

**The Knowledge of God as *Informed***  
**by Philosophical Argument and Reflection: Some Excursions**  
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I have maintained that all knowledge of God is situated within a confessional starting point. But I have also argued that matters of philosophical argument and reflection are likewise situated within that starting point.<sup>1</sup> That is, as H. Richard Niebuhr says of revelation, when it comes to giving an account of critical reasoning itself, we cannot avoid *confessing* “what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view.”<sup>2</sup> I am, in other words, committed to critically examining even my most radical convictions largely because I find the efforts of Socrates and his heirs more admirable than those of Protagoras and his heirs, and while it is hardly negligible that the Socratic heritage offered arguments on behalf of their efforts—sometimes very forceful and elegant arguments—I remain more convinced of their efforts’ admirability than of the soundness of any one of their arguments. I can’t help believing—*confessing!*—that openness to truth should always outweigh the desire to win an argument, and that belief claims me so radically that I couldn’t give you a reason for it that didn’t already presuppose it. So I can’t escape a confessional starting point.

Philosophy tends to focus on keeping us open to further truth, even when we think we already know it all. I would argue that faith, properly understood, does the same thing, just from a much more practically engaged and contextual level than would be useful for philosophy departments. Both philosophy departments and faith communities need to make room for shareable insights and questions that come to light as they engage one another in critical conversation.

The following musings are to be taken as intriguing excursions from the basic portrayal of God’s selfhood that I have sketched elsewhere in explicitly confessional terms. They fall into four sections: I) the concept of God, II) philosophical arguments for God’s existence, and III) an example of nontraditional theistic “metaphysics” or “ontology.”

**I. The Anselmian/Augustinian Approach to the Concept of God**

God is “that than which no greater can be conceived,” i.e., the being greater than any other conceivable being.

Such a being must possess all “great-making” properties to the fullest extent that they could conceivably be possessed all at once by a single being. (Note that “greater than” can mean “bigger than,” “better than” or both.)

People can disagree about a) which properties are truly great-making (See Augustine *On Christian Doctrine*, I.7) and b) which great-making properties are compatible.

Thus many classical theists have contended that such a being affects all others unsurpassably yet is also immutable and thus cannot in turn be affected in any real way by those others. So God was held to be incapable of genuine compassion. The reasoning here was apparently that, yes, compassion may be a great-making property in its own right, but it was not nearly as great-making as immutability. So compassion had to go. Thus Anselm: “Thou art compassionate in terms of our experience, and not compassionate in terms of thy being ... because thou art affected by no sympathy for wretchedness” (*Proslogion*, VIII).

But revisionary theists (not all of them process theologians) regard being unsurpassably affected by *all* others as a property every bit as great-making as immutability and the ability to affect

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this subject see Charles W. Allen, “The Primacy of *Phronesis*,” *Journal of Religion* 69 (1989): 359–74. The manuscript version of this article (“Radicalizing *Phronesis*”) can be accessed online at: [www.therevdcharleswallen.com/radphron.doc](http://www.therevdcharleswallen.com/radphron.doc).

<sup>2</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1941), p. 29. I find this characterization helpful as far as it goes, but do not always draw the same implications for universalizing moves that Niebuhr seems to draw.

all others unsurpassably. And they contend (at least Schubert Ogden does) that all these properties are compatible if we make a distinction between God's nature (or essence: "**what** God is") and God's actuality (**how** this God exists from one moment to the next). God's nature is indeed immutable, and the fact that God exists with certain essential properties is likewise an immutable truth, but God's actuality is unsurpassably "mutable" (and thus really capable of unsurpassable compassion).

This disagreement is only among theists who share many assumptions in common inherited from Western philosophy. The issue is further complicated when we introduce other voices from other traditions, especially if we recognize (as we CTS types tend to do) that there are people in these traditions (Buddhist Masao Abe is a good example) who seem every bit as insightful and devoted as people to whom we would listen in our "home" traditions.

Short of total relativism (which is not only incoherent but impracticable), this does not mean that our differences are so great that we cannot engage in instructive conversation about which properties are genuinely great-making. Indeed, it does seem that one thing that thinkers in all cultures agree upon already is that there are genuinely great-making properties.

To that complication, add the further complication that many thoughtful and devoted persons in nearly every tradition insist that the being greater than any other conceivable being must also be beyond comprehension. (Note, however, that "incomprehensible" does not necessarily mean "completely unknowable.") At the very least this means that, even if we could agree on a list of genuinely great-making properties, they would apply only in a very peculiar sense. This makes questions of compatibility difficult to decide. (Some would go further than this and add that ultimate reality is utterly beyond any kind of knowledge and description. If they really meant this, however, they would have to stop talking about it.)

From a more explicitly confessional standpoint I would propose the following rules for God-talk:

**When talking about anything:**

- 1) We should try to be as consistent as we can.
- 2) We need a good-enough reason to say something that looks inconsistent.

**When talking about God:**

- 3) We should prefer statements that make God look greater and better than anything else. (This will inevitably drive us to say some peculiar things that may look inconsistent.)

**When talking about the God of Jesus Christ:**

- 4) We should radically redefine "greater and better than" in terms of this peculiar story of God's boundless self-giving. (This will drive us to say even more peculiar things that may look inconsistent.)

Note: I am not saying here that rule 3 should logically precede rule 4. The order makes sense in pedagogical terms, but Christians start as much from rule 4 as any other.

## II. Recasting Theistic Arguments in Pragmatically Conceptual Terms

Many of the theistic arguments become more plausible, but also more vulnerable, if recast in terms of the pragmatic (i.e., practical or rhetorical) inescapability of a conceptual network in which the existence of certain kinds of "things" must be presumed. Then one argues that one sort of "thing" presumed by any such network will have enough "great-making" properties to be called God.

In other words *we cannot divorce the question of God from the question of the most fundamental concepts by which we currently make sense of everything we notice.* (Hence the metaphysical excursions presented in the last two sections.)

After all, believing or not believing in God is not like believing or not believing in the Loch Ness monster. For to disagree over the Loch Ness monster's existence is simply to disagree about one more thing in the universe. But to disagree over God's existence is to disagree about the very structure of the universe itself. (See S. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe? Reason & Mystery as Pointers to God* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996], p. 22.)

When I say that these conceptual issues must be approached pragmatically I am suggesting that *we can only deal with what we can conceive here and now.* That others might think surprisingly differently in other contexts is not ruled out, but that possibility (or is it an

“impossible possibility”?) can play no role in our current debates except to remind us of our fallibility.

As we'll see, the ontological argument recast in these terms epitomizes what I'm indicating here, as does the whole “Anselmian” approach to the concept of God.

But in *pragmatically* conceptual terms this is no longer a matter of leaping from a “subjective” or “internal” concept to an “objective” or “external” reality, since that distinction is itself pretty thoroughly relativized.

The move instead is *from conceiving* of certain most basic categories *to acknowledging* that in practice we cannot consistently regard categories that basic as empty.

In a sense, then, the move remains subjective, though I suggest that it may provide us with all the objectivity we'll ever need or hope to gain.

Other arguments can also be recast in these terms. Here are examples:

### **A Pragmatically Conceptual Cosmological Argument**

In any currently conceivable conceptual scheme:

1. Possible transience implies necessary permanence, or, if something can be transient, then something must be permanent.
2. Something can be transient.
3. So something must be permanent, i.e., there is a necessarily permanent being (or if “being” sounds too loaded we can substitute “instance of reality”).

#### **Comments:**

This presumes that any currently conceivable conceptual scheme will contain notions like possibility, actuality, necessity, transience and permanence. Possible transience is, incidentally, an identifying characteristic of contingency. A contingent being, according to most definitions, is one that might not exist (even if it happened to exist always). That makes it possibly transient.

Some may object to step 1, arguing that the question, “Why is there anything at all?,” still makes sense. Step 1 assumes that this question is not coherent enough to make sense. The question assumes that there might not have been anything. That means anything of any sort--not only no actual things but also no possible things. It implies, in other words, *the possibility of no possibilities*. What sense could that make?

Whether there is a necessarily permanent being that also possesses the right variety of great-making properties to be recognized as God awaits further development. But note: Necessary permanence is greater than possible transience, actual transience, necessary transience, or merely actual permanence. So necessary permanence must be attributed to the being greater than any other, so long as it does not conflict (and it seems not to) with a still greater property. Furthermore, a necessarily permanent being must coexist with all other possible and actual beings, and this must also be said of the being greater than any other. But that does not make them the same unless there can be only one necessarily permanent being.

There is another version of the cosmological argument that takes us a little further. This follows from recognizing that a wholly contingent being cannot be the most inclusive instance of reality. This argument however, leans toward a pantheistic concept of God and thus is likely to raise as many issues as it purports to address.

### **A Pragmatically Conceptual Cosmological Argument (With Pantheistic Leanings)**

1. We cannot conceive of a less-than-most-inclusive instance of reality without conceiving of a most inclusive instance from which it may be distinguished.
2. If we affirm that a less-than-most-inclusive instance of reality exists, then we must also affirm that a most inclusive instance exists.
3. We do affirm that a less-than-most-inclusive instance of reality exists.
4. So we must also affirm that a most inclusive instance of reality exists.
5. We must conceive of this most inclusive instance of reality as including all other actual and possible instances to the extent consistent with their “otherness.”

6. Such an instance also corresponds to the being greater than any other we can conceive (and under either description there can be only one of these by definition).

**Comments:**

Where does this argument get us? Embroiled in controversy! It will raise objections not only from secularists but from other types of religious thinkers.

The move from 5 to 6 will of course be objectionable to theists who reject pantheism (though many classical theists never rejected it outright, in light of Acts 17:28: "In him we live, move and have our being"). And the same move would be rejected by the *absolute* nondualist, who would also reject 5. (Pantheism can, I believe, be regarded as a form of *qualified* nondualism, though it is different from what the Hindu philosopher Ramanuja had in mind when he introduced the term.)

To the objecting theist the pantheist will want to ask how a being that is *not* maximally inclusive of all others could conceivably be greater than one that is. (The pantheist is assuming here that the following principle is a pragmatically inescapable conceptual truth: given two things distinct from each other, either both of them are included by a third thing or else one of the pair includes the other. Is there a conceivable alternative to this? What about perichoresis, aka "interpermeation"?)

The absolute nondualist will object to step to step 5 (indeed the whole Anselmian approach) because it leaves a place for otherness in the ultimate scheme of things, and this kind of nondualist insists that, ultimately, there can be no otherness. Ultimate reality cannot be said merely to *include* everything else, for inclusion preserves a distinction between the "includer" and the included. The absolute nondualist holds instead that ultimate reality *is identical* with what *only appears* to be everything else. For similar reasons this nondualist cannot equate ultimate reality with the being greater than any *other*. What other?

It is worth pointing out here that in practice the absolute nondualist inevitably winds up giving differences (i.e., otherness) more reality than his or her theory would seem to allow. (E.g., "In everyday practice we have to act as if all kinds of differences really do matter, though of course ultimately they don't.") In other words, the absolute nondualist becomes practically indistinguishable from the *qualified* nondualist, except of course for continuing to claim not to be one (which, ironically, is yet another assertion of difference). Why not then join the qualified nondualist in embracing a theory that better matches the practice?

The pantheist may still have problems of his or her own, however. The concept of a most inclusive instance of reality turns out to be, if not incoherent, at the very least unstable. Does it make any more sense than the idea of the greatest number? (There can't be one, by definition.) It might seem to make a bit more sense to speak of the greatest number of existing things at any one time, but that too becomes problematic if we think the past could actually be infinite. Can there be a greatest infinite set at any one time? Most mathematicians these days say that some infinite sets can be greater than others, which lends the idea some viability. But the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument tries to show that an actually infinite set is incredible. Even Charles Hartshorne, the pantheist *par excellence*, has admitted to being "puzzled in the matter." (See his *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*, [La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1970], p. 235.) Admissions like that have led Hartshorne to grant that his own conceptual system may not be paradox-free, and so he has formulated the "principle of least paradox": "No position can be argued for merely on the ground that other positions present paradoxes. One must decide which paradoxes are the really fatal ones, in comparison with those of contending positions" (*Ibid.*, p. 88).

This is a striking admission, and it considerably weakens the force of any argument for the superiority of one conceptual scheme over another. Both the theist who rejects pantheism and the absolute nondualist may take comfort from this. And it only confirms what I have hinted at earlier, namely that the proper setting for any arguments of this sort is an ongoing conversation where people starting from different standpoints aim at mutual instruction. As one kind of move within that conversation, arguments like these are instructive. As attempts to play a final trump card, they're useless.

In the meantime, there is also a fairly plausible version of the teleological argument (or argument from design) that can be recast in pragmatically conceptual terms. This can also be expanded into a kind of moral argument.

### **A Pragmatically Conceptual Teleological (and Moral) Argument**

1. We have no reason to regard creatures like us as cosmic accidents; we intelligent, purposive, moral beings are as much a part of nature as anything can be.
2. So we must conceive of the ultimate source and ground of our existence in a way that makes intelligent, purposive, moral beings like us a natural consequence of whatever influence we must otherwise attribute to it.

#### **Comments:**

This seems a plausible line of reasoning. But while it's a healthy reminder, it doesn't take us very far. It's so innocuous that David Hume appeared to have no quarrel with it, nor would John Dewey (who actually argues along these lines). So it hardly establishes that the ultimate source and ground of our existence is itself purposive, intelligent, moral etc., but only that it cannot be utterly alien to those characteristics. Put more positively, *ultimate reality is at least remotely supportive of personal and moral characteristics*. That may not be much, but it's not nothing either.

Another kind of moral argument is that it is pragmatically incoherent for us to take seriously a commitment to truth for truth's sake if we also presume that reality is ultimately such as to make that commitment look silly. As Charles Hartshorne remarks, "Those who out of loyalty to truth are compelled to confess truth not to be worthy of loyalty are in a strange case" (*Beyond Humanism* [Lincoln, Ne.: University of Nebraska Press, 1968], p. 56). But this does not of itself answer the question, "What would reality ultimately have to be like in order to make intellectual honesty look worthwhile?"

This brings us finally to the ontological argument. (The word "ontological," incidentally, is a bit misleading. "Ontology" usually means a theory of "being" or reality. There doesn't seem to have been any compelling reason to use the term for this argument. Others have called it a "modal" argument.) It will be instructive to repeat the so-called first version of the argument, which does indeed seem defective.

### **The Ontological Argument: First Version**

1. Anselm's definition: God is "that than which no greater can be conceived."
2. Existence in reality is greater than existence the understanding alone.
3. "The fool" says that God exists only in the understanding, not in reality.
4. This means that the fool claims to be able to conceive a being having all God's properties *plus* existence in reality.
5. This means that the fool claims to be able to conceive a being greater than God.
6. But the above definition implies that a being greater than God cannot be conceived.
7. Therefore it is impossible for God to exist in the understanding alone: if God exists in the understanding (i.e., if Anselm's definition is coherent), then God must exist in reality as well.

#### **Comments:**

This is the version that has provoked the most criticism. Some objections seem clearly misplaced, while others seem more decisive.

**Gaunilo's objections:** 1) It is in fact impossible to conceive of such a being "than which no greater can be conceived." 2) We can imagine a greatest conceivable island, but we don't think that means such an island must exist. Why should we think otherwise with God?

**Anselm's replies:** 1) If you understand the phrase "that than which no greater can be conceived," then you already have conceived of such a being. 2) An island greater than any other conceivable *island* still would not be greater than any other conceivable *being*. In fact, an island, as a "being" surrounded by all kinds of greater beings (e.g., the body of water around it, the planet, the solar system) is disqualified from the outset from "competing" for the title of the being greater than any other conceivable. The holder of that title must "outrank" all other kinds of beings. Nothing else could have this property.

(Anselm didn't explicitly put his response this way, admittedly, but he may have implied it.)

**Kant's objection:** Existence is not really a property that adds anything to our definition of God or anything else. The definition of 100 dollars is not changed by whether or not I have 100 dollars. (Here's perhaps a clearer illustration: Imagine a glass of water. Now imagine it with a lemon in it, and the picture changes. Now imagine it with a straw, and the picture changes again. Now imagine it as existing. Does the picture change this time?) Most philosophers think this objection is more on target, at least with this version of the argument.

The second version of the argument was first noted by Charles Hartshorne and later given wider billing by Norman Malcolm (who never acknowledged Hartshorne's role in its "discovery"--the jerk). It rests on the difference between existence and *necessary* existence (or existence in every conceivable situation). This answers Kant's objection: even if existence is not a property that affects our definition of God, *existence in every conceivable situation* does seem to be such a property. This time try imagining a glass of water existing in every conceivable situation. Actually, we won't be able to do this, because it would involve picturing the glass in every conceivable situation *at once*, and we can't imagine that. The closest we could come to that is thinking of the glass against a constantly shifting backdrop. In any case, the picture is definitely affected (rendered impossible) by the addition of this property. The following version is once again recast in pragmatically conceptual terms.

### A Pragmatically Conceptual Ontological Argument

1. God, by Anselm's definition, is the being greater than any other being we can conceive.
2. A being that exists in every situation we can conceive (i.e., a "possible world") is greater than one that does not. (This avoids Kant's objection: even if existence is not a property, "pansituational" existence is.)
3. So we cannot avoid presuming that such a being exists in every situation we can conceive.
4. Our actual situation (or "actual world") is one that we can conceive.
5. So we cannot avoid presuming that this being exists in our actual situation.
6. We also cannot avoid attributing all other "great-making" properties to this being, insofar as we can conceive of a single being possessing such properties all at once.
7. By so proceeding we may expect to arrive at the concept of a being whose description corresponds sufficiently to our idea of God. (Though we'll have questions about this as long as there is disagreement about it among people we take to be roughly as reliable as we are, or more so.)

### Comments:

It seems to me (today, anyway) that this argument does pretty well indicate that we cannot coherently deny the existence of the being greater than any other we can conceive, unless of course that property should itself turn out to be incoherent. This is not a proof of **God's** existence, however, as long as step 7 is open to debate (and it most assuredly is). But it still gives each of us a very good reason to consider belief in God a live option so long as we are convinced that all the other "great-making" properties essential to our idea of God can be attributed to this being. And we don't have to wait for everybody else to agree with us before becoming convinced of this ourselves, so long as we are open to hearing any reasons they may have for disagreeing with us.

### Appeals to Experience

What else might tip the scales in favor of belief in God? We can still appeal to religious experience, or rather testimonies about religious experience:

1. Religious people, many have argued, tend to agree on this: in our everyday existence we can sense a more elusive reality that ultimately enables and sustains our everyday existence (however threatening it may sometimes seem).
2. So we may presume, barring decisive explanations to the contrary, that such a reality exists.

### Comments:

This adds something, but what it adds is just as subject to further dispute as anything we've considered so far.

I find the claim to have found a common thread plausible up to a point, as long as we remember that there is no such thing as an experience (not one we can report, anyway) prior to some culturally conditioned interpretive scheme.

The claim ceases to be plausible when people conclude that this must therefore be the essential message of every religious tradition. It could very well be part of almost any religion's essential message, but all religious traditions seem to start from much more specific convictions which make this alleged common thread somewhat tangential.

However widespread such testimonies like these are, we cannot prove that they are not illusory. We have to decide whether to trust them, and if so, which of them we should trust more than others.

### **Cumulative Conditions for Believing in God (or Some Other Ultimate Reality)**

We can draw together all the threads of this pragmatically conceptual, Anselmian approach by looking at them all as contributing to what I have elsewhere described as "cumulative conditions" for believing in "that than which no greater can be conceived." Here is a slightly revised version:

However you understand "that than which no greater can be conceived," you will have no reason to regard it as anything but real, practically speaking, insofar as the following conditions are met:

#### **A. Coherence** (internal and external)

1. You can offer some account of it which seems sufficiently coherent (at least not self-contradictory).
2. The account does not contradict the most reliable information you presume to have about your less-than-ultimate surroundings.

#### **B. Significance**

1. The account provides a context in which certain aspects of your experience seem less puzzling than otherwise. (Arguments from "religious experience," a sense of "creaturehood" or contingency or moral obligation or purposefulness in the universe, etc. are all pertinent here, though not decisive.)
2. The account makes the realization of your *most inescapable values* more conceivable than otherwise. (Your most inescapable values are those whose realization seems implied, however vaguely, in your very willingness to assess any values at all. Again certain moral arguments are pertinent here.)
3. The account encourages more willingness to assess your beliefs than otherwise, or at the very least no less than otherwise.

#### **C. Communicability**

1. You are either encouraged or not too discouraged by the extent to which the account can be shared with and embraced by other *reliable people*, especially by other *pertinently reliable people*. (Reliable people are simply any people whose judgments you might in any way rely upon in other matters. Pertinently reliable people are any people whose judgments you might rely upon in other *sufficiently related* matters.)

#### **Comments:**

Each of these conditions should be thought of as strands braided together into a rope, instead of links in a chain. With links in a chain it doesn't matter whether they are linked together or not if there is even one weak link. But when individual strands in a rope may not be strong enough by themselves to support the weight they're needed for, they may still be strong enough that, when braided together, they can provide the needed support. This is what is meant by a cumulative case. [See C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-35), 5:264; Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981; Donald Wayne Viney, *Charles Hartshorne and the Existence of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).]

Many critics of theistic arguments insist that you can't combine these conditions in this way. Antony Flew dismisses the attempt as the "ten leaky buckets" strategy. It's obvious that if you hold one leaky bucket under another the water will still run out, and it won't help to keep adding more leaky buckets, but what Flew doesn't consider is that you might be able to fit the leaky buckets together tightly enough that all the leaks would be blocked (as long as the holes don't overlap). That is what the defender of the cumulative approach is claiming we can do.

As might be expected in light of previous disclaimers, here, too, there is no tidy formula which would allow you to achieve wide agreement on either the extent to which each of these conditions is being met individually, or the extent to which they together support an overall judgment. Questions of such basic importance never have been settled without ongoing controversy and probably never will be. Still, enumerating conditions like these serves to remind you of the full scope of likely disagreements and to discourage focusing on only one or another aspect of them. It also shows you the points at which you are vulnerable to criticism--which questions deserve answering, at least to your own satisfaction.

#### **Conclusion:**

The confessional starting point still seems most decisive. What finally inclines us to belief or skepticism is the set of "truths" we confess to have claimed us most radically. If that set includes truths that assert or imply the reality and/or presence of God, then we may find reflections like these helping to clarify just why these truths belong to that set. If that set doesn't include such truths, reflections like these may prove interesting but not very persuasive. Perhaps what we need more than arguments, then, is more honest soul-searching about just what truths really do claim us most radically. But this is not fideism, for if that soul-searching is to be fully honest it must remain open and responsive to questions we might not always want to hear. Thus the crucial check for any of our convictions depends on their viability within a responsibly confessing community.

### **III. A Process Account of God and the World**

Process philosophy and theology represents one of the most ambitious attempts to articulate a conceptual network in which the existence of something like what people mean by "God" seems a pragmatically inescapable presumption. I have both sympathies and reservations. The following summary of process thought attempts to simplify its often complex vocabulary for the sake of brevity and maybe even clarity. I have tried here to give as sympathetic a portrayal as possible. My critical remarks come later.

#### **The Most Basic Principles**

All things are activities or features of activity. (Whitehead calls activities "actual entities" and features of activity he divides into "eternal objects" and constituent "elements" of an actual entity; Hartshorne, more simply, calls activities "actualities" and calls features of activity "abstractions.")

No activity is completely determined by other things.

All activities are partly determined by other things.

All activities are partly self-determined.

#### **Implications for the World as We Find It**

An enduring object (or subject) is a succession of activities with common features.

In some combinations activities will practically cancel out their self-determining aspects. For example, in a rock there is plenty of activity at the atomic and subatomic levels, but the activities are so random that the rock itself is basically inert.

Activities can be integrated in ways that make more inclusive centers of activity possible.

For example, in my body there is plenty of activity at the subatomic, atomic, and cellular levels, but here, unlike a rock, these combine to make me able to act as a *relatively* independent individual.

More inclusive centers of activity are more self-determined (or responsive) than less inclusive centers.



Self-awareness is an eventual product of an ascending scale of ever-more-inclusive centers of activity.

### **Implications for God's Relation to the World**

Process thought is often accused of limiting God's freedom to be God, but the process theist will reply that it does no such thing—the limitation is only on *our* tendency to speak nonsense about God. In process theology God remains “that than which no greater can be conceived.”

*The* most inclusive center of activity conceivable is God.

Such a God is not an exception to the principles that apply to other things but is rather their “chief exemplification” (Whitehead), even if (as Whitehead came to acknowledge) the principles themselves are established by God.

As the most inclusive center of activity, God is also the most relative of all beings. God responds directly to *all* other activities, not just to some, and God directly influences *all* other activities (to the extent consistent with the above principles), not just some.

But precisely because God's activity is relative to all others, God's *existence* and *nature* are absolute and everlasting. *That* such a being exists is independent of any particular circumstances, even though *how* such a being exists depends directly on those circumstances.

God responds to all activities by integrating them into God's own activity, and that response in turn influences all other activities toward the degree and manner of integration achieved by God.

Most process thinkers argue that the presence of any significant degree of order in a universe with practically innumerable centers of activity requires (or at least suggests) the existence of precisely such a single center of activity that, while not all-controlling, is nevertheless universally most responsive and universally most influential.

Process theism can still claim that God is omnipotent and omniscient in the classical senses: God can do anything *except* what would be *logically* impossible to do, and God can know anything *except* what would be *logically* impossible to know.

But against classical theism process theism insists that *total* control and *total* knowledge of creatures' actions (or of God's own actions) before they occur are both logically impossible.

Since God never wills anything logically impossible, there is ultimately no difference between saying that God cannot do something and saying that God will not do it.

### **Prayer & Our Chief Aim from a Process Perspective**

Our ultimate (and thus most important) aim in life is to enrich the ultimately unbreakable communion between God and ourselves (“ourselves” includes you, me, and all other creatures). (This, by the way, is also God's ultimate aim.) We thus cannot live for ourselves alone but live for ourselves most genuinely by living for one another.

Any other aims in life derive their true value from contributing to this ultimate aim. If we try to invest them with any value beyond this, we deceive ourselves and are bound to be disappointed.

No matter what our situation is, God always gives us a way to realize this aim here and now, though without discounting the presence and enormity of evil and suffering or the appropriateness of grief, anger and protest.

Prayer is useless unless we are willing to open ourselves to what God is offering us. If we do so open ourselves, then prayer helps us to discern God's offer, to reorient our own aims in light of that offer, and becomes itself one way of responding to that offer.

Prayer is thus itself a means of enriching the unbreakable communion between God and ourselves, and as such it makes a difference not only to us but to God and everything else.

But it is only in rare circumstances that prayer makes the kind of difference that would noticeably change the course of events beyond one's own immediate sphere of influence. And we should never encourage people to believe that prayer can or should be used ultimately for any aim other than enriching the communion between God and ourselves.

Anything else would be a by-product at best, and to put anything else before our ultimate aim, besides being idolatrous, would deprive us of our own true fulfillment.

### **Assessment**

There is much in process thought that seems plausible and immensely attractive. Those who wonder whether it can be reconciled with Christian faith should try reading Schubert Ogden, John Cobb, and especially Marjorie Suchocki.

I have a few reservations. There is of course the common reservation many thinkers have about suggesting there is something like a decision taking place even at a subatomic level. How can we *start* with an idea like that? But rash as that suggestion is, I do find it helpful in making sense of things.

A more serious reservation has to do with the concept of self-determination, which is central to process thought. Most process thinkers seem unaware of how paradoxical a concept this is. In self-determination the self that determines and the self that gets determined must somehow be different and yet the same. Hegel had no problem with something like this, because he reveled in dialectical oppositions, but that is precisely the kind of (supposedly) muddled thinking that process thinkers (e.g., Hartshorne) seem to want to avoid. But they seem to have avoided it mainly by not talking about it.

The way thus seems open to rethink process categories in more elastic (dialectical? paradoxical? tense?) terms such as we find in contemporary reworkings of the doctrine of the Trinity, acknowledging that concepts like “self,” “other,” “unity,” “plurality,” “freedom,” “necessity,” are all being stretched to their limits at this most fundamental level of reflection. On those terms it will not always be easy to say where self-determination ends and determination by another begins in referring to God’s and our interaction with one another or even one’s interaction with oneself. If we take this step it will of course become more difficult to distinguish (as we must still try to do) between a genuine “mystery” (along Rahnerian lines) and utter nonsense. But I see no alternative if we are to make any sense (even fuzzy and fragmentary sense) of the idea that we are really capable of some degree of self-determination.

### **Trinitarian vs. Process Models of God: Some Comments**

While there may be “metaphysical” or “transcendental” reasons for Trinitarian thinking, for Christians the doctrine of the Trinity arises from trying to make sense of its conviction that for our sake the one God of Israel has drawn unsurpassably near to us in the life, death, resurrection and continuing presence of Jesus the Christ.

The doctrine of the Trinity is sometimes invoked to stress that God can be “the one who loves in freedom” without having to create a world. This is often contrasted with process theologies indebted to Whitehead and Hartshorne, where it is held that the existence of God and some world are both necessary. More traditionally inclined theologians tend to argue that, if “some world exists” were a necessary truth, then God could not be said to love *in freedom*.

This debate has always struck me as posing a false dichotomy. For one thing, it seems that with God the distinction between freedom & necessity becomes very peculiar. The human “language game” of *willing* to do something vs. *having* to do it seems largely dependent on the fact that our will, due to ignorance, can run counter to what is & isn’t possible. God, however, can’t be ignorant about this. So unlike the rest of us, God’s intentions can’t be frustrated by logical or metaphysical constraints, since it would never even occur to God to intend anything to the contrary. What practical difference is left, then, between saying (with process thinkers) that God *can’t* exist without a world and saying (with Trinitarians) that God *won’t* exist without one? It seems to me that this distinction becomes very difficult to draw, whether in process or Trinitarian terms. (On the other hand, I don’t think many process thinkers have noticed this, since too few of them pay any attention to the ways in which language works.)

Both Trinitarian and process thought have to grapple with the paradoxes of self-reference & self-determination. Both actually agree up to a point: God can’t be love without an “object” of love. Process thinkers, however, argue that this object can’t also be God, and clearly, if we are using “object” in its ordinary sense, they have a strong case. But of course we turn out to be using it in a somewhat peculiar sense.

On the other hand, as I've mentioned, process thinkers seem mostly unaware of how paradoxical their own most cherished concept of self-determination is. How, after all, does an actual occasion determine itself, even partly, and remain self-identical? They just don't (or won't) talk about this, I suspect, because it suggests that their categories are not univocal after all. (In fact, an actual occasion's self-determination could just as easily be portrayed as a *vestigium trinitatis*.)

In a manner of speaking, both process thinkers and Trinitarians have to acknowledge that self-determination already is a kind of "other-determination." That leads me to wonder whether self-determination can be given a meaning precise enough to say exactly where self-determination ends and "other-determination" begins. If not, then it becomes difficult for process thinkers to insist that this "other" can't also be the one God (in a different "mode"). But it also becomes difficult for Trinitarians like Joe Jones to insist that "as self-determining, God is not determined by anything else, ... except as God wills to be so determined." Unless the "otherness" within God's own being is a sham, God is *necessarily* determined by "something else" (of a sort), if still a "mode" of God's own being.

On a related matter, if the triune God can be totally self-determining, as Trinitarians in the Western church tend to argue, I'm not sure why we would call this self-determination "love." Can there be genuine love if the beloved cannot be "beyond" the determination of the lover? And if the beloved can be in some sense beyond the lover, doesn't that provide support for a more social model of the Trinity (as is more prominent in the Eastern churches)? Such problems may also lie behind process thinkers' insistence that the "otherness" some Trinitarians posit within one divine subject just wouldn't be "other" enough to be called love (except in a narcissistic sense). (This, I think, is also Hegel's reasoning for regarding the world as necessary-though I'm not sure what *necessity* means once things get dialectical. Sometimes I've wondered if Reinhold Niebuhr's description of the fall shouldn't be applied to creation: creation is not necessary but inevitable. The expression is of course problematic.)

Similar problems arise when we speak of God's ability to make choices apart from something beyond God's determination. Can there be a genuine choice without a certain degree of unpredictability involved until the choice is made? And can there be such unpredictability within the immanent Trinity? Again it all seems to turn on how "other" God's own "otherness" can be.

The upshot of these comments is that we can't be too sure about what does and does not follow from our God-talk at this level of abstraction (hence the appeal of a more historical fall-back position). There may still be a "logic of the matter," even after we let in a few paradoxes, but it is hardly a straightforward logic. As I've said, concepts like "self," "other," "unity," "plurality," "freedom," "necessity," etc., are being stretched to their limits here, and we should expect to remain perplexed about how to use them. (Some of them are tricky enough even in ordinary usage.) I'm not trying to discourage abstract thinking, in fact I insist on its necessity, but I doubt we should invest too much in its always contestable outcomes. If anything, it's the character of our debates over such matters, not their outcomes, that may prove most instructive.