem of evil and evolutionary theory as the two main reasons they choose not to believe God exists. In this essay, I propose to solve the problem of evil by offering a kenosis theodicy. I will argue that the kenosis theodicy I offer overcomes the inherent liability of other kenosis theories, theories which assume that God is voluntarily self-limited.

In his famous poem, “In Memorium,” the poet Alfred Tennyson pondered the impact of evolutionary theory upon our understanding of evil and the apparent purposelessness of life:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
   That Nature lends such evil dreams?
   So careful of the type she seems,
So careles of the single life;

That I, considering everywhere
   Her secret meaning in her deeds,
   And finding that of fifty seeds
She often brings but one to bear,
After noting that a single life seems to matter little, but Nature guards against the destruction of the species, Tennyson points out that Nature seems not to care of even the species:

"So careful of the type?" but no.
From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She cries, "A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go.

"Thou makest thine appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death:
The spirit does but mean the breath:
I know no more." And he, shall he,

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law--
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed--

Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or seal'd within the iron hills?

Tennyson is suggesting that evil and suffering are at odds with the idea that God loves the world and all its creatures. He wonders why we should consider God loving if evolution, “red in tooth and claw,” apparently does not care whether single individuals or even species end as fossils and dust. Should we regard God benevolent in light of evil and evolution?
Some believe they can evade the problem of evil by suggesting that God does not cause evil. Free creaturely choices gone awry and the general constraints inherent in any finite structure cause evil. But these answers are not enough. Believing that God is not evil’s cause does not solve the problem of evil. The typical view of divine power is that God has the capacity to prevent evil events autonomously should God choose to do so. Genuinely evil events that cause human and nonhuman suffering demand an answer for why a loving and powerful God would fail to prevent such evils.

One recent attempt to solve the problem of evil has gained influence among Christian scholars exploring the science-and-theology interface. This theory draws from a short passage in Philippians in which the writer speaks of God’s self-giving. The word used to describe this self-giving is “kenosis” (2:7). Biblical scholars do not agree about how to conceive of kenosis, but many speculate that it best be interpreted as divine self-limitation for the sake of others.

A collection of essays, *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, explores what kenosis might contribute to the science-and-theology dialogue in general and to solving the problem of evil in particular. Kenosis theory as articulated in this collection champions divine love while reconceiving divine power. Kenosis rejects divine unilateralism, because it maintains a crucial role for free creaturely contributions. In its robust form, kenosis theory avoids the God-of-the-gaps problem created by the natural/supernatural. Kenosis theory contends that creatures invariably rely upon God’s creative self-giving for their existence in general and their ability to love in particular.

John Polkinghorne, the book’s editor, adopts kenosis as an affirmation of God’s voluntary self-limitation that allows creatures to enjoy power and freedom. The affirmation of divine kenosis provides grounds to argue, says Polkinghorne, that “no longer can God be held to be totally and directly responsible for all that happens.”

Such voluntary self-limitation “is quite different from Process Theology’s conception of an external metaphysical constraint upon the power of deity,” says Polkinghorne, because the kenotic vision maintains “that nothing imposes conditions on God from the outside.” Divine voluntary self-limitation also differs from what Polkinghorne calls “Classical Theology’s picture of God.” Classical theology envisioned God “in total control” and invulnerable “such that there is no reciprocal effect of creatures upon the divine nature, of the kind that a truly loving relationship would seem to imply.”
Polkinghorne’s theory of kenosis entails that God calls upon creatures to play some role in their own creation. “The kenotic Creator may not overrule creatures,” says Polkinghorne, “but the continuous Creator must interact with creation.” The word “interact” is preferable to “intervene,” says Polkinghorne, because intervene carries “connotations of arbitrary interruption.” There is an unavoidable cost in this interaction without interruption and creaturely contribution. “Creatures will behave in accordance with their natures: lions will kill their prey; earthquakes will happen; volcanoes will erupt and rivers flood.”

Polkinghorne admits that his scheme does not solve all the problems of theodicy. He believes, however, that it tempers those problems by removing the suspicion that God is incompetent or indifferent. Polkinghorne summarizes his view by saying that God allows the created other to be and to act, so that, while all that happens is permitted by God’s general providence, not all that happens is in accordance with God’s will or brought about by divine special providence. Such an understanding is basic to the interpretation of evolutionary history as creation’s making of itself. Such an understanding is also basic to theodicy’s disclaimer that God does not will the act of a murderer or the destructive force of an earthquake, but allows both to happen in a world in which divine power is deliberately self-limited to allow causal space for creatures.

God’s exercise of love and power emerges from “the interior ‘constraints’ of the self-consistency of the divine nature.” Divine voluntary self-limitation maintains God’s total benevolence by qualifying, in a kenotic way, the operation of God’s power.

I find the general theory of kenosis helpful. As typically presented, however, it does not provide an adequate solution to the problem of evil. Polkinghorne admits this. It cannot provide a solution, because the God voluntarily self-limited remains culpable for failing to prevent genuinely evil occurrences. Like most, Polkinghorne conceives of kenosis as God’s entirely voluntarily self-limitation. God retains the capacity to withdraw or override the freedom of others should God choose to do so.

Divine kenosis as understood by Polkinghorne entails that God retains the capacity to withdraw or override the freedom of others should God choose to do so. The God who is voluntarily self-limited yet retains the capacity to veto creaturely freedom ought to become un-
self-limited from time to time to stop the horrors that innocent victims endure. To say it another way, the God capable of vetoing the freedom of creatures ought to do so occasionally in the name of love. Temporarily vetoing the power for freedom of those generating genuine evil -- if such vetoing is possible -- is the loving thing to do. While Polkinghorne’s kenosis theory rightly affirms that creatures possess freedom to love, it does not solve the problem of evil.

Polkinghorne is right, however, to be wary of solutions to the problem of evil suggesting that some force outside of or greater than God imposes metaphysical limitations. Versions of process theology that suppose an external metaphysical constraint or the imposition of outside conditions upon God’s power ought to be rejected. Perhaps Polkinghorne would agree with me that Whitehead’s thought on these matters should be adapted rather than adopted. The problem of evil is best solved by rethinking God’s own character and relations – what Polkinghorne calls the interior constraints of the self-consistency of the divine nature – rather than suggesting that some outside dominating opposition confines God.

The alternative I propose begins by postulating that love is an essential attribute of God. It is necessarily the case that God acts intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (which includes past divine actions), to promote overall well-being. Loving others is not an arbitrary divine decision but an aspect of God’s eternal, unchanging nature. God cannot not love. God is love.

In suggesting that love is an essential aspect of the divine nature, however, I am not suggesting that God has no choice whatsoever with regard to love. That God will love others is necessarily the case. This derives from God’s nature, not the divine will. However, how God loves others is a free choice on God’s part. Here, the divine will is expressed in God’s choosing the form and expression of love appropriate for each recipient.

The second postulate in my alternative is that God is essentially a relational being. Love cannot be expressed in absolute isolation; love is inherently relational. As relational, God is affected by those to whom God relates. For some time, relational theologians have rejected the idea that God is an aloof and distant monarch uninfluenced by others. Instead, relational theologians like myself affirm that God suffers and is passible, to use the classic language. This means that God is influenced by the ups and downs, joys and sorrows, sins and loves of others. God is the best and most moved mover.
John Wesley quoted approvingly the classic description of the omnipresent God as “the Soul of the universe.” If one understands a soul to be present to and influencing all parts of one’s body and also being influenced by the body, the label is appropriate. Instead of referring to God as the Soul of the universe, however, some today adopt the label “panentheism” to emphasize God’s immanent omnipresence without denying divine transcendence. God penetrates the entire universe, but the divine being is not identical to or exhausted by the universe. God is distinct from others, having God’s own essence, constitution, and agency. Elsewhere, I have also suggested that “theocosmocentrism” might be a helpful label to identify God as the one intimately and everlastingly present to all in the cosmos.

If love is an essential divine property and love requires relations, we should conclude that the divine essence requires relations with others. Divine relatedness is an aspect of the divine essence. Just as God did not voluntarily decide various features of own nature, God does not voluntarily decide to be relational. To relate to all others is essential to what it means to be God. God does not depend upon relations to creatures to exist, of course, but the ways in which creatures respond to God affects the moment-by-moment constitution of the divine life.

Some Christian theologians agree that relational love is a necessary aspect of the divine essence, but they argue that God only necessarily loves others in the Trinity. Love for creatures, they say, is contingent upon God’s wholly voluntary decision. Love for others in the Trinity is necessary; love for others in the universe is accidental.

The hypothesis I offer, by contrast, claims that God is necessarily related to creatures. God has been necessarily related to whatever God has created everlastingly. To accept my hypothesis, one may or may not affirm that God is related necessary within the Trinity. For those who consider the notion of relations within the Godhead a crucial element in an adequate doctrine of God, my hypothesis that God relates necessarily with creatures should not be seen as a rival or alternate view. One can affirm both that God necessarily relates within the Trinity and that God necessary relates to creatures. The hypothesis that God necessarily relates to creatures because relational love is an essential property of the divine essence is crucial to solving the problem of evil.

Some theologians mistakenly argue that if God requires relations with creaturely universe, God would cease existing were the universe to cease existing. However, this does not follow if God is said to exist necessarily. After all, a being that exists necessarily requires
nothing outside itself to stay alive. I argue that a scheme supposing that God necessarily and 
everlastingly relates to some creaturely world or another is preferable to a scheme that claims 
that God’s relations to the world are accidental.\textsuperscript{xvii}

Like other theologians who affirm kenosis, I speculate that God lovingly provides 
power and freedom to all creatures capable of self-determination. God does this in each 
moment of each creature’s life. God is the giver of the gift that creatures require to live, love, 
and have their being. We might call this “prevenient grace,” to use the language of Wesleyan 
theology.

God acts first (preveniently) to initiate each moment in a creature’s life, and God 
provides the power and freedom that creatures require. All creatures are utterly dependent upon 
God. God provides freedom to each agent, and each agent responds freely to the varied choices 
each faces. Theologian Randy Maddox calls divine initiating action that requires creaturely 
freedom, “response-able grace.”\textsuperscript{xviii}

A key to my kenosis theodicy is my claim that God’s prevenient provision of the power 
for freedom to every creature derives from God’s essence. This means that prevenient grace is a 
necessary, not wholly voluntary, aspect of deity. Because God necessarily provides freedom to 
all individuals as God essentially relates to them, it makes no sense to suggest that God could fail 
to provide freedom and power. In other words, God’s essential love relatedness entails that God 
cannot withdraw, fail to offer, or override the freedom that God gives to creatures in each 
moment.

My proposal shares affinities with how Maddox talks about John Wesley’s understanding 
of divine power. He writes,

Perhaps the best way to capture Wesley’s conviction . . . is to say that he construed God’s 
power or sovereignty fundamentally in terms of empowerment rather than control or 
overpowerment. This is not to weaken God’s power but to determine its character! As 
Wesley was fond of saying, God works “strongly and sweetly.”\textsuperscript{xix}

I refer to Maddox’s characterization of Wesley to suggest that God’s relational love is such that 
God’s empowering of others is fundamental to God’s nature. To say it another way, 
empowering others is part of what it means to be God. Deity does not overpower creatures, in
the sense of vetoing creaturely freedom. That would be a violation of God’s very essence. And God cannot violate God’s own essence.

Crucial to the scheme I am proposing is the claim that God empowers and invites others to love, but God does not coerce others. Coerce, as I use the word, means complete control over or unilateral determination of. I suggest that God’s empowering and inspiring is always persuasive. The words we might use to describe this persuasive action might include “call,” “lead,” “lure,” “woo,” “appeal,” “attract,” or “encourage,” among others. These words suggest that God does not -- and I claim cannot -- fully control creatures.

At this point, my kenosis theodicy should be apparent. The loving God who is essentially related to and who necessarily provides freedom to all creatures is not culpable for failing to prevent the evil that occurs because of free creaturely choices. God cannot be culpable, because God essentially and lovingly relates to all creatures by gifting them power for freedom in each moment. God could no more choose to cease existing than to cease to provide freedom kenotically to those with whom God lovingly relates. The genuine evil of the world results from debilitating choices these empowered creatures make.xx

Another way to distinguish my kenosis theodicy from Polkinghorne’s proposal is to say that my kenosis theory speculates that God is involuntarily kenotic because of God’s loving nature. Polkinghorne seems to advocate voluntary divine self-limitation. My kenosis alternative envisions a God whose essence is love, who necessarily relates to creatures because of that love, and who necessarily “self-empties” or “self-offers” in each moment of the divine life to provide freedom to all others capable of self-determination. God is necessarily, not voluntarily, kenotic. My kenosis theodicy agrees with Polkinghorne who appeals to the “the interior ‘constraints’ of the self-consistency of the divine nature” by arguing that God’s self-emptying is a necessary part of what it means for God to relate to, create, and empower creatures.

My alternative of a necessarily kenotic God provides us with a way to overcome the inherent liability of a self-limited deity who fails to become un-self-limited, in the name of love, to prevent genuine evil. The loving God of this kenosis theory is not culpable for failing to prevent genuine evil. The necessarily kenotic God lovingly provides the power and freedom necessary for creatures to respond.
When creatures respond poorly by using their God-given freedom wrongly, the world’s well-being decreases and genuine evils occur. When they respond appropriately, the overall well-being, blessedness, flourishing, or Shalom that God desires is established.

God’s kingdom comes, God’s will is done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

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i Alfred, Lord Tennyson: In Memoriam (54 - 56 fragment) 1850
ii John Polkinghorne, The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis, 95.
iii Ibid.
iv Ibid., 92.
v Ibid., 96
vi Ibid., 100.
viI Ibid., 95
viii Ibid., 102.
ix Ibid., 96.
x Instead of “essential,” some philosophers prefer “superessential” to refer to divine attributes. The latter term implies that a particular attribute applies to God in all possible worlds. I mean for “essential” to imply the same.
xiii The notion that God is the most moved mover, rather than the unmoved mover, derives from Abraham Heschel. Various process theologians employ the phrase as well. Clark Pinnock titles one of his books that promotes the idea that God is affected by others, Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001).
xiv A number of scholars have embraced panentheism in recent days. One of the better accounts of the diversity of meanings the label carries is found in the collection of essays, In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World (Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, eds. [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004]). In that book, see especially “Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Pantheistic Turn in Modern Theology” (Michael W. Brierley) and “Pantheism Today: A Constructive Systematic Evaluation” (Philip Clayton).
xv I use “theocosmocentrism” to distinguish my own view from the variety of panentheisms that scholars have adopted (for these varieties, see In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being). By theocosmocentrism, I mean that God has always been related to some universe or another, and God did not create the universe from absolutely nothing (creatio ex nihilo). Some panentheists, by contrast, affirm creatio ex nihilo and the notion that God existed alone prior to God’s creation of this universe.
This alternative admittedly entails various metaphysical consequences pertaining to divine power and creaturely freedom, but these consequences arise from the divine essence and are not imposed by outside conditions.

If one were to attack the concept of the social Trinity by claiming that the Trinity would fail to exist if one member were to expire, that person would commit the same conceptual error as the error committed by those who claim that the God who necessarily exists would expire should some world or another expire.


Ibid., 55.

Some distinguish between moral evil and natural evil. Examples of moral evil may include murder and incest, whereas natural evils may be hurricanes and earthquakes. Following Whitehead and the process tradition, I suppose that a measure of self-determination extends even to the most fundamental elements of existence. This supposition allows one to generalize that the same explanation for why God does not prevent moral evil applies to why God does not prevent natural evil. God cannot prevent both, because providing power and freedom to others – whether those others are complex or simple – is part and parcel of God’s unchanging nature.