

**ALL THINGS WISE AND WONDERFUL: A Christian Understanding of How and Why Things Happen, in Light of COVID-19** by E. Janet Warren. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2021. 208 pages + index. Paperback; \$27.00. ISBN: 9781725292031.

In *All Things Wise and Wonderful*, E. Janet Warren develops a multi-disciplinary, Christian understanding of causation with the hope that it will help us ‘to respond with integrity and compassion for those who suffer’ (182). Warren is not short on familiar examples of uncompassionate responses to suffering that are worth critiquing: ‘God caused the pandemic to teach us to be kind,’ (127) ‘Everything happens for a reason,’ (180) ‘This tragedy happened to grow your faith’ (22). Warren argues that these symptoms point toward a common diagnosis: a false, ‘omni-causal’ view of God, according to which God ‘causes everything that happens, including pandemics’ (31).

The first, introductory chapter lays the groundwork for the rest of the book in two ways: first, by giving a complex taxonomy of philosophical distinctions bearing on causation and, second, by introducing the (as Warren argues) problematic practice of too easily explaining an event as the result of God’s direct causal intervention (e.g. God provided a parking spot!) when mundane explanations suffice. The tension between the complexity of causation and the human tendency to gravitate toward simplistic (divine) explanations becomes the book’s recurring theme. In chapter 2, Warren surveys Biblical claims about causation, concluding that it ‘does not give a simple account of causation,’ (45) and encouraging the reader to ‘accept ambiguity and complexity’ (36) in the text rather than demanding a coherent Biblical theory.

The third chapter, ‘What Does Christian Theology Say About Causation?’ is the clear standout and would make a provocative discussion-piece for an undergraduate class on divine providence in a science and religion course. Warren contrasts two pictures of God, one in which God is an omni-causal, omni-controlling dictator of a deterministic world (57, 77) and another in which God is a servant king who relinquishes the option to utilize God’s power in order to preserve space for indeterministic, creaturely freedom (53, 58). The strokes are intentionally broad, nudging the reader to see the potential ethical pitfalls of positing an omni-causal God. In particular, Warren worries that an omni-causal God would not be capable of being lovingly response to creaturely agents (57).

On Warren’s preferred picture, God builds a world that can host longstanding causal patterns without repeated divine intervention: once created, the world is, in some sense ‘self-causing’ (35) and does not require any special act of divine conservation. Although God does act in the world, God refrains from fully exercising God’s power to control in order to respect ‘the freedom he has granted to humans and the created order’ (60).

The contrasting portraits, however vivid, also preempt discussion of various middle views—one might distinguish between an omni-causing and omni-controlling God, for instance. Warren is also stronger on critique than on the details of her own positive proposal—perhaps by design. ‘The language of metaphor and analogies is more accessible,’ Warren writes, ‘than the language of philosophy or science’ (68). This is faithful to her refrain that real-world causal networks are messy and not easily wrapped in neat theological packaging, but it may prove frustrating to those readers eager to engage the details of a constructive project.

In chapter 4, Warren gives the reader a crash course in statistical concepts that are useful for understanding causation, quickly covering (for instance) base rates, regression to the mean, and the law of large numbers. Genuine chance is not incompatible with a kind of sovereignty, Warren argues; rather, God ‘created randomness’ (90) and is capable of guiding overarching events through it while fostering the vulnerability, excitement, and intellectual humility that comes with real chanciness. Chapter 5 asks what science says about causation. Notable—both for the audience it will attract and exclude—is Warren’s commitment to take divine healings, demonic activity, and parapsychology seriously while also summarizing key concepts from quantum theory and medicinal practice.

In chapter 6, Warren turns to psychological explanations of why we jump to simple causal explanations. Drawing liberally from Kahneman,<sup>1</sup> Warren introduces dual processing theory, distinguishing between our quick, automatic system 1 judgments and our reflective, deliberate system 2 judgments. Citing Barrett’s *Hyper-sensitive Agency Detection Device*<sup>2</sup> and Taleb’s *narrative fallacy*,<sup>3</sup> among other mechanisms, Warren suggests that causal explanations that invoke a narrative about God’s intentions are often psychologically easy for us jump to (via system 1). Reflective Christians should, Warren argues, be aware of this tendency and moderate our confidence in unreflective judgments about divine intervention in ordinary events.

Chapter 7 and the following conclusion take a pastoral turn and will be of special interest to church study groups. Alongside giving practical recommendations for exercising discernment, Warren concludes that ‘by better understanding the nature of causation and the nature of God’s interaction with our wise and wonderful world, we can better evaluate how and why things happen, without glibly assuming God causes everything’ (177).

Warren’s book could profitably be read by undergraduates in a science and religion course at a confessional college, with special attention given to the third chapter, which has points of contact with Polkinghorne,<sup>4</sup> Bartholomew,<sup>5</sup> Boyd,<sup>6</sup> and Oord.<sup>7</sup> But the book may be even more at home in study groups at (broadly) evangelical churches, where the writing’s therapeutic lens can shine. Warren’s easy prose is accessible as she hops without hesitation from the Bible to Polkinghorne to Aristotle to *Bruce Almighty*.

While the breadth of Warren’s book is impressive, any interdisciplinary book is liable to engage more fully with some disciplines than others. It’s no surprise that Warren’s book is strongest when drawing on her expertise in medicine and theology and less so when discussing philosophy.

One philosophical concern for Warren’s argument against an omni-causal God is the possibility of causation from non-action. Some philosophers think that absences cause. My *not* watering the plant causes it to die; my *not* calling on his birthday causes Dad to be sad. In each of these cases, there is something I could have easily done that would have prevented the effect. But if absences cause, then there is a serious challenge for Warren’s view. For a powerful and wise (even if not classically omniscient) God can easily prevent most events from happening. God could easily have prevented me from getting that last parking spot or my friend from being infected with a virus. Perhaps, then, God’s *not* preventing these events should number among their causes (or at least their explanations).

This need not be a criticism of the overall theological picture Warren develops—one in which God does not intend or directly intervene to prevent the normal operation of the world except (usually)

for explicitly theological reasons. Rather, I suggest that how much leverage can be got by critiquing the concept of an *omni-causal* God depends on substantive philosophical commitments about the nature of causation and how causation relates to other philosophical concepts like explanation and responsibility. Perhaps a God as powerful and involved as traditional Christian theology posits can't help but be in close causal contact with the world—a God whose interventions, however sparingly placed, ripple far through the created world, either by preventing or by failing to prevent events that are well within God's power to stop. If so, then, then 'God didn't cause that' may not often be strictly true, even if God didn't specially intervene with the purpose of bringing the event about: 'God didn't intend that,' 'God didn't plan that,' or 'God didn't want that,' may be more honest. Retaining God's (in)action as causes of mundane events—while complicating the story about divine intent and providence—may also allow us to vindicate the Biblical practice of prayerful complaint against God's (in)action (with Job and the psalmist) as a therapeutically important and theologically understandable response to suffering while simultaneously allowing us to join Warren's critique of 'comforting' clichés about God's specific purposes for particular harms.

But these are concerns about tactics within the context of a shared goal to enrich and complexify Christian understandings of causation. At its best, Warren's work therapeutically nudges the reader toward a healthy skepticism of over-easy ascriptions of God's direct causal intervention in the world. And this amidst an ambitious, interdisciplinary conceptual toolkit that weaves accessibly through theology, philosophy, statistics, psychology, and the sciences more broadly.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, Justin. *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Belief*. New York: Free Press, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Random House, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Polkinghorne, John C. *Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Bartholomew, David J. *God, Chance and Purpose: Can God Have It Both Ways*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Boyd, Gregory A. 'Open Theism.' In *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, edited by James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, 13–47. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Oord, Thomas Jay. *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2015.

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