

Contemporary Responses to Classical Theism

GOD IN PROCESS THEOLOGY

MUCH OF CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY has moved away from classical theism as many theologians, regardless of their theological method or theological traditions, have found different reasons to revise, or even abandon, classical theism. Process theologians primarily critique classical theism on account of the philosophical influences on classical theism, but also for its emphasis on divine transcendence. Process theologians do not, however, argue that all philosophical influence on the doctrine of the divine attributes is inappropriate. Rather, they suggest that there is a more appropriate philosophical basis on which a doctrine of God should be built. This philosophical basis is process philosophy.

Process theologians are often labeled panentheists on account of their belief that all things are in God and God is in all things (“pan” stemming from the Greek word meaning “all,” “en” coming from the Greek word meaning “in,” and “theism” of course from “theos” meaning “God”). A common definition of panentheism states, “The Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part exists in Him, but His Being is more than, and not exhausted by, the universe.”¹ It is more appropriate, however, to refer to process theology specifically as *process* panentheism (or dipolar panentheism), due to the fact that there are other forms of panentheism that are held by non-process theologians and that there are a variety of ways that theologians understand the idea of panentheism. The variety of ways that theologians understand panentheism is well illustrated throughout the recent volume *In Whom We*

1. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., s.v., “Panentheism,” 1213. Cooper affirms that this definition is “a commonly accepted generic definition” of panentheism (Cooper, *Panentheism*, 27).

Live and Move and Have Our Being, edited by Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke. On account of this diversity, John Cooper correctly remarks that “theologians who endorse panentheism do not agree on what it is or should be.”²

In the midst of the diverse understandings of panentheism, Niels Gregersen observes that there are “more or less shared” affirmations found in all versions of panentheism. Hence, following Gregersen, when I use the term panentheism throughout this book, I mean the notion that “there exists a real two-way interaction between God and the world, so that (1) the world is somehow ‘contained in God,’ and (2) there will be some ‘return’ of the world into the life of God.” Gregerson adds: “the idea of bilateral relations between God and world may even be said to be distinctive for panentheism.”³ Based on this definition of panentheism, Gregerson outlines three varieties of panentheism. The first, soteriological or eschatological panentheism, proposes that the world is “in God” only as a gift that comes through the redemptive grace of God. The presupposition is that everything does not automatically dwell “in God,” for example, wickedness and sin. According to this view, “Only in the eschatological consummation of creation shall God finally be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28).”⁴ The second type of panentheism, revelational or expressivist panentheism, views God as expressing himself throughout the world and thereby experiencing and being enriched by world history through this expression. While attempting to overcome an anthropocentric view of God, this second type of panentheism differs from the first in that here the world affects God, whereas soteriological panentheists generally emphasize the divine presence in creation to transform and—for Kallistos Ware and Gregory of Palamas—to divinize the world.⁵ The third type of panentheism is, of course, process or dipolar panentheism. Gregersen writes, “Here God is assumed to be in some aspects timeless, beyond space and self-identical, while in other aspects temporal, spatial, and affected by the world.”⁶ While the first two types of panentheism do

2. Cooper, *Panentheism*, 27.

3. Gregerson, “Three Varieties,” 20.

4. Ibid., 21. Clayton refers to this view as “eschatological panentheism” (Clayton, “Panentheism Today,” 250).

5. Ware, “God Immanent,” 167.

6. Gregersen, “Three Varieties,” 21.

not necessarily conflict with classical theism, process panentheism has the critique of classical theism at its very heart.

Process panentheism, and process theology in general, is based on process philosophy, which refers to a school of thought based on the publications of Alfred North Whitehead, who wrote in the 1920s and 1930s. At the foundation of his writings is the idea that reality is a process, everything is in flux, and everything changes. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus proposed, you cannot step into the same river twice.⁷ Whereas most of western philosophical thought begins with the presupposition that the basic ontological categories are “being,” “substance,” or “essence” (things which do not change), Whitehead proposed an ontology of relation, where the basic ontological category is relation. All reality is, for Whitehead, in process as these relations change. As an expression of this, Whitehead views the basic units of reality not as things or bits of matter, but rather as moments of experience, or “occasions.”⁸ Along with this emphasis on the relations between things comes the process conclusion that interdependence is an ontological given, which nothing, including God, can escape.⁹

The previous statement signals that process theologians privilege the immanence of God over divine transcendence. And yet, process panentheism differs from pantheism in that it maintains God’s individuality. Mellert explains that God is thought of as “more than the structure and totality of the cosmos and that he is in one sense distinct from it.”¹⁰ On the other hand, process panentheism differs from classical theism in that God is part of the process of change that occurs in all of reality. As Whitehead states, “God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification . . . He is not *before* all creation, but *with* all creation.”¹¹

Process theology’s view of God’s relation to the physical world also exhibits an immanent view of God. In contrast to classical theism, for which God is in no way a physical being (with the qualified exception of Jesus Christ), Charles Hartshorne proposes that God is “both physical and spiritual and the divine body . . . is all-surpassing and all-inclusive

7. Mellert, *Process Theology*, 14.

8. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 27.

9. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 21.

10. Mellert, *Process Theology*, 61.

11. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 521.

of the creaturely bodies, which are to God as cells to a supercellular organism.”¹² Here Hartshorne depicts God as the divine soul of the cosmic body. As a result, some critics of process theism describe this theology as presenting God as “radically immanent.”¹³

Process theology does still present God as transcendent over the world. However, the difference between God and the world is presented as a difference of degree, more so than kind. For example, God is temporal like humans are, but he is transcendent in his temporality in that he is everlasting. Further, Schubert Ogden describes God as “the eminently relative one;” suggesting that God is relational above and beyond any way that any creature could be.¹⁴ David Pailin explains that, overall, according to process theology, “Divine transcendence means that God is unsurpassable by any other. No-one can ever be more loving, more aware, and more appreciative than God.”¹⁵ In addition, Hartshorne speaks of God’s “dual transcendence” meaning that “God contrasts with creatures, not as infinite with finite, but as *infinite-and-finite (both in uniquely excellent ways, beyond all possible rivalry or relevant criticism)* contrasts with the merely fragmentary and only surpassably excellent creatures.”¹⁶

For the purposes at hand, the process doctrine of God is probably best (and perhaps most easily) understood when contrasted with classical theism. Hartshorne’s description of the supposed “theological mistakes” of classical theism provides a helpful summary. These “mistakes” are that God is absolutely immutable, impassible, omnipotent and omniscient.¹⁷

KEY ATTRIBUTES IN PROCESS REVISIONS OF CLASSICAL THEISM

Immutability

While classical theism affirms that God is immutable, process theology explicitly denies this claim. Process theists charge that classical theism’s account of divine immutability rests on the illogical idea of absolute perfection. That is, one of the primary arguments Aquinas makes, and

12. Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 44.

13. Johnson and Huffman, “God of Historic Christianity,” 23.

14. Ogden, *Reality of God*, 64.

15. Pailin, “Panentheism,” 111.

16. Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 44 (original emphasis).

17. *Ibid.*, 2–4.

classical theists following him, is that God cannot change because any change from perfection is necessarily for the worse. Hartshorne argues that this idea of absolute perfection implies the idea of something that has been made complete (this idea itself, Hartshorne argues, is not possible to conceive). However, since God is said to be the maker of all, then this idea of perfection cannot apply to God.¹⁸

Process theologians respond to classical theism by proposing that God is relatively perfect. That is, in relation to all other things, God is the most perfect being and is worshiped as “forever superior to any other being.”¹⁹ This idea of relative perfection allows for the possibility of a positive kind of change for God—that God can grow in ways that are beneficial for God and even for the world. In fact, if God lacked this ability for growth and relativity, God would lack “genuine perfection.”²⁰ For example, Hartshorne argues that God must be able to grow in divine enjoyment. If God were to experience new forms of aesthetic beauty in the world, God’s enjoyment must increase. To lack this ability, Hartshorne argues, would make God defective, for this would then mean that there is a way in which humanity, with their increasing aesthetic sense, would surpass God.²¹

Discussions of divine mutability within process theology most frequently occur in the context of a discussion regarding the two natures of God (hence the other label for this form of theism as “dipolar theism”). One nature describes the absolute existence of God, whereas the other describes God’s relative actuality as in relation to others. Humans too are dipolar, but not absolute in any way.²²

There are two main ways of explaining the divine “natures” among process theists: one following Hartshorne, the other following Whitehead. Hartshorne speaks of God’s abstract essence and God’s concrete actuality, while Whitehead speaks of the primordial and consequent natures of God. God’s abstract nature (Hartshorne) refers to the way in which God has absolute existence and is eternal (in the sense of existing forever), independent, and even unchangeable. John Cobb and David Griffin

18. Ibid., 2, 6. As an analogy, Hartshorne asks “Consider the phrase ‘greatest possible number.’ It, too, can be smoothly uttered, but does it say anything?” (ibid., 7).

19. Ibid., 9.

20. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 178. Cf. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 47.

21. Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 10.

22. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 179.

explain the abstract nature as including “those abstract attributes of deity which characterize the divine existence at every moment,” for example, omniscience.²³ Whitehead’s understanding of the primordial nature differs slightly from Hartshorne’s concept of the abstract nature. Although Whitehead refers to the primordial nature of God as “God in abstraction, *alone with himself*” and that in this nature God is “free, complete, primordial, eternal, actually deficient, and unconscious,” Whitehead does not mean to suggest that this is an aspect of God that exists (or even could exist) apart from creation.²⁴ Rather, “God’s ‘primordial nature’ is abstracted from his commerce with ‘particulars.’”²⁵ The primordial nature of God is the side of God that entertains all ideas and provides the initial aims to all of creation (that is, the divine persuasive influence toward certain goals). One might say that the primordial nature is the ground of the actuality of God. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, who develops her theology on Whitehead’s philosophy, writes, “God’s primordial nature is the vision of all possibilities whatsoever, harmonized in the very process of being known.”²⁶

Turning to the other nature of God, the concepts of the concrete actuality (Hartshorne) and the consequent nature (Whitehead) of God convey the same idea. Hartshorne understands the concrete nature or actuality of God as the sense in which God is temporal, relative, dependent, and constantly changing, as relating with the world.²⁷ Whitehead also expresses God’s experience of the world in the idea of the consequent nature of God. Whitehead writes that the consequent nature “originates with physical experience derived from the temporal world, and then acquires integration with the primordial side. It is determined, incomplete, consequent, ‘everlasting,’ fully actual, and conscious.”²⁸ In his consequent nature, Whitehead would say, God constantly prehends all occasions. That is, God experiences all that happens in the relations of the world as they happen.

To provide some final clarity regarding the distinction between the primordial and the consequent natures, Donald Sherburne explains,

23. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 47; Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 46.

24. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 50, 524 (emphasis added).

25. *Ibid.*, 50.

26. Suchocki, *God-Christ-Church*, 73.

27. Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 46.

28. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 524.

"In his primordial nature God prehends the infinite realm of possibilities; in his consequent nature he prehends the actualities of the world."²⁹ This may be illustrated by considering divine knowledge. In God's abstract nature, God is omniscient, knowing everything knowable at all times. By contrast, in God's concrete actuality, God's "concrete" knowledge depends on decisions that are made by creatures.³⁰

So how does the process articulation of the dipolar nature of God present God as mutable? One finds in it, particularly the consequent nature of God, a picture of a God who relates with the world and is *changed* by the world, as God prehends the changes in the world.

Impassibility

The concept of God's consequent nature also clearly illustrates how process theism differs with classical theism with respect to the issue of divine impassibility. While classical theists reject that God can feel (especially suffer) because these (changing) feelings would introduce changes in God, Whitehead famously spoke of God as "the great companion—the fellow sufferer who understands."³¹ In fact, process theologians argue that God feels *everything*. As Suchocki explains, in God's consequent nature, "Every actuality that comes into existence is felt in its entirety, as it felt itself, by God."³² According to classical theism, God appears to be compassionate from our experience of God, but God does not actually experience a feeling of compassion or sympathy. Cobb and Griffin claim that this classical theistic proposal regarding divine compassion means that the divine love is entirely creative. On account of this, they argue, God must love some creatures more than others, since he does not act in the same manner toward all creatures.³³ Hence, where classical theists have repeatedly rejected that God can feel in any way and perceive the idea of God feeling as a hypothetical weakness for God, process theologians maintain that God loves with divine sympathy for all things and view this as a positive aspect of God's nature.

29. Sherburne, *Whitehead's "Process and Reality,"* 227.

30. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 47.

31. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 532.

32. Suchocki, *God-Christ-Church*, 73.

33. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 45–46.

Omnipotence

If immutability is not the main difference between classical theism and process panentheism, then one certainly finds it in their respective views on divine omnipotence. For Hartshorne, it seems the doctrine of divine omnipotence is the most significant theological mistake of classical theism. It has, in Hartshorne's opinion, presented God in the image of a tyrant.³⁴

As with the process critique of impassibility, part of what is at stake here is an affirmation of God's love. Cobb and Griffin note that psychologists affirm that if someone truly loves another person, they will not control them.³⁵ Hartshorne adds, "Wise parents do not try to determine everything, even for the infant, must [*sic*] less for the half-matured or fully matured offspring."³⁶ This would, of course, be an issue particularly for select classical theists of the Reformed kind. They would respond and say that God does not control people in the sense of forcing people to do things; "It is determined exactly what the creature will do, but determined that he or she will do it freely."³⁷ To this, Hartshorne responds saying that here "freely" means nothing more than "liking it," which would not (in his opinion) be a truly voluntary act.³⁸

Further, still related to the love of God, the issue of theodicy causes process theologians to reject the whole of the classical theistic tradition on divine omnipotence. The problem of evil is based on an apparent contradiction between divine omnipotence (a God who is able to stop all evil) and divine love (a God who would will to stop evil). In an attempt to overcome the problem of evil, process theology denies that God is omnipotent, and therefore, process theologians argue, evil does not contradict God's benevolence.³⁹

For process theology, the processes of the world are part of God's being, indeed, even intrinsic to it. God is not an omnipotent, all-powerful being who stands in opposition to another reality (known as the creation), but rather, God is part of the same reality as the rest of existence.

34. Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 11.

35. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 53.

36. Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 12.

37. *Ibid.*, 12.

38. *Ibid.*, 17.

39. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 53. Compare, Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil*, 251–310.

In fact, Cobb and Griffin emphasize, “God is not another agent alongside creatures. God only acts in them and through them.”⁴⁰ Moreover, God is subject to the metaphysical principles that govern creatures, and the whole world. This suggests that the rest of existence sets limits on God. By contrast, in classical theology, the understanding that God created the world out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) carries with it an implication that God, having created it, has the power to transform and mold the world in any way that is possible. Since process theologians deny the classical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*,⁴¹ it follows that God is not omnipotent; God does not have the ability to mold creation in any way that God wishes, for example, through miracles.⁴²

This does not mean that process theologians deny that God is very powerful. In fact, they readily affirm that God is the most powerful of all beings. It is just that God does not exercise his power in a way that is coercive, controlling, and overpowering, and that God, in fact, is *not even able* to do so. God acts only by divine persuasion through other creatures. God does not control every detail, but he does affect every detail. As persuading, God provides the initial aim for every occasion (each happening in the world), but creatures are always free to reject it; the creature provides the subjective aim for the occasion. Based upon this process understanding of divine power, Suchocki concludes that “what is actually seen as we observe the world is not the initial aim of God, but what has been done with that aim in the world’s own dealings with it.”⁴³ From this perspective Mellert (certainly with overemphasis) says that God “is powerless before the freedom of each individual moment.”⁴⁴ In process theology divine creative activity *must* be responsive to the world. Such expressions of divine power stand in stark contrast to classical theism and especially forms of classical theism that present God’s unilateral power as the cause of all things.

40. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 157.

41. Ogden, *Reality of God*, 62–63, 213–14; Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 65.

42. With respect to miracles, Cobb does believe that God can speed up the healing process, but he suggests that God is attempting to (by persuasion) heal every person. In his own words, “God does not choose to heal one and leave another to suffer” (Cobb, *Process Perspective*, 17).

43. Suchocki, *God-Christ-Church*, 50. Similarly, Hartshorne writes, “The only livable doctrine of divine power is that it influences all that happens but determines nothing in its concrete particularity” (Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 25).

44. Mellert, *Process Theology*, 47.

Eternity and Omniscience

While the above attributes are most pertinent for the argument of this book, one can further understand process theology in its critique of classical theism with respect to what it means for God to be omniscient and eternal. In contrast to classical theism, where God is eternal in the sense of being outside of time or timeless, according to process theism, God is everlasting, or, one might say, temporal. As was seen above, according to process theology, God is subject to the same metaphysical principles as the rest of creation, including the passing of time. However, as with the rest of the attributes of God, Hartshorne comments, "God is similarly both eternal and temporal in all-surpassing way; God alone has an *eternal individuality*, meaning unborn and undying, and God alone has enjoyed the entire past and will enjoy all the future."⁴⁵ This affirmation of divine temporality allows process panentheists to affirm that God is mutable. That is, in order for God to experience change, God must be able to move (temporally) from one state to another state. This understanding of divine everlastingness and divine mutability also affects how process theologians understand divine omniscience.

Certainly, for classical theism, if God cannot change, then God's knowledge cannot change either. By contrast, along with process theology's affirmation that God is mutable, God's knowledge changes as well. Suchocki realizes that the doctrine of omniscience provides security and comfort in the face of the "ambiguity and terror of time."⁴⁶ She responds to this human anxiety of not knowing the future by emphasizing divine wisdom to respond to any future situation. This is her answer to the "terror of time," rather than divine knowledge of the future, which she believes is essentially a denial of time. Nevertheless, process theologians do affirm that God is omniscient; God does still know all that *can* be known.⁴⁷ God knows all of the past and present, but God knows the future as it is (from our perspective), namely, as possibilities and as partially indefinite. Hence, in contrast to classical theism, according to process theologians, God's knowledge grows.

45. Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 44 (original emphasis).

46. Suchocki, *God-Christ-Church*, 70.

47. Hartshorne denies God is omnipotent, but says that "the word 'omniscient' seems somewhat less badly tarnished by its historical usage than 'omnipotent'" (Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 26).