A Theology of Constancy: I. A. Dorner's Mediating View of Divine Immutability as Legacy for Open Theists

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ABSTRACT

Here, it will be proposed that the doctrine of divine immutability imagined by Isaak A. Dorner, a lesser-known nineteenth century theologian, is an unmistakable antecedent of today's open theists. Recognizing the predominant attribute of God as love, which requires genuine reciprocity with the object of that love—humanity—proponents of openness theology come at the doctrine of God from angles that are atypical in comparison to classical theistic positions, especially Calvinism. Insofar as God is immutable, argue the open theists, his constancy is expressed via unflinching and unfailing attributes that involve his love, but not his infinity. Thus, their thesis is that God willingly allows for, and accommodates, authentic human agency within his divine plan, and he does so to the extent that future contingencies must remain unknown to him. Despite the popular notion that this sort of theology is recent, this essay will demonstrate otherwise.

INTRODUCTION

Compared to some of the monumental scholars of divinity born into Modernism, I. A. Dorner's theological renown may seem relatively insignificant, especially in the American venue where his work is largely concealed by the shadows cast from the greats of Germany's prominent schools—most notably the titans of Tübingen. Even as a product of Tübingen himself, Dorner is scarcely known at any remarkable depth, much less studied, save for the advanced levels of North American seminaries. Yet, those exposed to his work may be quick to identify familiar echoes ringing off the theological framework erected by a more recent, postmodern movement. For it is Isaak Dorner's solution for the problem of divine immutability currently being employed as a neo-mediating element, between the antitheses of American conservative orthodoxy and liberal theology, by today's proponents of open theism.

This premise will be supported around the presentation of four main points. The first will examine the basic context and goal of nineteenth century mediating theology and look to establish Dorner's place and contribution therein. Next, the problem Dorner perceived with divine constancy, and the doctrine's troubling antecedent effect upon the viability of theology, will be reviewed in relationship to the unsatisfactory implications of immutability within the preeminent theological structures of his day. The focus will then shift to the occasion for Dorner's theology of immutability, as well how he perceived the divine ethic as the primary means for explicating a remedy. Once explained, his work's unmistakable legacy to modern scholars will begin to finally, and somewhat naturally, come into relief when compared among the hypotheses posed by the pioneers of the current openness movement. The goal, then, will be to ultimately have demonstrated how the enduring contribution of Isaak Dorner has been preserved in, and for, North American theological scholarship.

MEDIATING THEOLOGY OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

I. A. Dorner (1809-1884) was among a handful of mid-nineteenth-century German theologians credited with the establishment of *Vermittlungstheologie* (translated "mediating theology"). This relatively fleeting movement within the discipline of historical theology is also commonly associated with Julius Müller and Richard Rothe, who along with Dorner are those considered the "principle exponents" of the German mediating school.[1] Foremost on the minds of these theologians, according to Olson, was "carving[ing] out a third way between Protestant orthodoxy and liberal Protestantism."[2] To an even wider extent, the school explored the territory between the day's core agents of liberal theo-philosophical influence and the stern orthodox establishment of Protestant Lutheran pietism, seeking to put forth a theological method that offered reconciliation to the incompatibility between the supernaturalist and rationalist camps. As suggested by Ullmann, the mediators recognized the value inherent in each system and endeavored to accommodate both reason and feeling by scientifically tracing their opposition back to its original point of unity.[3]

More vitally, as Aubert notes, "these theologians did not merely look for conciliation between "rationalism and supernaturalism." They were also dedicated to bringing about a rekindling of "Christian theology . . . [wherein] they did not separate themselves from the tradition of the church"[4] Sensing the Nineteenth Century's shift toward liberalism, the mediators perceived the time was right for demolishing some of the messy obstacles left standing by the Reformation. Yet, perhaps in an effort to not snub the devout sensibilities of the classically orthodox, they did not demonstrate a willingness to surrender the critical elements of Christian dogma, and most importantly historical Christology, in dealing with those

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[1] Stanley H. Russell, "Mediating Theology," in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor A. Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 360.

[2] Roger E. Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Deconstruction to Reconstruction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 242.

[3] Russell, "Mediating Theology," 360.

[4] Annette Aubert, *The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 64.

obstacles. Thus, insofar as the goal of these men was not in mediation for the mere sake of peace and unity, they strove for genuine theological accord—the sort that paved a way toward an unmistakably "Christian" Christian faith, both philosophically coherent and practically viable within their modernist world.

Isaak August Dorner stands out as one of the most highly regarded among the *Vermittlungstheologen.* As stated, he was educated at Tübingen, studying under the likes of F. C. Bauer, who was deeply influenced by Hegel. It was there, as well, where Dorner began his own teaching career, which took him to positions at various institutions over the years, before eventually landing him in the University of Berlin, the most prestigious post of them all.[5] The theology of Dorner is likely most well-known by way of his contributions within the systematic sphere of Christology, where he studied and wrote extensively on the person of Christ and the Incarnation. Dorner, as with most theologians of his day, operated in the theological space between the extremes of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg W. F. Hegel. For him, much of the stress between the two was traceable to trouble at theology's very core—the doctrine of God. Central to the problem, as Dorner saw it, was a doctrine of divine immutability, which in the classically orthodox tradition upheld God as rigidly unchanging and, therefore, wholly impassible. Unable to square this view with the portrait of God painted by the witness of Scripture, which depicted a God responsive to, and actually moved by, his creation, Dorner proceeded to recast immutability into a doctrine that actually worked. Between 1856 and 1858, Dorner laid out his case in an obscure (even in European, albeit to a lesser extent) set of essays, published in the journal he himself established, *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie.* In these articles he identified the problems inherent with the idealist and classical positions on immutability. It will be profitable to examine these views before studying how Dorner set to arbitrate the friction between them.

[5] Olson, *Journey of Modern Theology*, 246-47.

DIVINE IMMUTABILITY
IN THE CLASSICAL AND LIBERAL STRUCTURES

Perhaps no greater boast can be given to the value of Dorner's doctrine of divine constancy than the praise offered by Karl Barth, who noted his own "treatment of immutability owed much to Dorner's inspiration."[6] Perhaps as well, no greater example of Dorner's authentic mediating pursuit can be demonstrated than by the efforts various scholars have put forth in aligning his theology of constancy to the extremes (Schleiermacher v. Hegel) he was, for all intent and purpose, attempting to gather in. For instance, Sherman notices "significant continuity" connecting Dorner to Schleiermacher on the matter,[7] while Malysz, on the other hand, sees that "Dorner's view of God was itself heavily . . . influenced by Hegel's conception of the divine."[8] Perhaps being colored by each to a certain extent, Dorner finds both failed at rendering any meaningful exposition on the relation of God to creation, and/or his work within the world. The stumbling block for each, in his view, is that their presentation of immutability places upon God, as portrayed in Christ, unnecessary insolubility.

DORNER ON SCHLEIERMACHER

Regarding Schleiermacher, Dorner's contention is due to the former's insistence on maintaining immutability as defined by classical theism. Influenced heavily by pietism, Schleiermacher espouses immutability in the rigidly fixed sense of traditional orthodoxy—a strange

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[6] Robert Sherman, "Isaak August Dorner on Divine Immutability: A Missing Link between Schleiermacher and Barth," in *The Journal of Religion* 77, no. 3 (July 1997): 380. In the course of this research, it appeared that were it not for the attention garnered for Dorner that came by way of Barth's nod to him, there may be little, if any truly lasting echo of Dorner today, among scholars. In fact, this point can be comfortably stressed with the practically unanimous consistency with which the sources cited for this study made the point of articulating this fact, not to mention all those consulted but not specifically used herein, making note of it as well.

[7] Sherman, "Dorner on Divine Immutability," 380.

[8] Piotr J. Malysz, "Hegel's Conception of God and Its Application by Isaak Dorner to the Problem of Divine Immutability" in *Pro Ecclesia* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 448.

dichotomy within the theological composition of the "Father of Liberal Protestantism" indeed. Still, it is such a view of God, wholly timeless and changeless, that undergirds his theology and attracts criticism from mediating theologians in general. Dorner declares, "The general contemporary reaction against [Schleiermacher's] concept of God shows how opposed we are to the traditional doctrine."[9] His opposition to the traditional doctrine, now resident in Schleiermacher's theology, is the impetus behind his second of three essays on immutability that taken together will compile Dorner's complete treatise on the matter.

The nature of God in the traditional theistic construct was originally formulated among the pagan Socratic thinkers, most notably Plato and Aristotle. To the former, whose metaphysic rested heavily on the idea of absolute forms as the essence of the "divine One," humanity has no agency upon the transcendent. To the latter, whose metaphysic was anchored in the unmovable mover, that which was transcendent (god) is perfect being and, therefore, capable only of reflecting upon itself by virtue *of* itself. Such impressions were handed off through the patristic development of Western Thought, wherein the earliest Christian theologians emerged from later generations of Neo-Platonist philosophy. Thus, to Augustine, whose enormous influence permeated the doctrines of the budding Church's religious structure, God's essence is "only what does not only not change but also cannot at all change."[10] In other words, immutability and impassability must remain hallmarks of God's infinite perfection. To be caused to change, or to be otherwise affected, by that which is finite and imperfect, is to imply God is "less than" to begin with, or became "less than," by way of responding to anything besides himself. Such thought was established as the dominant view among Christians through to Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, and beyond—as will be revisited later.[11]

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[9] Isaac A. Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, trans. Robert R. Williams and Charles Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 120.

[10] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 5.2.3.

[11] John Sanders, "Open Theism: A Radical Revision or Miniscule Modification of Arminianism?" in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 71. *Cf*. Olson *Journey of Modern Theology*, 250.

Ultimately, Schleiermacher's rendering of God is one that preserves, and very much rests upon, the pagan/Augustinian standard; wherein, as Sanders defines the classic model, God is as timeless actuality, having no potential for change (*actus purus*).[12] Continuing, God is simple in the sense that he is not composed of contrasting distinctions, or any plurality that creates within him an internal or external dependency.[13] Thereby, God is necessarily immutable by nature and in essence, unchanging "in any respect including thoughts, will, or emotions." He is, by virtue, impassable insomuch as he is never responsive and/or reactive to creation, or humanity, as if he is in reciprocal relationship to, or with, either.[14] In this classically theistic configuration, God is absolutely independent to, and *ipso facto*, closed off from creation.

Dorner responds by noting the implications of such traditional characterizations of God are manifestly negative when considering the "knowledge of God, the personality of God, as well as human freedom," and as such, demands the task of reconstructing the doctrine of God must be undertaken.[15] To start, saying that God is internally free of any distinction (contrast) fails to explain the relationship of God to creation, because contrasts between the two are abundantly obvious. To assert contrast is beyond God, however, "deprives us of the possibility of conceiving God as the cause of plurality . . ."[16] Williams adds that Dorner is resistant to such a notion given that plurality is readily demonstrated in God, if not, "God could only be actual, but not potential . . . universal but

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[12] Ibid., 71. (*Cf*. Olson *Journey of Modern Theology*, 248). Here, the very present definition of these attributes is take from Sanders for the simple reason that this study will circle back to him in a later section, with special emphasis to regard of his handling of them, as a prominent open theist. There is no attempt to "stack the deck," as it may be perceived, to make this thesis easier to handle later on. The classical theistic view of God's immutability, impassibility, and simplicity in Augustine's day, is the same was in Dorner's, and as it remains today—for Sanders and for all.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 120.

[16] Ibid., 126.

not particular . . . eternal but not temporal . . . etc."[17] With real distinctions effectively annulled, by concepts like divine simplicity and unity, God's relationship with the world cannot be interactive in any sense.[18] Dorner claims if this position is truly the case, "God would find only himself in the world and so would be the effect of his own causality."[19] This Aristotelian-rooted hypothesis defies the ability of God being interactive within the course of history. In fact, if God is in such a closed loop, it necessitates his divine mind being fixed solely on his own divine self. Under such strain, Dorner posits that God could not love, "for love requires another."[20] What then with regard to Christ? Dorner maintains Schleiermacher's classical view of God puts the concept of redemption in "a most insecure position."[21] It is a position at odds with the basic identity of God within the Christian faith; namely, that God is love, God regrets, he grieves, is jealous, and he changes his intention in response to human action, such as repentance and/or prayer.

DORNER ON HEGEL

The time spent directly refuting his assertions may lead some to believe that Dorner is in tighter agreement with Hegel than Schleiermacher, considering the volume of words Dorner penned toward the latter. However, this is not the case. Olson goes as far as to suggest Dorner may find Hegel even more objectionable.[22] Regarding Schleiermacher, Hegel swings to the opposite extreme, favoring not the transcendently removed, fixed, and non-reciprocating God of Aristotle, adopted through as orthodox; but rather, embracing the view of God as fully immanent being. He insists, "The understanding of the modern age has made God into an

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[17] Robert R. Williams, "Introduction," *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, by Isaak Dorner, trans. Robert R. Williams and Charles Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 22.

[18] Robert R. Williams, "I. A. Dorner: The Ethical Immutability of God," In *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 724.

[19] Ibid., 127.

[20] Williams, "Introduction," 22.

[21] Ibid., 129.

[22] Olson, *Journey of Modern Theology*, 246.

abstraction … against which man can only beat his head in vain."[23] For Hegel, it is among the vagaries where religious expression is best observed. Against Schleiermacher then, God is awash with distinction. His divine plurality is not confined to the simple contrast between himself and the cosmos. To see it otherwise would imply God is not a part of creation, because the whole of the universe is rife with variation. On the contrary, Hegel maintains it is impossible to overlook God as "intimately a part *of the … world*."[24] God undergoes, and actually undertakes, perpetual mutability—giving and even submitting himself to the world and changing with it, as history rolls along. In this model God is always "becoming," just as creation, humanity, and the world is. Or, as Malysz translates, God surrenders "to a single process by means of which 'God releases himself from himself.'"[25] So as the world is in the process of history, so too is God.

Dorner does not reject Hegel in wholesale, agreeing that history unfolds according to "God's own life in time."[26] Dorner's prosecution of Hegel rests primarily in the fact that Hegel's conclusion is inevitably a pantheistic one, in the least, if not altogether panentheistic, in fact. Some level of appreciation for Hegel is discernable in that Dorner warms to Hegel's attack on classical theism, although there is no mistaking he feels it "overshoots the mark," as Brown notes.[27] That there is no differentiation discernable between God and world, leaves Dorner uneasy, fearing the ramifications of such monistic theologies of God and cosmos strip God of ethical potential, and therefore, any religious value as an object of worship.[28] Dorner avers God must be free from the world if he is to be ethically engaged with humanity. The only other alternative seems be a re-visitation of deism, as Dorner sees it, because if God lacks the potential for loving and reciprocal relationship with the world, he must either be seen as the pantheistic God of Hegel, or the deistic God of classical theism—

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[23] Hegel, as quoted by Malysz, in "Hegel's Conception of God," 449.

[24] Malysz, "Hegel's Conception of God," 454; emphasis added.

[25] Ibid. 452.

[26] Olson, *Journey of Modern Theology*, 251.

[27] Robert F. Brown, "Schelling and Dorner on Divine Immutability," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 2 (June 1985): 244.

[28] Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 120.

immutable, but no longer vital.[29] This would be a circling back on Schleiermachian inevitabilities, however. Insofar as Dorner is concerned, the answer must lay somewhere in the space between.

A SOLUTION: DIVINE IMMUTABILITY AS ETHIC

Schleiermacher and Hegel, as it may seem up to this point, were not the only theologies that Dorner was confronting in his time and looking to resolve. Contemporary to his era was another German theologian of Lutheran background named Gottfried Thomasius (1802-1875). A student of both Schleiermacher and Hegel, Thomasius is considered one of the leaders in the kenotic Christological controversy, having developed what some theologians regard as the most sophisticated iteration of it.[30] This Christology seeks to solve a major disconnect over immutability through positing the Incarnation is only possible via God divested. Kenoticists support a somewhat radical view wherein God totally self-exhausts his divine attributes in order to completely become, and thus truly experience, humanity as the Christ. According to Thomasius, passages like Philippians 2:6-7 and Luke 2:52 confirm that Christ was entirely emptied of his divinity.[31] Assuming that Christ is equally God, as the Father and Spirit are God, kenotic theologians hold to the belief that the hypostatic union, established in orthodoxy, is not possible, unless certain absurdities are

[29] Ibid., 111-112. It will serve well to note that Dorner does not accuse Schleiermacher of deism. Rather, he seems to mark the correlation to Schleiermacher's theology to it, wherein if followed to its good and logical end, would likely (and ultimately) result in such a deistic view.

[30] Williams, "Introduction," 7.

[31] Olson, *Journey of Modern Theology*, 252. Dorner does not address the matter of *Luke* directly, however, as Williams notes (see Williams, "Introduction," 6) Dorner "hotly" contested a kenotic hermeneutic for Philippians 2:6-7. Dorner himself says, "This seems to be what Philippians . . . means, not that Christ has ceased to be in the form of deity, or has given up his equality with God, but only that he, standing in this fullness and glory, has not shirked this alienation and humiliation. The subject of the sentence is Jesus, not the Logos, as Lutheran theologians have irrefutably demonstrated. How can Philippians be regarded as an example of an act of kenosis that falls entirely within an invisible sphere?" in Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 65-66; note 43.

accepted regarding Scripture's witness of Jesus' humanness (*i.e.* he experienced infancy, grew in wisdom, grieved, suffered, and died).

DORNER AND THE KENOTIC CONTROVERSY

It is worth noting that Dorner's occasion for drafting his essay, which comprises the first part of *Divine Immutability*, is most attributable to kenoticism than the motivation for addressing either Hegel or Schleiermacher.[32] Initially, Dorner feels some attraction to kenotic theory, as it successfully attacked the classical doctrine of immutability and, aside from its consequences upon Christology, seemed to be fundamentally on the right track.[33] The problem, however, is that the proverbial baby is thrown out with the bath water. Olson points to Dorner's feeling that, "Thomasius had sacrificed too much of God's immutability," and fails to answer the question of how he could thoroughly self-divest and yet remain perfectly God.[34] Thomasius has simply juxtaposed the tension over divine immutability and the hypostatic union, to a different form of the same essential question. *How could Christ be fully God and become fully man,* morphed into *How does God remain God if he gives up divinity in order to become man?* Despite some initial admiration, the internal contradictions of the kenotic hypotheses are too flawed to reconcile. And while Dorner rejects the theory, it serves as the catalyst for his attempt to formulate a viable solution to the problem of Divine Immutability, because the questions it touches upon need resolution. Namely, "Does not the living communion of God with the world require divine mutability in some sense?"[35]

DORNER'S ETHICAL GROUNDWORK

As Dorner sees it, the ultimate solution to the strain applied by the pull of both Schleiermacher and Hegel, and so admirably yet

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[32] Sherman, "Dorner on Divine Immutability," 380.

[33] Williams, "Introduction," 9. Here, Williams actually writes that Dorner believed kenotic theory was "basically correct." This seems to be a bit too hearty of a conclusion, hence the attempt at backing off of that sentiment here. Williams points to Dorner as saying, "The traditional doctrine of divine immutability fails to do justice to either the scientific of religious interests" (also p. 9). As such "basically correct" seems to create a paradox of sorts.

[34] Olson, *Journey of Modern Theology*, 254.

[35] Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 81.

unsatisfactorily mitigated by Thomasius, is in abandoning immutability in terms of metaphysics. The key to bridging the disconnect lay in placing God's immutability in ethical terms. The basis for such a maneuver is indeed linked to the place of the Incarnation within Christian faith. However, as kenotic theory reveals, mitigating tensions over incarnation for incarnation's sake does little to assuage the more profound dilemma. The matter, for Dorner, goes beyond contemplating *that* Christ became man, into examining *why* Christ became man. The work of Christ, both as God and as man, culminates in salvation. Thus, Dorner starts to reconsider the doctrine of God from the standpoint of soteriology, which is the bedrock precept of the Christian faith, and therefore demands a doctrine of divine immutability constructed from a perspective prioritizing the Atonement.

In his summary disposition on kenoticism, Dorner "argues that soteriology does not require theology abandon altogether divine immutability and divine transcendence."[36] This serves as foundational to his doctrinal construction. Williams identifies the two soteriological presuppositions with which Dorner builds his solution for the problem. They are: "1) some concept of divine mutability is necessary as instrumental to salvation, and 2) some concept of divine immutability is necessary as grounding finality of salvation in God's goodness." [37]

With regard to the first presupposition, and by way of historical study into the matter, Dorner objects that immutability is systemized theologically under those attributes of God that are classically considered natural or metaphysical.[38] While such attributes describe *how* God is (action), his ethical attributes speak to *what* God is (essence). Statements like God is good, or God is love, describe God as actuality. Statements like God is omnipotent, or omniscient, describe God as modal potentiality—as in God can do all things, or there is nothing God cannot know. Hence, to Dorner, soteriology is the end to all of God's salvific purpose. God must

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[36] Williams, "I. A. Dorner," 729.

[37] Ibid., 721.

[38] That is very much the case as well today. Consider Erickson, who distinguishes attributes between those, which portray God's greatness, and those, which characterize God's goodness. The former are listed as God's natural attributes, while the latter are God's moral attributes. See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 233-317.

also be constant in his ethical love and goodness. After all, God is divinely perfect as he is (in essence), therefore any lack of absolute constancy in the ethic of God would be internally negating, in fact, to the ontological reality of the necessity of his perfect goodness. Williams paraphrases Dorner in adding, "The ontological argument concerning a greatest conceivable, supremely perfect being, attains God not as concrete existence, but as that ethical necessity which *ought to be*."[39] In other words, as surely as God is, God is surely good. Any separation from one to the other, or any diminution of God as good to something qualitative (as if to say 'God has much goodness') is to mischaracterize God in totality. In Dorner's theology, "The relation … is not a mere contingent connection; rather the good in God must be understood to be the original element that constitutes and qualifies everything else."[40]

Dorner additionally insists, however, that soteriology is not just accomplished by way of God's ethic. Salvation is accomplished through redemptive action, requiring God to change in nature (act), in order to meet the demand of "being made flesh" for the atoning process. This is the second of Dorner's presuppositions and where mutability is demonstrated by God self-limiting, while not completely abandoning, his transcendental potentiality in taking on flesh. The Incarnation remains of tremendous worth in the erection of Dorner's reformulation of constancy. He says, "It is undeniable that God, so far as he dwells in man [i.e., Jesus Christ], also leads an historical life in the world, enters into contact with time … God changes the world. . . enters into temporality."[41] This dynamic then necessitates that the world changes God, in turn. So too must love change God. Dorner stresses God's motivation for entering the world is love's very sake, stating "a communion of love" is grounded not in "bare omnipotent will," where

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[39] Williams, "I. A. Dorner," 735; emphasis added. Williams is indeed correct in his estimation. He cites Dorner as saying, "All the so-called proofs for God are, rightly apprehended, only preludes to the ontological, which attains its truth however only in the ethical." Williams' thought is hereby favored for its contemporary clarity and punctual value for the preceding thought.

[40] Ibid., 731.

[41] I. A. Dorner, "Dogmatic Discussion of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," in *God and Incarnation in Mid-nineteenth Century German Theology: Thomasius, Dorner, Bierdermann*, ed. Claude Welch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 116, quoted by Olson, *Journey of Modern Theology*, 256.

the creation of freewill objects of that love are involved.[42] His entrance into the world is, therefore, an ethical one, wherein God allows himself all the demands of reciprocal relationships and their reciprocal effects.[43] Olson, in other words, summarizes that given such a loving objective, "God could not fail to be affected [i.e. changed] by his own incarnation."[44] Still, even though Dorner's solution is now articulated, a ripple effect is stirred.

Questions and Contentions

For Dorner to declare that God is affected by human agency amounts to a rather controversial statement, given his context and the implications regarding the classical view. First, classical theism maintains that any power exercised by humans is ultimately form God, to the extent where anything influenced by human cause, if not ordained and determined by the will of God, is perceived as impossible—as it is impossible for any human action to render God "less than." Naturally then, Dorner's freewill infused theology raised many questions, and certainly objections for what this implied of God. Nevertheless, Dorner dug in, committing to the requisite dynamics of ethical relationship, plainly asserting:

> Since God created what is free for the sake of the ethical, he has in a certain way set over against himself a being of the same kind, which can resist him (Gen. 3:15). By the creation he has exposed himself to the creature's possible opposition and defiance, which for him is by no means simply a matter of indifference. He cannot break this opposition inwardly and turn it into devotion by any force, because such a contesting of the opposition outside him would involve him in contradiction with himself as the one who wills man as free ethical being."[45]

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[42] Ibid., 257.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid. 256.

[45] Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 149. Also cited more briefly in Olson, *Journey of Modern Theology*, 257. Such a statement unambiguously establishes Dorner's freewill theism. This quote will hereby serve to justify it being presupposed in the following discussion.

In addition to its inevitable effects on God's omnipotence, Dorner's immutability also encroaches on God's omniscience. If God's give and take relationship with humanity allows mankind contingent influence, God's divine foreknowledge is neither absolute nor exhaustive. Olson notes that Dorner is certainly the maverick of his day in "[biting this] bullet more than any Christian theologian before him."[46] "[If] there are free powers in the world," Dorner stipulates, "then there are free decisions by the creatures, which indeed have their ground of possibility in God but which have their ground of actuality only in the free beings and not in God."[47] Anticipating the consequence of such a position, he doubles down, resolutely concluding:

> But now it is to be said: God knows what is present as the present, and thus the divine foreknowledge of actuality advances as appropriate thereto. What was yet future and known as such moves into the present and from there into the past; but the divine knowledge accompanies it in its course, there assumes a changing shape in the divine knowledge itself; and that presupposes a movement, *a change even in the knowing activity of God himself . . .* Thus, God's knowledge is a knowledge conditioned by contemporary history, interwoven and advancing with it.[48]

God's transcendent attributes necessarily are self-limited and changing for God to enter the world and relate with his creatures. This action, however, demands no limitation of God's immutability as ethic, specifically his love and goodness. When compared with the portrayal of God in Scripture, Dorner feels his doctrine is not only biblically consistent, but rationally cogent and viable to spiritual living.[49]

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[46] Olson, *Journey of Modern Theology*, 258.

[47] Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 149.

[48] Ibid., 151; Dorner's emphasis.

[49] John Sanders, *The God Who Risks—A Theology of Divine Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 167.

A LEGACY: A THEOLOGY OF DIVINE IMMUTABILITY FOR OPEN THEISTS

From here, supporting the central claim of this discussion presents little difficulty. Even cursory familiarity with the theology of open theism (hereafter OT) should draw awareness to the unavoidably clear connection it has with Dorner's immutability. The similarities are both dramatic and obvious. Space precludes any real developed presentation of OT thought—not to mention the fact it is beyond the scope of this thesis. To fully resolve said thesis we need only yet to point out Dorner's theologically similar approach to openness theologians and his doctrinal DNA resident in the anatomy of their theological underpinnings.

OPEN THEISTS AS POSTMODERN MEDIATORS

Olson, in his chapter titled "Mediating Theologies Build Bridges between Orthodoxy and Liberalism," is apt to note how a study of Dorner naturally leads to the question of whether he is a modernist iteration of today's open theists?[50] A definitive answer is of course elusive in the sense that the term "open theism" is a label arising out of the late Twentieth Century, some hundred odd years after Dorner's death.[51] However, Dorner's stature as a mediating force between the polemics of his era is similarly reflected in openness pioneers today. While a century has passed between Dorner and OT thinkers, their place and purpose within the theological landscape of this current time is strikingly similar.

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[50] Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 259; note 49. Olson admits that it would appear the tag "open theist" certainly fits Dorner. He alludes to the work of Claude Welsh, who cites Dorner as a precursor to OT. At the very least, Olson states that Dorner is a freewill theist and there is little to argue with regard to that.

[51] Although tangential to the track of this thesis, It is my contention, after studying his "Reconstruction of Divine Immutability" (Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 131ff.), and having studying much of the thought and literature of the main proponents of openness over the years, little doubt surrounds the fact that the theological shoe fits Dorner's footprint rather precisely. Insufficient room exists here to fully develop this argument, but a solid case is manifest *a prior* between the writings of Dorner and OT proponents that they are cut from the same cloth, no matter what they are dubbed.

In the preface *The Openness of God—A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (which remains the seminal text for the OT position), Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Richard Rice, William Hasker, and David Bassinger (who remain the prominent voices of OT) identify their context as being between "proponents of two . . . views, classical theists and process theologians."[52] Here, Dorner's absence of influence upon American theological development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries is brought clearly to light in that those he was pitted between (Schleiermacher and Hegel) saw their thought transverse the Atlantic. While the traditionally orthodox view of God was already reinforced with Charles Hodge through to twentieth-century fundamentalism, it was Paul Tillich who carried the Hegelian influence over for American process thinkers, like John Cobb, Alfred North Whitehead, and Charles Hartshorne.[53] These two streams, between which Dorner worked, became further entrenched (as in the case of devout orthodoxy) and/or further evolved (as in the case of process theology) seemingly unchecked. At least until the emergence of OT, in the late decades of the last millennium, whose proponents once again took up working the space between. Not only is the place the same, the mediating purpose is as well. As if dies cast from the same mold, Pinnock, et al. state their objective is to, "present an understanding of God that is distinctly different from each [classical and process theism, noting] many people are looking for an alternative vision, but have difficulty formulating one. We hope this work will benefit such seekers."[54] Telling here, as to the noted North American unawareness of his work, OT scholars are casting what Dorner already has. Dorner's vision is the alternative these "many people" seek.

OPEN THEISTS ON IMMUTABILITY

Having confirmed that Dorner's place and purpose is more generally, yet certainly, reflected in that of OT, attention now becomes the

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[52] Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God—A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 9. It is appropriate to at least note, while not a contributor to this book, Gregory Boyd is commonly be considered among the pioneers of OT.

[53] See for example Olson, *Journey of Modern Theology*, 367-420.

[54] Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*, 9.

particular focus of his legacy to OT, specific to divine immutability. Whereas Dorner observed God's constancy of ethic, he respected the demand for divine mutability in entering ethical relationship with humanity. What is observable in Dorner's doctrine is a God changing in action and reaction to human cause, his change and self-limitation, and the necessity of how this impinges on the classical view of omniscience as exhaustive perfect foreknowledge, in favor of present knowledge. While seldom, if ever, credited to Dorner, all of these classically Dornerian hallmarks are seen in the musings of OT thinkers. In fact, restating the basic OT model of immutability would appear to merely be a reappraisal of what is noted above. One benefit of the OT approach is that its proponents, while laying out the same philosophical and pagan historical contentions as Dorner, spend considerable time making biblically rooted arguments in support. Dorner, for the most part, foregoes this.

To make Dorner's legacy clearer on the matter, looking to the derivative implications of his doctrine of immutability will be more fruitful. Consider for instance Dorner's firmness in accepting the ramification that reciprocal ethical relationship meant reciprocal effect upon God, despite the classical position such contingency made God weaker. Sander's carries this theme forward in great detail with his work *The God Who Risks*, an entire volume dedicated to the position that God's providential plan is carried out through navigating the risk/reward equation in ethical and willing love relationship with free humanity and all its inevitable let downs, resistance, and outright defiance.[55] He writes, "God cares, and caring leads to pain when it sees the beloved destroying itself."[56] Pinnock adds, "God took a risk when he made this kind of a world, since freedom entails the possibility, if not the necessity, of genuine evil because love can be refused."[57]

Today's OT pioneers also face the matter of limitations to divine foreknowledge head on, as did Dorner. In reality, their defense is nearly indistinguishable in many respects. Sanders claims, "According to open

[55] Referring to text cited in note 45.

[56] Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 48.

[57] Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 132.

theism, God has what may be called 'present knowledge."'[58] Had he stated "according to Dorner" he would have been as equally accurate. The view is the same. Dorner's distinction that God's present knowledge boils down to his knowing "actuality" from "potentiality" is merely restated. Sanders translates, "God knows some events will happen (certain possibilities will become actualities). That part of the future which is indefinite is known by God as possibilities and probabilities."[59]

In both cases, each recognizes that the exhaustive foreknowledge, which sees the future as actuality, is an absurdity in a freewill, reciprocally loving, and fully ethical relational system. Just as Dorner felt his view was more scripturally aligned, philosophically taut, and viable to Christian life, the open theists claim their view, "is a superior paradigm in light of the relevant biblical, theological, philosophical, and practical material."[60] That it may be is ultimately for the reader to decide. What is certain, and hereby duly noted, is that no matter in its success or failure the paradigm claimed by today's open theists is an inheritance from the legacy of Isaak August Dorner.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that today's proponents of open theism are currently employing Isaak Dorner's solution for the problem of divine immutability as a neo-mediating element between American conservative orthodoxy and liberal theology. By examining the basic context and goal of nineteenth century mediating theology, as well as Dorner's place and contribution therein, support for this claim was developed along two major avenues. First, in identifying the problem Dorner perceived with divine constancy, and the doctrine's troubling implications within the preeminent theological structures of his day, it was demonstrated how modern theologians of the openness persuasion are waging nearly the same

[58] Sanders, "Open Theism," 83.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*, 9.

mediation today. Secondly, Dorner's theology of immutability was thoroughly laid out in a fashion that made its similarity to the positions of today's open theists emerge naturally and inevitably before anyone with a general sense of what openness theory is. It is hoped then that the goal of crediting Dorner's legacy, observed in the work of these current theologians, has been achieved. The enduring contribution of Isaak Dorner has been preserved in, and for, North American theological scholarship, as a result of what open theists are undertaking. Whether or not they will be more lastingly influential than Dorner remains to be seen. However, and to a large extent, both Dorner's work and purpose is reflected in them and that legacy should be prominently noted.

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