

## PANENTHEISM

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Panentheism literally means “all (is) in God” (from the Greek). As a concept of God, panentheism attempts to do justice both to divine transcendence – that God is “beyond” or more than the world – and divine immanence – that God is “in” the world. Panentheism maintains that the world is in God, included in the divine life, but that God’s reality is not reducible to nor exhausted by the reality of the individuals or the structures of the universe or of the universe as a whole. Thus God is all-inclusive or all-encompassing with respect to being.

Strictly construed this entails that all divine relations are internal relations, that is, relations between God as integrated whole and the creatures as included parts. For panentheism then, while the universe is part of God, God and the universe do not form an undifferentiated whole. Panentheism draws definite distinctions between God as the including whole and the non-divine parts of the universe considered in themselves. Certain properties of divinity, such as aseity (“self-existence”) or necessary existence and the all-encompassing attributes of omnipresence (everywhere present), omniscience (all-knowing), and omnipotence (all power or all-powerful) apply to God but definitely not to individual creatures or to the universe itself. (Note though that process forms of panentheism find the notion of divine omnipotence problematic.) Another important distinction drawn between God and creatures concerns mutual freedom. Panentheism upholds indeterminism: Spontaneity and free will in the universe mean that antecedent causes do not fully determine present events and actions, so the future is not fully

predictable or foreknown, even by God; creatures have real choices. In summary, while God is not an individual simply distinct from the non-divine individuals, in the way for example that one human being is distinct from another, neither is God to be equated with the universe or its constituents.

### Panentheism as Alternative

In construing divine transcendence and immanence as above, panentheism mediates between deism and certain forms of traditional theism on the one hand and pantheism on the other hand, attempting to avoid pitfalls of both. Deism, as developed in the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, holds that God created the world to operate according to natural laws but is uninvolved in its destiny. The God posited by traditional theism is not as separate from the universe as is in deism; however, panentheists judge what they call classical theism to be equally inadequate. Classical theism, in affirming certain divine attributes stemming from ancient Greek philosophy – immutability (unchangeability), impassibility (to be unaffected by another), and eternity (in the sense of strict timelessness) – does not permit God to be in genuine relation to the world.

Pantheism literally means “all (is) God.” That is, everything at least in its true essence is divine. Clearly panentheism has affinities with pantheism. American Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000), the principle theological interpreter and developer of process philosophy, at first labeled his concept of God, “The New Pantheism.” The trajectory of German idealism produced both pantheists and panentheists. One could say that panentheism attempts to get as close to

pantheism as possible in stressing the intimate relationship between God and nature, while still maintaining clear distinctions between them. A key difference is that pantheism tends to a (quasi) materialistic or (quasi) substantialistic understanding of God: Entities in the world share the divine essence or substance to a greater or lesser degree. Therefore, any distinction between God as a whole and the constituents of the universe is a matter of degree rather than of kind. In addition, since everything is a mode or attribute of God, pantheism typically denies indeterminate freedom.

The metaphor or analogy of the world as the body of God is popular among panentheists. Hartshorne compares the God-world relationship to that between a person's mind and the cells of its body. Arthur Peacocke (1924- ), a key figure in the science and religion dialogue, speaks approvingly of the feminine, womb imagery that panentheism encourages: As with a fetus in its mother, creation is within God. American Christian theologian Sallie McFague (1933- ) has been the principal developer of the metaphor of world as body of God. British philosophical theologian Grace Jentzen (1948- ), in drawing the connection between God and world so tightly as to jettison indeterminate freedom, offers a pantheistic version of the metaphor.

### Some Connections with Science

Panentheism offers divers advantages for those interested in the intersection of science and religion. Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), in his role as a philosopher of science, and others have observed that the dominant model for the natural world moved from mechanism to organism during the nineteenth century. Panentheism offers an organistic understanding of the

God-world relation in contrast to deism's mechanistic understanding. Like deism, panentheism offers a concept of God where natural laws or processes are respected, where God refrains from interventions that overturn nature. The crucial difference is that panentheism posits a God intimately involved, continuously interacting, with the world.

Panentheism's intimate connection of God with a world in time entails a God who in some sense or dimension is also temporal. As the trajectory of modern science – from the Newtonian mechanics of the Enlightenment to evolution to Einstein's theory of relativity – has put an exclamation point on the temporal nature of reality, panentheism offers a consonant concept of the divine.

As indicated above, creaturely spontaneity and indeterminate freedom are crucial for panentheism in its distinction of God from creation. Both quantum mechanics, in stating that the motions of sub-atomic particles are probabilistic rather than determinable from known antecedent conditions, and chaos theory, in demonstrating the unpredictability of future events, provide openings for panentheists and other supporters of indeterminacy. In particular, Peacocke, British physical chemist, Anglican priest, and panentheistic theologian, applauds panentheism's picture of a God who is continuously creative in relation to an open universe. It must be noted, though, that no consensus exists among scientists that quantum indeterminacy or, even less, chaos theory unpredictability entail any ultimate indeterminacy in the universe.

We have seen that panentheists reject divine supernatural intervention. Avoiding violation of natural processes is also a concern of other theologians involved in the science and religion dialogue, including Americans Thomas F. Tracy and Nancey Murphy. It may seem that

such thinkers must renounce any traditional Christian notion of special providence, namely, that God causes particular events in natural or human history (in contrast to general providence, that God determines the general laws or processes of the universe). However, this is not uniformly the case.

For example, in his later writings Peacocke develops his notion of top-down causation, maintaining that divine action with respect to the universe not only upholds general laws or patterns but causes specific events. Whether such divine pre-determination is compatible with indeterminate creaturely decisions and their chance interactions is a major difficulty for this viewpoint.

Murphy and Tracy purchase special providence by positing that God determines the probabilistic quantum movements of subatomic particles and that these in turn produce macro-effects that result in specific events. The virtue of this notion is that it contravenes no natural laws or regularities: The quantum events that God determines are within the scientifically permissible ranges of motion, and apparently no conceivable method exists for discerning God's causation on the quantum level. At the same time, this "invisibility" is problematic: That God ultimately causes a valued event (as opposed to, say, an event issuing in tremendous evil) appears to be a matter of blind faith, at least as far as physics is concerned. Other problems for this viewpoint are the speculative nature of the connection between quantum events and macro effects and, for advocates of indeterminacy and openness, the denial that quantum events are ultimately indeterminate. More broadly, critics of the above approaches might judge them to be backdoor attempts to reintroduce too much transcendent or interventionist causation by God.

### Panentheism's History

The term panentheism was coined by German idealist philosopher Carl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781-1832). As mentioned above, German idealism, with strong ties to nature Romanticism, produced various panentheistic and pantheistic thinkers. The clearest and most fully developed panentheistic model was that of physicist, experimental psychologist, and philosopher, Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887). Earlier examples of panentheism or panentheistic tendencies include Western mysticism and Hindu bhakti (referring to devotion to a personal god) and its principal theologian Ramanuja (traditional dates, 1017-1137). These examples are not surprising, as mysticism generally softens the creator-creature distinction, while in India that distinction is not drawn as sharply as is typical in Western religions. Various philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century have been labeled panentheists, including Nicolai Berdyaev, William Pepperell Montague, Paul Weiss, Karl Rahner, and John MacQuarrie. While the panentheistic affinities of these thinkers are undeniable, some failed to develop a clear panentheistic model, others promoted ideas contrary to basic premises of panentheism, while still others explicitly refused the label panentheism for their thought. Coming out of German idealism, exile from the Nazis to America Paul Tillich (1886-1965) is regarded as one of the premier theologians of the twentieth century. Tillichians widely acknowledge his panentheism. His famous phrase, "God is not a being, but being-itself," has obvious panentheistic implications. Tillich, who claimed the phrase "eschatological pan-en-theism," was accused by some critics of pantheism, to which he would jokingly respond, "This pantheist is going to take a walk in his

garden.” Tillich’s reluctance to disavow the attributes of divine immutability, impassibility, and eternity compromise his manifest panentheistic intentions, according to American theologian David Nikkel (1952- ).

The fullest explicit development of panentheism in the twentieth century came from process thought. Whitehead, British mathematical physicist and philosopher, originated process philosophy, its theism developed and to some extent modified by Hartshorne. For process thought, reality at its depth is not static being but rather a process of becoming. God is not an exception to, but the highest exemplar of, this ultimate or metaphysical principle. As did Fechner, process thought advocates panpsychism, that all integrated entities of the universe possess some degree of sentience or feeling. The fundamental unit of reality for process philosophy is an occasion of experience. God, in the consequent nature for Whitehead or the concrete pole of divinity for Hartshorne, includes all past occasions of experience. Process panentheism emphasizes omniscience and, to coin a word, omni-pathy (all-feeling). God intimately knows all experience, is affected by, sympathizes with, all feelings. As Whitehead puts it, “God is the fellow sufferer who understands.” Whitehead purchases divine transcendence through the primordial nature, which is the reservoir of all possibility. Hartshorne purchases same through the abstract pole of divinity, which refers to the changeless character of God, namely, that God will always lovingly know and integrate whatever experiences occur in the universe. If the world influences God as object of divine knowledge, likewise God influences the non-divine individuals as object of their awareness – as a lure providing preferences for their actions. To what extent the divine lure only persuades versus constrains decisions as the

unavoidable object of awareness is debated by process theologians. What is beyond dispute is the rejection of omnipotence, which is interpreted to mean God is all-powerful, which would overthrow indeterminate freedom.

### Contemporary Issues

McFague, mentioned earlier in relation to feminine divine imagery, has presented one of the most well-known models of panentheism in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Her development of metaphors for a God in intimate relation with the world enliven and enhance the sense of the concept of panentheism. On the other hand, her doubts concerning what we can actually know about God pose a potential problem for her panentheism. McFague's minimal Christian theistic claim is that there is a power in the universe on the side of life that is, metaphorically speaking, personal. When McFague adds that this power is many rather than one, critics may question whether God in her concept or metaphor is sufficiently integrated to panentheistically include the universe; critics may question whether there is a difference of substance between her view and American Christian theologian Gordon Kaufman's serendipitous creativity, that God should refer to the cosmic and evolutionary forces that have resulted in life and human life rather than to any personal or agential reality. Contrast McFague's outlook to that of Tillich and Hartshorne, who maintained that God is "not less than conscious" or superconscious (while recognizing the anthropomorphic dangers of attributing conscious personhood to God).

Many theologians in the science and religion dialogue affirm some notion of God's



sustaining creativity common to the Western religious traditions: Every aspect of every particular constituent of the universe is radically contingent, dependent upon divine power for its continued existence moment by moment. Process theism rejects such an understanding of divine power. Whitehead is clear that both divine and finite occasions of experience are manifestations of the ultimate metaphysical principle of creative synthesis, each such occasion possessing ultimate independence of being. Whitehead reasons that if God were upholding the very existence of occasions, then indeterminate freedom would be overridden and his panentheism would transmute into a pantheism. Christian process theologians, while often neglecting to acknowledge this Whiteheadian perspective on divine power, have not challenged it either. The question for panentheists who wish to retain a notion of divine sustaining activity is this: Can omnipotence be defined as “all power” rather than “all-powerful”? Can God panentheistically encompass all power by sustaining and thus empowering the existence of each creature, as an existence with indeterminate freedom? If such a concept is not self-contradictory, then one can avoid pantheism and affirm a notion of divine power more consonant with the all-inclusive logic of panentheism.

–David H. Nikkel

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