

**Process Thought for Freethinkers and Other Naturalists
(With an Optional Theological Afterward)**

Charles W. Allen

In this talk I want to go out on a limb and try presenting the basics of process thought in a way that would appeal to freethinkers and other naturalists. Among other things I'm going to argue that, if you are a naturalist and not a theist, process thought gives you some of the best possible reasons for remaining one. Ironically, I'm arguing this as a priest and a theologian, which is why most people would see this as going out on a limb. But I think this is worth trying, and I'll say more about that later.

Process thought makes some very sweeping claims. It's too general to be called a scientific theory, though it's based on experience and open to critique in light of experience. But it's more of a general worldview—like materialism or physicalism. It can be called a form of metaphysics or ontology or cosmology. Or it can be considered just a way of thinking—about literally everything.

I'm going to try to give you a nuts and bolts introduction, try to spell out some of its implications for how we look at nature, and then explain more about why I think the world would be a better place if there were more process naturalists in it. You can tell me afterwards if you think I've taken leave of my faculties.

I accept the two basic principles I'll introduce in a moment, as far as they go, but the best known process thinkers usually go way beyond those principles and introduce ideas that get increasingly debatable the further you go with them. They think they're introducing more precision. I think they're usually mistaken about that. I think they wind up obscuring the simplicity, ingenuity and fruitfulness of their core ideas. They give people more excuses not to consider the way process thought can reframe all sorts of debates that we've inherited. So I'm going to stick to the core ideas. And I'm going to suggest that anything a process thinker says that goes beyond those ideas be considered an optional development.

Process Thought in a Nutshell:

Process thought is a broad, mostly American philosophy of nature which views the everyday world as, fundamentally, comprised of active processes (I'll just call them activities), as opposed to inert substances. You can find versions of it in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead and, most notably, Charles Hartshorne and Alfred North Whitehead (a British "transplant"). Even Bertrand Russell found some of its basic ideas cogent. Whitehead became the most influential figure in this movement, but he introduced all sorts of intricacies and peculiar terms that make process thought seem forbiddingly complicated. I think it's better to look at process thought as a broader worldview that can be quickly stated in two basic principles:

1. All things are activities or properties of activities.
2. All activities are interactive—relatively interrelated, yet relatively original.

That's it. Those two principles are, I believe, all you need to understand process thought. If you get confused—or skeptical!—reading this or that process thinker, fall back on these two principles—they're the core ideas. Different thinkers draw different conclusions from them, but unless you plan to become an authority on the subject yourself, I think it's wiser to stick to the basics.

People familiar with process thought are often amused when some current thinkers come along and claim to have “discovered” some of its fundamental insights. Process thinkers seem to be at home with just about any theoretical developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There's nothing in quantum mechanics, string theory, meme theory, semiotics or artificial intelligence that would surprise a process thinker. They tend to say, “We've already made room for that. What's the big deal?”

The best current philosophical discussion I've seen on process thought is Nicholas Rescher's *Process Metaphysics* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996). Rescher doesn't get stuck on any particular thinker, and he discusses it in terms of current philosophical issues. He also has a brief online entry on process philosophy in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-philosophy/>.

How This Applies to Nature

I think this is the best account of the natural world that I've ever found. It establishes a basic connection between living things and nonliving things, between thoughts and physical processes. You don't have to be so puzzled about how life can emerge from dead matter, because both living and nonliving things have a common source. You don't have to be so puzzled about how thoughts could be related to physical processes, because they're both processes, not totally opposed kinds of “stuff.” So if computers ever pass the Turing test and start sharing their hopes and dreams with you, you'd better start treating them with more consideration. I don't know for sure that this will happen, but process thought makes it easier to imagine it happening, at least some day. Process thought doesn't answer every question, and it raises questions of its own, but so does any other account of nature that tries to make room for things like us.

And it's based on experience—we all experience activities. We experience them as directly as we could experience anything (though I don't think any experience is completely direct). We see others act, and we experience our own activity. When we act, we respond to the influence of other things, and our response introduces something at least somewhat original into the whole mix. It's not just a passive reflection of everything else—it's active. This is so much a part of our experience that we may not notice, but if you pay attention you can see what I'm saying.

Right now you're reading this; you're responding to the influence of what I've written; you're not just passively reflecting my words, you're either agreeing or disagreeing or wondering whether to do either; but however you're responding, it's an active response; even if you agree, you're responding actively, making an original contribution to this process that only you can make. Your response makes you different, and you make a difference to others. That's how it is with all our experiences. Process thought runs with the hunch that maybe what we experience here—an active response—is not some fluke in the natural order, some “ghost in the machine,” but a key component in everything that happens anywhere.

True, when we generalize and say that *all* things are activities or properties of activities, we're definitely extrapolating beyond what we more or less directly experience. But if somebody else says that all things are matter (or that all things are mind), they're extrapolating beyond what we directly experience too. So I don't think you can say that process thought is any less empirical than materialism or idealism. All three extrapolate, in ways that cannot be directly tested, from different aspects of our everyday experience. But to me the process approach seems the most livable.

Process Naturalism?

It's no secret that process thought has appealed to many liberal or progressive religious people. So if you're a freethinker, committed to naturalism and secularism, you're obviously entitled to be suspicious.

But I think the two principles of process thought are open to a variety of interpretations—religious, secular, theistic (of a *very* peculiar sort!), naturalist, etc. In fact I would suggest that part of the appeal of process thought is the extent to which it reframes the very terms on which we debate such fundamental issues. It helps explain, I think, why people often divide into opposed camps by focusing on one aspect of our common experience at the expense of other aspects. It seems to provide new ways to get past certain stalemates, while at the same time allowing different camps to preserve a great deal of continuity with their original positions.

For example, process thought is not necessarily opposed to materialism or physicalism. It all depends on how you want to define “matter.” If you think matter is a bunch of inert microscopic billiard balls bumping into or sticking to one another, then you'll have a problem with process thought. But what physicist thinks of matter that way anymore? In fact, as naturalist Stephen E. Toulmin documents, the word “matter” has about as varied and debatable a history as words like “mind” or “God.” And nowadays, he observes, “the physicist's fundamental units are no longer bricks: they are now dynamic units, defined by characteristic patterns of energy and activity” (Stephen E. Toulmin and June Goodfield, *The Architecture of Matter* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962], p. 375). So even if with process thought you regard activities as fundamental, that doesn't

mean you can't call them *material* or *physical* activities. Other process thinkers might disagree. Some prominent representatives insist on following William James and calling activities "experiences," which is bound to sound a bit spooky to most naturalists today (I've always cringed at that usage myself). Some prefer to call them "events" or "actual occasions." Others call their position a form of "neutral monism," a view endorsed by Bertrand Russell (for more about this, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neutral-monism/>). Everybody seems to agree that, whatever we call the basic "stuff" of reality, it's fundamentally active, and that's why I use the word "activities." Where you come down on this has mostly to do with finding the most appropriate terminology that preserves this common thread, and words like "material" and "physical" have a broad enough history that there's nothing to prevent you from using them.

Process thought is opposed to some types of reductionism, but not all. Daniel Dennett draws a useful distinction between "good" reductionism and "greedy" reductionism (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995], pp. 81-82). I'm not sure Dennett always observes the distinction himself, but at least he recognizes it. Greedy reductionism is the attitude that something complex is "nothing but" its constituent parts. It confuses analyzing with replacing. Good reductionism seeks to understand complex things by analyzing them into simpler parts or processes, without invoking some outside agency (what Dennett calls a "skyhook") that has to intervene. This is actually what process thought does itself by analyzing everything into activities and their properties. So process thought has no objection to good reductionism, although it insists that analyzing things, though necessary, is never the whole story when it comes to making full sense of them. Process thinkers do often describe themselves as holists, but they can't invoke that term, as some holists do, to reject good reductionism. Again, I see this as an example of reframing the whole debate between holists and reductionists. There's good (analytic) reductionism and good (informed) holism, and these are not to be confused with greedy reductionism or (let's call it) "fluffy" holism.

Process thought tends to oppose mechanistic accounts of natural selection, because they leave no room for any degree of originality. (If they do make room for it, they're not mechanistic any more.) But on the other hand it expects the appearance and survival of any new trait to follow the unpredictable pattern that natural selection outlines: in a limited network of activities, novelties (i.e., mutations) appear unpredictably; but the only novelties that survive will be those that cohere best with the network's ongoing activities, and this cohering is likewise unpredictable—in part because the appearance of novelties has already changed the network and made it even less predictable than before! So there is astonishing order and complexity in the universe, but even the most intelligent "watchmaker" imaginable could not have predicted, much less designed, the particular order and complexity we actually have. Any watchmakers, at any level, would remain "blind" on that subject. To an extent, then, process thinkers agree with Dennett and with Richard Dawkins (who, you probably know, wrote *The Blind Watchmaker*), though they would insist that nothing, at any level, is quite as blind or automatic ("algorithmic") as

Dennett and Dawkins seem to presume. And there is no *single* watchmaker—not nature, not God (if there is one).

Obviously, process thought rejects extreme versions of determinism. People can mean different things by “determinism” of course, but in this instance I mean the idea that an activity could be determined by other things in ways that would exclude any sort of originality. That’s the version of determinism that process thought rejects. Some things may be exclusively determined by other things, but if that’s the case, those things are not activities. They’re dependent things. But even with activities determinism is still a hugely important factor. No matter how original an activity may be, it will also exemplify practically countless predictable and general properties. In fact, without predictable and general properties, we couldn’t even talk about its being original! The only originality we could notice and talk about is a *relative* originality. If you stop and pay attention to what’s happening right now, it seems clear that there is something unrepeatable (and thus original) happening, but (maybe paradoxically) you couldn’t even notice that if it were totally unrepeatable. So determinism is a huge factor here. On the other hand, the only time you notice how determined things are, you’re doing that in an original context that will never be repeated again in every respect. And you are responding in a way that affects you and others. So in that sense determinism can’t be the whole story, even though you can’t escape from it.

But it’s also crucial to note here that process thought does not make the mistake of equating freedom with indeterminism or unpredictability. It seems clear that if my fingers started moving unpredictably over the computer keys, I would not be acting freely or responsibly. Process thought would insist that my typing this right now, and your reading it later, involves determinism in some aspects and originality in still other aspects. It’s the aspect of originality that’s most crucial in calling my typing and your reading “free” or “responsible.” And if you leave any one of these aspects out of reckoning, you’re simply abstracting from what is happening concretely. Abstractions always apply, and in that respect determinism is true. But they never apply in exactly the same way to what is happening concretely, and in that respect determinism can’t be the whole story. It’s a necessary part, but not a sufficient one. So the process view on determinism is similar to its view on reductionism: there are good (analytic and non-greedy) accounts of determinism, and good (informed and non-fluffy) accounts of freedom, and we need both to tell a balanced story of what’s happening concretely.

Perhaps most importantly for most freethinkers and naturalists, it’s entirely possible to accept process thought as an account of nature and remain wholly uninterested in whether or not there is a God. In fact, process thought actually undercuts many of the popular reasons for believing in God. After all, if nature is already chock-full of different degrees of originality, there’s no need to invoke an “outside” creator or designer to explain any of the complexity we find in nature. Many theists make two fundamental mistakes: a) they equate naturalism with greedy reductionism, and b) they assume that theism is the only alternative to greedy reductionism. But I’ve already suggested that a naturalist can be

both a good reductionist and a good, non-fluffy holist, in which case these theists are mistaken on both counts. So some process thinkers, like John Dewey, think nature is already lively enough to give us all we need, once we grow up and stop longing for magical solutions to our problems. He makes a strong case, and what makes it an especially strong case is that, as I suggested of process thought in general, Dewey succeeds, I believe, in reframing the very terms on which people might debate the differences between, say, naturalism and theism.

Why Would a Theist Commend Process Naturalism?

And that brings me to the reason for giving this talk. I consider myself a theist—a peculiar sort of Christian theist, but one of a growing number of theists who have learned from process thought. So why do I want to encourage the development of process naturalism? Is this some dishonest attempt to move you closer to theism, so I can more easily push you over the edge? If that question hasn't occurred to you yet, it ought to.

My short answer is, no, regardless of what I might *like* to see happen, I don't *need* for you to become a theist. I'm actually pretty confident that the majority of freethinkers I talk with will remain naturalists. And that's not a problem. I don't think any God worthy of the name would penalize you for that. Justin Martyr, one of the earliest church "fathers," considered even reputed atheists to be fellow Christians because he thought they lived by the same "Logos" ("Reason") that Jesus embodied. That's good enough for me, though I won't try to make you a Christian by definition—that's cheating.

But more importantly, I think my own theistic interpretation of process thought will benefit from listening to naturalistic interpretations. For that to happen I need to have conversation partners who know how to talk the language of process naturalism. So if any of you decide to try that you'll be doing me a favor.

As I've pointed out, I believe process thought reframes the terms in which naturalists and theists might understand themselves and each other. For me, it makes naturalism harder to dismiss. I know what to do with greedy reductionists. It's easy to catch them looking silly. I don't feel obliged to listen to them for very long. But I don't quite know what to do with John Dewey, or, to come closer to home, with one of my own favorite mentors, Stephen Toulmin, who is also an admirer of Dewey.

Both Dewey and Toulmin are thoroughgoing naturalists. Both recognize that our value-charged participation in our present situation is as much a part of experience as our observation of certain factual components. They don't think we're just wishfully projecting when we speak of beauty and goodness, because they recognize that a universe comprised of activities is an *engaged and engaging* universe, not a neutral collection of bare "facts." Religious people might find this encouraging, but the point here is that naturalists like Dewey and Toulmin are saying that we don't need any further grounding for truth, beauty and goodness beyond our own experience of nature. It might be OK to

use the word “God” to identify certain features of our experience, but we really don’t need that word. Our experience of nature is rich enough, all on its own.

I think they make a powerful case. Obviously, I think there’s still a case to be made for why the word “God” might play a more vital and integral role in process thought than Dewey or Toulmin think it could play. But I’m not going to talk about that now. For now my point is that, even when I’ve done my best to make that case, or watched while somebody else tried to make it, I don’t expect naturalists like Dewey or Toulmin to be overly impressed. I expect them to say that it’s a subject worth talking about further, when they have time, but I don’t think they’ll feel much need to shift their thinking. There was a time when I would have found that response exasperating, but now I find it to be delightfully provocative.

The point is, if you accept the two principles of process thought, you’ll find that the meanings of terms like “matter,” “mind,” “body,” “spirit,” “nature” and “God” are all beginning to shift. They haven’t lost all continuity with their popular meanings, but they’re definitely shifting. And there’s definitely room for conversation about when it’s OK to use them, and even about whether some of them have been rendered obsolete. It’s not so much a matter of looking for new evidence as it is a matter of looking at our everyday experience from different angles, and deciding how best to speak of it in a way that pays attention to all its complexity.

This really complicates things! It opens the door to conversations that I don’t think will end any time soon. For me it gets even more complicated because I’ve already been involved in conversations on process thought that included, not just theists and naturalists, but Buddhists, Taoists and even the occasional Neopagan. And because everybody’s terms are shifting, I find it instructive to listen to all these different voices. I can’t afford to dismiss them out of hand, even the ones that strike me as a bit silly. None of us are settling for some lazy, mushy relativism—quite the reverse. We’re already presuming, for the sake of conversation, that the two principles of process thought are universally true, though not beyond question. We’re just aware of the need to keep listening as we explore how perennial questions get reframed by those principles.

So again, I think process thought can be a powerful aid to freethinkers and naturalists. It allows you to embrace a form of naturalism that will confound many of your supernaturalist critics even more than you can do with familiar types of naturalism. It allows you to do an end run around most of their arguments and leave them in the dust. You might even provoke some of them to consider healthier patterns of thinking themselves, though I wouldn’t hold my breath. And of course it helps you understand why somebody like me likes to hang around folks like you.

Now, I don’t *need* you to be a process thinker, any more than I need you to be a theist. Process thought isn’t the only game in town, and like theism, it too needs conversation partners who look at things in different terms. (As I mentioned earlier, I’ve questioned a

number of important tenets that most “orthodox” process thinkers accept, so I’m already a bit of a dissenter.) But you would still be doing me a tremendous favor if you at least tried playing with process categories. You’d be forcing me to remain honest about whatever reasons I think I’ve cooked up for being a process theist. And you’d be doing freethinkers a favor too. You’d be helping them come up with new reasons to say “Thanks, but no thanks” to Christians bearing tracts. So give it some thought—some freethought. That’s the most I can ask.

Optional Afterward: Why, Then, Am I a Theist Instead of a Naturalist?

As some kind of theist, I do think the word “God” can play a more vital and integral role in process thought than John Dewey thought it could. But remember, the meanings of terms like “nature” and “God” start to shift when you think in process categories. To the question, “Is God more than nature or a part of nature,” the process thinker might exasperatingly answer, “Yes.”

In process terms, the simplest definition for something like God would be: the ultimate, all-interactive activity, i.e., the activity in direct interaction with all other activities. If you take “nature” to mean “all other activities besides God,” then God is more than nature. If you take “nature” to mean “all activities, period,” then God is a part of nature. Either way, God is not an exception to the two principles of process thought. Whitehead was fond of saying that, as he used the term, God is not the exception to the principles, but their chief exemplification. (Traditional theists find that a very troublesome statement, and not without reason, but we won’t go off on that tangent right now.)

It seems to me that there are two questions that the process naturalist would immediately want to ask here: 1) How would we know whether or not there is, in fact, an ultimate, all-interactive activity? 2) If there is such an activity, is it God-like enough to be called God? I think process naturalists and process theists will answer both questions differently, and I do not think either will be able to show demonstratively that the other is less reasonable, or less experience-based, though they may be convinced of that to their own satisfaction. But they can still learn from conversing with one another.

I’m not sure which question to tackle first, but I’ll start with the first one. How would we know whether or not there is, in fact, an ultimate, all-interactive activity? It strikes me that this is both an empirical (experience-based) question and a conceptual question. It’s about paying attention to all that we seem to experience, and it’s about coming up with concepts and categories that do the most justice to all that we seem to experience. (I say “seem to” because, again, I’m not naïve enough to think that there’s such a thing as a pure, uninterpreted experience—not one anybody can talk about anyway.) Any “theory of everything” is going to have this empirical/conceptual mix, whether it’s materialism, physicalism, determinism, idealism, naturalism, theism or process thought. Experiments

don't work here, not when the theory is set up to be consistent with every predictable outcome. You'll always be moving in a circle—experiencing what your concepts set you up to experience, and conceptualizing what your set-up experiences suggest. It doesn't have to be a vicious circle, but it's definitely a sort of circle.

That's why some philosophers in the last 100 years have suggested that we should not try to have any "theories of everything," not if we really mean "everything." I don't buy that, and most naturalists don't buy it either. In practice we're always going to presuppose some fundamental outlook, whether we try to make a more consistent theory out of it or not. Because it's fundamental, it's not going to be like most other theories or most other outlooks—it's too general to test, and we're too invested in it (we're living by it) to know if we're being objective enough about it. But we can't afford *not* to talk about such things, since they shape how we live and, more importantly, how we treat others.

Process theists claim that the concept of an ultimate, all-interactive activity (conceived in terms of process thought), makes better sense of all that we seem to experience than any worldview (process or otherwise) that lacks such a concept. It represents the ultimate integration of process thought's principles. It provides a concrete, open-ended setting in which all activities occur (including its own activity). It helps make charitable sense of the variety of ways in which people in different times and places have found themselves responding to a presumed reality they could neither escape nor control. It integrates our unquenchable need for analysis and observation (good reductionism) with our equally unquenchable need for wholeness and participation (good holism) better than any other approach, even better than process naturalism.

Claims like that obviously can't be assessed either way overnight. It takes time; it takes encountering all sorts of different situations and asking yourself if the concept helps or hinders your understanding of that situation. I've been testing that claim in that way for years now, and I'm persuaded that it helps more than hinders. It coheres with everything that I've experienced and learned about in the past thirty years, but more importantly, it helps me integrate all the diversity and complexity I've encountered in every new experience. Nothing seems to have presented a serious challenge. Much seems to make sense in ways I could not have predicted.

But that's me, and of course I'm invested in that outlook. On the other hand, I don't think I'm any more invested than John Dewey was invested in his version of naturalism or than Richard Dawkins is invested in meme theory. I can afford to be mistaken. In process terms, I won't be left alone in a meaningless universe if I'm persuaded that there's no longer any need for God-talk. I'm not invested in the concept in a way that makes me unwilling to listen to people who reject it, especially if they can tell me what they're rejecting (an ultimate, all-interactive activity). It actually encourages me to keep listening to people who see things differently. And of course I see my willingness to do that as a further confirmation that this is a concept worth keeping, since process theism has played as vital a role as anything else in helping me to lighten up about ultimate issues. I would

expect John Dewey and Richard Dawkins to make similar claims for their own outlooks—to them they seem to make better sense than the alternatives of a whole variety of experiences over time. That’s why I can’t afford to dismiss them and why I’m convinced that they can’t afford to dismiss people like me.

One further point: while most process naturalists tend to be uninterested in whether there is an ultimate, all-interactive activity, even if some of them embraced the idea they could still argue that they are thoroughgoing naturalists. Acknowledging such an activity may heighten our sense of participation in nature. It may even help account for the persistence of impulses we usually call religious. But now that we’ve found a more sensible way to identify it, why wouldn’t it be better to keep calling it nature, or an aspect of nature? Wouldn’t that be less misleading than introducing any sort of “God” talk?

Good question. In fact, it’s another way of asking our second question: If there is such an activity, is it God-like enough to be called God? I think so. So do other process theists. But answering this question is just as complicated as answering the first.

Here’s an additional complication: process thought works very easily with religions that have something besides God as their ultimate reality, say, the Tao of Taoism or the Buddhist concept of *Sunyata* (which is best translated as “boundless openness”) or “Heaven” in Confucianism or Brahman in more devotional strands of Hinduism. It’s an astonishingly hospitable worldview, which will definitely disappoint those who are out to prove that their version of God is the only workable answer to our biggest questions.

What, then, is the point of calling this ultimate, all-interactive activity God? For me and for many theists, the word “God” has always seemed pointless unless it pointed to a reality that is in some way or other *responsive* to me. I tend to agree with Dawkins that Spinoza’s and Einstein’s pantheistic God doesn’t sound like anything I would bother to call by that name. Nothing I or you do makes any difference to that God. For them, “God” is simply what we call an unresponsive nature when we feel awestruck by it. Being awestruck by nature is a commendable attitude, but I would simply call it “Nature.” I would use the word “God” only if I could conceive of there being some sort of two-way interaction between me and ultimate reality.

But that’s exactly what process thought offers: an ultimate, all-interactive activity does interact with me, and not just with me but with all the activities, at every level, that combine to make me who I am. I make a real difference to that activity, and that activity makes a real difference to me, all the time. It somehow matters in the grand scheme of things that I exist. It matters that you exist. It matters that worms and amoebas and electrons and many-dimensional strings exist. We all matter; we all make a real difference to the ultimately real and to one another. IF there is an ultimate, all-interactive activity, all of that follows. Process theists call this, not pantheism, but **panentheism**—all things indwell God, and God indwells all things, but God is not simply identical with all things, as a pantheist would say.

An ultimate, all-interactive activity is not, of course, “a” person. But I have no trouble thinking of “it” as personal. There’s a difference, in other words, between being “a” person and being personal. Actually, the creed my church recites every Sunday implies that God is *interpersonal*, which I think is an even better way to think of the ultimate, all-interactive activity. (More about that in a moment.)

Of course, this is a kind of anthropomorphism, but so what? How is it any worse than saying that my cat is “happy” when I return home? When her tail puffs up and she gets that wild look in her eyes, I know she’d “like” me to chase her around—not too much, but just enough. She likes to “play.” There’s nothing untrue about those statements. They’re not appropriate for some laboratories, but they’re just fine for pet owners.

There was a time when it was considered unscientific even to think that animals suffered pain. People dissected living dogs and cats, without anesthetic, and when others worried about their screams they were told not to be anthropomorphic. Clearly, that was a mistake. Nobody ever came up with a knock-down proof that animal pain was real. We just don’t think that way any more. The point is, anthropomorphism is not to be avoided at all costs. It has its uses whenever we’re talking about something that really does seem to interact with us—cats, dolphins, maybe even computers some day. It’s what Thomas Aquinas called “analogical predication,” and he insisted that it’s the best we can do when we try to talk about God. The fact that it’s analogical doesn’t make it untrue—it just makes it analogical.

So for me and for many of today’s thinking Christians, an ultimate, all-interactive activity is certainly God-like enough to be called God. When we worship, for example, we deepen the interaction between ourselves and this activity. The uniqueness of each of us is affirmed, strengthened and challenged by a unique activity that opens us to all other activities around us, which are also unique. We’re drawn to celebrate the interrelatedness and originality of all things and to strive for more just, peaceable and sustainable forms of both. In all this, we matter to God, and God matters to us. Our mutual interaction is deepened, and both we and God are different because of it. Those of us who have been drawn to more contemplative forms of worship find all that we ever looked for, and then some, when we worship in these terms.

Furthermore, if we embrace process theism we can also reframe the traditional problem of evil. In a world where no activity completely overrides the originality of another—not even an all-interactive activity—we shouldn’t be surprised that chaos and conflict exist. It doesn’t need to be explained, and process theists are not hesitant simply to say, “Shit happens.” It’s not part of some grand plan. God can’t be blamed for failing to design a chaos- and conflict-free world because such a world is not even logically possible in process terms. It’s such a nonsensical idea that it would never even occur to God—only to confused beings like us. If anything, we should instead be impressed that there’s anything to talk about besides chaos and conflict. But most importantly, instead of

obsessing over why there's so much evil and suffering, we have every reason to turn our attention to empathizing with those who suffer and asking what we can do about it.

Televangelists and many traditional believers in God will still have objections. They will insist that any God worthy of the name has to be totally independent, omnipotent and omniscient, etc. They insist upon a God of total control who at any moment might produce all sorts of magical-looking effects just like those biblical epic movies from the 1950s. Only a God who could do all that is worth their time, even though God never has done anything like that for them.

Process thinkers tend to reply, "Well, so what? Our God is more believable than yours." That's a point worth considering on its own. It's never been clear how a genuinely responsive God could also be totally independent, omnipotent and omniscient. Most process theists would insist that God is perfect in freedom, power, knowledge, and of course presence, but they insist that freedom, power, knowledge, presence and even perfection itself are intrinsically open-ended and interactive concepts—quite the opposite of total control.

Furthermore, process thinkers have often pointed out that their version of God may in fact be more biblical than the all-controlling God of popular theism. The Bible is not entirely clear about whether God needed something to work with or not in creation. Nor does God appear to be totally in control. In fact, most biblical stories portray God as someone who interacts with us like one more being among other beings—not *just* one more being, by any means, but not so different as to make genuine interaction impossible. The biblical writers on the whole, like most believers today, were far more concerned about a *responsive* God than about an all-controlling power.

Sure, the biblical writers wanted a powerful God too, but part of what makes the Bible such an engaging collection is that its writers keep debating over just what kind of power they can expect God to exercise. There's a dawning realization in the Bible that God isn't there to rescue us from having to work out how to get along with our surroundings, our neighbors or even our enemies. There's a dawning realization that generosity and compassion and faithfulness are ultimately more powerful than coercion. Reflecting on the story of Jesus' life, death and risen life, St. Paul went so far as to say that God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). I don't think I need to convince you that this is an idea that most Christian leaders have found too inconvenient to follow. But it's right there in our own sacred text.

In any case, regardless of how the Bible is read, almost all process thinkers, like most professional biblical scholars, agree that the Bible, like other sacred texts, is a collection of biased and exaggerated testimonies—maybe they reflect profound interactions with God, maybe there's even something about this collection that puts it practically in a class by itself, but it's not the last word on anything. So most process thinkers simply are not interested in whether somebody can quote a passage here and there that makes God look

all-controlling. Such passages are still human testimonies, biased and exaggerated at the very least. Maybe they're exaggerated responses to the ultimate, all-interactive activity in an endless network of activities. Maybe that's who the biblical God really is. That's what most process theists would say.

Process theists treat the "big name" Christian theologians of the past 2,000 years in a similar way. They like to believe that, if Augustine and Aquinas had just tried thinking in process categories, they would have had a much easier time saying what they were trying to say. Now I think process theists often fail to notice that these pre-modern theologians often did have the nerve to challenge the philosophical categories they borrowed, and that there are ways to read them that are more convergent with process thought than one might have assumed. Process thinkers, I'm afraid, tend to be dilettantes when it comes to the history of theology. But at their best they are trying to explain why their current concept of God didn't quite get articulated until recently. They're trying to show a fundamental continuity with past believers, while explaining some major differences. It's not that different from a present day logician claiming, "I'm doing basically the same thing that Aristotle was doing," even though Aristotle might not recognize it. "All humans are mortal" is *not* the same as " $(x)Hx \rightarrow Mx$," but most logicians claim that the latter preserves the most important features of the former.

I would actually argue that process thought makes more sense of the Nicene Creed than traditional theism (more about that later, if you're that curious). The Creed conceives God, not just as the ultimate, all-interactive activity, but as the ultimate, self-interactive activity which differentiates from and responds to "itself" in ways that are both interrelated and original. Such an activity would be the simplest possible instance of the principles of process thought—the "interactivity" from which all other activities, and even the principles themselves, derive. Whitehead called God the "chief exemplification" of process thought's principles, but on this reading God would be the original source of the principles. (Whitehead said something like that too, which often goes unnoticed.)

There's one more question a process naturalist might want to pose. Maybe there's an ultimate, all-interactive activity. Maybe there are good reasons to see an underlying continuity between this and what many people, past and present, have called God. Maybe we *can* call it God. But *should* we? Isn't that word too dangerous to use any more? Even if it's not totally obsolete, shouldn't we retire it anyway?

As with the other questions, I think it would be irresponsible for a process theist *not* to be continually challenged by that question. My response so far is to say that I think that would be a futile effort. It's not the sort of word people can simply decide to retire. You might hope that it will just wither away on its own, but right now it's a powerful word that integrates the lives of too many people, and they're not going to let you take it away from them. It's dangerous precisely because it has the power to integrate people's lives—for the better as well as for the worse. So it seems far wiser to keep looking for ways to

help it integrate people's lives for the better, even when there's room for debate about what counts as better. That's what many of us clergy have been trying to do all along.

Of course you can help those of us who do want to use the word by continuing to challenge our usage, and especially by continuing to remind us of its dangers. But don't be disappointed if we don't drop it. If you provoke us change the way we use it, you haven't failed.

And if some day the word did fall out of use altogether, that wouldn't make things less dangerous. People will find other powerful words to integrate their lives. And because they're powerful words, others will find ways to exploit them for their own self-serving agendas, just as people try to do with the word "God." People are always willing to coerce others and even to kill them in the name of some "higher" cause, and I don't think the disappearance of words like "God" would make them any less likely to do so. Whatever powerful words people lived by, you'd still need to work hard at keeping them from being misused, and you'd still find it an uphill and frustrating struggle. Those of us who keep the word "God" around have further reason to keep struggling against that, no matter how often we fail.

But right now we do know a lot about how "God" can be misused, so again, I hope you can appreciate the often frustrated efforts of those of us who live by that word and try to keep it from being misused. We won't make you use it, but give us some credit for not being totally deluded about what we're doing when we keep using it. We're not being dishonest, and we're not being "enablers." And you probably need to do the same with whatever words you live by.

I think this is about all I need to say about process theism. And I think I need to remind you again that I don't need you to be a process theist or any other theist, or even a process naturalist. If you are a freethinking naturalist, I already feel enough kinship with you that I don't need to change you. I'm confident that we'll both change as we pursue ideas wherever they lead. As a process theist, I can't imagine God wanting either of us to do otherwise. And I'm confident that we'll both be surprised over and over again by new insights. I will probably keep seeing the hand of God in that. You will probably see something else. But as long as we try to understand our differences in thinking, we'll all learn something from that. I don't need anything more.

One More Optional Afterward: Process Thought and the Nicene Creed

I think what most process thinkers say about God is defensible. But I want to try approaching the idea from a different angle. If we stick with the two basic principles of process thought, I think it actually makes the Nicene Creed look more credible. Let me explain why.

If you assume that the principles of process thought are true, what would be their simplest possible instance?

Maybe it would be two activities in mutual interaction.

But what if we can simplify it further? Many process thinkers would say we can't. I say we can, as long as we stick with the two basic principles and don't try to limit in advance what they can mean.

I think that the simplest possible instance of process principles would be a self-interactive activity—an activity which is both relatively interrelated and relatively original within itself. There is room for debate, of course, about whether the idea of a self-interactive activity is even coherent, but I think the case can be made that it is.

This is what the Nicene Creed seems to say about God.

In my tradition, the Nicene Creed is not ever beyond criticism, and if you look at the history behind its adoption you'll see why. But we take it seriously, because for many centuries after its adoption it was practically the only game in town. People who want to put the Bible before the Creed have a point, but they forget that Christians were still debating the contents of the New Testament when the Creed was adopted. Even its sharpest critics would grant that, for better or worse, it is the most widely accepted statement of Christian faith.

I suggest we think of the Nicene Creed as a thought experiment inspired by the central Christian conviction that in Jesus' life, death and risen life we meet nothing less than God. The creed tries to rethink what God must be like in order for us to meet God in this way. It's not a final statement, but it's worth exploring. Here's a current translation:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

By the way, the original Greek term (*pantokrator*) translated as "almighty" actually means "all-governing." In Latin it's translated as "*omnipotentem*," i.e., "omnipotent," and that's unfortunate. Leaving that point for now, let's note how in the Nicene Creed God is both one and yet diverse, both interrelated and original: God the Father begets "God from

God, light from light, true God from true God,” i.e., God the Son. And then the Spirit “proceeds” from God, another version of “God from God.” (By the way, I’m using male language because that’s what the creed does. I recommend alternatives: try Augustine’s Lover, Beloved and Mutual Love.) Father, Son and Spirit are distinct from one another but at the same time inseparable—relatively interrelated, yet relatively original with respect to one another. You can see them as distinct activities, or as distinct, active aspects of one self-interactive activity, or as both at once. Process thought (at least the two basic principles) lets you get away with all of that. (Actually, Whitehead and Hartshorne might disagree, but that’s because of the specific ways in which they develop the two basic principles—but I consider those developments harder to defend—or even describe—than the two principles themselves.)

The major twist that process thought gives to this ancient idea is that God’s activity, like ours, is full of unpredictable diversity—diversity unpredictable even by God. But again, it’s a peaceable diversity that deepens God’s unity without ever breaking it.

But this may not be such a new idea after all. Something like this idea of God appears in the work of Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century Church Father who helped get the Nicene Creed permanently established: “He succeeded in imagining an infinite that is ... an endless display of beauty, surpassing the beautiful as the ever more beautiful, imparting beauty to beings from its own depth of loveliness” [David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 188]. In fact, Gregory may have been the first major thinker to see infinity as a good thing. Plato and Aristotle thought it was a defect (p. 190). But according to Gregory, “We hold the divine nature to be infinite and unlimited ... [for] perfection is not marked of by limits. The one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit. How then can one arrive at the sought-for boundary when he can find no boundary?” (Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 1.7-8)

The difference between God and us creatures is that God does this in an unlimited and peaceable way, while in our current condition we do something like this in limited and conflicted ways. But God’s plan for us is to draw us beyond our conflicts until we become finite, peaceable expressions of God’s unlimited life—no matter how long it takes!

So, believe it or not, process thought doesn’t just overturn pre-modern concepts of God. It may actually help us recover them! In process terms, the Nicene Creed invites us to imagine the maker of “all that is, seen and unseen” as the original self-interactive activity from which all other activities result. It says a lot of other things too, and many of them can be debated—for example, that Jesus embodied this activity’s self-differentiation in a uniquely healing way that the rest of us can only imitate in part. But even statements like that seem less puzzling if you think in process terms.

So again, this confirms for me how process thought doesn't so much reject other ways of looking at things as reframe them. And it does that in a way that lets us look at them in a new light. Some old ideas may survive and even thrive. Others will probably wither away in time. We're in not position to make too many predictions about that. And I think that's a very healthy place to be. For now, whether we're naturalists or theists, we can continue to celebrate the interrelatedness and originality of all things and to strive for more just, peaceable and sustainable forms of both. What else could matter more?