

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 6

1-1-1984

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Recommended Citation

Holmes, Arthur F. (1984) "Whitehead and Ethical Monotheism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol1/iss1/6>

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WHITEHEAD AND ETHICAL MONOTHEISM

Arthur F. Holmes

The perennial tension between science and religion finds one of its more far-reaching manifestations in the influence of Whitehead on contemporary process theology. The earlier mechanistic model of Renaissance science had raised crucial questions about the nature of God, of the human person, and of morality, which kept philosophers busily employed from Descartes to Kant. Whitehead develops what seems to me a devastating critique of that mechanistic scheme, involving the fallacy of simple location and the primacy of presentational immediacy. Yet his own organismic alternative, modelled on energetic and relativity physics and on developmental biology, raises just as serious issues on the very same topics: God, the human person and morality.

These issues, I suggest, come to focus in his explicit rejection of ethical monotheism. In this paper I shall outline how that rejection arises from his treatment of these three topics and then raise the same questions about three possible modifications of Whitehead's metaphysic and their theological consequences. I say "raise" questions, for I am rather proposing a hypothesis than establishing a conclusion; and I invite rejoinders.

That process theology offers a number of attractions I readily admit. It sees the God-creation relationship as a historical process, rather than just a series of isolated acts. It sees it teleologically, rather than in the mechanistic causal terms of the Cartesian tradition. It recognizes that everything in this world is subject to change, and that God too (unlike Aristotle's Unmoved Mover) is not altogether timeless but actually experiences change. It undercuts any fact-value dichotomy by making value an inherent factor in the world-process, and of course it takes seriously the philosophical importance of recent biological and physical science. All this I count as its virtues. But I come neither to praise Caesar nor to bury him. I am rather asking whether these virtues can be preserved without Whitehead's rejection of ethical monotheism.

I

What then are Whitehead's basic difficulties with ethical monotheism? Is there something in his metaphysical scheme that is inimical to the creedal tradition in Christian theology?



1. *Whitehead's value theory* is remarkably like Romanticism. In fact his daughter commented that, during her father's years as a mathematician, he poured over Wordsworth's poetry "as if it were the Bible," no doubt because of its underlying themes of creativity and the aesthetic values in nature.¹ Whitehead himself draws these themes from the Romanticists in *Science and the Modern World*. He has what I shall call "an aesthetic theory of value," in which both truth and goodness are understood as aspects of beauty. Value involves intensity of feelings, plus harmony. Evil therefore is its twofold antithesis: in opposition to intensity, triviality; in opposition to harmony, discord. But evil is necessary to the good, to both its harmony and its resultant intensity of feeling. Evil serves the good, as discord serves aesthetic value.²

Moreover evil, he tells us, has a metaphysical and not a moral cause. It is due to the natural process of events, not to any responsible agent. Distinguishing God from his ultimate principle of creativity, he makes natural creativity, not God, the efficient cause of things. God gives to an emergent event its initial subjective aim, but the actual aim is due to its own creativity in working with the data of previous events that flow in one cosmic epoch after another. All evil is thus reduced to natural evil, and is due to the everlasting and uncreated natural process.

Whitehead noticeably does not deal with normative ethics. Conceptions like right and wrong and moral law have no place in his thinking. The "good" does find a place in terms a little reminiscent (not surprisingly in the light of their long association) of G. E. Moore's ideal utilitarianism, and perhaps of Bradley's "My Station and Its Duties" within the harmonious unity of a social community. At times he reminds me of Plato's unifying form of the good, an aesthetic ideal to be sure. But apart from the satisfaction inherent in an experience and its contribution to future events, no further value judgments can be made. No deontological element appears. The experience of intensity and harmony is what counts.

2. The reason for this lack seems to be that Whitehead's metaphysics allows no categorical distinction between event and action, or between natural causes and responsible agents. *His God is not an efficient cause* of this world, nor of events within it, but a final cause whose power is persuasive only, and not coercive. The primordial nature of God is a *conceptual* state of affairs, consisting of eternal objects (or logical possibilities), like the Platonic world of ideals. Possibilities are not efficient causes: they lure us with a calling that is non-efficacious and is resistible. God, then, can do no more, and can be no more effective, than a "lure for feeling." Plato's problem of participation has returned. How do temporal events participate in the eternal? Not by divine creation to be sure, not by divine fiat.

Moreover, Whitehead speaks of the primordial nature of God as arising not out of some actual world, nor therefore out of what God is in his essence (for God too is an actual entity with no fixed essence), but out of "the decision of God's nature." What he means is obscure. Plainly he does not mean that God, in accordance with

his own essential nature, decided what ideals to adopt, for his God has no eternal and essential nature. I take him rather to mean that primordial conceptual possibilities are “decisive” in *creating* God’s nature. In other words his subjective aim is a “decision” about eternal possibilities in the same sense of “decision” that he uses of other entities. David Griffin goes further: he refers it back to everlasting and necessary principles inherent in the general character of all creativity and all metaphysical advance.³ *God’s ends, his subjective aims, are then limited by the possibilities in preexistent being and becoming, not determined by God’s free agency.* God himself, then, is a grand instance of cosmic creativity rather than himself “maker of heaven and earth.”

The notion of responsible agency as distinct from natural event does not appear in Whitehead’s account either of God or of the human self. Three factors shape events, be they divine, human or whatever: other events; eternal objects (those possibilities with which God lures us); and the inner creativity of the emerging event itself. This latter is an imaginative freedom that shapes the actual subjective aim. (Notice again the Romanticist vein.) We see it in the primordial nature of God, selected from all possible arrangements of eternal possibilities, and we see it in the human self, and of course every other kind of thing. It is a creative response to the other two factors, and it determines how the occasion will achieve a unifying aesthetic satisfaction of its own. The “decision” involved is only free in the sense that it is ultimately settled not by external factors, whether temporal or eternal, but by the internal emotion of a novel response. *It is a surge of inner feeling injecting a tertium quid into the emergence of an event .*

Whitehead is a gradualist; so the same scheme applies universally, differing only by degree of consciousness and feeling. Freedom at its peak is still a spontaneity undetermined by external factors, whether efficient or final causes. The kind of agency which wisely and *deliberately chooses* , that *initiates* something, and that has the power of contrary choice, this kind of agency is absent. Moral responsibility for one’s self-creating decisions seems not to arise.

We can see now why ethical monotheism is unacceptable. If I am right in this argument, then moral right and wrong in any objective sense have no place in Whitehead’s scheme, nor does moral responsibility for one’s choices and actions, nor therefore sin and guilt. Man is not a moral agent, and neither is God. Not only *creatio ex nihilo* as a free act of God is excluded, but so too are other Divine acts, like incarnation, revelation, redemption, and a final judgment. Whitehead’s God resembles the Greek logos rather than the Johannine logos of creation and grace. And his theology never moves materially beyond its roots in the immanentistic theology of the nineteenth century.

II

In Judaeo-Christian terms, then, is Whiteheadian philosophy a theological *cul de sac*, or can we build a way out? Three logical routes arise, reminiscent of the routes explored in response to mechanistic philosophy, respectively by Spinoza, Berkeley, and Descartes.

The Spinozan route avoids Whitehead's quasi-Platonic dualism of God and creativity, by *making God himself the creative energy* as well as the ordering logos of the cosmos. The result is some kind of pantheism or panentheism. But can it reintroduce responsible agency, or avoid the aesthetic theory of value? The history of monistic schemes from Plotinus through Spinoza and on into Romanticism suggests not.

The Berkeleian route avoids both Whitehead's own impasse and the Spinozan escape route, by *converting creativity* from a natural organic experience *into a personal activity*. The result is the kind of personal idealism we meet in Brightman and Bertocci, which reintroduces responsible agency and distinctively moral values, and so abandons a totally process metaphysic. But like idealism generally it poses difficulties over the problem of evil. For Whitehead everything is organic experience, and God's experience is all embracing. While he is the cosmic lure for feeling, the good ends his primordial nature envisions are frustrated by adverse outbursts of natural creativity, for world after world without end. But a similar kind of finiteness can plague the personalist's God. If all is personal activity, all evil is due either to personal activity or to factors given in the underlying nature of persons. Natural evil, then, has no other locus than in persons, no other source than the activity of agents or some "given" within the person that is resistant to good. Brightman explicitly called this factor "the given," locating it within God himself; that personalist God, like Whitehead's, is limited in his power over evil. His grace is not sovereign now, nor is the hope guaranteed that it will be in the end.

This leads to a third escape route, *the Cartesian*. The universalization of mechanistic causal explanations, by Thomas Hobbes for example, created problems from a Christian point of view regarding God, human persons, and morality. Descartes therefore made *exceptions to the mechanistic rule*, most noticeably in the case of reason and the will. I do not think he went far enough, nor am I proposing that we adopt his mind-body solution intact. Rather I want to consider what happens when we make exceptions to Whitehead's universalization of his organic rule.

Why, after all, must all kinds of being be treated univocally with respect to metaphysical categories? If all being can be shown otherwise to be an interrelated and cohesive whole, why is either quantitative or qualitative monism required? Whitehead, I suggest, absorbed the monistic demand from his idealist friends and mentors like F. H. Bradley—and Wordsworth! He rejected the quantitative and

idealistic side of it under the influence of modern science (and perhaps colleagues like Russell and Moore). But he retained qualitative monism and that, I suggest is the problem.

Let us then allow the categorial distinctiveness of personal agency as the exception within an otherwise process scheme, and see where it leads. First, it means that *human* experience, physiologically and psychologically considered, might well be understood in process terms, but that other dimensions of personality require additional forms of explanation of a more personalistic sort: in other words, some kind of mind-body dualism. Second, it means that *God* as a non-physical being is susceptible to process accounts only by very loose analogies, rather than in univocal terms. Agent categories, developed in regard to human agents, are more directly applicable to God. Third, with the entrance of agency, the *ethical* too reenters.

This sounds all very fine perhaps and almost Biblical, even if it is overly sketchy; but one major and complex problem persists. What about Whitehead's category of creativity, its separateness from God, and his consequent romanticism? If we maintain the separation, can God be God? Christian theism plainly wants no uncreated creativity other than God himself. Perhaps creativity is not another actuality at all but a sort of super-eternal-object which particular creative moments exemplify. But then whence the actual creative energy they exert? God is still not the creator-cause. If we say instead that natural processes are *divinely* created with a capacity to generate novelty, Whitehead's scheme again is changed, for then creativity is no longer the category of the ultimate. And how then do we explain the primordial nature of God. If it is not accounted for by the category of creativity, then we have another exception to the process rule.⁴

The relation of process theology to ethical monotheism, then, depends on three key issues:

- (1) Can an aesthetic theory of value be reconstructed to account for the ultimate incompatibility of good and evil, and to provide an adequate basis for the deontological element in normative ethics?
- (2) Can the concept of an event be developed so as to allow for deliberate (rather than random) freedom and for responsible agency?
- (3) Can the dilemma over the God-creativity dualism be avoided? If we separate God from ultimate creativity, then God is not sovereignly God, not the Judaeo-Christian God. But if we combine them, then God is not "with us" in the creative process, is not the Whiteheadian God.

My hypothesis therefore is that unless these 3 issues can be settled positively, process theology cannot make peace with ethical monotheism and cannot be "creedally" Christian.

NOTES

1. Mary Wyman, *The Lure for Feeling* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960) pp. 129-31.
2. *Adventures of Ideas*, part IV; *Process and Reality*, part V.
3. David Griffin, *God, Power and Evil* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), part III.
4. Robert Neville presses this line of thought against Lewis Ford, in *Creativity and God* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), pp. 138-40.