



The Mystery of Creaturely Otherness

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God's decrees foreordain, and his creative act brings into actuality, beings other than God. Creation marks the beginning, therefore, of non-divine "otherness." Now of course otherness does exist eternally within the divine nature. But creation is the beginning of something new: a *non*-divine otherness, a *creaturely* otherness. Creatures are the work of God, fully planned by God, dependent on him, and under his control. But they are not God, not extensions of God's nature.

Creaturely otherness is linked to a number of Christian mysteries and controversies. Consider the following:

1. Where does created otherness come from? It is not an extension of God's nature, nor is it made of something that exists eternally alongside of God. Scripture teaches that everything except God himself is created by God himself. But those two alternatives would seem to be exhaustive. Thus the church has adopted the formula that God originally created the world out of nothing. But every philosopher knows the proposition, "from nothing, nothing comes." Evidently God is able to overrule this philosophical principle. When there is nothing, @UN(plus) the divine energy, something *can* come forth. What is impossible for man is possible with God. But then we can see that creation is a miracle, such a stupendous miracle as to be quite beyond our comprehension.

2. How should we understand the *integrity* of creaturely otherness? By "integrity," I mean the ability of things to exist and function on their own terms, to be distinct from other objects, to play their own distinct roles in history. The integrity of creatures is not simply the integrity of God's nature, although creatures are certainly dependent on God ("contingent") for their existence and function. God's own integrity certainly sustains the existence and functions of creatures. But since God has ordained creatures to be *different* from him, he has given them natures and functions different from his own.

When a man dies, for example, it is not because God dies. It is, rather, because that death fulfils God's plan *for that particular creature*. The man dies because that is his peculiar, individual destiny, different from the fulfilment of God's purposes as such.

Each item in creation has its own role to play in God's wise plan. That item will remain in existence as long as it takes to fulfill that distinctive role.

Therefore, if the words "independence" and "autonomy" were not so often attached to unbiblical notions, it might be possible to use them to describe the integrity of creaturely otherness. The human life you live has its own significance, granted by God to be sure, but different from God's own significance and in that sense "independent" of it. Of course that life is also *dependent* on God's plan for history and his providential rule. Once God formulates his plan and creates the world, created individuals have stable historical roles distinct from God himself and sometimes even opposed to him. And once God grants to creatures these roles, he will not take them away, for to do so would violate his own plan.

If God has ordained that Bill will live to be 80 years old, he will not change his mind and take Bill's life at 60. God's plan is eternal, unchangeable. It is consistent with itself. Just as God keeps his promises, he also sees to it that his decree will be fulfilled. Like his preceptive will, his decretive will is covenantal.

3. Does God, then, limit his sovereignty? Yes and no. No, because this creaturely integrity is itself part of God's decree. At no point does God relinquish control over his world.

But I stress again that God's decree is not irrational or inconsistent with itself. In that sense, as Reformed theologians have always said, God cannot do simply anything. He cannot do something which contradicts his nature. And he cannot include one thing in his plan which contradicts another. In that sense, God is limited in what he can do.

And that limitation has something to do with the nature of creaturely otherness. For God to be consistent with himself, he must also be consistent with Bill. God knows that his plan includes the proposition that Bill will die at 80. That is a fact about God's plan; it is also a fact which God foreknows about Bill. All other things that God ordains for Bill must be consistent with this reality.

One can, therefore, say, that God's plan is limited by what he knows about Bill. He foreordains according to his foreknowledge. But it would be equally true to say that in this case one part of God's plan is simply furnishing a logical limit to another part of it.

Arminians say that God's foreordination is based on his foreknowledge. The Calvinist need not deny that this is the case. But he should go on, then, and point out to the Arminian that that foreknowledge itself is in turn based upon foreordination!

There is in God's mind a reciprocity between foreknowledge and foreordination. Neither is simply "prior" to the other. God's knowledge is based on what he foreordains; but his foreordination is not an ignorant foreordination. His plan is a wise plan, a plan formulated according to knowledge.

Here the concept of "middle knowledge" may be cautiously employed. God's "middle knowledge" is his knowledge of what takes place under various conditions. His "necessary knowledge" is of everything possible, his "free knowledge" of everything actual. "Middle knowledge" is of things hypothetical and their results. To Molina, who first formulated the concept, middle knowledge is based, not upon God's nature or plan, but upon his perceptions of the independent (in the bad sense!) behavior of creatures. Reformed theology, of course, denies this. But Reformed theology does not deny that God has a knowledge of matters hypothetical. He knows what will happen "if David goes to Keilah" and "if David does not go to Keilah."

So God knows that if Bill is fatally shot at 60, he cannot live to be 80. Therefore God prevents, as part of his eternal plan, the possibility of Bill being fatally shot at 60. God's will is formulated according to knowledge, including his foreknowledge concerning creatures; but his knowledge is also dependent upon the decisions of his will.

God does not limit his sovereignty, but his eternal plan does take creaturely integrity into account. God does not want to make creatures which have no integrity. Thus he makes beings which are fitted to carry out their distinctive purposes; and the other elements in God's plan respect those distinctive purposes.

While this position is clearly Reformed rather than Arminian, it does provide us with some talking points in discussions with our Arminian brothers and sisters. When they argue on behalf of free will and limited divine sovereignty, they may be erroneously groping for a genuinely scriptural point, namely, the reality of creaturely otherness and its integrity.

Indeed, we can tell the Arminian that God does take human nature into account when he formulates his eternal plan for us. But that is only one perspective! The other perspective is that God's knowledge of our nature is itself dependent upon his plan to make us in a particular way. God's will is based on his knowledge, and his knowledge is based on his will. Ultimately all the attributes, including knowledge and will, are identical in the divine simplicity. But each attribute is a perspective on his nature and plan. The problem with the Arminian, then, is not so much in what he affirms, but in what he denies. And his problem may also be described as monoperspectivalism.

4. Why did God create the world? He did not do it because he was unhappy or lonely or needy; he did not do it to remedy any lack in himself, for he lacked nothing.

Thomas Aquinas teaches that love is "diffusive of itself." That is, love seeks opportunities for self-giving. And since God is love, he therefore supremely desires to give of himself to someone else. He creates the world in fulfilment of this desire. But to say that God creates the world because his nature is "diffusive" is to say that the world is not a free creation but a necessary one. It is to say that God's nature *constrains* him to create. And if so, before he created, he would not have been fully God.

The traditional Reformed answer is that God created the world for his own glory, which is certainly true. But do we really want to say that God would have been *less* glorious without the world, that without the world he would have somehow been lacking in glory? I believe the reply to that is that *whatsoever* God does, he does for his glory. Indeed, he was glorified in the creation and government of the world. But he would have been glorified also had he decided not to create the world. All of his decisions manifest his glory and deserve perfect praise.

But then the question remains open: what did God accomplish in the creation of the world that he would not have accomplished otherwise? Why did God, after all, create the world?

We may never know the answer to this question. We can say with confidence that God had a reason, because all his works are done in wisdom, according to his wise plan. But it must not be a reason that somehow constrains or requires him to create. And that reason may never be known to us.

Van Til calls this the "full-bucket" problem. God is all-glorious, self-sufficient; yet he creates a world to glorify himself. He does not create to meet a need; but if there is no need, his decision to create seems irrational. Van Til thinks that at this point we meet the invincible barrier between God's thoughts and the thoughts of men. This problem, he thinks, is insoluble to a human mind. I am less certain of this point. I could not prove that no human mind will UN(ever) find an answer to this question; such negatives are indeed hard to prove. But certainly I do not presently have an answer to it. God has a reason for creation, a reason which does not involve meeting some divine "need." But I don't know what it is.

But permit me to speculate a bit. Speculation has a bad name in Reformed theology, because it tends to abandon *sola scriptura*. But there are types of speculation that are useful. It is sometimes edifying, for instance, to consider *possibilities*, without knowing whether or not they are actual. These possibilities may or may not be taught in Scripture;

but if they are genuinely possible, they will tell us what Scripture *allows for*. And understanding Scripture involves knowing both its teachings *and* knowing what possibilities it *allows for*. In that sense, godly speculation can be an exercise of *sola Scriptura*, teaching the *possibilities* allowed in Scripture, so that we will not try to forbid views which Scripture permits.

My speculation is simply that God made the world because he likes historical drama. This is not a complete answer, for we would have to ask afterward, why does God like historical drama? But the preliminary answer may have to suffice for a while.

Many problems in theology center on the relation of God to history and time. The problem of evil, for instance, is made worse by the passage of time. If human suffering never took more than three seconds, we might say, it wouldn't be so bad; yet frequently it takes much longer. And on a larger scale, human suffering in general has lasted for millennia. Why couldn't Job have been healed earlier?

And why has Jesus taken so long to return? Peter (II Pet. 3) tells us that he is giving his elect time to repent and believe. But why should *that* take so long?

One can reply that it has taken so long, because God has appointed preaching as the means of bringing the good news, and preaching to all the nations of the world takes time. But why did God choose preaching? Why did he not simply give to each person a private revelation?

Would these problems be lessened if the historical drama were shortened-- to, say, a week? or even a few minutes? or even a few seconds? But time is relative, after all. A day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and vice versa. Further, if the time scale for everything were shortened, doubtless human patience would also be shortened. Three seconds of suffering in six seconds of earthly life would be exceedingly frustrating.

The problems really seem to stem from history itself. Once God decides to put a historical drama into play, these problems seem to be inevitable.

But it is this historical intention that also explains so much. Once God determines to do something in time, in a created world, rather than in his own eternal trinitarian fellowship, then there must be a creature, with creaturely otherness and creaturely integrity. That creature must have responsibility: a meaningful role in the drama, one distinct to him and not equivalent with that of any other creature or of God. And if evil enters the drama, that evil must be extended in time, whether for centuries or for minutes; and there will be pain and suffering.

And although God will be the "author" of the drama, he will not be the "author of sin;" for he remains perfectly holy. The sin and evil will be part of the creature's responsibility; for creaturely integrity is not illusory.

Why does God take pleasure in historical drama? Perhaps because the archetype of historical temporality is found in the trinitarian relations of begetting and processing. Why does it please him to include evil in that drama? We may never know; see my AGG for some thoughts. But we do know that he uses it to achieve something good and even glorious, and to make his name great, Rom. 9:17.

5. Perhaps God's pleasure in "historical drama" is related to the Scripture teaching that God's power is made perfect in weakness. As Paul Helm well points out in his *The Providence of God* (IVP), God's power is not a power which accomplishes its purposes

instantaneously, by brute force. In this respect, it does not behave as we usually imagine that omnipotence would behave. The outworkings of God's purposes seem laborious, through many years and many apparent defeats. God does not usually force himself on people. He labors with them. And ultimately, God the Son accomplishes redemption through the remarkable medium of his own death.

Here, there is much grist for the Arminian's mill. God seems at many points in history to be waiting on men and women. The process theologians and other "weakness of God" theologians (who deny divine omnipotence in order to solve the problem of evil) also take comfort from this phenomenon. (Do not confuse what I am saying with their ideas.) But the fact that God uses weak means to accomplish his purposes does not mean that he himself is weak. Indeed, what Scripture wishes to teach us seems to be that God is all the more magnificent because he is able to achieve so much through so little. The greatest events in history are achieved not through muscle and atomic power, but through the greater serving the younger (Matt. 20:20ff), through dying to self.

If God's power is, in general, a "power made perfect in weakness," we can understand why in creation it must operate historically. A power-in-weakness does not, generally, work instantaneously, although God certainly does on occasion work instantaneously.

Hence, God gives the sword to the state, but not to the greater institution, the church. For that very reason, the church's power is greater; it is God's own power-in-weakness. It is, therefore, very wrong for the church to attach its hopes to political programs, though it should be active in politics as in all spheres of human life.