

# Whitehead's Theory of God and the World

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The object of this paper is to point out two contrasting strains of religious feeling which appear in Whitehead's writings, to show how each is related to certain features of his cosmology, and to make some suggestions about the outcome of his theory of God and the world.

I. One strain of feeling which is expressed in Whitehead's writings is a vivid sense of the goodness of God and the reality of the world. There is the intuition that God is neither the sum of all things nor the sole source of all things, because he is good. And there is the intuition that the individual things which make up the world are real for God as well as for each other and for themselves.

This strain of feeling appears most clearly in passages where traditional absolutisms, of one sort or another, are under attack. It belongs to the more empirical and realistic side of Whitehead's thought, and to his more vigorous and adventurous moods.

This strain of feeling finds expression in Whitehead's cosmology in his denial of any "eminent" reality, and in the positive doctrines which accompany that denial. If God is absolute or unconditioned reality, it is difficult to make sense of saying that God is good, for then God is, or is responsible for, everything that happens. Things which are other than this reality are inevitably regarded as in some sense unreal.

Of course, philosophers do not always embody in their systems all of their original intentions. And the question is often raised whether Whitehead has succeeded in doing so at this point. I would suggest that Whitehead's denial that there is any unconditioned or absolute reality is implemented positively in five ways:

(1) God is subject to the general categorical conditions for actual entities, and thus is not "arbitrarily" introduced into Whitehead's cosmology. By the mere fact of introducing some notion of God into his cosmology Whitehead does not repudiate any of the methodological principles set forth in his later writings. What these principles require is, that whatever actual entity is introduced into the cosmological scheme must have some connection with immediate experience, and that any such entity must exemplify the categories which apply to all actual entities.

It seems fairly clear that God as conceived in Whitehead's philosophy is an instance of the general principles applying to actual entities in his system. God is a unity of conceptual and physical experience. He is concrescence, satisfaction, and superject. He has subjective aim, and subjective forms of feeling. He exists formally as an immediate actuality, and he exists objectively for other actual entities. There are, of course, some important differences between God and actual occasions, which we shall have to notice later. But it seems true that on the whole Whitehead has avoided what he calls the "arbitrary" introduction of the concept of God as an explanatory principle.

(2) Whitehead's conception of God supplies a "reason" or ground for a plurality of real individuals. Whitehead contrasts his philosophy with that of Spinoza at this point, repeating the familiar criticism of Spinoza's "arbitrary introduction of the 'modes.'" Since God, in Whitehead's system, originates conceptually in the form of a primordial vision of possibilities, God is physically incomplete, and requires many individuals in the creative advance of nature for his completion in physical actuality. Thus the very nature of God requires that there be real individuals other than God.

(3) It seems that Whitehead, in saying that an actual occasion is "derived" from God, does not mean to say that the individual occasion is completely determined by God. God conditions the formation of a novel occasion, specifically in that the novel concrescence derives from God in the initial phase of its subjective aim. The occasion derives from God, that is to say, the ideal possibility which it actualizes in its process of becoming. But, vis-a-vis God, the novel concrescence expresses creative freedom or self-determination in two ways:

(a) There is autonomy in the determination of the subjective form of valuation of the conceptual aim, that is to say in the determination of how the possibility derived from God is felt. The conceptual aim in the novel concrescence will not have the same subjective form which was had by that conceptual feeling in the primordial nature of God which the conceptual aim "re-enacts." The specific difference between the two subjective forms will be due to the creative activity of the novel subject.

(b) In the concrescence there is creative spontaneity in realizing or actualizing the subjective aim initially derived from God. The occasion arises with a relevant ideal, an ideal of what it may become. But it remains for the concrescence to decide what, more specifically, this ideal means in the particular context of its physical experience here-now. This Whitehead calls the "immanent decision" of the concrescence. Further, not only the progressive definition of the subjective aim, but also the process of concrete actualization of this aim belongs to the self-activity of the individual occasion.

(4) Any actual occasion, in addition to being qualified by God, in its turn qualifies the nature of God. The achievement of the satisfaction of each actual occasion is objectified for God by the physical prehensions which make up God's consequent nature. This achievement on-part of God thus adds a determination to God's physical nature.

Of course, Whitehead says that the incompleteness of the consequent nature of God does not "derogate from" the eternal completion of his primordial vision of the possibilities. But there is an important sense in which even the primordial nature of God is, for any actual occasion A, different from what it was for an antecedent occasion X. For after all God is, like any other actual entity, a concrescence or unification of feelings into which physical feelings as well as conceptual feeling enter. Thus God as an individual actual entity will be different for A than he was for X. A. will apprehend God from a different

perspective than did S. And, what is more important, God as prehended by A will include that determination of his nature which results from his physical prehension of X. Presumably, this will make a difference in the relevance of the ideal possibilities for A.

This effectiveness of actual occasions in determining the relevance of God's primordial nature for future concrescences, even though they do not add anything to the content of his primordial vision, is a consideration which mitigates to some extent the alleged "cleavage" between the primordial and consequent natures of God.

(5) Finally, it may be suggested that the subjective experience of any actual occasion and the subjective experience of God may be mutually exclusive, in the sense that neither shares the immediate experience of the other. (Cf. Schilpp, p. 449, ll.23ff.)

It can be shown that no two actual occasions share any immediate experience. The influence of any actual occasion on any other actual occasion takes place by "objectification." When one occasion thus becomes an object for another, it has lost the immediacy of experience in which its concrete actuality consisted. It has "perished." The formal or immediate existence of any actual occasion is a unity of experience which is private to itself.

If this interpretation of the relations between actual occasions in Whitehead's system is well founded, as it is believed to be, and if Whitehead's professed intention of applying the general metaphysical categories to God is taken seriously, then the present suggestion naturally arises.

In fact, Whitehead seems to use much the same language in one case as in the other. The fundamental distinction between formal and objective existence is applied to God as well as to actual occasions, and the immanence of God in other actual entities is identified with his "objective immortality." The immanence of God is his objective existence in actual occasions. It is not God in his own subjective immediacy.

In turn, actual occasions are said to be "objectified" in God. That is, God's physical prehensions of actual occasions seem to conform to essentially the same conditions as do the physical prehensions of one actual occasion by another. Actual occasions as prehended into the consequent nature of God do not retain their own immediacy. The consequent nature of God as a "living, ever-present fact" is not the collective immediacies of the individual actual occasions. It is the everlasting, subjectively immediate experience of God.

If the present suggestion is well founded, and God transcends actual occasions in the sense that there is no sharing of immediacy between God and actual occasions, then the distinction between Whitehead's theory and pantheism becomes much clearer than it otherwise would be.

"The features of Whitehead's cosmology which have now been indicated seem to implement, in one way or another, his denial that God is absolute or unconditioned

reality. Likewise they implement his affirmations that God is good and hence cannot be the sole determining factor in what happens, and that the world with which we have to do in common experience is real. Upon these considerations, or upon some of them, any attempt to distinguish between Whitehead's theory and pantheism, or absolute idealism, or scholasticism, must be based.

II. There is another strain of feeling which appears in Whitehead's writings. It is a sense of the unity of all things in God. All possibilities are included in God's primordial vision. All actualities come to be unified in God's everlasting consequent nature. All things have a place in and contribute to the intensity of God's experience.

This strain of feeling appears in most of Whitehead's later writings, and is especially evident in his final interpretation at the end of Process and Reality, in the later chapters of Adventures of Ideas, and in the Ingersoll Lecture, Immortality. This strain of feeling reproduces, in Whitehead's way, one of the persistent religious intuitions of mankind. What is in the world as partial and transient is imaginatively identified with what is complete and everlasting. The human spirit turns, to use terms adopted by Whitehead in the Ingersoll Lecture, from the World of Facts to the World of Values.

This strain of feeling is also implemented in Whitehead's cosmology. In the primordial nature of God, there is "unfettered" valuation of all ideal possibilities. No eternal objects are omitted from God's primordial vision, and all are positively valued. God "yearns for" the realization of them all. And it is from these conceptual prehensions of the ideal possibilities that each actual occasion derives its initial subjective aim. Let emphasize the importance of this last feature of Whitehead's system.

The individuality of an actual occasion consists in its being a novel unity of experience which is definite and exclusive of all other unities of experience. And it is by virtue of the subjective aim at satisfaction that the various prehensions composing a concrescent occasion are integrated into a unity of experience. What must be emphasized is that Whitehead's theory of real individuals in the actual world depends in a crucial way on the notion of subjective aim. And the presence of such an aim from the beginning of a novel concrescence can only be explained, in Whitehead's system, by reference to God. Whitehead's theory of actual occasions, as a theory of real individuals, cannot be understood apart from his theory of God. God is essential to the theory of actual occasions, and is not an interesting but superfluous addition to it. The theory of actual occasions does not stand on its own feet, and Whitehead evidently does not intend that it should do so.

"Again, in the consequent nature of God there is physical prehension of every actual occasion in the creative advance of nature. The physical achievement of every actual occasion is immortalized in God's everlasting unity of feeling. Here, I suggest, another function of God in Whitehead's cosmology appears. God seems to be required for the effectiveness of past actual occasions in the formation of a novel occasion in the present.

"Whitehead's description of the transition from past to present involves in an essential way the "givenness" of the past for the present. It is because of the stubborn factual character of the past that the present occasion is obliged to conform to it and to re-enact it. Now on Whitehead's principles it is legitimate and necessary to ask the question, What is the reason or ground of this givenness of the past?"

"Why is it that X, a past actual occasion, is now given for A? The obvious, but false, answer would be that X is itself the reason why it is now given for A. It is true that X is the reason for what is now given as an initial datum for A. X in its own process of actualization has determined the character of this condition to which A must conform. But X cannot serve as the reason for the fact that this datum is now given for A. For X has now "perished" and is no longer actual, whereas, according to Whitehead's "ontological principle" the only "reasons" are actual entities. Past actual occasions cannot serve as the reasons why data from the past are now given. This is an inevitable consequence of the epochal theory of time.

"Now the only actual entity in Whitehead's system which might serve as the ontological ground of the givenness of the past is God. So far the implications of Whitehead's ontological principle seem perfectly clear. It is not so clear that Whitehead intends to assign this function to God, though there is no evidence to the contrary and some passages come very near to asserting it. And it is not at all clear by what mechanism God could exercise this function. What is entirely clear is that no other entity in Whitehead's system could do so. The fairest conclusion seems to be that the consequent, or to be more exact the superjective nature of God, is Whitehead's explanation of the fact of the givenness of the past for the present, when the individual occasions of the past actual world have perished.

"The importance of this conclusion, if it is correct, must be emphasized. Whitehead's whole theory of causation and perception, which is his account of the organic connectedness which exists between actual occasions, depends essentially on his theory of causal objectification, which is his account of the transition from past to present. Genuine connectedness between actual occasions is to be found only between past and present occasions, by way of causal objectification. And for his theory of causal objectification, some account of the givenness of the past is crucial. Therefore, if the present suggestion is well founded, the function of the superjective nature of God, in making possible the givenness of the past for the present, is essential to the intelligibility of Whitehead's account of real connections between actual occasions. As God is essential to the individuality of actual occasions, so also is he essential to their connectedness. Again, Whitehead theory of actual occasions does not stand on its own feet, nor does it seem to be intended to do so.

Both for the individuality of actual occasions, on which Whitehead's claim to be a pluralist rests, and for the real connectedness of actual occasions, on which his claim to have constructed a philosophy of organism rests, God is required as an explanatory principle. Actual occasions individually and collectively are not sufficient to themselves. They depend on God. It is these important functions of God, with respect to the actual

occasions which make up the world, which in Whitehead's cosmology implement Whitehead's version of the age-old intuition of the unity of all things in God.

III. To make proposals for remodeling a philosophical system is both a thankless and a relatively unfruitful procedure. The suggestions which follow are not to be taken as such proposals. They are merely indications of points at which the philosophy of organism seems to be more compatible with Whitehead's intuition of the unity of all things in God than with his intuition of the goodness of God and the reality of the world.

The inclusion of all possibilities in God's primordial envisagement seems to compromise both the goodness of God and the reality of the world. God does not select from the possibilities, it seems. No possibilities are excluded from his vision. All possibilities, including mutually incompatible ones, are envisioned with appetite for their realization. Presumably, at some time in the advance of nature any possibility will, by virtue of God's envisagement, be relevant to some new act of becoming.

This all-inclusive or "unfettered" valuation of God's primordial nature seems more compatible with a vision of an eternal One than with a vision of good God. John Buchan remarks in his autobiography, of Richard Haldane,

"He was apt to antedate the higher unity in which contraries were to be reconciled."

Whether such a higher unity is conceived as realized in actuality, or as realized in conceptual anticipation, the result seems disastrous for the suggestion that God is good.

The ideal completeness of the primordial nature of God seems also to compromise the reality of the world. No novel possibilities are initially available to particular acts of becoming except those conceptually realized in God. Further, it is dubious whether any act of becoming selects from among the possibilities in God. The result is that the general character of any subjective aim, if not its more definite specification, is necessarily and directly derived from God. "Persuasion" in this context has very little meaning. There remains a kind of freedom or creativity, as we have seen, as a ground for real individuality, but only in minimal sense.

The unification of all actualities in the consequent nature of God is another doctrine which accords better with the sense of the unity of all things in God than with the sense of the goodness of God and the reality of the world. It is difficult to see how, on his premises, Whitehead could say that God prehends negatively some aspects of any actual occasions. It seems that not only every achieved actuality but all of the content of every actuality enters into God's physical realization.

This seems to mean that all happenings, and every aspect of every happening, have some positive value for God. It also seems to mean that, as in God, all actualities are compatible with each other. This makes it very difficult to give any intelligible meaning

to the goodness of God. One supposes that in order to attribute any such character as goodness to God it is necessary to say that some things, or at least some aspects of things, are essentially incompatible with each other not only in any given moment but also in any conceivably long run.

The unification of all actual occasions in God seems to vitiate the intuition of the reality of the world no less than the intuition of the goodness of God. If Whitehead's doctrine of social immanence has been fairly understood, then the effectiveness of any actual occasion operates by way of the effectiveness of the consequent nature of God. God is the ontological ground of the givenness of the past, on which the effectiveness of the past in the future depends. The immediate actualities of individual occasions are only fleeting, though novel, episodes in the history of God's everlasting unity.

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[Handwritten note: “Based heavily, as I recall, upon readings especially in Schalpp’s The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.”]