

Divine Omnipresence and Human Suffering

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Abstract

Traditionally, it is believed that God is all-powerful and omnipresent. Given the notion of divine omnipresence, why does it seem like God is absent amidst suffering? This paper presents a philosophical and theological analysis of God's omnipresence. I hope to show how we may construe a robust and viable doctrine of divine omnipresence amidst suffering. I argue that although God's presence results in divine action, given that divine action is mostly experienced in a *relational, covenantal context*, his presence does not always lead to the absence of suffering. Although God is ontologically and maximally omnipresent, he is *specially* and *covenantally* present only with those who are open to a relationship with him. His presence with worshippers can be both interventional and noninterventional. In the former, he might remove suffering; in the latter, only inner peace and comfort might be experienced.

Keywords: divine omnipresence – immateriality – intensity – relationship – suffering – interventional and noninterventional divine activity

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

psalm 139:7–8 (niv)

1. Introduction

Philosophers¹ and theologians seem to have given God's relationship with space little attention compared to other great-making properties of God, such as divine omniscience, omnipotence, eternity, and immutability.² The lack of interest in divine omnipresence is not because it has no philosophical and theological basis or relevance. Anthony Kenny, in his famous *The God of the Philosophers*, argued that there are no successful attempts by philosophers to explain how a nonembodied mind is active in the universe (Kenny 1979, 127; Van den Brom 1983, 637). This may not be the case anymore today, as we shall see below, due to increased interest in omnipresence. Another question the classical notion of divine omnipresence raises is the issue of the immateriality of the nature of God in relation to his existence in space. In other words, how can an immaterial being be maximally present in space? The problem posed by a nonembodied being's relation to space gave rise to what is commonly called the *immateriality puzzle* of divine omnipresence, which will be discussed shortly. Apart from the immateriality puzzle, there is also the *intensity puzzle*. God seems to be more intensely present in some places than in others, such as at the location of the burning bush and in the tent of meeting. The intensity puzzle relates to how divine omnipresence seems nonuniform, as I will show below.

This paper explores how an immaterial being is necessarily everywhere and yet can be more intensely present at particular locations *intentionally*³ than at others. By *intentional divine presence*, I mean such instances as when God purposefully went to the Garden of Eden and when he appeared to Abraham or Moses with the intention of fellowship or to bring about a particular state of affairs, as in Sodom and Gomorrah. I will discuss the immateriality and intensity puzzles of divine omnipresence in relation to divine activity, especially in the context of suffering. Ultimately, this article aims to show that God can be present in the suffering of worshippers by way of either intervention or non-intervention. In what follows, I briefly explore how divine omnipresence has been traditionally understood, discussing the views of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. I then survey the current debate on how God is maximally omnipresent (Hud Hudson), the question of pan(en)theism (George Gasser), and divine omnipresence in relation to divine action (James M. Arcadi). Taking my cue from Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, I explore an underdeveloped aspect of the debate, namely, the appropriation of the omnipresence doctrine in the context of suffering. I argue that although God's presence results in divine action, given that divine action is mostly experienced in a relational, covenantal context, his presence does not always lead to the absence of suffering. Although God is ontologically and maximally omnipresent (without divided attention, fully present, and open to relationships with humans),

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the European Academy of Religion in St Andrews, June 19–23, 2023.

² Many philosophers agree with this assertion; see Oakes (2006); Kenny (1979); Van den Brom (1984, 637); Edwards (1992, 175).

³ Richard Swinburne defines an intentional action as "one that an agent means to do." He goes on to distinguish between "instrumentally basic actions" and "non-instrumentally basic actions." The former are actions that are intentionally done to achieve a goal, while the latter are not (Swinburne 2016, 108–110).

he is specially and covenantally present only with those who are willing to have a relationship with him. His presence with worshippers can be interventional and noninterventional. In the former, he might remove suffering; in the latter, only inner peace and comfort might be experienced.

Divine presence is a significant motif in many religious traditions and should be taken seriously. In Judaism and Christianity, a prominent aspect of God's promises to his people is his dwelling with them. The divine presence has been traditionally associated with human flourishing, while God's absence has been associated with disaster. In Christian philosophy and theology, the ultimate point of divine presence is the incarnation, in which God became human (Peckham 2021, 73).

2. The Views of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas on Divine Omnipresence

The difficulties with conceiving how an immaterial being can be maximally present in space are not new. Augustine, in this regard, accuses those who doubt the ability of an immaterial being to be present in space as corporeally minded. He argues that an immaterial being cannot be maximally present in space (the way corporeal substances are), because such a being is not localized in a temporal abode. Material things, such as water, earth, air, and light, are composed of numberless parts and cannot be multiple located. Contrary to the divine, these material things will lose their unity when spanned (Augustine 1993, 20).

Augustine argues that God can be everywhere without being localized because he "knows how to be wholly everywhere without being confined to any place. He knows how to come without leaving the place where He was; He knows how to go away without abandoning the location to which He had come" (Augustine 1993, 21). In other words, by his very nature, it is impossible for God not to be omnipresent.

Elucidating the notion of divine omnipresence further to the second person of the Trinity, Augustine explains that just as the first person of the Trinity is omnipresent, so is the second. Although Christ in his earthly ministry showed some sort of divine ignorance, especially in relation to the Parousia, just as the Father seems to demonstrate some level of divine ignorance in the Old Testament, there are also instances where Christ demonstrated he was not localized in a temporal abode. Augustine argues that "the same Christ, as God, is always everywhere. For he is the light that shines in the darkness, though the darkness does not grasp it. He is the power and wisdom of God, . . . *it stretches from end to end mightily and arranges all things pleasingly*" (Augustine 2004, 234).

Because a wrong notion of divine omnipresence could easily lead to pantheism and the dissolution of the creator-creature distinction, Augustine draws our attention to clarifying this distinction by showing that God's presence is analogous to the relationship between the human body and wisdom. Although someone's body may be small, they may have a high level of wisdom; in other words, their wisdom is not measured by their body size. Still, Augustine warns us not to suppose that, to be maximally omnipresent, "God is spread out through all things as if by spacial magnitude in the same way that the earth, or a liquid, or air, or this light is spread out. For every magnitude of this sort is smaller in a part than in its whole" (2004, 236).

Augustine suggests divine presence can also be conceived from divine activity: his creative presence is the energy that gives life to the cosmos: "God is spread out through all

things not such that he is a quality of the world but such that he is the substance that creates the world, rules it without any toil, and contains it without any burden” (2004, 237). However, this does not mean that he occupies space everywhere as a mass occupies space. When a material substance occupies space, the extent to which it occupies space has a limit so that when it is exhausted and the mass is still being stretched, it will lose the unity of its substance. God, by contrast, while being everywhere with his presence, is not spread out like matter so that parts of him are split to occupy various regions. When it is said that God is everywhere, it means that he “is whole in the heavens alone and whole on the earth alone and whole in the heavens and in the earth, contained in no place, but whole everywhere in himself” (Augustine 2004, 237).

Anselm discussed divine omnipresence extensively in his *Proslogium* and *Monologium*. In his usual dialectical way of discussion, Anselm argues that because there is a distinction between regions *a* and *b*, whatever exists wholly in region *a* is distinct from that which exists wholly in region *b* at the same time. As such, no part of anything that exists wholly in one region can exist in another: it is either present in region *a* and absent in region *b* or vice versa (Anselm 1923, 93). Yet, the doctrine of divine omnipresence emphasizes that God is wholly present in all locations—how is this possible?

To answer this question, Anselm introduces the concept of simultaneity as an escape route: with this concept, he can explicate how the supreme being occupies every space yet is not localized to a temporal location and how its essence is not split into parts to occupy local regions. He argues that an immaterial being “is more appropriately said to be everywhere, in this sense, that it is in all existing things, than in this sense, namely that it is merely in all places . . . It must so be in all existing things, that it is one and the same perfect whole in every individual thing simultaneously” (1923, 99).

Due to the idea of simultaneity, Anselm denies that God *exists in* or *is present in* a particular region. Instead, God exists *with* region *a* because such a region cannot *contain* God (1923, 93)—God contains all (50). Divine omnipresence rightly belongs to God because of his attribute of infinity. As an eternal being, God necessarily and wholly exists everywhere (49).

Given that God is immaterial, how could he be everywhere? Aquinas, like Augustine, denies that God is materially yoked with creation. Instead, he is like an agent within creation. In other words, divine presence in creation is due to divine activity: without such a presence, creation cannot exist. Aquinas (like Augustine) states that space is (co-)created. If God had not created, there would be no space, and God would not be present everywhere. God sustains and preserves the universe through his divine power and presence, and therefore, he is present (Aquinas 1947, 45). According to Aquinas, when it seems God is not everywhere, the issue is not that God cannot be everywhere but that *to be everywhere means to be in every place*. Being in every place implies that God’s simplicity is not upheld, for it presupposes that God is material. His constituents, like particles of salt or dust, are spread everywhere. In line with Augustine, Aquinas denies that God is materially yoked with creation; rather, he is an agent present within the creation. “God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works” (Aquinas 1947, 44).

Contrary to material beings, God exists everywhere in the cosmos through his essence (*per essentiam*) and power (*per potentiam*), which is the basis for understanding divine presence from the perspective of divine activity. Aquinas says God’s presence everywhere in

the cosmos by his power can be likened to how a king is said to be present in the whole kingdom. His rulership over the kingdom is the way by which he is everywhere in the kingdom (Aquinas 1947, 47).

Richard Swinburne (2016, 113) argues that when Aquinas states that “‘God is everywhere in substance, power, and presence’ on the ground that ‘God exists in everything by power inasmuch as everything is subject to his power, by presence inasmuch as everything is naked and open to his gaze, and by substance inasmuch as he exists in everything causing their existence,’” it means God can directly “cause effects at every place,” because his presence allows him to know what is happening in every place without relying on causal chains.

Clearly, then, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas emphasized that divine omnipresence should be coherently conceived, while they also insisted on remaining faithful to scripture. However, it seems that although they conceived divine presence in relation to divine activity in the universe, these theists were not interested in formulating a theodicy that takes divine omnipresence as a starting point, even though some argued that God is present with believers through his grace.

3. Three Contemporary Views on Divine Omnipresence

Let us now turn to the current debate on God’s omnipresence. Hud Hudson has been one of the leading voices in the recent discussion. He lists six problems associated with the doctrine of omniscience (see Hudson 2009, 205):

1. *The simplicity problem*: How can an incomposite being occupy more than one region at the same time?
2. *The multilocation problem*: How can a being wholly occupy two distinct regions at the same time?
3. *The containment problem*: Given that to be present in a region connotes being contained by it, how can God be said to be present in a particular region?
4. *The timelessness problem*: How can an atemporal being be localized?
5. *The incorporeality problem*: How can an immaterial being occupy space?
6. *The colocation problem*: How can two things that are numerically distinct each occupy the same region?

To demonstrate the relationship between an immaterial being and space and how such a being is said to be present at a specific location as a response to the above six problems, Hudson borrows the following schema from Josh Parsons:

“ x is entirely located at r ” =_{df} x is located at r and there is no region of spacetime disjoint from r at which x is located.

“ x is wholly located at r ” =_{df} x is located at r and there is no proper part of x not located at r .

“ x is partly located at r ” =_{df} x has a proper part entirely located at r .

“ x pertends” =_{df} x is an object that is entirely located at a non-point-sized region, r , and for each proper subregion of r , r^* , x has a proper part entirely located at r^* .

“ x extends” =_{df} x is an object that is wholly and entirely located at a non-point-sized region, r , and for each proper subregion of r , r^* , x is wholly located at r^* .

PARSONS quoted in HUDSON 2009, 206

To be precise, Hudson seems to mean that to say x is located, entirely located, or wholly located at r_1 means that although x is present at r_1 , this does not eliminate the possibility that x might be wholly located at another location r_2 while still present at r_1 , provided x has the ability to be present at multiple locations. Hudson argues for a literal occupation account of divine omnipresence from the notion of God's mereological simplicity, because it claims the concept of omnipresence is correctly conceived as *ubiquitous extension*. This is because to *entend* is "to be wholly and entirely located at some non-point-sized region (in the case of omnipresence, at the maximally inclusive region) and to be wholly located at each of that region's proper subregions (in the case of omnipresence, at every other region there is)" (Hudson 2009, 209).

Furthermore, the notion of ubiquitous extension also solves the problems of containment, timelessness, and colocation because God is free from the constraints associated with being located in space, provided we admit that God's relationship to location is an accidental property. God is his own kind; his omnipresence enables him to be collocated with every other thing in space (Hudson 2009, 210–211).

According to Georg Gasser, the debate on the nature of divine omnipresence raises several questions and objections. How, for instance, should we construe the way an immaterial being relates to space? Like Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, Gasser argues that "to be present at" is a generic notion and should, therefore, be understood in basic and nonbasic ways. He explains: "'Being present at' in a basic sense means that any locative facts about an object's presence in a region in space are entirely constituted by facts about this object itself and its relation of being present at this region in space" (Gasser 2019, 45). So, being present at a location simply means being materially located in that place; for example, being present and having dinner at a restaurant. By contrast, "'being present at' in a non-basic sense . . . means that any locative facts about an object's presence in a region in space are constituted by facts about another entity (or entities) bearing a 'present at'-relation in a basic sense and to which the object in question stands in a particular relation" (Gasser 2019, 45).

Gasser illustrates the differences between the basic and nonbasic senses with an analogy of a king and his rulership over his kingdom.⁴ In the basic sense, "being present at" means the king is present materially on his throne, ruling over his kingdom. In the nonbasic sense, "being present at" means the extension of the king's rule over his kingdom, even though he might not be physically present at all locations. The presence of his lieutenants in every part of the kingdom on behalf of the king symbolizes the king's presence all over the kingdom. Therefore, divine omnipresence is to be understood from the perspective of divine power (Gasser 2019, 45).

Gasser goes on to show how Hudson argues that only a material God can be omnipresent. He notes that for Hudson, materiality does not connote physicality as understood in the physical sciences. Instead, to be material is to be located in a certain way in space, namely, *to entend*. In addition, God's ubiquitous extension does not lead to pantheism, nor does it present a concrete picture of God. "Ubiquitous extension amounts to maximal presence and

⁴ Gasser's king-and-kingdom analogy of presence is similar to that of Aquinas mentioned earlier.

as such it can be considered to be a great-making property,” says Gasser (2019, 49). However, whereas Hudson seems to endorse the idea that God accidentally became material due to his act of creation, Gasser rejects the idea of material divine presence, arguing that Hudson’s idea either leads to pantheism or contradicts the classical concepts of divine omnipresence, simplicity, and immutability (2019, 51).

For a concept of divine omnipresence that solves the immateriality puzzle, Gasser presents three desiderata: “(1) Propose an account of maximal divine immanence in the cosmos; (2) avoid that God Himself turns into a material object, and (3) respect the traditional ontological distinction between God and (any form of) creation” (2019, 51). Using the human body-soul analogy, Gasser elucidates that just as the soul exists *holenmerically* (he argues that *holenmerically* matches Hudson’s *entension*) in the human body—a mode of existence in which the human soul exists wholly in every part of the human body and is absent in none—so does God exist in the cosmos. He exists *holenmerically simpliciter* with no limitations, because spatial features of God are accidental and nonbasic; they are dependent upon the power of God. Therefore, divine omnipresence needs to be conceived from the perspective of divine activity; as a result, there is no need any more for the notion of absolute space. God is omnipresent by his knowledge, power, and essence. He providentially upholds and preserves the creation through his power; however, divine activity is both general and special—in other words, it is *covenantal divine activity*, as argued in this paper. The notion of *covenantal* divine activity relates in this paper to *special* divine activity in the cosmos, and it is the basis for solving the intensity puzzle of divine omnipresence. Gasser, on the other hand, concludes that divine omnipresence is divine omni-activity, which means that God is present in the universe by his divine activity—this operational notion of divine presence is discussed below. Gasser rejects the notion of absolute space (2019, 57–58, 60).

In his (2017) article “God Is Where God Acts,” James Arcadi synthesizes a biblical-philosophical methodology in reconceiving divine omnipresence. He concludes the debate on divine omnipresence encounters two puzzles: the *immateriality* and *intensity puzzles*. He shows that Hudson’s solution to the immateriality puzzle is insufficient, rejects the occupancy theory—used by Hudson, which relates to God’s material existence in space—and advocates an agency theory (Arcadi 2017, 631).

An interesting element introduced by Arcadi stems from his biblical-philosophical methodology. This methodology takes the narrative of the Hebrew scriptures seriously “as a source of training the mind” (Arcadi 2017, 632). God, as the key character of the Hebrew narratives, invites us to stand face-to-face with him so that we may learn to understand him and to see him as he is portrayed in the narrative. Arcadi summarizes impressive data from these narratives and shows how they present God and illumine how divine omnipresence should be conceived (2017, 632).

In addressing the intensity puzzle, Arcadi refers to strong and weak theophanies. He argues that the narrative of the Hebrew scriptures compels us to think of divine presence or, rather, theophanies in degrees. These degrees solve the intensity puzzle in that, in a strong theophany, a high degree of divine activity is evident. A high concentration of divine presence is simply a high concentration of divine action. As portrayed in the Hebrew narratives, God is taken to be materially present in holy places mainly for the sake of divine activity. While these narratives may not satisfy our curiosity or resolve the difficulties involved in articulating a

robust notion of divine omnipresence, they show that God is maximally present everywhere and that he is sometimes intensely present in a few select locations by his divine activity (Arcadi 2017, 635–637).

4. Appropriating the Notion of Divine Omnipresence in the Context of Suffering: A Theodicy of Relational Analytic Theology

Drawing from the narrative of Hebrew scriptures, Eleonore Stump, in her (2010) book *Wandering in Darkness*, introduces another dimension into the debate on divine omnipresence, namely, love and relationality. In this section, I intend to build on Stump’s work to expand this underdeveloped side of the debate from a theodicy of relational-analytic theology. In her chapter on union, presence, and omnipresence, Stump develops a theodicy of narrative analytic philosophy based on love as a union. She argues that presence and mutual closeness are critical elements to sustaining a union, which leads to the question of what it means to be present with or to someone, and if it is possible to be *present with* or *to someone* without being close to that person. Stump distinguishes between *minimal* personal presence and *significant* personal presence, depending on the nature of such closeness (Stump 2010, 110).

Metaphysically, one cannot but argue that God is everywhere. However, in the context of divine activity, God’s presence is not uniform but comes in degrees. This explains why sometimes those who suffer feel that God is absent: if he is everywhere and acting all the time, they expect God to remove their suffering. The Bible also seems to suggest that divine presence is not uniform. It seems God’s presence is felt differently in different locations, and there appears to be a difference between God’s *general* and *special* presence in the cosmos. For example, the Bible says God went to the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3); he went to visit Abraham by the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18; he was at the spot of the burning bush (Exod. 3); and Moses requested that the presence of God accompany the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod. 33). God was at the tent of meeting (Exod. 25), and he was in the temple (1 Kings 8:11), although he is Spirit and does not dwell in temples built by human hands (Acts 7). At some point, the glory of God departed from the temple (Ezek. 11).

This idea of the nonuniform presence of God represents the intensity puzzle of divine presence. It means God is more intensely present in some locations, especially through divine activities, than in others. On the cross, even the Son of God felt the absence of the Father and asked, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). The Greek word *enkataleipō* means “to separate” or “to disconnect,” which means Christ’s connection to the Father was disconnected on the cross.⁵ And just as the Son of God felt disconnected from the Father, so did the saints often feel God was absent in their precarious conditions. In the context of suffering, divine absence is related to a lack of interventional divine activity—in other words, in agony, the sufferers do not experience the delivering power of God. Therefore, many saints felt God was distant or absent. This seemingly leads to the evidential and logical problem of evil. However, from an existential version of the problem of evil, which this study is contingent upon, God is not only present metaphysically, but he is also intentionally present with the sufferer, especially in a covenantal context, as shown below.

⁵ Why were the persons of the Trinity disconnected? Some Bible commentators believe the Father forsook the Son because he vicariously took our inequities and, as a result, stood as an enemy of God (Holmen 2003, 605).

Obviously, the sin of humans must have led to the disconnection between Jesus and the Father. In our case, a believer needs to have a covenantal relationship with God to always feel his presence, whether in suffering or not. In line with this, Stump argues that real presence—in other words, significant personal presence—needs to include *second-person experience* and *shared (or, joint) attention*. Current studies in autism have led psychologists to delve deeper into explaining human relationships. Second person-experience and shared attention refer to different modes of consciousness. For instance, in joint attention, there is a common focus binding two people together. Let me give a personal example of what this all means in terms of the divine-human relationship. I would argue that God was maximally present with me during the darkest moment of my life, when, after my mother’s death and faced with the challenges that accompanied her demise in my life, I attempted suicide three times. However, because I was distracted by my afflictions, I had no second-person experience of God or shared attention with God. If someone desires to experience God’s presence significantly and maximally, they must be able and willing to share their attention with God. That said, there may still be obstacles to sharing attention, despite one’s willingness to do so (Stump 2010, 117).

Daniel Jackson supports the idea that how significantly and maximally present God is to any human depends on that person’s relationship with God. He argues that people could experience or lose the divine presence in the ancient world. In line with the retributive principle in Deuteronomistic theology, sin is mostly seen as the reason for losing the divine presence. Jackson argues that “through sinning, people exchange the divine presence and thus they lack it” (2018, 301). Although I am not presuming that only sinners feel God’s absence amidst adversity, it seems the basis for God’s intentional presence, to a greater extent, has a covenantal undertone. In other words, the divine presence or absence is sometimes experienced on the basis of the worshipper’s relationship with the divine, as seen in Stump’s argument above.

As said, the divine presence is closely associated with divine action. Augustine, Aquinas, Arcadi, and a host of others favor the idea of the *operational* presence of God: God is where God acts. Ordinarily, if and only if p , then q . Not q , therefore, not p . Thus, where there is no divine activity, God is absent. If God is present by divine action alone, then the theist faces the challenge of explicating how God is omnipresent. Yet, his divine action seems absent in some situations and regions, especially in the context of suffering.

The Hebrew scriptures begin with an account of divine action. They take it for granted that God exists and that he acts by bringing the entire cosmos into existence. After this singular act of creation, the Bible shows that God is actively working in the cosmos. Divine actions can be minor but also major deeds, including mighty and dramatic experiences.⁶ J. L. Mackie argues that the laws of nature are descriptive. When a miracle happens, these laws are violated. Given that the laws of nature from a theistic perspective are established by God, who has authority over them, there could be exceptions to how the laws of nature operate due to acts of God, Jesus, or a human representative of the Trinity. In that case, the notion that divine action constitutes a breaking of the laws of nature is discredited, because miracles do not violate nature’s laws except in the Newtonian (mechanical and electrical) conception of the laws of nature (Mackie 1982, 19–20; cf. Plantinga 2010, 321). However, in Mackie’s understanding, the debate could take a different direction in line with the current notion of quantum mechanics. Of course, quantum mechanics, emphasizing probability, will undoubtedly raise further questions and objections, like the mechanical/electrical notion of the cosmos (Plantinga 2010,

319–321). The Hebrew scriptures conceive all actions, both subtle and dramatic, as consequences of divine activity. From the biblical perspective, human existence is a product of divine activity, just as the world’s existence is due to divine action.

The Heidelberg Catechism, arguing for God’s constant divine action in the universe, states that the providence of God is “the almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, he still upholds heaven, earth, and all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance but by his fatherly hand” (answer to question 27). The extent of divine action in the universe has been debated. Today, open theism⁷ advocates a risky⁸ notion of divine providence, given the presence of suffering in the world.

Whatever one’s understanding of divine action is, the notion has traditionally been a part of Christian confessions and creeds. The scriptural passages mentioned above suggest that divine presence implies divine activity. However, it seems this is not always the case. Although God was always with Abraham, Abraham also experienced some downtime; as a result, he lied to Abimelech that he was Sarah’s brother without mentioning that he was also her husband, because he was afraid of being killed (Gen. 20:1–16). Looking at Joseph’s story within the framework of God’s covenant with Abraham, one has no reason to doubt that God was with Joseph. Yet, Joseph had to suffer all kinds of afflictions and hardships. A straightforward reading of Joseph’s narrative, especially the period in which he was a slave, only reveals hopelessness. However, toward the end of the story, we see him prospering. The Bible states that God was with Joseph because he flourished despite his afflictions.⁹ The Israelites in the wilderness faced tough tests, including death, although God was with them. He was with them when they turned their backs on him during the episode with the golden calf in Exodus 32. Moses pleaded that the presence of God would accompany them, and God went with them (Exod. 33).

⁶ Miracles are a significant aspect of the Christian faith; without them, Christianity may be reduced to naturalism. Such weightier issues as the incarnation and atonement, the death and resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ, as well as miracles that modern science seems to undermine—for instance, healing and the power of prayers—have been heavily attacked by many philosophers, at least since the Enlightenment. For example, John Macquarrie stated that “the way of understanding miracles that appeals to breaks in the natural order and to supernatural intervention belongs to the mythological outlook and cannot commend itself in a post-mythological climate of thought” (Macquarrie 1996, 226; cf. Plantinga 2010, 318). In other words, the traditional notion of miracles and other divine actions cannot be reconciled with the contemporary understanding of science and history. This is because science has a pragmatic and realistic approach to every action. Scientifically, everything seems to be explained from the perspective of concrete causes and effects, and divine activities do not fit into such a conception (Macquarrie 1996, 227).

⁷ On open theism, see Pinnock et al. (1994); Sanders (2007).

⁸ For a discussion, see Antombikums (2022).

⁹ “The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned” (Gen. 39:2–4). All Bible quotations are from the New International Version

The conclusion on the relationship between divine presence and interventional divine activity leads to the question of whether operational omnipresence, in other words, the view that divine presence equals interventional divine activity, is logically and traditionally grounded. From a perspective of general providence and the fact that everything in the cosmos operates because it originated from God, who is the first cause of everything, operational omnipresence is tenable. However, suppose one were to consider divine action from the dramatic point of view or as taught by the Heidelberg Catechism; in that case, one may likely face a few questions and objections—for instance, if God is acting all the time and everywhere, why is there plenty of suffering in the world? This is a fundamental issue.

Some versions of the operational notion of divine presence presuppose that divine presence leads to human flourishing, while divine absence leads to human disaster (Peckham 2021, 73). However, this is not always the case: even the righteous ones, such as saints, have suffered, despite their covenantal relationship with God. Job is a classic example of someone who, although he had no formal recorded covenant with God, had lived his life fulfilling all theological obligations required of people who had entered into a covenantal relationship with God. God himself declared that Job had met the requirements and introduced him to the devil as an upright man. Ordinarily, Job should have been the last person to experience suffering. However, Job was not saved despite his righteousness. His friends were aghast at Job's suffering and his claim of innocence, concluding that Job had not kept his theological obligation to God.

As argued above, God is not absent due to suffering, but the sufferer may feel that he is absent because God does not take away their suffering. N. Verbin holds that it is possible to have an intimate relationship with God while one suffers and to experience his presence actively. In his suffering, Job never sees God as being far away, nor does he feel any disconnection from God. He still experiences intimacy with God. However, in this new intimacy, God is now cruel to Job. Job wonders what has become of his relationship with God and seeks explanations for God's actions, hoping to re-establish the former blissful relationship (Verbin 2007).

God's response to Job concerning why he suffered is unexpected. Instead of answering the question why, God offers a series of questions on what might seem like a virtual tower of creation. Job does not receive an answer as to the reason for his predicaments but a series of questions he cannot answer. He surrenders and concludes, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5). The answer to the question of why Job suffered is not his sin. It has nothing to do with divine goodness or justice or the end of the narrative, in which Job became more prosperous than in his earlier days. It is about the fact that Job saw God because God was with him in his affliction (Stump 2010, 192). Although not in a literal way of seeing, due to shared attention, Job saw God in a way in which he wouldn't have seen him except for his suffering. Job saw God as a parent directing his love toward the entire creation, including those who were suffering (Stump 2010, 193). Habakkuk wrestled with God when he read the notion of Deuteronomistic theodicy into the suffering of the righteous at his time. Habakkuk declared that the just would live by faith. It means that we can be sure that God was with Abraham, Joseph, the Israelites, and all those waiting upon him in their afflictions.

The intensity puzzle of divine presence is established from the operational notion of divine presence and the biblical passages mentioned above. Given the foregoing, one is

justified in arguing that there are at least two kinds of divine presence: *general* and *special* (or *covenantal*) divine presence. These two kinds of presence lead to a nonuniformity of divine presence (Peckham 2021, 75–76, 84). God is more present in some regions than in others, even though he is everywhere. This study suggests that the only reason that accounts for the nonuniformity of God’s presence is special/covenantal presence.

Consequently, we may propose to distinguish between interventional and noninterventional divine activity in the cosmos. Alvin Plantinga (2010, 322–323) offers four definitions of divine intervention.

1. “An intervention occurs when God does something A that causes a state of affairs that would not have occurred if God had not done A.” On this first definition, conserving and nourishing the creation, which are essential aspects of divine providence, amount to interventional divine activities.
2. “An intervention might be defined as what occurs when God performs an act A, which is neither conservation nor creation, that causes a state of affairs that would not have occurred if he had not performed A.” This second definition makes intervention a special divine activity in the cosmos.
3. We could define intervention “as happening when God performs an act that is very improbable, given the previous states of the world.” The problem with this third definition is that it is unclear why God should not perform such improbable acts—God is at liberty to perform whatever he wishes.
4. “One might define intervention in terms of the various low-level generalizations, not entailed by quantum mechanics, on which we normally rely: bread nourishes, people don’t walk on water or rise from the dead, and so on. God would then be said to intervene when he causes an event contrary to one of those generalizations.”

Suppose it is established that intervention means such dramatic divine activity as raising people from the dead and healing sick people without concrete medical explanations. In that case, nonintervention would seemingly mean God is *not* doing something dramatic in that sense, especially when events happen naturally. In the case of Joseph, we can distinguish some interventional and noninterventional divine activity. God did not stop the brothers of Joseph when they sold him, nor did God save him when Potiphar’s wife falsely accused him of attempting to rape her, although God was never absent. But there was also some interventional divine activity; for instance, when God helped Joseph interpret the dream (Gen. 41).

On the basis of the Hebrew narrative, we are justified in holding that God is maximally present and, at the same time, more intensely present in some locations than in others. This intensity, in some cases, implies divine activity. It follows that God is never absent, but his presence in the cosmos is not always uniform. This is the only way we can make sense of the biblical assertion that God is always with the righteous in their afflictions, even if he has done nothing to halt their suffering. His presence is sufficient to provide comfort, peace of mind, and assurance. Christ said, “I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20); this promise brings relief amid adversity.

Still, God may be absent intensely from a region, provided the people in that region have no covenantal relationship with God and do not keep his holy ordinances. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah might be used to illustrate this point. Whatever one’s understanding of

Genesis 19, it cannot be denied that God was both *absent* and *present* at Sodom. God was *absent*, because he was not there to save the people. After all, there was no covenantal relationship between them and God. However, he was also *present*, because he acted—but not in the people’s interest. In addition, as stated above, when people experience what seems like God’s absence in their suffering, this is not necessarily the result of sin. It could be due to noninterventional divine activity. God cannot be absent because of his omnipresence and intentional divine presence. If believers seem to experience God’s absence, they could attempt to activate their spiritual eyes and minds to understand their union with Christ beyond their suffering so that they may receive spiritual consolation.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have summarized the ongoing debate on divine omnipresence, focusing especially on the immateriality and intensity puzzles and the issues of pantheism and divine activity. Hudson argues that God is maximally and materially present everywhere by ubiquitous extension. Gasser argues that being maximally present does not imply material presence and, therefore, does not lead to pantheism. In his view, divine presence needs to be conceived from the perspective of divine activity. Arcadi, finally, argues that God is where God acts.

Although philosophical and theological interest in divine omnipresence has been rekindled, the discussion still revolves around the coherence of the doctrine, particularly the immateriality and intensity puzzles, while neglecting its implications for the divine-human relationship in the context of suffering. This study argues that divine presence should be understood from the perspective of shared attention. God is always present, and he wants humans to relate with him willingly. This explains why he might be absent in suffering when those who suffer have no relationship with him. In addition, I have argued that his presence and actions are not always interventional: they can also be noninterventional. This is the only way we can make sense of the intensity puzzle, which is that God appears to be more present in certain places than in others.¹⁰

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