The Panentheism of Charles Hartshorne: A Critique

by Laurence W. Wood

A serious attempt to refute traditional theism is made by Charles Hartshorne. He polemicizes that traditional theism is "an incorrect translation of the central religious idea into philosophical categories." His voluminous writings attempt to show that traditional theism is self-refuting because of its contradictory affirmations. In language reminiscent of Nietzsche, he suggests it might be a "hoax of priestcraft."

He proposes a "neo-classical theism" as the only means for preserving the logic of belief in God. Some Christian theologians (notably, John Cobb, Jr., and Schubert Ogden) appeal to Hartshorne in much the same way as Thomas Aquinas appealed to Aristotle. Ogden says Hartshorne's panentheism is "perfectly compatible" with the Bible and is the only means for presenting the Christian message to the contemporary mind.

This paper intends in part to assess Hartshorne's interpretation of traditional theism. It intends also to focus upon the common concerns of his panentheism and traditional theism, while at the same time pointing out their possible differences. While the sympathies of this writer will be obvious, no claim is being made to prove philosophically that traditional theism is true and that Hartshorne's neo-theism is false. This paper more modestly intends to be an analytical interpretation of some aspects of these two theistic perspectives and pointing out their possible implications for religious philosophy.

1. The Possibility of a Natural Theology

Henry N. Wieman praises Hartshorne because his natural

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Theology “makes no appeal to revelation, faith, intuition, mystic vision, authority, paradox, or any of the devices by which religious teachers and thinkers exempt their ideas from rational criticism.” For Hartshorne, truth is identical to conceptual clarity. Metaphysical truth is the abstract reality of what is exemplified in the actual world. Whatever is conceivable is intelligible and what is intelligible is reality itself. What cannot be known as it essentially is cannot be real. If God exists, then His essence must be rationally comprehensible and He must be capable of being talked about literally without resorting to metaphor, equivocation, and paradox. Especially such metaphors as God is a father should be dropped.

Hartshorne’s attempt at a natural theology is a needed corrective in protestant theology which labors under the inhibitions of Kant’s dictum that there can be no theoretical proof for God’s existence. However, he fails to see that while a natural theology is in principle a possibility, in practice it cannot be successful apart from revelation.

Contemporary Thomists insist that protestant theologians have greatly misunderstood their idea of natural theology. Battista Mondin particularly shows that Thomistic natural theology is not a pure natural theology. He shows that Barth’s criticism of natural theology has weight against the deistic philosophers of the eighteenth century who believed God’s existence is provable without recourse to revelation, but that is not the position of Thomism.

While the existence of God should be self-evident from a consideration of the contingency of the world (which demands a self-existent being to account for the fact of its dependent being), in practice this knowledge is clouded by the distorting influence of evil upon human perception. Unlike the popular misunderstanding of Thomism in Protestant circles, Aquinas also taught that every part of human life has been negatively influenced by evil, including the ability to reason correctly. E.L. Mascall, a contemporary spokesman for Thomism, says: “One does not have to be Calvinist to acknowledge that sin has weakened human reason to see clearly what should be so obvious about God’s existence. Yet grace restores the mind as well as the heart to its proper integrity.”

This does not mean a Christian has a higher intelligence than a non-theist, but it does mean he is existentially capable of insight unavailable to him before. Perception of truth is always more than intellectual exercise; our perceptions have an affectional dimension as well. Mondin writes of the Thomist position:
The believer is not endowed with an extra-power, that the unbeliever does not possess. What distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever is faith, and faith is no knowing power, but a mere habit which gives to the knowing power previously existing (i.e. to reason) a disposition to accept as true, and meaningful, what otherwise would be rejected as false and nonsensical.  

The debate between Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston illustrates this impasse between the theist and the non-theist. Copleston, a Thomist philosopher, admits their conclusions about God's existence are different because their "ideas of philosophy are radically different." It is appropriate and possible to discuss natural theology with non-theists, but the theist recognizes that natural theology is successful only from the standpoint of revelation.

Hartshorne's revision of the ontological argument is unconvincing. Even before Kant, Aquinas argued against the sheer idea of God as constituting a theistic proof. The reality of God is more than a question of logic alone. If God exists, it is to be demonstrated upon a realist perception of truth. That is, the truth of reality is mediated directly through sensory experience. A realist perception of truth, while of course it cannot be logically proved, is more able to justify its postulates about reality than can an idealist perspective. Even the idealist in practice has to live like a realist.

An idealist interpretation of truth tends to draw deductive, infallible, absolute conclusions about reality. For example, Hartshorne asserts that the essence of God is altogether explicable through modal logic. Such an identification of God with human reason is staggering even to those theists who are committed to an idealist perspective. On the other hand, an epistemological realist holds to the twin postulates that reality is mediated directly through our senses and that it is intelligible to the mind. If God's existence is to be demonstrated, the mind must perceive that fact through its experience with extramental reality. If the inner constitutive nature of being is not given through sensory experiences, then God's existence cannot be demonstrated. Yet the mind does perceive through its experience of the contingency of the world that God as a self-existent Being necessarily exists; otherwise, the world could not exist. The mind's obvious perception of the dependency of the world requires an infinite, self-reliant Being as its sustainer and creator. The
contingency argument is not based on the deduction of one proposition from another, but it is a consequence of the inner constitutive nature of the world.14

Yet a pure natural theology cannot demonstrate God’s existence. Etienne Gilson, who is perhaps the most significant expositor of Thomas Aquinas in contemporary scholarship, points out that while Greek thought provided the technique to express “ideas that had never entered the head of any Greek philosopher,”15 Aristotle had taken natural theology as far as it could without reaching a true theistic understanding.16 Gilson calls it “an unpalatable fact” that the revelation of God to Moses became “an epoch-making statement in the history of philosophy.”17 He shows that “Plato and Aristotle had pushed their investigations almost as far as human reason alone can take us.”18 The ultimate cause of things can only be known as a personal God from the standpoint of the Christian revelation.19 For Aquinas, there is no way one can discover the true existence of God through reason alone.20

Gilson shows that after Aquinas had provided the climax in the history of natural theology, it was almost immediately followed by an anticlimax. Why? Because metaphysics was divorced from theology. While the existence of God should be “most obvious,”21 the fact is no one sees it without the aid of revelation. Such a theistic idea was never realized by Greek philosophy. Only from the Judeo-Christian perspective does the existence of God become philosophically obvious. Gilson writes:

Philosophers have not inferred the supreme existentiality of God from any previous knowledge of the existential nature of things; on the contrary, the self-revelation of the existentiality of God has helped philosophers toward the realization of the existential nature of things. In other words, philosophers were not able to reach, beyond essences, the existential energies which are their very causes, until the Jewish-Christian Revelation had taught them that “to be” was the proper name of the Supreme Being.22

The reason why natural theology fell into disrepute, Gilson says, was because it ceased to be Christian. The post-sixteenth philosophers (beginning with Descartes) attempted a pure natural theology separated from the Christian religion. Gilson writes:
"Modern philosophy has been created by laymen, not by churchmen, and to the ends of the natural cities of men, not the end of the supernatural city of God."\textsuperscript{23}

For Thomas Aquinas, the supreme expression of wisdom was theology. Christian wisdom was a synthesis of revelation and human wisdom. Descartes, on the other hand, developed his philosophy "quite independently from his personal Christian conviction."\textsuperscript{24} Gilson writes: "What was new with Descartes was his actual and practical separation of philosophical wisdom and theological wisdom. Whereas Thomas Aquinas distinguished in order to unite, Descartes divided in order to separate."\textsuperscript{25} Gilson goes on to show that Descartes wrongly believed he could prove the existence of God "wholly separated from Christian theology . . . whom philosophy had never been able to discover so long as it had remained foreign to the influences of Christian revelation."\textsuperscript{26}

Gilson further shows that Descartes' proof of God was not in fact a pure natural theology despite his contention to the contrary. For Descartes could never have affirmed so unmistakably the existence of God had it not been for the influence of the Christian revelation upon his philosophy. Gilson argues that the only successful natural theology is one which, given the revelation of God, proves that His existence is necessary from a rational consideration of the contingency (i.e., dependency) of the world. In principle, this natural theology done in retrospect of God's revelation is arguable with non-theists as well, even though they may well not choose to accept it.

It is indeed surprising that protestant theology has so widely accused Thomism of constructing a pure natural theology. As Mascall points out, the textbook doctrine tends to be rigid in making the distinction between the natural and the supernatural and has been the basis in large part for this misunderstanding.\textsuperscript{27} Yet Thomist philosophers have been insistent upon the mutuality of revelation and reason in constructing a natural theology.

Presumably, the myth will continue to the misfortune of protestant theology. Protestant thought has too long allowed itself to be victimized by the subjectivism of Kantianism. The consequences have been disastrous in many instances. Classical theological liberalism and new-orthodoxy are two notable movements which have had difficulty speaking biblically about God because of the Kantian dictum that transcendent reality is incapable of being known. Contemporary theology will continue to be fragmented into
competing movements until the mutuality of revelation and reason is once again recognized. Neo-Thomism can contribute to a protestant balance between revelation and reason, if the long-standing prejudices and misunderstandings about natural theology can be laid aside. Otherwise, protestant theology will continue to swing from undue emphasis on reason (liberal theology and process theology) to an undue emphasis on revelation (neo-orthodoxy).

2. God as Dipolar

Hartshorne defines God as dipolar. The dipolar concepts include: absolute-relative, existence-actuality, necessity-contingency, perfection-imperfection, being-process, abstract-concrete, infinite-finite. The latter terms in these polarities are inclusive of the former terms which play a subordinate role. Reality is thus made up of ultimate contraries which are brought into harmony with each other asymmetrically. While the terms in these polarities are interdependent, the latter are the constituent nature of reality. This is a reversal of the theistic position which ascribes being priority over process.

For Hartshorne's neo-theism, process, relativity, actuality, contingency, imperfection are interchangeable terms which are more inclusive than the concepts of being, absolute, existence, necessity, and perfection. He says that classical metaphysics with its monopolar view began "the long tale of the metaphysical abuse of Scripture" which dates back to Philo and culminated with Augustine. Hartshorne believes his process philosophy which makes God primarily relative instead of absolute now permits us to rediscover the biblical God and the true meaning of worship. Instead of a God who transcends the finite world, his concrete reality is the actual world in its entirety. The dipolar concepts of existence-actuality illustrate this definition of God. He has both existence and actuality. His existence denotes his abstract essence; His actuality denotes the empirical exemplification of His abstract essence (i.e., existence). God's perfect existence is a mere conceptual abstraction; it refers to the inexhaustible potentialities in God. His actuality is the ongoing series of imperfect expressions of His perfect existence. God's imperfect actuality is thus greater than (and inclusive of) His perfect existence.

The metaphysical necessity of God's existence is that, given the fact of the actuality of the world, one must posit necessary existence.
There can be no actuality without the corresponding necessity that existence be conceived. Hartshorne sees this to be the true discovery of Anselm’s ontological argument. The perfect being is one who cannot be conceived not to exist. Anselm’s mistake was to confuse God’s existence with His actuality. Instead of defining God’s perfect existence and imperfect actuality as dipolar, Anselm posited a split between a monopolar God and the world.

Another set of polarities is absolute-relative. He defines the absolute as “unrelated.” For example, in the ordinary knower-known relationship, it is the knower who is related and the known (e.g., a stone) that is absolute (unrelated). Theism supposedly turns this around. God’s perfection is that He is “unrelated” (absolute). Hartshorne concludes that traditional theism really turns God into a superobject rather than a supersubject. He is more like a superstone than a superperson. Herein lies the inconsistency of theism. It equates God’s perfection with an absolute unsurpassability. While our greatness is our ability to be related to other objects, God’s supposed greatness is His inability to be related to anything other than Himself. Yet classical theism insists the world is related to God, though God is not related to the world. What can be greater “nonsense,” he asks?

He could have been more helpful in his critique of theism if he had pointed out the several ways the concept of the absolute has functioned in the history of thought. First, it may refer to what is completely unrelated (as with Hartshorne). Second, the absolute may refer to the all-inclusive reality (pantheism). Third, the absolute may refer to the Supreme Intelligence whose existence is necessary but nonetheless actual and who is the creative ground of everything else which is contingent upon His necessary existence. This is the position of traditional theism. Since theism does not define the absolute as does Hartshorne, there is here no logical contradiction.

3. God in Process

This new theism calls for a reorientation of God toward process and openness to the future. Herein lies its difference from pantheism which conceived God in terms of a monistic, static substance, whereas panentheism (all-in-God) stresses the dipolar concepts of reality.

A corollary to Hartshorne’s panentheism is panpsychism. There is not such thing as blind matter. Nor is any aspect of the world without
some degree of awareness. Awareness means mutual interaction and freedom for everything to interrelate.

Freedom means there is a degree of chance inherent in the behavior of the world. There are genuine alternatives in the world which can be chosen freely without coercion. Freedom means to be self-deciding and self-creating. It reaches its greatest expression in God who embraces the actuality of everything past and present, as well as the abstract possibilities of everything future. The future of the concrete God, however, is never settled. What God’s actuality will be is contingent upon the choices of all those present living organisms contained in His reality — from the subatomic level to the highest level found in humankind. It can thus be seen why Hartshorne says process is the fundamental concept of panentheism rather than the notion of being. It can also be seen why he labels his panentheism a surrelativism. God is Surrelative (i.e., the supremely relative).

Hartshorne believes his quasi-theism is a more accurate reading of Holy Scripture than traditional theism. In the light of its insurmountable logical difficulties, Hartshorne thinks theists have no other alternative than to adopt his proposal. If God is to be worshiped, then God must be a God in process, not a static, unrelated Monarchical-like Being.

Hartshorne fails to see that process is also a fundamental idea in traditional theism. While Greek metaphysics defined being in a static manner, traditional theism, represented by Augustine and Aquinas, did not. Aquinas redefined ultimate being as self-existing (acting) being. Gilson shows that Aquinas defined existence as dynamic activity (becoming). But God’s becoming is not a finite becoming in which God changes from one state to another. The notion of activity is not identical in meaning to changing. Hartshorne’s metaphysics confuses these terms.

In his exposition of Karl Barth’s doctrine of God, Eberhard Jüngel shows that God’s being is in becoming. But God’s becoming does not mean finite movement in which God’s existence is altered. God’s eternal becoming is the motion of love within His truine Being.

The God of Aquinas is Pure Act. Activity and energy within the divine being are fundamental. The biblical history of revelation substantiates this affirmation that God is one who acts (cf. G. Ernest Wright, The God Who Acts).
A weakness of the Augustinian definition of God is the Platonic philosophy of essentialism in which God is primary defined in terms of ideas (essences) rather than concrete existence. While he certainly affirmed the dynamic reality of God and thus radically modified the Platonic notion of static substance, Augustine's reliance upon essentialism worked against the biblical insight that God is fundamentally one who is a self-existing being who acts with decisiveness.

Nevertheless, Augustine's substantialism was modified by his stress upon the relational concept of God's triune being. As Christopher Stead points out, Augustine's term for God was "substantial relations." Hence process in God is fundamental for Augustine. God is Father by virtue of His dynamic relation to the Son. The Son is Son by virtue of his relation to the Father. The Holy Spirit is the dynamic union of Father and Son. In this way, Augustine affirms God's infinite being, while preserving His living, dynamic reality.

The Eastern Church spoke of the divine procession. God is in eternal process within Himself. The Father begets the Son, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from Father and Son (as formulated by Western Christianity). This notion of process is an infinite actual process which does not involve an alteration in God's infinite being. To be sure, finite process does involve change. But if God is an infinite being who has actualized all possibilities, then process within His divine reality does not imply finite changes.

Hartshorne's use of process harks back beyond the traditional theism of Augustine and Aquinas to classical Greek philosophy in which essence is a static notion. Hartshorne defines the essence of ultimate reality as a mere abstract, logical notion which lacks dynamic actuality. But if God is a personal Creator ex nihilo who is "a pure Act of Existing," then the infinite process within His divine being cannot be prejudged on the basis of our finite process. Hartshorne's metaphysics suffers from his not discussing the issue of process as formulated in traditional theism. He rather generally states that theism is riddled with logical confusion because he assumes that actuality always infers finiteness, while the concept of being always infers static sameness.

While Greek thought defined being in static terms of substance, Aquinas defined God's being in dynamic terms of existence ("pure Act of Existing"). That is why R.G. Collingwood says Aquinas
altogether eliminated the Greek notion of substance with his definition of God as Pure Act. This is also why Gilson calls Thomism an existential philosophy as opposed to an essentialist philosophy. Gilson writes that for Aquinas "existence is not a thing, but the act that causes a thing both to be and to be what it is." While Hartshorne is right to insist upon process in God, it is a non sequitur that process necessarily involves finite changing. God's existence is not an abstraction, but is His freedom to act, even as human existence is one's freedom to act. For humans, to exist is a finite becoming of one's true essence, whereas for God His existence is identical to His essence. His essence is a pure Act of Existing.

4. The Mystery of God

A fundamental implication of God's mystery in traditional theism is His ontological distinction from the created order of being. What emerges from this polarity of God and the world, Hartshorne says, is a third reality: "So it seems that the total reality is World-and-God, a whole of which both creator and creatures are constituents. This whole is neither God nor world but a third entity of which no account is given us in the system" of traditional theism.

Hartshorne introduces an illicit meaning into the word, God, here. One cannot add God and the world together because they are different categories. God is not one more numerical finite entity alongside which other entities in the created world can be added together. The idea of a third entity, God-and-the-world, which would be greater than either God or the world, is a logical impossibility for a God who is infinite being, though it would be true of a finite God.

Corresponding to Hartshorne's denial of God's self-existence is his rejection of creatio ex nihilo. He says this doctrine arises from a "dubious interpretation" of an "obscure parable" in Genesis. Though the Hebraic mindset was not metaphysically oriented, there is no intrinsic reason why the Bible could not be restated in the new cultural thought-patterns of Hellenism. In fact, this process was already begun in the New Testament. It is curious that after Hartshorne has blamed traditional theism for its "metaphysical abuse" of Scripture that he appeals to the Bible for support of his own process metaphysics, as if in his case the Bible does speak metaphysically.

The doctrine of ex nihilo is implicit in the Bible. It became normative in later Judaism. The first clear statement of creatio ex
nihilo is II Maccabees 7:28, but as Edmond Jacob says, this doctrine “was the only possible issue [inference] from the thought of the Old Testament.” As Yehezkel Kaufmann points out, in the Old Testament “this principle is not yet made explicit.” He further writes: “Yet the role of the tohu wabohu is quite unlike the past played by the primeval matter of pagan cosmogonies. God creates the cosmic phenomena of light, firmament, sun, moon, and host of heaven by fiat alone, with no recourse to primeval stuff.” This doctrine implicit in the Old Testament became normative in Judaism of Jesus’ day. It is echoed in certain New Testament passages as Romans 4:17, Hebrews 11:3, and II Peter 3:5. Hartshorne is out of step with the consensus of biblical scholars in this regard. Nor does his panentheistic idea have truly biblical foundation. Kaufmann writes: “The pagan idea that the deity derives power and benefit from certain objects and substances is entirely absent in the Bible.”

The thrust of Paul’s argument to the men of Athens on the Areopagus was the cosmological transcendence of God’s being. In contrast to the polytheistic inclusion of the gods within the world (which is not altogether unlike the more sophisticated panentheism of Hartshorne), Paul says:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all men life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24-25).

Kaufmann further writes of the Old Testament: “Theogony makes the birth of the gods part of the eternal, self-operating process of becoming that governs the universe. Hence the gods . . . are subject to a succession of ages.” On the other hand, “the biblical god, however, is outside of the flux of becoming and change.”

For Hartshorne to contend otherwise is to go against well-established results of biblical exegesis. Hartshorne’s panentheistic reduction of God’s being to finite process and relativity is a reverting back to the paganism rejected by the Bible. Panentheism is turning God the Creator into a naturalistic deity who is a creature (Romans 1:25). The God of the Bible is the living God of creation, the sovereign Lord of history, and His nature is invisible and spiritual (John 4:24; Romans 1:20). The inescapable conviction of the Bible is
that God is personal though distinct from His creation, and He enters into relation with His creatures freely, while at the same time maintaining His separate, determinate individuality. Hartshorne's neo-theism lacks an appreciation for this quality of mystery in God's infinite being.

5. The Possibility of God-Talk

Hartshorne's finite God does not tell us something about Himself because He lacks concrete personality. He argues that the personal God of traditional theism also could not talk to His creatures because the idea of an infinite being would logically exclude His relatedness to the world.54

The Christian theist chooses a different approach than Hartshorne's. Not only does the Bible preserve a balance between God's infinite mystery and His revelation in history, philosophical considerations substantiate that talk about an infinite God is a possibility.

The basic metaphysical attribute of God is being. Being as such is not a genus, but it is what embraces everything as Aristotle maintained. All God-talk in traditional theism presupposes that being is fundamental both for God and humans. The classical biblical text which illustrates this metaphysical conviction is in Exodus 3:14, where God declares his name to Moses: “I am who I am.” The writer to the Hebrews also says the fundamental thing about belief in God is “that He is” (Hebrews 11:6). The “I am” statements of Jesus contained in John's Gospel also reflect the “I am” of Exodus 3:14.

Since being is not a finite category as such but a quality of all levels of reality, traditional theism avoids the charge that its God is wholly other. In this respect, the imago dei doctrine (Genesis 1:27) is a fundamental premise for making theological assertions.

The Thomist doctrine of the analogy of being is helpful here. One can make assertions about God, but they are analogical. Since God and humans are rational beings, communication can take place. But since God is infinite being and humans are finite beings, we can only understand what transcends our being analogically. Analogical language is not equivocal since we do have being in common with God, though unlike the divine being our being is dependent being. Nor is analogical language univocal, for finite beings do not possess being in exactly the same way the divine being does. Nonetheless, finite beings can know what the infinite being reveals in a positive
way about Himself since there is a hierarchy of being in which finite persons share being in common with God. Hence talk about God is a rational possibility.

Hartshorne may reject the notion of a complex hierarchical view of reality. He may opt for a "one-storied" universe. He may require that reality should be talked about univocally and literally, but in so doing, he obscures the spiritual uniqueness of human beings and the transcendence of God.

6. God's Power and Evil

Hartshorne's God is not an actual person who bears responsibility for the "why" of creation. Evil is a necessary implication of the freedom of the world, and God exercises persuasive (not coercive) power in influencing (but not dictating) the world.

Traditional theism is allegedly unnecessarily burdened with an insoluble problem in understanding freedom and evil because it holds God responsible for creating ex nihilo and ascribes to Him a "sheer monopoly" of power. Evil allegedly makes sense in panentheism because the world is free of divine coercion and because God is not the cause of things. If God is the metaphysical cause of things, God's goodness is called into question.

The hidden premise in this ancient objection to theism is that reality ought to be simple, but this is just where its inadequacy lies. Reality is far more complex than atheism or panentheism will allow. There are no easy answers in regard to the twistedness of the world. The sin of the world cost something also for God — the death of His Son. He could not simply whitewash the wrongs in the world. To do so would be to undermine His own morality. Not even an all-powerful God who has created persons with moral freedom can act capriciously, as if He had exclusive monopoly on power. But He can act graciously and lovingly. This is the significance of the incarnation — the divine person, the God-man, took upon Himself the pain and suffering of the world. The morality of God is vindicated, not by some capricious act in which He simply overcame and overruled finite freedom, but by His becoming finite in Jesus of Nazareth. (Notice that becoming, process, is at the heart of the doctrine of the incarnation).

To demand of God that He annihilate tragedy and sin if He is all-powerful is to misunderstand the meaning of divine power in traditional theism. It is to make Him a capricious Superman who
defies the laws of His own moral being. For God to create persons with finite freedom implies the possibility of choosing evil. Edward Madden and Peter Hare in their classical treatment of the theistic problem with evil have shown that some evil is logically compatible with the notion of God's sovereignty and love. Their reservations about theism are not based on a logical contradiction in theism, but on the apparently gratuitous nature of evil and its unjust distribution. Yet, is not the extensive twistedness of the world a possible implication of moral irresponsibility? Paul even shows that the entire creation travails in the pain of the consequences of human sin. Because of the interrelatedness and solidarity of humanity and because of the intrinsic relatedness of humanity with nature, all creation suffers evil as a result of human irresponsibility (Romans 8:18-23).

Unlike Hartshorne's view in which evil is largely explained away since no personal God is responsible for creation as such, traditional theism recognizes the tragedy of evil for what it really is — a consequence of wrong human choices. The tragedy of evil is in its fundamental sense that it was not necessary for wrong choices to be made (even though the possibility of wrong choices necessarily coexisted with the fact of freedom). Because of the intrinsic relatedness of humanity and creation, evil appears gratuitous and unjust in its distribution in the sense that evil extensively blights the whole world.

God had no ultimate reason for evil existing in the world. There is not some hidden plan He has for the world in this regard. What we view as tragedy is so for God. Ultimately, God will redeem the world and tragedy will be overcome through our choices to accept His redeemed humanity in Jesus Christ. This is why the eschatological hope of the Christian is an essential part of his faith in God.

The doctrine of original sin assumes the gratuitous nature of evil. But, as Mascall writes: "The doctrine of original sin is a cheerful doctrine, for it assures us that the sad condition in which we find ourselves is not the condition for which we are made and that by the grace of God we can be delivered from it."

So radical is the Christian understanding of the terrible implications of free will that it allows for the real possibility that tragedy may not be overcome altogether. It is entirely possible that some through their moral rejection of God's grace may find themselves eternally outside the Kingdom of God. It has been
suggested that the highest compliment given to human beings by God is to allow them to choose their eternal destiny.61

This concept of the eternal loss of the self seems difficult to accept. We might well wonder why God made human beings knowing in advance the abuse to be made of freedom. Why would God create if evil would become so gratuitous and terrible in its consequences? There is no reason which we as finite beings can give. The theist chooses to let an infinite, wise God be God in this decision of His to create. Of course the believer affirms that God's will is in accord with his rationality and morality. Yet it will not help in the final analysis to argue with Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds. This is simply the world God freely choose to create. To demand that we fully know the reasons why God created is existentially understandable, but philosophically unproductive. Is the gratuitous nature of evil worth the price of creation? God thinks so, even if we think not.

Nontheists may think this insoluble problem makes theism unacceptable, but the theist is still free to argue that nontheists do not make the problem of evil any more palatable (especially since they offer no hope for deliverance). Nor do they offer alternatives which escape any less serious logical and existential difficulties, especially as it can be seen in the self-contradiction of the nontheist's assumption that there is no moral reason for things existing while morally arguing against the immorality of the world. One cannot simultaneously argue against the idea of the ultimate morality of the world while assuming the objectivity of his own moral insight. If there is no moral reason inherent in the being of the world, there can be no persuasiveness to the particularistic judgment of a nontheist who claims he possesses moral insight into why God cannot exist. The nontheist cannot have it both ways. If there is no inherent moral reason to the being of the world, then he should be unable to see any problem at all with regard to evil. A problem of evil is a problem for the traditional theist, but the nontheist from the outset has excluded himself from even discussing the issue by the nature of his own postulates.

A similar difficulty obtains for panentheism. Hartshorne assumes a moral and rational structure inherent in the world, but he denies there is any moral reason why there is anything at all. Morality is an irrational given; it is altogether unaccounted for. Especially God is not morally responsible for the cause of the world. A theist will argue
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that if there is no rationale for finite rationality itself then morality and rationality are indistinguishable from arbitrariness. Moral reasoning is simply reduced to individual caprice, and any attempt to construct meaning and value is illicit from the outset.

Even if there is a real element of chance (arbitrariness) in reality (the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy), the scientist and the philosopher still assume the priority of rational structure over arbitrariness. Unless reality is predictable in accord with reason, then life will be disrupted and all theoretical constructs will collapse. For truth depends upon the principle of rational explanation. Yet how can one explain the principle of rationality itself? If we assume reasons can be given for everything (even to acknowledge irrational behavior depends on rational insight), then are we not compelled to assume that finite rationality itself must be accounted for? Hartshorne says not. He makes contingency the basis of everything. Hence the self-cancellation of his panentheism. He has no apparent theoretical basis upon which to construct any theory of truth or morality, if irrational causes account for the being of the world. How can there be any logical reasoning at all if there is no ultimate reason why there is something rather than sheer nothing is not explained. Whitehead’s labeling this difficulty “the ultimate limitation” and “the ultimate irrationality” indicates the panentheistic failure to account for the validity of logical thinking. These labels do not theoretically justify logical reasoning any more than does Bertrand Russell’s nontheistic attempt to justify belief in inductive reasoning through what he calls “induction by enumeration.” He frankly admits that how one can justify the validity of reasoning “remains unsolved to this day.” The theist is able to see in these concessions traces of sheer fideism.

The panentheistic insight that God’s existence is the principle of rationality is thus weakened by its equating God’s actuality with contingency. If the reason for anything concretely existing is irrational, then upon what philosophical basis can reason be relied upon at all — other than blind faith? Irrationality and rationality become indistinguishable.

It seems apparent that the nontheistic and panentheistic objection to belief in a personal self-existent Being, who is all-powerful and good, is too easy. For there can be no true moral reasoning without the presuppositions of traditional theism which provides the only basis for assuming the validity of rationality and morality, as the
Thomist tradition has always maintained. While evil may be an insoluble problem for the theist, the more fundamental problem of reasoning at all is an insoluble problem for the nontheist and panentheist. What is metaphysically needed, as Kant put it, is a Supreme Intelligence who alone can "render the existence of the contingent . . . comprehensible." Otherwise, one falls into "the narrowing assertions of materialism, of naturalism, and of fatalism."

Though the theistic position poses a problem for itself, one's faith in God does enable one to face the future with hope, even if the "why" of gratuitous evil and its unjust distribution cannot be silenced. The reason for this hope is grounded in the fact of the sufferings of God in Christ. To be sure, Hartshorne also speaks of God suffering. If God lacks a conscious, subjective awareness of emotions, there is little comfort in the panentheistic identification of God with the world. God in Christian theism suffers in Jesus Christ. God is affectional in His being, and because He is an infinite, intelligent Being, the intensity of His pain surpasses all limits of human anguish. This notion of a hurting God who has suffered in Jesus Christ shows the extent of His emotional involvement with creation. His suffering is a testimony that God is doing everything that an all-loving, all-powerful God can do to save the world, given the context of human freedom and morality.

To be sure, God's perfect being is not altered through His openness to the world and His emotional involvement with us. Yet God is truly affectionate and is consciously aware of His and our emotions. The error of Patripassianism is not that it taught that God's being included pathos, but that God was capable of being changed in His essence by finite persons. The idea of impassibility in traditional theism in this regard is misleading for us today since passion no longer means being acted upon and changed. Passion for us denotes the idea of emotional involvement.

7. Reality as Personal

The basic philosophical objection to Hartshorne's process metaphysics is that it de-personalizes reality. His conception of the world harks back to the early Greeks, such as Empedocles, who describes the essence of the world as love (attraction) and hate (strife). Love and hate are metaphysical abstract essences, not characteristics of free intelligences. That is, love is not primarily
associated with a conscious subjective knowledge of one’s emotions, but is an abstract principle.

Hartshorne defines love as “sympathetic participation.” That is, the actual world is the sympathetic (i.e., interdependent) participation of all its parts in each other.69 Love is not primarily an affective relationship between intelligent persons, but is rather a mutual association of the particulars of reality. Love is more of a principle than a personal response.

Freedom is de-personalized in its primary signification and reinterpreted as a cosmological principle of chance inherent in all reality from the molecular level up to the actual whole of the world. To be sure, it is not sheer chance for Hartshorne, but the principle of indeterminacy is where his emphasis lies.70

Knowledge is also de-personalized in the primary sense of the word to mean ontological relatedness, not critical reflection.71 He asks: “What is concrete knowledge . . . if not some kind of sympathetic participation or love?”72 Love, knowledge, sympathetic participation are more or less interchangeable terms to designate an impersonal principle of interdependence, mutual association, and inclusiveness.

The concept of awareness is also de-personalized. “Awareness is essentially a response, an adaptation to others.”73 Also, “personality” is de-personalized. “And what is ‘personality’ but an enduring individual character or essence in a flux of such responses?”74 Personality means the “character” of God (i.e., His abstract essence). It refers to “the mere universal divine outline of existence without concrete or particular content” and as such “is indeed empty.”75 Personality denotes primarily the social relations of all concrete entities. Personality thus no longer carries with it a common sense definition of meaning an individual rational being.76

Awareness means the “act” of God. To say God acts is to say he “responds.” This responsiveness in God is the primary feature of the relative, concrete aspect of God. “Personality” is the primary feature of the absolute, non-actual aspect of his reality. It is the personality of God which is metaphysically, eternally enduring, but it is His awareness that is empirically changing. Personality is only a metaphysical abstraction, lacking actual intelligence. Awareness means the empirical relatedness of everything. It specifically has no connotation of psychological self-awareness which is a characteristic of determinate beings with intelligence.
What Hartshorne is asking us to see is that every part of reality from the molecular level up to the actual whole of reality (God-and-the world) is self-deciding, knowing, loving, responding, while stripping all these terms of their commonsense, personalistic meanings. In this respect, Hartshorne has more aptly called his panentheism a neo-Buddhism.

His neo-Buddhism is further seen in the way he defines human beings as changing individuals who lack any enduring self-identity. Here we come close to the notion of absolute change, that nothing endures except that the present does somehow include the past, though what is present is not the past reality as such. The only enduring event is the specious present.

How is it possible to defend this notion of absolute change in which nothing endures? Paul Tillich has shown the inadequacy of this idea:

The first thing to be emphasized is that human nature could not change if there was not something unchangeable in it. This is easy to understand: absolute change is an impossible notion, because without a subject of which we can say that it changes we neither could notice nor measure a change.

Hartshorne refuses the force of this telling criticism of his process metaphysics. He in turn accuses Tillich of falling into Eleaticism because he makes being, not process, the key ontological concept.

For Hartshorne, only love impersonally conceived as the dynamic interrelation of all things is the enduring quality of reality. God is the greatest exemplification of love, for he is the integration of all actualities, though he undergoes a “multiplicity of states.” Hartshorne says this means the God I “worship” is not your God. Neither do I worship the same God now that I did a moment ago.

Why? Because He is always changing in His actuality, though His love (i.e., that quality which binds reality together) guarantees the unity and harmony of the world. The Christian theists might be led to think this notion of many “gods” is only a more sophisticated form of polytheism.

It is apparent that love in its primary signification does not mean a self-conscious emotion between persons. To be sure, Hartshorne does say only men worship (i.e., praise God) because he alone has intelligence enough to speak. But what does it mean to praise God if
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He has no determinate knowledge of our acts of worship? Worship is de-personalized to mean a verbal response on our part to something which cannot know what we are saying.

According to its commonsense meaning, to be a person is to be a determinate being with free intelligence. Hartshorne denies that God is a person in the sense of "a single determinate actuality." He is a person in the analogical sense that he, like men, is a unified and integrated being. His difference from us is that he is "absolutely cosmic or universal in his capacities interacting with all others." Hartshorne rejects what he calls a "substance theory of personality" in favor of "the Buddhist-Whiteheadean or event theory" according to which "an existing person [whether divine or human] is a sequence of actualities, several per second presumably."

For Christian theism, this is the fatal flaw in Hartshorne's panentheism. What sense does it make to say that reality is a process actualizing its meaning if reality is de-personalized? What sense can be made of a panpsychist contention that atoms strive, decide, create, love, know, if they are devoid of free intelligence? Are not such qualities exclusively the possession of determinate beings with intelligence? Even allowing for the quantum theory of physics which says there is chance in the very structure of reality, there is no reason why we should anthropomorphize atoms. Even though Hartshorne claims his panpsychist metaphysics is the most intelligible alternative, it is difficult to avoid the impression that it is an abstraction unrelated to real life, especially because it de-personalizes reality.

Herein lies the most glaring paradox in his thought. The concrete God is the all-embracing actuality, but for whom is the concrete God an actuality? For Himself? No, because He is not a self-conscious living mind who has a determinate knowledge of Himself. For man? No, because there is no way any person can embrace in the mind the comprehensive whole of reality. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Hartshorne's concrete God is an abstraction. A commonsense concept of personality requires us to think of ideas as belonging to a living self-conscious mind. Values are nothing if they do not belong to someone. Hartshorne implicitly admits this when he acknowledges that the concrete God after man's disappearance from the world may include everything "faintly and ineffectively." Why? Because God's existence is not an actual intelligent being. To locate "ideas" and "values" within the empirical world apart from any association with
an actual intelligence is finally to de-personalize the meaning of ideas and values. In his criticism of humanism, Hartshorne rejects this exclusiveness of values to rational beings as a deification of humanity. But it seems his thought has fallen into the opposite error of anthropomorphizing the world.

Hartshorne’s reduction of reality to the relative world leads to a further reservation about his panentheism. He seems to have no vision of mystery. There is no allowance in his system for what Tillich calls the abysmal nature of reality, or what Michael Novak calls the experience of nothingness. Hartshorne’s rationalistic emphasis upon the meaningfulness of reality ignores the gnawing suspicion that there is an unknowable element about ultimate reality which engulfs us and threatens us. Tillich’s panentheism interprets this abysmal nature of reality as the unknowable depth of reality which points to the unchangeableness of God as Being-itself. Existentialists, like Sartre and Camus, interpret this feeling of nothingness as an ontological vacuum in man’s being. For them, nothingness is unknowable because nothing is there to be known. Hartshorne has no place in his philosophy for this experience of non-being. There is also a corresponding neglect in his panentheism concerning the feeling of anxiety and ambiguity of life. To say that the “essence of God is philosophically explicable and knowable” is to say nothing is left unexplained about ultimate reality. If one knows the very essence of God, then one is not estranged from God. There is then no divine mystery, no grace, no sin, and that feeling of twistedness of the world and the threat of the Unknown are simply explained away.

It becomes easy to see why Hartshorne disallows subjective immortality. His philosophy remains within the ordinary view of human experience with no properties lying outside. There is nothing more to reality. This emphasis upon the universality of truth has the advantage of claiming objectivity for itself, but it has the disadvantage of undermining the significance of the individual with his passionate interest in eternal happiness which transcends the specious present. It can thus be said Hartshorne has de-personalized immortality, for “we are ephemeral, but immortally so, for nothing escapes being woven into the imperishable and living texture of deity.” Hartshorne objects to the charge this makes the concept of immortality “impersonal.” He asks: “What is personal if not an actual human life from birth to death? It is that which is everlastingly cherished.” But what sense does it make to say a concrete God who
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has no determinate intelligence "cherishes" our life from its birth to death in His eternal life? And is not the notion of an individual who is "cherished" forever meaningless at least for the individual, if he has no subjective existence in the life hereafter?

Kierkegaard’s criticism of the Hegelian “concrete universal” seems applicable to Hartshorne: “What happens to the individual is in the last analysis a matter of indifference.”

8. Hartshorne’s Panentheism and Christian Theology

Obviously many of Hartshorne’s concerns overlap with Christian faith, and some Christian theologians believe his categories are easily adapted theologically for interpreting the gospel to the contemporary mind. Most notably among those who think this way is Hartshorne’s former student and distinguished professor at Claremont School of Theology, John. B. Cobb, Jr. Whether or not his attempt to provide this synthesis is successful merits consideration, but a full discussion of this question lies outside the scope of this present essay.

However, Cobb’s adaptation of process philosophy to Christian faith is suspect from the beginning for several reasons, if finite process is posited as the fundamental feature of God’s actuality. First, God can give us no “absolute” or “provisional” guarantee that good will triumph over evil, despite Jesus’ promise of the coming Kingdom. If God is subject to finite process, then He too can be victimized by evil and cannot promise us with certainty the arrival of the New Jerusalem.

Second, Cobb, unlike Hartshorne, does allow for the possibility of life hereafter, though he is unsure about its reality and is not overly concerned about it. His ambivalence stems in part from the panentheistic denial that persons possess enduring spiritual self-identity. Human beings are a sequence of momentary events who come to an end at their physical death. Paul thought differently about this. If we are imprisoned in the finite process with no spiritual transcendence and with no hope beyond this present world, Paul felt life was meaningless here and now. Without the eschatological hope, preaching is pointless, faith is empty, and existence is regrettable (I Cor. 15:14, 19).

Third, God’s reduction to finite process calls into question His deity. Unlike Hartshorne, Cobb’s Christian convictions cause him to ascribe personal self-awareness to God. Yet His self-awareness is
limited by the finite process. Particularly, God does not know the future. If God is a self-knowing mind who does not transcend the relativities of this worldly process and who has no comprehensive knowledge of future reality, then one cannot help but wonder if God does not feel the insecurity and anxiety of this Unknown Future. What is to keep us from thinking God “deifies” this Unknown even as man’s anxiety about the future has been the occasion for his “anthropomorphizing” his experience of the Unknown? Despite his impersonal notion of being, Tillich’s criticism of Bergson’s process thought seems incontrovertible at this point.

A God who is not able to anticipate every possible future is dependent on an absolute accident and cannot be the foundation of an ultimate courage. This God would Himself be subject to the anxiety of the unknown. On the other hand, without that which limits openness, history would be without direction. It would cease to be history. ¹⁰¹

How finite process as the basic attribute of reality can be harmonized with Christian faith is impossible to know. For it gives us no security about the triumph of good over evil; it minimizes the significance of the eternal happiness of individuals; and it weakens faith (“ultimate courage”) in God since He Himself is “subject to the anxiety of the unknown.”

The religious implications of Hartshorne’s metaphysics are in many respects negative from the standpoint of traditional theism, as Hartshorne intended. It denies otherworldly realities. It denies the history of salvation. It denies the special revelation of ultimate reality (a personal God) in history. It denies that anything absolutely unique can happen in history. It is a denial of the Incarnation. ¹⁰³ It is a rejection of the normative authority of the Bible, for the Bible can teach us nothing about the essence of anything which is not already exemplified in ordinary human experience. ¹⁰⁴ The Bible as a record of God speaking and acting in history is decided against in favor of a philosophy which stresses universal principles for “which factual distinctions are neutral.” ¹⁰⁵ Nothing historically factual is then of any consequence to Hartshorne’s quasi-theism. Hartshorne’s metaphysics minimizes the significance of the affectional nature of truth, as if the conscious subjective awareness of human emotion is not the core of personality. Hence worship of God as personal devotion is de-
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personalized into an aesthetic, intellectual exercise. Lacking the personal dimension, Hartshorne’s theism has more aptly been called a quasi-theism.106

Yet Hartshorne impressively shows that a positivistic narrowing down of truth to mere empirical facts is a retreating from the philosophical responsibility of addressing reality as such. He demonstrates that human experience cannot successfully evade the fact of God’s existence. He rightly contends that any meaningful notion of God includes His involvement in time and that His relationship to the world is grounded in the fact of divine energy and activity. He rightly argues against a deterministic model of reality, showing that freedom is a characteristic of the world because it is a fundamental attribute of God. His rejection of a Kantian bifurcated world in which only the appearance (phenomena) of reality (noumena) is knowable is a move in the right direction if a wholistic perspective of reality is to be maintained. Over against atheism, humanism, and deism, Hartshorne seeks to show that the values which give meaning to the whole of creation are grounded in the immanent activity of God’s concrete actuality. Whether or not his quasi-theism is more adequate than traditional theism for interpreting reality is a decision each person must make for oneself. For truth, though it is an intellectual activity, is a moral decision.

Footnotes

4 Ibid., p. 2.
7 DR, pp. xvi, 1-5, 40. The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neoclassical Metaphysics (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1962), p. 131. cited hereafter as LP.
8 A Natural Theology for Our Time (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1967), pp. 2,4. Cited hereafter as NT.
11 Mondin, p. 11.
The Asbury Seminarian

13 NT, p. 77; DR, pp. 36-40, xiii.
14 Cf. He Who Is, p. 61.
15 Gilson, God and Philosophy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), p. 43.
16 Ibid., p. 37.
17 Ibid., p. 40.
18 Ibid., p. 43.
19 Ibid., p. 48.
20 Ibid., p. 54.
21 Ibid., p. 22.
22 Ibid., p. 65.
23 Ibid., p. 74.
24 Ibid., p. 75.
25 Ibid., p. 77.
26 Ibid., p. 80.
28 PSOG, pp. 82, 92.
29 NT, pp. 109-110; DR, p. 1; Man’s Vision of God and the Logic of Theism (Chicago: Willet, Clark, 1941), pp. 90-91. Cited hereafter as MVOG; LP, p. 34.
30 NT, p. 77; DR, p. 88.
31 PSOG, pp. 71, 72, 97, 98; LP, pp. 109f.; Anselm’s Discovery (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1965), p. x. Cited hereafter as AD.
32 PSOG, pp. 105-106; LP, pp. 58ff.
33 NT, pp. 18, 45; PSOG, p. 105.
34 DR, pp. 8, 18.
35 PSOG, p. 131; DR, p. 8.
36 DR, pp. 16, 14, 26; NT, p. 45: PSOG, p. 133.
37 LP, pp. 124-126; DR, p. 27.
38 PSOG, p. 22; LP, p. 126.
40 DR, pp. 21, 23.
41 DR, pp. 1-4; PSOG, p. 103.
44 Gilson, p. 72.
46 Gilson, p. 70.
47 PSOG, p. 83.
48 DR, p. 30; cf. MVOG, pp. 93ff.
49 PSOG, pp. 36-38.
52 Ibid., p. 72.
53 Ibid., p. 73.
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DR, pp. 16, 14, 26; NT, p. 45; PSOG, p. 133.
55DR, pp. 134-142.
56DR, pp. 141-142; NT, pp. 80ff., 120.
57NT, p. 119.
58NT, pp. 80ff., DR, p. 135.
61Ibid., p. 43.
62DR, pp. 73ff.
65Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), p. 112.
66Ibid., p. 64.
67He Who Is, p. 111.
69NT, p. 13; cf. MVOG, p. 346.
71PSOG, p. 19.
72NT, p. 13; DR, pp. 10-11; LP, pp 41-42.
73PSOG, p. 22.
74PSOG, p. 22.
75NT, p. 76; MVOG, p. 249.
76DR, pp. 25-27.
77LP, p. 122; NT, p. 109.
78NT, pp. 76-77; AD, pp. 111-112; LP, pp. 121-124.
81NT, p. 104.
82NT, p. 4.
83AD, p. 111.
84PSOG, pp. 19-20, 22.
85NT, p. 136.
86AD, pp. 111-112.
88DR, p. 94.
89Beyond Humanism (Chicago: Willet, Clark, 1937), p. 2.
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92. DR, p. xiii.
93. NT, pp. 76-77, 107, 110.
94. NT, p. 111.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid.
100. Ibid., pp. 135-136.
102. NT, pp. 18-19; cf. MVOG, p. 112.
103. PSOG, p. 9; AD, pp. xi, 112; NT, pp. 76, 77; LP, p. 68.
105. PSOG, p. 8.
106. Madden and Hare, pp. 12-13, 118-121.