

God, the Gods, and the Process Perspective

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I appreciate an opportunity, such as this, to join a discussion made possible by three papers which together exhibit an intellectual carefulness and creativity not altogether common in such conversations. My contribution will be to offer some comments on each paper, none substantively critical, but also to attempt to even the field a bit by expanding on the position developed by Professor Monica Coleman. Her point of view, I think, is a sharper alternative to those of Professors Dan Dombrowski and Don Viney than her gentle prose leads one initially to suppose. She raises fascinating issues that I would like to underscore.

Dombrowski's paper is a splendidly clear exposition of the neo-classical concept of God. By neo-classical I mean the particular version of the process understanding of God adumbrated by Charles Hartshorne. Dombrowski's main task is to get clear about what infinity does and does not mean, and in the process he shows how to resolve Zeno's famous paradoxes and overcome Kant's first antinomy. But since this analysis of infinity is so crucial to neo-classical theism, and important to its critique of the Western classical tradition, Dombrowski's paper is also a strong argument on behalf of Hartshornian process thought. At a minimum he shows, I believe, that the neo-classical God is coherently conceivable.

Viney's paper fits Dombrowski's as hand to glove, or perhaps glove to hand. Dombrowski observes that "infinity" applies to the possible aspect of God, God's abstract side, but, he notes that "this tells us little about God's *actuality* (i.e., *how* God exists in concrete detail from moment to moment)." It is this "concrete detail" that forms the basis of Viney's argument on behalf of the mystery of God. Viney's task, building on Anselm, is to argue that the greatest conceivable being is a being "greater than can be conceived" and thus to preserve the mystery of God which is, he says, essential to any adequate theological discourse. There is an apparent paradox

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here, for how can a being, whom we are able to conceive of as being the greatest, also be greater than can be conceived? Put differently, how can an inconceivable being, be conceived of in any way at all. But the paradox is dissolved when the distinction Dombrowski and other neo-classical theists make is called to mind. We can conceive of the distinction between possibility and actuality in God, and it is especially in the richness of actuality that God's nature surpasses all understanding. In short, we can conceive of why God's actuality cannot be conceivable to us.

Indeed, we might note that the inconceivability of God's concrete actuality has an analogy in our own human experience. It is clear to me that Don Viney's actual experience is not clear to me. That's precisely because it is his experience alone, and so only accessible to him. We can abstractly conceive of a repository of all experiences, such as neo-classical theism conceives of God, but we cannot even begin to form a conception of what it would mean to bring together the procession of those contingent experiences into a concrete synthesis. On this I think Viney is right.

There is a question, though, as to whether that is enough. Is this the mystery that is required in an "adequate" concept of God? After all, as the analogy with human experience suggests, the mystery of God does not seem to be different in kind from the mystery that characterizes each human subject from the vantage point of others. Of course, it is vastly different in quality – vastly different, for we cannot even imagine what it would be like to draw together the succession of all experience, to say nothing of experiencing ourselves that synthesis. And as Whitehead once noted, some differences of degree are so vast as to constitute differences of kind. That is true, I think, for all practical purposes. But, again, is that enough, is this "practical" difference in kind the sort of difference we require if we are to do justice to the mystery of the divine?

The traditional ways of speaking about God's mystery, as Viney says, are to attribute to God that which is logically contradictory, or to say that no positive statements properly apply to God. Viney has responses to each that may be conclusive, but there are, after all, other assertions of the mystery of God, such as those in the apophatic tradition, that might in fact be sustainable. For example, there is the argument of Robert Neville, another philosophical theologian who works within a process philosophical framework. Neville's position hinges on the distinction between the determinate and the indeterminate. The world, he says, is the sum total of things that are determinate. If we are to ask the so-called ontological question, Why is there something rather than nothing? the answer cannot be one more determinate thing. Hence, if we are to ask that question, the answer must be that which is indeterminate. And about that which is indeterminate, one can say nothing, or rather, one can say nothing more!

Of course, whether one asks the ontological question, as Neville himself admits, is a matter of something like religious sensibility or, perhaps, metaphysical taste. And so, too, I think is what may be its corollary, namely, the sense that the mystery of the divine must be different in kind from the mystery that attaches to all other things.

My basic point is this: Whether the quite significant mystery that neo-classical theism is able to attribute to God is "enough" mystery to provide an adequate concept of God is a question that itself depends, it seems to me, on a certain metaphysical taste or religious sensibility. Viney's defense of God's mystery, and the

larger clarification of neo-classical theism which it also provides, will be compelling then,...to those who share Viney's sense of things.

Coleman's paper, however, acutely raises the question of what I have vaguely referred to as taste or sensibility. Among neo-classical theists, the question of alternative sensibilities is seriously constricted by the ontological argument, the claim that a being than which nothing greater can be conceived – and thus, as Viney says, which in some respects is greater than can be conceived – exists necessarily.

There are several questions here, which I don't have time (and, frankly, am not qualified) to address. One is whether the ontological argument works. The validity of an argument is not established by majority vote, to be sure, but the fact that the majority of philosophers who have thought about the ontological argument apparently do not subscribe to it should give us some pause. Another question is whether if it does work we should pay any attention to it. This may seem like a cavalier point, but I don't think so. Some years ago a student said to me that if the ontological argument works it proves only that there are some dimensions of reality to which reason does not reliably apply. When I pressed her, she recalled Whitehead's statement that a good theory should be able to take account of each item of experience, and, she added, it should do so in a manner that is not dismissive. She said that for her and for many devout believers (like her) as well as for thoughtful non-believers, the experience of not knowing whether there is a God has to be dismissed if one accepts the ontological argument. And if she must accept its validity, she will reject the applicability of the reason on which it is based to this particular subject matter.

There is a third kind of question, having to do with the nature of "perfection." It can be asked in connection with the ontological argument: If we were to accept the argument, what is the nature of the perfection the necessary existence of which it demonstrates? The question, however, can also be asked independently of the ontological argument: How is divinity most adequately conceived – as being singular or as being plural? The monotheistic philosophical and religious traditions of the West have taken the position that the most valuable state of affairs is one that somehow joins in a unity all individually realized values. Neo-classical theism shares this assumption with the classical tradition, adding the important point that this unity of value does not vacate or minimize the dispersed values which first belong to the discrete individuals whose achievements are being unified.

I understand the worldview Coleman is discussing to reflect a different sensibility: The greatest conceivable state of affairs is one in which perfections remain to some degree dispersed, not united into one, except perhaps nominally as what we might call "divinity." A pragmatic argument on behalf of this point of view is now appearing in some quarters of Western social thought. It is the argument that while intolerance of others on behalf of a particular set of religious or social values is undoubtedly due to many factors, taken in isolation from other factors monotheism provides more direct support for intolerance and the violent defense of truth than does polytheism. That argument, its various forms, and the responses to it, need not occupy us here; the point here is simply to note that the argument that "an abiding diversity of achieved values or perfections is more perfect than their ultimate unification" is not totally alien to our Western culture, long dominated by religious and philosophical pursuits of one ultimate.

In any case, if we were to countenance the idea of a diversity of irreducible or “un-synthesized” centers of value that are, however, in a distinct class that makes them worthy of adherence or worship – if we were to countenance such an idea, Coleman asks, can process thought make sense of it. She thinks it can, and I agree. Indeed, I might urge its compatibility with “polytheism,” a term she resists, to a degree that goes beyond Coleman’s own very interesting proposal.

Against the Hartshornians, who contend that God is a serially ordered society of actual entities, Coleman holds (consistent with Whitehead’s own language) that there is “an everlasting actual entity with primordial and consequent aspects” (*Olódùmarè* or *Ọlórún* in Yoruba religion) which she variously characterizes as “a morally neutral force...found in all things,” a power that “imbues all creation,” the “life-force of creation and the *òrìṣà*” (the multiple divinities of Yoruba religion), and the “dynamic stuff” without which the world cannot operate.” Except for Coleman’s statement that this “everlasting actual entity” has consequent as well as primordial dimensions, one might immediately conclude that this actuality, or *Olódùmarè* in the Yoruba system, is to be equated with “Creativity” in Whitehead’s process philosophy. And I am still not sure that this equation is mistaken, for Creativity in Whitehead’s thought refers both to the giving of the past to the present and the reception of the past by the present – both, in a sense, the primordial and the consequential antiphony of the cosmic process. Whatever the best way to locate *Olódùmarè* in a process scheme, she is correct, I think, to assert that the *òrìṣà* to which this “life-force” gives rise can be, and presumably are, sustained in and by the cosmic process. So in a process philosophy freed from the necessity of one and only one God, there can be multiple beings or realities worthy of worship – and, according to the Yoruba, there are.

In conclusion, I would like to note this same possibility in the terms of more conventional process thought, if, again, our conclusions about God are not constrained by the ontological argument. Clearly process thought has to date harbored more than one view of God. Robert Neville’s God is the indeterminate ground of all processive things. Donald Crosby argues that nature is worthy of worship and quite properly occupies the place that traditional theism has reserved for God. Bernard Loomer argued similarly that the “whole of things” is God. Bernard Meland understood God to be “the More,” the depth dimension of the cosmic process that is intuited in what Whitehead refers to as perception in the mode of causal efficacy. Other process thinkers have viewed God as an element of the cosmic process that “makes for right,” whether through the provision of propositional feelings, or as the Beauty, in Whitehead’s sense, that draws the cosmic process forward. And it might not be too much to contend that Gordon Kaufman’s view of God as serendipitous creativity could well be fitted into a process framework.

What is particularly interesting to me, in line with Coleman’s project as I understand it, is that at least some of these would seem to be “compossible,” mutually possible Gods. That is, if by “God” we mean centers of reality to the advancement of which we might properly give ourselves and in relation to one or more of which we might rightly order our lives, then the process system not only permits a number of different views of one God, it also permits a number of different Gods! On this view, the “community of Gods,” to use Coleman’s term, might include the mystery of things, the intrinsic value of concrete reality, the ideal form of

becoming for each present moment, the lure of the Beauty that is presumed to draw all things, and the ceaseless creativity that characterizes the cosmic process. One or more could conceivably be worshipped without discounting the reality and importance of the other Gods. The population of this process “community of Gods” falls well short of the 410 *òrìṣà* of the Yoruba people, but it is moving in that direction!