

BY HENRY JAMES YOUNG

God and The World: A Process Perspective

Is God involved in the world? In the attempt to protect the absolute-ness, immutability, eternality, and majesty of God over against the finitude, temporality, mutability and imperfections of the world, traditionally theologians, metaphysicians, and philosophers have created a static God, and a gulf between God and the world; and as a result, they have not conceived of God as being significantly involved in the world. Whitehead correctly speaks to this problem when he says, "Undoubtedly, the intuitions of Greek, Hebrew, and Christian thought have alike embodied the notions of a static God condescending to the world, and of a world either thoroughly fluent, or accidentally static, but finally fluent . . ." ¹ We inherited this gulf between God and man, in large measure, from the Aristotelian philosophy of substance and the Newtonian mechanistic cosmology. And because of this we have not been able to keep a reciprocal relationship between permanence and change, being and becoming, and potentiality and actuality in reference to God. We have argued that God represents permanence, being and actuality whereas, the world represents becoming, potentiality and deficient actuality. Thus, along with his changelessness God is independent of the world; and, the world along with its fluency is dependent on God. How then can we speak of God in a way that avoids this gulf between God and the world created by traditional theology? And how can we speak of God in a way that makes his involvement in the world a significant aspect of his being?

The purpose here is to show that the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead avoids this gulf between God and the world which philosophy inherited from the Aristotelian philosophy of substance and the Newtonian mechanistic cosmology. After this discussion we will be able to more fully appreciate Whitehead's contribution in perceiving the world in more scientific terms and in making God more significantly involved in social change.

Whitehead developed a social conception of reality, meaning that he viewed reality from an organic perspective. To say that reality is organic means that it is interconnected, interdependent and interwoven. All reality is interrelated in that nothing is detached from the whole. The whole means the universe which contains a multiplicity of subsystems. Here Whitehead is accounting for the oneness of reality and the many-ness of reality. What is reality made of?

Reality is made of actual entities; "They are the final real things of which the world is made up. There is no going behind actual entities

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 521.

to find anything more real."² The word entity is simply the Latin equivalent for thing.³ Thus, actual entity refers to concrete actuality. Concrete actuality is not macrophysical, but rather, it is microphysical.⁴ To treat macrophysical objects as though they are the concrete is to be guilty of what Whitehead calls "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness."⁵ The common sense view of reality, however, is to perceive tangible objects as the really actual things in the world. But are they the really actual?

Under the influence of quantum physics, Whitehead realized that concrete reality consisted of quanta of energy, which are subatomic, indelible and microphysical. These are energy events and they interpenetrate each other as wave fields extended throughout space. Whitehead refers to these energy events as happenings drops of experience, actual entities or actual occasions.

However, Whitehead is careful not to separate concrete actuality from its becomingness. In other words, concrete actuality refers to the process by which an actual entity or energy event moves from potentiality into actuality. He defines reality in the context of its becomingness, making being and becoming inseparable. "To be" means to become because all reality is caught up in a constant process of becoming. Creativity or process is an ultimate metaphysical principle that underlies the totality of reality.⁶ Creativity is contentless, characterless and formless. It is devoid of actuality apart from actual entities or energy events. Therefore, the base of reality is process, change or creativity. Here, as we will now discover, Whitehead has replaced the Aristotelian philosophy of unchanging substances at the base of reality with the notion of process at the base of reality.

According to Aristotle, a substance is "that which is not asserted of a subject but of which everything else is asserted."⁷ What makes a substance important for Aristotle is, it can exist separate and without other categories but they cannot. A substance has qualities, but it doesn't depend on the other categories for its existence, whereas the categories depend on it for their existence. It is always the fundamental category in defining what is, and is therefore, always the subject of attributes. Not only is substance the only category which can exist independently but it is also changeless and permanent. Here we can see that substance is the basic category for Aristotle and all else is its attributes.

A substance undergoes or endures change but itself doesn't change. In repudiation of the Aristotelian philosophy of substance, Whitehead

² *Ibid.*, p. 27. Very frequently Whitehead uses the terms actual entity and actual occasion synonymously. (*Ibid.*, p. 119).

³ See Ivor Leclerc, *Whitehead's Metaphysics* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1968), pp. 21-22 and Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1926), p. 5.

⁴ The word microphysical refers to subatomic infinitesimal particles. Macrophysical refers to objects that can be observed.

⁵ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁷ W. D. Ross, *Aristotle* (London: Methuen).

completely abandons the notion of substances at the base of things enduring change. The base of reality is not unchanging substances, but rather, Whitehead argues that creativity itself is at the base of things. Basic to Whitehead's notion of an actual entity is that it is an experiencing subject. An actual entity is not a subject undergoing change in time.⁸ Whitehead abandoned this notion and replaced it with the notion of subject-superject.

The term subject in Whitehead refers to the internal constitution of an actual entity and the term superject refers to the effects the actual world has on this experiencing subject. In other words, an actual entity as subject is a drop of experience, and as a superject it is the result of its own experience as the actual world affects it. Whitehead makes this point very clear when he says, "An actual entity is at once the subject experiencing and the superject of its experiences."⁹ The term subject is used mostly by Whitehead when an actual entity is considered in respect to its own real internal constitution but he makes it very clear that subject is always to be construed as an abbreviation of subject-superject.¹⁰

Whitehead says that each actual entity has its own individual purpose, which is internally given. This gives it its own uniqueness and significance. Now, as each actual entity attempts to accomplish its purpose, it goes through the process of what Whitehead calls self-formation, self-determination, or self-creation. Whitehead doesn't think or speak of an actual entity apart from becoming. In other words, we cannot speak of an actual entity on the one hand, and becoming, on the other hand. An actual entity is only defined in the context of its becomingness, which means that Whitehead makes being and becoming inseparable.¹¹

When an actual entity becomes, Whitehead describes this process as

⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 43. H. K. Wells feels that Whitehead, on the one hand, has abandoned the traditional doctrine of a subject undergoing change in time, but on the other hand, has retained the notion of self-identical permanences. He says, "Whitehead has dispensed with the traditional concept of substance as the self-identical continuity underlying changing qualities, and in its place he has substituted process, passage, events. But at the same time he has retained the traditional method which demands self-identical permanences as subjects of thought." See H. K. Wells, *Process and Unreality* (King Crown, 1950), p. 29. In my response to Wells, at this point, Whitehead refers to a self-identical object as a society of actual occasions and the nature of an actual occasion, for Whitehead, is that it is the subject experiencing and the object of its own experience. Therefore, self-identical objects, being composed of perpetually perishing actual occasions, are not static and are not unchanging substances enduring change. But rather, they are caught up in the perpetual flux of process itself. Therefore, Whitehead is not as traditional in this regard as Wells argues. Raymond Smith helps to explicate Whitehead's non-traditional approach when he says, "Now if the actual thing or actuality itself must be viewed as a process of becoming and perishing, as Whitehead wishes, there is no point in constructing a philosophy of unchanging substances or permanent qualities. The notion of a static philosophy, Whitehead believes, stems from ancient thought," namely, Aristotelianism and Platonism. See Raymond Smith, *Whitehead's Concept of Logic* (Westminster Md: The Newman Press, 1953), p. 59. See also M. B. Bakan, "The Subject-Object Relationship in Whitehead," *Journal of Philosophy*, LV (1958), pp. 89-101, and James Hudson, "The Doctrine of the Actual Occasion in Whitehead" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University Graduate School, 1964), p. 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

the creative advance into novelty,¹² which is another characteristic of the individuality of actual entities.¹³ Whitehead uses the term novel to express the originality and uniqueness of each actual entity. This means that no two actual entities are the same and no two actual entities in their becomingness make the same contribution to the ongoingness of the actual world.

The Novelty of an actual entity also means that it transcends every other actual entity.¹⁴ It transcends every other actual entity in that it is different. Now, this difference doesn't mean that each actual entity is not made of the same thing, namely, a complex drop of experience. But, it simply means that each complex drop of experience has its own contribution to make to the total drops of experiences.

Whitehead calls the process by which an actual entity completes its contribution to the actual world, its concrescence. Concrescence names the process in which the world of many things become the novel one. Each instance of concrescence is itself a novel entity and an original contribution to the world. Whitehead doesn't bifurcate concrescence and the actual entity because "... when we analyze the novel thing we find nothing but the concrescence."¹⁵ This means that an instance of concrescence is termed an actual entity. And, the word concrescence, as used by Whitehead, represents the growing together of actual entities.

When an actual entity becomes, this represents a movement from disjunction to conjunction or from multiplicity to unity. When an actual entity becomes, many actual entities become unified into a whole. When they grow together into this whole, this is their concrescence. Whitehead speaks to this when he says, "That in the becoming of an actual entity, the potential unity of many entities — actual and non-actual — acquires the real unity of the one actual entity . . ." ¹⁶ Therefore, the actual entity is really the result of the concrescence of many potentials. The potentiality for being an element in a real concrescence of many entities into one actuality is, for Whitehead, actual and non-actual.¹⁷

In further repudiation of the Aristotelian philosophy of substance, Whitehead argues, rather than to perceive reality as isolated, independent, unchanging, separate and unrelated substances, in a certain way, everything is everywhere at all times. This is to say that every location in the world involves an aspect of itself in every other location. And, every spatiotemporal standpoint mirrors the world.¹⁸ The key to Whitehead's notion of interrelatedness is his doctrine of social immanence, which means that actual occasions are united by the mutual immanence of occasions, each in the other.¹⁹ Things are not defined in the context of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹³ The plural form Whitehead uses for actual entity is Nexus.

¹⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 143.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and The Modern World* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1925), p. 128.

¹⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 254.

their isolation but rather, things are defined in the context of their togetherness. Things grow together, which is the foundation of oneness and concrescence within Whitehead's organic philosophy.

The thing that enabled Whitehead to perceive reality as being fundamentally interrelated is the philosophical principle of relativity. This means that every actual entity is defined in the context of being a potential for every becoming. He points this out when he says, "... it belongs to the nature of a 'being' that it is a potential for every becoming."²⁰ Whitehead contends that this principle of relativity is applicable to the total of reality. And not only is a being a potential for every becoming but is not defined apart from its becoming. Its becomingness is as fundamental as its interrelatedness.

Another fundamental problem in the history of philosophy and theology that Whitehead attempted to correct was the Newtonian cosmology; it contended that bits of matter in their spatio-temporal relations were located in definite finite regions of space throughout a definite finite region of time. These bits of matter were not related to each other, they existed separate and independent of each other. Whitehead refers to this as the doctrine of simple location.²¹ This doctrine presupposed the ultimate fact of irreducible matter spread throughout space in a flux of configuration. These bits of matter were purposeless, valueless, mechanistic and followed a fixed law of nature external to their existence. Each bit of matter had its own individual characteristics, such as its shape, its motion, and its mass. The relationship between these bits of matter was only spatial rather than internal.²²

It contended that if a bit of matter was alone in the universe, being the sole occupant of uniform space, it would still be that bit of matter which it is. It also argues that a bit of matter could be described without any reference to past or future, because it was conceived as being wholly constituted within the present moment.²³

It conceived the world as a complex machine that follows immutable laws which are deterministic. From it emerged the philosophies of determinism and scientific materialism.²⁴ Determinism refers to the predictability of these bits of matter and scientific materialism refers to the fact that these bits of matter were considered as irreducible particles of matter.

In opposition to this Newtonian cosmology which is based on scientific materialism, Whitehead begins his critique by acknowledging the fact that matter consists of quanta energy and vibratory phenomena

²⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 33.

²¹ Whitehead, *Science and The Modern World*, p. 81.

²² Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1938), pp. 181-182.

²³ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, pp. 200-201.

²⁴ For an excellent discussion of the Newtonian Cosmology and its philosophical consequences see John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of The Modern Mind* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1940), pp. 253-281.

which "... dissolve into the vibrations of light." These quanta of energy are organic processes of becoming. This leads to the notion of energy as being the fundamental reality consequently displacing matter from that position as is found in the doctrine of simple location. Whitehead calls these quanta of energy events, drops of experience, or actual entities.

Now, since I have shown that the Aristotelian cosmology and the Newtonian cosmology are based on static mechanism cosmologies, it follows that their conceptions of God are also static unchanging and detached from the world.

Aristotle's conception of God represents the culmination of his static cosmology. He uses the cosmological argument to demonstrate God's existence as the Prime Mover or Unmoved Mover. He makes God's unchangingness a metaphysical necessity; he also makes God's existence, as Whitehead correctly describes, an exception to all metaphysical principles invoked to save their collapse.²⁵ In order to fully understand this it is important to note that in Aristotle's metaphysics actuality is prior to potentiality. God, being at the top of the hierarchy of substances and consisting of pure actuality is the uncaused cause of all reality. The world in all of its plurality of substances is the manifestation of potentiality becoming actuality. However, the potentialities of substances in the world could not be actualized without the agency of an eternal uncaused cause to set them in motion and this cause is pure actuality. God is uncaused and unmoved because if he were not then it would have been necessary for Aristotle to posit an existing entity behind God as the first cause.

Aristotle's God is monopolar, meaning that he only has one pole, which is transcendence. Because God only contains transcendence, he is totally detached and uninvolved with the affairs of the world. Not only is he detached and uninvolved but is also unconcerned with man. He shows no love for the world; in fact, this God tends to be indifferent about the world. He doesn't move the world because he loves it, but he acts as the object of its desire. Here God is passive rather than active. He only acts as the object of man's desire and in the sense it is man who is active and dynamic in his love for God.

The theism that emerges from the Newtonian mechanistic cosmology is a God whose existence is external to that which he has made.

He is analogous to that of the clockmakers, meaning that once the clock is made it runs on its own independent course. Here God is the architect and designer of the world; he also put it into motion as the clockmaker puts the clock into motion. But God remains the source of the world, meaning that the world, as Newton perceives it, continues to be dependent on God's power. How then is God related to the world? Like the clockmaker he is only related through intervention. When something gets wrong with the clock the clockmaker then intervenes in

²⁵ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 521.

an attempt to repair it; so it is with the Newtonian conception of God.

Whitehead avoids the static monopolar concept of God found in Aristotle and Newton by developing a dipolar concept of God. This means that the being of God includes two natures within his existence. Whitehead defines these two natures as the primordial nature of God and the consequent nature of God. The primordial nature refers to God's transcendence and the consequent nature refers to his immanence. These natures function interdependently and complimentary; they are not bifurcated. But rather, they represent two interdependent modes of God's existence. In this way, Whitehead avoids a totally transcendent static, absolute, abstract God, on the one hand, and a totally immanent, relative concrete God, on the other hand. Whitehead's dipolar theism includes transcendence and immanence as metaphysical necessities, thus avoiding the traditional gulf between God and the world.

The dipolarity of God's existence is not unlike other actual entities in the world; for they too are dipolar, meaning that they have a mental pole and a physical pole. The origination of simple causal feelings refers to the physical pole and the origination of conceptual feelings refers to the mental pole.²⁶ According to Whitehead, "No actual entity is devoid of either pole; though their relative importance differs in different actual entities."²⁷ These two poles are integrated at the point of the concrescence of an actual entity. Here God is no exception to this general metaphysical characteristic. The mental pole of God refers to his primordial nature and the physical pole refers to his consequent nature. But how are these two natures related to social change?

In his primordial nature God is the eternal aboriginal accident of creativity, meaning that he is the first instance of creativity. In this sense God is nonderivative. However, in his consequent nature God is involved in time and social change. According to traditional Aristotelian-Newtonian theism God is completely actual and perfect with no potentiality as a part of his nature. In contrast to this monopolar concept of God, Whitehead's dipolar theism contends that God in his primordial nature is changeless and complete but in his consequent nature God changes within the ongoing creative advance of the world, and in this sense He is incomplete in his consequent nature. To say that God changes means that he includes temporality in his consequent nature and therefore, whatever happens in the world whether negative or positive affects God. In the midst of change God remains God because he is a non-perishing actual entity; in other words, other actual entities perish but God himself doesn't perish. If he perished he would cease to be God. To say that God is incomplete in his consequent nature means that his existence is interdependent and interwoven with the continual growth toward perfect and unrealized possibilities in the world. Here Whitehead is careful not to think of perfection in a static sense; but rather, he thinks

²⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 366.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

of it in a dynamic sense. This means that God nor the world ever reach static completion because both are caught up in the ultimate metaphysical principle creativity itself. Perfection in this sense becomes existentialized in an ongoing process.

When an experience, happening, or event reaches its perfection, it becomes actualized, satisfied, intensified, finished, completed, and concrete. This represents a movement from potentiality to actuality. A brief discussion of this process will help illuminate more clearly the relationship between the primordial and consequent natures of God.

In his primordial nature God is the underived home of all possibilities or potentialities; he is the reservoir of these possibilities and apart from him there would be no possibilities for realization in the world. God's primordial nature provides these possibilities to the world by persuasion rather than by force. When an actual entity or experience accepts one of these possibilities for its actualization in the world, God, in his consequent nature, participates in this process. Because of the relativity of all things there is a reaction of the world on God and a reaction of God on the world. God becomes enriched when the world moves toward intensity of value and toward the actualization of its possibilities. In this sense, God is affected positively by the world. But when the world moves toward the rejection of God's possibilities then God is affected negatively. Thus, the primordial nature provides possibilities for man and the consequent nature participates in the actualization of these possibilities. This means that, "The consequent nature is the weaving of God's physical feelings upon his primordial concepts."²⁸ Because the consequent nature of God is affected by the world, God is affected by whatever happens in the world and in turn affects the temporal world.

Along with God's incompleteness, in His consequent nature, He is also determined. He is determined by the creative advance of the world. Being determined by the creative advance of the world doesn't mean that God is not free to make His own individual decisions. Because each actual entity in the world is free to make its own decisions and the integrity of its freedom is not violated within Whitehead's metaphysical system. Therefore, God is determined in His consequent nature because in actuality He derives His physical pole from the world itself. Whitehead speaks to this when he states that God's consequent nature "... originates with physical experience from the temporal world, and then acquires integration with the primordial side."²⁹

Because God in His consequent nature is determined by the world, He is within time. In His primordial nature He is timeless, meaning that He is not within the temporal order. But in His consequent nature He participates within time as other actual entities do. But, God also transcends time in that He is non-temporal and also in the sense that the past becomes objectified in His nature. The past becomes everlasting in

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 524.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

God's consequent nature to the extent that it is always present in God. This brings into focus the meaning of objective immortality in God which will be discussed later.

One of the great accomplishments of Whitehead's dipolar theism was the bringing together of God and man or God and the world. No longer does one have to adhere to the strict concept of deity found in Aristotle, Newton and the history of Western Theology. Whitehead destroys the dualistic gulf which existed between God and man. He expresses the interdependence of God and the world in the following famous passages which deserve quoting in full.

It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent.

It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many.

It is as true to say that, in comparison with the world, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently.

It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World.

It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God.

It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God.³⁰

The above passages of Whitehead sufficiently demonstrate the interdependence of God and the world. Therefore, as long as man exists within the creative advance of the world he can be assured, according to Whitehead, that God will remain fluent, and that things will remain conrescent. The primordial nature of God assures man of conrescence and the consequent nature of God assures man of fluency. Whatever man creates in the world effects God and God affects everything within the world. In this way we can say that God is in the world and the world is in God.

The consequent nature of God is inseparable from the world. There is no way of speaking of the world apart from God, just as there is no way of speaking of God's consequent nature apart from the world. Whitehead made this very clear when he pointed out that, on the one hand, God in His consequent nature creates the world, and, on the other hand, the world creates God. This means that God and the world function in a complimentary fashion.

Basic to Whitehead's philosophy of organism is the notion that actual entities "perpetually perish." After an actual entity reaches its conrescence it then loses its status as an experiencing subject, which means that it loses its subjective immediacy. The subjective immediacy of an actual entity refers to its living experience. An actual entity is an experiencing subject until it reaches a final cause. When an actual entity reaches this completion, it becomes efficient causation for future actual

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 528.

entities. Therefore, as an actual entity perishes subjectively, it acquires objective immortality.³¹

Objective immortality is the category Whitehead uses to describe all actual entities after they perish. After they perish they cease to exist as experiencing subjects and become objects or data in God's consequent nature. Therefore, to perish doesn't mean to cease to exist but rather, it means to take on the form of objective immortality in God's consequent nature as a new objective condition added to the riches of attainable actuality.³²

Whitehead's notion of objective immortality is his answer to the religious problem of everlastingness or the conservation of value. It also speaks to the religious problems of evil and redemption. In terms of everlastingness, God in His consequent nature preserves all the good in the world as it becomes objectively immortal. This means that after man existentially experiences good in the world, the good is not lost but rather, becomes objectively immortal in God's consequent nature. After the good in the world passes into God's consequent nature, it then flows back into the world and participates in influencing future experiences toward the actualization of the good. This notion of the conservation of good is analogous to the Kingdom of God. However, here it is dynamic rather than static. The good that is conserved in God's consequent nature never reaches static completion because God nor the world reaches static completion. Because both God and the world are caught up in the ultimate metaphysical principle of becoming. Therefore, the traditional notion of the Kingdom of God as being a futuristic eschatological end point to history or consummation is replaced with the notion of an ongoing processual existentialization of the consummation of the Kingdom of God.

As man accepts the multiplicity of possibilities provided by God's primordial nature, on the one hand, and when he responds positively to good that flows back into the world from God's consequent nature, then the Kingdom of God becomes existentially consummated within history. It becomes existentially consummated but never completed in terms of future possibilities inherent in God's primordial nature. This means that there is always new possibilities for man. But what happens if man never accepts God's possibilities? This brings into focus the problem of redemption and evil.

On the one hand, evil is a natural phenomenon in that the nature of life requires a process of elimination and selection. Here I am not speaking in reference to man's freedom to accept or reject life but rather to the way in which life itself presents itself to man as a natural phenomenon. When we speak of lost, elimination, selection, or perishing, religiously speaking, we think of evil. God overcomes this evil in the sense that he saves the world from the loss of the good. And also God

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 340.

overcomes this evil in the sense that he himself is a nontemporal actual entity caught up in the midst of temporality, mutability, finitude, change, time and imperfection, other actual entities perish but God by the nature of his existence is exempted from perishing; otherwise he would cease to be God. And as the result of his nonperishing existence, he continually remains "our help in ages past our hope in years to come."

God's redemption for man refers to his continual offering new possibilities for man whether man accepts them or not. God doesn't coerce man in accepting these possibilities, man is free to say yes or no to God. If man says no to God's possibilities and descends into the depth of human inferiorities, oppression, man inhumanity to man and ethnocentrism this doesn't mean that God will withdraw new possibilities from man. The redemption is the fact that God's inexhaustible possibilities are always present and available for man's self actualization but it is man who must accept them. Therefore, when man says no to God, this decision results in moral, social, political, and economic evils. But, on the other hand, to say yes to God means to move toward the actualization of God's possibilities for man. God, in terms of his relation to the world, is affected by whatever decision man makes whether positive or negative.

