

Panentheism—Part Two

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Panentheism (all **IN** God) as opposed to Pantheism (all **IS** God)

Basic Beliefs of Panentheism (con't)

Relation of God to Universe. In a panentheistic worldview, God's consequent pole is the world. This does not mean that God and the world are identical, for God is more than the world, and the individuals that make up the world are distinct from God. It does mean, however, that the world is God's cosmic body and that those creatures who make up the world are like cells in his body. This is why God cannot exist without some kind of physical universe. He does not need this world, but he must coexist in *some* world. Similarly, the world cannot exist without God. Hence the world and God are mutually dependent. Moreover, the creatures in the universe contribute value to God's life. The inclusive aim or goal of all creatures is to enrich God's happiness and thus help him fulfill what he lacks.

Miracles. An implication of panentheism is that supernatural acts are impossible. Since the world is the body of God there is nothing apart from God that can be broken into or interrupted. Indeed, God is largely a passive recipient of his creatures' activity rather than an active force in the world. God is a cosmic Sympathizer rather than a cosmic Activist. Consequently miraculous intervention in the world is out of character with the nature of the panentheistic God. Many panentheists reject miracles because the contemporary scientific view of the world rules them out. Ogden takes this stance. This is one reason why he adopts Rudolph Bultmann's program to demythologize the miracle stories recorded in the Bible.

Human Beings. Panentheists agree that humanity is personal and free. In fact, humanity as a whole is a co-creator with God and of God. He not only helps decide the course of human and world events but also those of God. Human identity is not found in some enduring "I" or self. Rather, like the rest of the world, identity is found only in the events or actual occasions of history in which humanity is becoming. The human being is partially creating himself or herself in every decision and act each moment. The goal is to serve God by contributing value to his ever-growing experience.

Ethics. Many panentheists believe that there are no absolute values. Since God and the world are in great flux, there can be no absolute, unchanging standard of value. On the other hand, such panentheists as Hartshorne contend that there is a universal basis for ethics, namely, beauty, harmony, and intensity. Anything that promotes or builds upon or acts from this basis is good; anything that does not do so is evil. But even granting this universal aesthetic foundation, specific ethical commands or rules are not universal. Though in general one should promote beauty and not ugliness, exactly how this should be done is relative. Therefore, even though there may be an ultimate basis *or* ground for ethics, values themselves are not absolute but relative.

Human Destiny. The destiny of humanity is not to be looked for in an actual heaven or hell or a conscious afterlife. Rather, human beings, like all of God's creatures, will live forever only in God's cosmic memory. A person who contributes richly to God's life, will have the satisfaction of knowing that God will fondly remember him or her forever. Those who live without contributing much value to God, who, in other words, live unfaithfully, will

not be remembered with much fondness by God.

In panentheism an ongoing evolutionary process helps move events forever forward. God and humanity are also seen as co-creators of history. However, unlike theism, there is no ultimate end of history. There will always be the unsurpassable deity who is constantly growing in perfection. And there will always be some world filled with self-creative creatures whose inclusive aim is to enrich the experience of God. History has no beginning and it has no end. There is no ultimate destiny, utopia, eschaton, or end. History, as everything else, has always been, is coming to be now, and will always be in process. History is not going anywhere, it is just going on.

Evaluation.

Contributions of panentheism. Panentheists seek a comprehensive view of reality. They recognize that a piecemeal understanding of things is inadequate. Instead they have sought to develop a coherent and reasonable view of all that exists, a complete worldview.

Panentheism manages to posit an intimate relation between God and the world without destroying that relation, as does pantheism. God is *in* the world but not identical to it. The presence of God in the universe does not destroy the multiplicity that humans experience, but rather preserves it and even bestows upon it purpose and meaning. Granting the existence of a supreme Being, panentheists show that the world must depend upon God for its origin and continuation. Unless God exists, the world could not continue to exist. They insist that there must be an adequate cause to account for the world.

Panentheists seriously relate their worldview to contemporary theories of science. Whatever worldview one holds, science cannot be ignored. Valid human discoveries in any field or discipline must be incorporated into one's worldview. If reality is truly reasonable and non-contradictory, then all of knowledge can be consistently systematized, no matter who discovers it or where it is found. Panentheists take this to heart.

Criticisms of Panentheism. Some of the more important criticisms will be noted here.

The idea of a God who is both infinite and finite, necessary and contingent, absolute and relative, is contradictory. A contradiction results when opposites are affirmed of the same thing at the same time and in the same manner or respect. For example, to say that a bucket is both filled with water and not filled with water at the same time and in the same respect is contradictory. Such a thing could never occur, for it is logically impossible.

Hartshorne has responded to the charge of contradiction by pointing out that the metaphysical contraries are not attributed to the same divine pole. Rather those attributes that belong together, such as infinity and necessity, are applied to one pole while the other attributes that belong together; such as finitude and contingency, are applied to a different pole. Infinity and finitude, necessity and contingency, though applied to the same being at the same time, are applied to the appropriate poles in God (Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God*, 22-24). The Christian theist, H. P. Owen, has responded that there seems to be no real distinction between the two divine poles. Since the abstract pole has no concrete or actual existence, then it must be a mere idea, having mental reality but no existence (Owen, 105). Therefore God must not really be infinite, and necessary, for those attributes are in the potential pole that does not exist in reality. God in reality is only finite and contingent. Or God must be both sides of the metaphysical contraries at the same time and in the same pole. The first option makes panentheism's doctrine of God meaningless, and the second makes it contradictory. In either event the bipolar concept of God is incoherent.

The idea of God as a self-caused being is contradictory. It is difficult to see how any

being could cause itself to exist. To think this could occur is to believe that potentials can actualize themselves. Cups could fill themselves with coffee and steel could make itself into a skyscraper. How could a being exist prior to itself in order to bring itself into existence? This is what a self-caused being would have to do in order to exist. A panentheist might respond that God did not bring himself into existence; he has eternally existed. Rather, the panentheistic version of a self-caused God creates his becoming. That is, God produces changes in himself. God actualizes his own potentials for growth.

But this leads to another problem. If God causes his own becoming and not his own being, then what or who sustains God in existence? How can a being change without there existing an unchanging being that grounds the changing being's existence? Everything cannot be in flux. Whatever changes passes from potentiality to actuality, from what it is not to what is. Such change could not actualize itself or be self-caused, for potentials are not yet the something they have the potential to be.

Nothing cannot produce something. Neither could such changes be uncaused, for there must be a cause for every effect or event. It seems, therefore, that the universe of change, which is the concrete pole of God, must be caused by something that does not change. Something outside of the changing order must sustain the entire order in existence. Therefore there must be a being other than what the process philosopher views as "God" that sustains him in existence. If this is true, then the panentheistic God is not really God, but the Being that grounds him is really God. Such a God is not an immutable-mutable being, as is the process deity; but would have to be simply immutable.

Another aspect of this problem is that the panentheist knows that everything, including God, is relative and changing. How can anyone know that something is changing when there is no stable reference point by which to measure the change? The theist has God and his absolute, unchanging character and will. The panentheist has no such standard. A panentheist could answer that his unchanging measure is the immutable primordial nature of God. But this does not seem adequate. For God's primordial pole is only an abstraction—it has no reality. It can be a conceptual measure, but not an actual one. Besides, a panentheist who says that God is immutable means that God is immutably mutable—He cannot fail to always change and always change for the better (Hartshorne, *Natural Theology*, 110, 276). Hence we seem to be back where we started, with everything changing and nothing that is being changed.

The panentheistic concept of personhood appears to conflict with our experience of ourselves. We, at least, believe ourselves to be personal beings who, to some degree, endure change. Most of us do not believe that we become new persons each moment we exist. In fact, to even say that "I become a new person each moment I exist" assumes that there is something that endures, the "I" to whom the changes occur. Otherwise, what changes? If nothing endures from moment to moment, then can it really be said that anything changes? If there is no sense in which the self is a continuous identity, then it appears that we can only speak of a series of unrelated actual "I" occasions (ibid., 58). And the only thing that can be said to change in that series of "I's" is the series itself, not each individual "I" in the series. This seems to destroy self-identity and to contradict human experience. This problem is particularly acute for Hartshorne. In accord with his view, one goes out of existence every time there is a moment with no conscious "I." That would include periods of sleep or under anesthesia or other moments of lapsed consciousness. A parent awakening a child from sleep would actually call the young one back into existence.

To say with the panentheist that some world or other must have always existed begs

the question. Of course it is impossible that total nothingness could ever be experienced, for no one could be there to experience it. Otherwise it would not be total nothingness. But this presupposes that only what can be experienced can be true. Why should this criteria for truth be accepted? Hartshorne implies that it should be accepted because there can be no meaning without experience (ibid.). Thus a concept that cannot be experienced must be meaningless. But if this is so then Hartshorne seems to have won his case by definition. For if there can be no meaning without experience, then total nonbeing, which cannot be experienced, must be meaningless. Hartshorne has established his case by defining meaning in such a way that makes total non-being a meaningless concept. He has not proved the meaninglessness of "nothing exists" but only assumed it, which is question-begging.

Even if Hartshorne can establish that total nothingness is not possible, the panentheistic view does not follow. For this would simply be a way of saying that everything cannot be contingent. But this leads naturally to a theistic position in which there must be a Necessary Being beyond the contingent world. It is not necessary to conclude that panentheism is true, simply because a total state of nothingness is not possible.

If the proposition "Nothing exists." is logically possible, then the existence of Hartshorne's and Ogden's God is tenuous. Such a God must keep the universe rolling and change universes quickly, or he poofs out of the picture. He is tied as with an umbilical cord to some world. But if it is logically possible that "some world exists" has not always been true, then it is logically possible that "God exists" has at some time been false. But, according to Hartshorne and Ogden, if God is not logically necessary, a necessary being that must always exist no matter what, then the existence of God must be logically impossible. By this rule the God of Hartshorne and Ogden is necessarily false.

Process theology faces a serious dilemma (Gruenler; 75-79). God comprehends the whole universe at one time, yet God is limited to space and time. But anything limited to space and time cannot think any faster than the speed of light, which takes billions of years to cross the universe at about 186,000 miles a second. However, there seems to be no way that a mind which takes this kind of time to think its way around the universe could simultaneously comprehend and direct the whole universe. On the other hand, if God's mind does transcend the universe of space and time and instantly and simultaneously comprehend the whole, then this is not a panentheistic view of God but a theistic view.

Sources

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