

God and Evil in Process Theism

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Abstract: If a good and almighty God exists, why do we register genuine evil? Whiteheadian process theology wants to assist Christian theology with philosophical theism that interprets God's sovereignty and God's creative and providential activity as being more in accord with both our everyday experience and God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ than in the case of either traditional theism or "free will" theism.

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As all philosophical and ethical questions, the problem of evil is related to what we believe, what is our conviction and for many also to the idea of God as the basis and norm of everything actual or possible. Theoreticians of ethics observe that the question of validity of moral duties can be inferred logically and thus independently of the idea of a general norm. However, arguing for validity of a moral duty must be set apart from the issue of the basis and the metaphysical presuppositions of such an argument. The presupposition of a transcendental basis or the belief in such a transcendental basis has an indisputable significance for the substantiation of moral norms. And it is exactly this presupposition that postulates the issue of evil in a new way. If there is God, why does he¹ not prevent at least the most horrifying instances of evil?

According to the usual view theism or any conviction that God exists entails a claim that the world was somehow created by this supranatural entity that is impeccable as to power (omnipotent), knowledge (omniscient) and goodness (morally perfect). The existence of genuine, indisputable evil, "without which, all things considered, the universe would have been better,"² appears to be a logical objection against traditional philosophical theism. Such evil is, at least from the Christian point of view, something that is against the will of God, and therefore, a truly omnipotent, omniscient, and

1 The usage of masculine does not indicate a gender.

2 "Genuine evil" in the definition of David R. Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 22.

morally perfect God would prevent it. The traditional philosophical theodicy, if it does not mean only the so-called “arguments for the existence of God,” is thus an effort for a coherent theistic response to the claim that the three “divine perfections” cannot be consistently defended.

1. The question of God’s power in process theism

A distinct voice in the Anglo-Saxon area of this debate represents the so-called “process thought,” which views reality as an ongoing process where everything is mutually related and exists only in the form of a continuous interaction with a supreme Subject. Those who share this view have no problem with identifying this Subject with God of most traditional religions and the interaction with the essential form of God’s creativity.

According to process philosophy and theology the problem of evil resides primarily in the traditional understanding of divine omnipotence. Process theodicy is thus predominantly a debate with the philosophical alternatives which form the framework of the traditional Christian concepts of God’s power. The perspective of these concepts is determined by dogmatic traditions built on the conventional interpretation of the Biblical witness with conscious or unaware use of Greek philosophical concepts. The primal source of the process theism is on the other hand neither the Bible, nor the Aristotelian philosophy but the metaphysics and philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and/or Charles Hartshorne, though it could be argued that a kind of religious instinct or feeling is behind their vision. In any case, Whitehead himself, as a former student of theology, saw an unique and authentic historical representation of the idea of God’s aim and activity as he viewed it in what he called “the brief Galilean vision of humility,”³ namely the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth, and was convinced, that “the essence of Christianity is the appeal to the life of Christ as a revelation of the nature of God and of his agency in the world.”⁴ Hartshorne who defined God of the theistic religions as “the One Who is Worshipped”, i.e. who is “worthy of the worship he calls for,” and was convinced that the process view corresponds with the Biblical

3 Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process, and Reality*, corr. edition (New York: Free Press, 1978), 342.

4 Alfred N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 167.

tradition of the “living God” much more than the theism of the classical metaphysics.⁵

The main protagonists of process theology also believe that process view of the intercourse between God and the world is compatible with the Biblical message, and they are convinced that this makes process thought both attractive and usable for Christian theology. Therefore, they search for such concepts of theistic world view which would confirm the elementary Christian doctrine of God. According to David Griffin such a doctrine would include these essential convictions: (1) God, the creator of the universe, is loving; (2) the world is therefore essentially good, although it is now filled with evil; (3) it is God’s purpose to overcome this evil; (4) this overcoming will include a salvation for us in a life beyond bodily death; and (5) God has revealed these truths and acted decisively to carry out the divine purposes in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.⁶

Process theology is able, according to Griffin, to confirm all these basic elements of the Christian doctrine built on the essential Biblical message. All other traditional teachings which are not part of the gospel are thus secondary, if not even misleading. This includes the doctrine of divine “omnipotence” used to support the hope that God could and in the end would triumph over the forces of evil, or – for example – the doctrine of “predestination” which was supposed to support the insight that salvation is based on God’s grace, not human works.

The authors of classical theology understood the proclamation and confession of “the Almighty” quite literally, that is in absolute sense, and they did not think it was contradictory. So, on the one hand they proclaimed that humans are free and morally responsible, and on the other hand they taught that everything good or bad in the world is somehow in accord with God’s will and God’s intention. This led to all kinds of sophistry in the interpretation of and giving reason for the presence of evil in the world. This is what process philosophy and theology radically deprecates. The process thinkers find the idea that God has full control of everything in the sense that everything that happens, happens in accordance with God’s will, and

5 Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1967), 3; passim.

6 David R. Griffin, “Process Theology and Christian Good News” in John. B. Cobb and Clark H. Pinnock (eds.), *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans, 2000), 8.

that behind all the horrors we witness in the world is God – either as the one who is causing it or as the one who lets it happen – is both philosophically and theologically unacceptable.

The basic problem is that the concept of divine all-powerfulness suggests the absurd idea of a monopoly on decision making. This makes God the creator of a “world” which is not a real world because it diminishes the reality of any responsible creatures. It transforms the traditional idea of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) into *creatio ex deo*, where the world does not differ as its being from any idea in God’s mind. Over against this the process thinkers believe that God’s creative power implies lower forms of the same. The “principles of creativity” limit certain accidental elements that the lower forms of power bring about but do not and cannot eliminate them entirely. For without a measure of sustainable “power independence” there cannot be any existence “outside” God.⁷

David Griffin, who was dealing with process theodicy more systematically than anyone else,⁸ explains the nature of divine creativity by distinguishing between monism and monotheism.⁹ The idea of one and only God does not imply monism. Accordingly, in searching for the most suitable definition of theism, process theodicy distinguishes between God and creativity. Creativity is the elementary disposition or endowment without which is no entity comprising any measure of subjectivity imaginable. It is an uncreated potency and freedom for self-creating and influencing others that makes reality a process in which such self-formation and influencing happens all the time. God as the only instance of creative freedom would be just a non-sensical impeccability of order, where there would be nothing to direct. Everything would be under control, but the character of this “everything” would not imply any existence. Therefore God whose relation to the world is an embodiment of this creativity does not have and cannot have absolute control. God directs the world by influencing it (while being constantly influenced by it, i.e. while reacting to what happens in it), but God’s power is only evocative: God’s continual interaction with all self-creating creatures resides in encouraging them or

7 For Whitehead’s view of evil see Whitehead, *Adventure of Ideas*, 259–64; Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil*, 282–85.

8 Besides the mentioned title see David R. Griffin, “Creation out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil”, in S. T. Davies (ed.), *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Edinburgh: Westminster John Knox Press, 1981), 101–18, and David R. Griffin, *Evil Revisited* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1991).

9 Griffin, *Evil Revisited*, 22.

luring them to such free self-creative decisions which when realized support what is at any given moment best for both themselves as well as for the surrounding and constantly developing world in its entirety.

If God as the highest or supreme power is not the only sustainable instance of power, the existence of evil does not imply the denial of God as the classical objection concludes. God as the creator and supporter of the actual world does not have in process view of divine supremacy even such coercive power that is possessed by human beings and as well as many other creatures because God does not have an “instrumental body” that is necessary in order to move or manipulate (from Latin *manus* – hand) with other “bodies.” God can make his will prevail in the world only by “persuasion,” that is without coercion and only on the assumption of a cooperation of the other actors, his creatures, but he cannot guarantee that such a cooperation will take place. Wherever there is capacity for goodness, there also is capacity for its opposite. Such correlations are necessary and their hypothetical absence in the real world is impossible. The creative advance of the world viewed as “process,” the world in which this principle works (and we can hardly foresee a “world” where it would not), brought about also creatures who can “sin”, whose response to the divine calling or luring to be in harmony with the ecosphere from which they emerged and to which they are naturally related might be decisively and moreover self-consciously negative. And so even while the aim of this process is and remains to be “good,” the actual products of it do not have to be such. So, the creation of the world is a risky adventure, and the risk grows up with the higher levels of freedom and awareness. Mainly, there is no alternative to this. This means that there can be no “why?” – why does God bring this evil upon us? – because God does not bring it upon us. God merely constitutes – through the structure and potentials of the creation – an order in which the individual creatures and sometimes even groups of creatures can on the one hand bring other creatures or groups of creatures happiness and beauty or, on the other hand, disasters, slavery, etc. Evil is simply a consequence of the creative freedom of the creatures and there is no point in looking for any rational grounds or reasons of concrete instances of destructive evil. They do not have that for they are in principle *irrational*. To put it differently, the presence of evil in a God-created world is explicable from the very notion of self-determining creatures, i.e. the only kind whose existence we can imagine.

2. The world as “cosmos”

However, what, on the other hand, cannot be so explained, is the fact that despite all disharmonies and all perishing the world is able to go on as “cosmos,” which in Greek means “jewel,” namely as an area of co-existing and in a large measure still mutually harmonious units. This phenomenon seems to suggest an inherent providential aspect that can hardly be disproved. So just as there cannot be imagined, on the one hand, any existence outside God without a certain measure of independence, there can be, on the other hand, hardly imagined non-chaotic existence without some influence by God. However, with God we can relate only such guarantee of world order, in which the growth of freedom means – in spite of all the unavoidable evil and destruction – a better chance for “good.” Therefore, any image of the world as a distributive machinery of reprisal betrays a flagrant misunderstanding of the idea of Providence. The management of universe does not imply a giant court of justice. The plurality of the creative agents simply means that even in a wisely directed world there will unavoidably be a certain risk of conflicts and suffering.

God does not have a coercive power, at least not the kind foreseen by traditional determinism, namely a total one-sided control of everything that happens. A certain degree of “coercion” is represented by the natural laws and regularities that guarantee the functioning of the universe as we know it, since the idea of divine management implies that the world is not ruled by sheer spontaneity and chance. Through the laws of nature God creates a situation where individual entities become, so to speak “a lot” to one another, but they do not become a kind of an impersonal field force of divine might.¹⁰ The evolution theory does not explain these laws and so someone who believes in God may suppose that it is a providential decree. In any case, in a livable world there must function a certain measure of predictability that enables the run of the world in the form we experience.

Hartshorne admits that at many instances the divine luring is not consciously registered and so it cannot be effectively opposed. He also says

¹⁰ Charles Hartshorne, perhaps the most important process thinker next to Whitehead, observes that the classic ancient wisdom document thematizing this – the Book of Job – clearly rejects such an idea. It is cherished by the mistaken comforters of Job, but not by “the voice from the whirlwind,” and Job himself at least partly comes to the apprehension that there is no “why” to the problem of evil. Cf. Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time*, 116–21.

that God tolerates variety to the degree where it does not cause chaos and disorder (the very opposite of “cosmos”), or that God prevents a state where reality would lose the nature of something concrete. He even argues that the process (the world) would disappear if there were no limits to the development of alternatives which are not compatible with it. All entities which possess a certain level of subjectivity enjoy some freedom of choice thanks to the order; we call “world,” an order which they do not determine or co-create. Thus, according to the process thinkers God has in fact a higher control than it appears at first. In addition to the general limits all living creatures are subjected to many specific or individual ones, given by what formed their particular past as the basic source of their present creativity. However, even here is God in charge only as the one who is calling or luring to the best choices in view of the overall harmony. There is no coercive divine intervention into the order of things.¹¹ It is another reason why any desire for “divine interventions” is highly problematic.

The existence of natural laws and regularities does not mean an arbitrary curtailment of creative freedom. On the contrary, it is its basis preventing such a state of affairs in which reality would lose the character of something concrete and distinguishable. Individual entities are free to respond to the challenges of their environs and of all other pressures or influences, thanks to the order of the natural world. Therefore, one should not talk about “limited” divine power – as some critics of the process view do – because such term suggests an image of a “lesser” power than the highest power which can exist in a real world.

3. Hope against evil

The above is the reason why process thinkers refuse not only the theodicy of classical theism but also the theodicy of the theologians and philosophers of the “free will theism,” namely the teaching that while the almighty God could determine everything, he has decided – aware of the value of the self-determining creatures – to create free human beings.¹² According to this view

11 Cf. Barry L. Whitney, “Hartshorne and Theodicy,” in Robert Kane and Stephen H. Phillips (eds.), *Hartshorne, Process Philosophy and Theology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 53–69.

12 From many representative statements of this position, we might mention Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

God could prevent evil but doing it he would limit human freedom, without which some values could not be achieved, and therefore God preferred to limit Godself. God however holds in reserve the possibility to intervene and thus interrupt the normal flow of events. It was God who gave his creatures their creative freedom, therefore he can overrule it whenever he wants to. How otherwise to explain miracles? God's dealing with the world includes the possibility to enforce something. God does not do it often in order not to cast doubt upon the nature of the created world and not to discourage our responsibility for making some decisions and actions on our own. Nevertheless, it is God's free volition.

The basic objection against this view is, that in this case the permission to be "against God" is not widening our freedom but putting it in danger. Freedom "to sin" which can be at any time withdrawn is not worthy of all the horrors in the world that we register as its consequences. It is not a freedom that fosters responsibility. Rather it fosters indifference and leads to trivialization of suffering. The idea of an absolute control in the sense of a power occasionally to rule out some volitions, acts or processes that are taking place in the area of the world's creativity and thus a power to prevent human or natural catastrophes as the Holocaust, devastating famines, deformation of newborns, or suffering of animals (which cannot have any "educational" purpose), etc. is far from inspiring faith. Rather it inspires wild speculations about possible "higher goodness" that is supposedly going to be achieved by it. If God's goodness is in any way related to a power to enforce it, we could not understand why such enforcement has hardly ever taken place.

God, to be sure, "intervenes" all the time but without interrupting the normal course of events. God's nonviolent influence never rules out the potency of his creatures to self-determination, for no event is one-sidedly caused by Godself. It is always a coaction when the acting subject is influenced by all that is challenging it or inspiring it. God's activity has constantly the character of calling or luring to taking the best step or turn, even though the concrete shape and effect of it differs according to the circumstances. God's original creative act and his activity in Jesus Christ does not differ as to its intention from his present acting. At the level of humans, God acts by persuading us to share and multiply his love and be involved in creating joy and beauty. But it is also at this level that resistance to God's activity causes evil, and this evil can become demonic and devastating. Human potency to misuse creative power becomes demonic and devastating when it is used in

deliberate opposition to God's intention and will. Because of the volitional reciprocity God cannot have this kind of evil under his full control and therefore he has to struggle with and use all his wisdom and influences to subdue it and overcome it.

The process theodicy resists sheer voluntarism, which wanting to preserve the principle of divine freedom opens door to either the idea of God's indifference or the idea of God's arbitrariness. For the process theist even God's miracles – presupposed one way or the other by all religious traditions – do not necessarily mean an interruption of the causal nexus. As much as divinity is and must remain a mystery to us, what we call God's signs or miracles do not have to be something entirely different from what God does all the time and therefore they do not have to be really "supranatural." Paranormal does not imply supranatural. Neither should the solution to the problem of evil be sought in the traditional strategy that is willing to justify all suffering and horrors by talking about "a test of faith," "the punishment for sin," or about "educational value" of suffering, etc. God is never in impasse and his creativity abounds with options how to proceed without the use of coercion or violence. These undoubtedly include his possibility and ingenuity to make some good from the evil that we have been caused or suffered. God intimately knows the pain and the horror we experience and through his actual presence to every living subject he can help us to come to terms with it. This is something else than claiming that God himself is producing or permitting such experiences even though he did not have to, as the "free will" theism seems to suggest.

The process thinkers admit that many Biblical attestations or images are not easily or fully reconcilable with process theism.¹³ Rather than giving us a full account of the nature of God's reality the Bible is concerned with revealing God's identity by providing us with a witness to the nature of God's acting in concrete situations. The scriptures' hermeneutical context is God's covenant with Israel, not cosmology. Israel bore concrete witness to God's acting and let the "cumulative context" modify this witness according to the actual need. The Biblical witness thus cannot be viewed as a systematical account of God's power. As the process philosopher Lewis Ford observes, "by his covenant with Israel all of God's actions could be accepted and understood

13 See Lewis S. Ford, *The Lure of God: A Biblical Background for Process Theism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 15. Cf. Griffin's survey of Biblical images in: *God, Power, and Evil*, 31–37.

as expressions of his age-long struggle and personal confrontation with his people and not as mere displays of raw, naked force."¹⁴

However, many a Biblical account can indeed be interpreted in a more universal or even "cosmological" context like the one represented by process theism. God's acting through a kind of "persuading" is being attested by the very Biblical account of "creation by the Word." The whole description of creation "in seven days" can be interpreted as a creative response, as a kind of dialogue in which the creatures react to God's creative call to "higher complexity." The concept of divine persuasion permits us to view the creative Word as a dynamic principle, thanks to which the world remains to be "cosmos" rather than chaos. The Logos in the writings of John functioning as that which unites everything and gives it good sense, and God's personal address calling humans to authentic and responsible decisions are thus in principle the same. The history of salvation culminating in the story of Israel and of Jesus Christ is in essential continuity with creation as God's continuous activity and thus with the history in general. God's covenant with Israel may be viewed as a symbol and paradigm of creative reciprocity between God and the world as such. God's providence persists in God's readiness to react appropriately to ever new situations. Christians believe that God's intention as well as God's characteristic dealing with the world is embodied primarily in the story of Jesus. It is thus fair to proclaim that the Biblical witness in its entirety attests the consistence of divine work. Some metaphorical descriptions of the work of God do not confirm this but they can be ascribed to the lack of interest of the Biblical witnesses in the logic of their testimony. This does not impair the overall impression.

Debates concerning the nature of God's acting in the Bible touches implicitly a topic which is more characteristic for the Biblical testimony than theodicy, namely the issue of hope. Is God a final warrantor of the meaningfulness of creaturely existence and a trustworthy foundation of hope in the final superiority of good? Or is God only guarantying that goodness will not perish, while the threat of universal annihilation persists? According to some process thinkers the Whiteheadian vision does not provide a full security of any kind of personal satisfaction or compensation. It provides only an assurance that our valuable earthly deeds and thoughts will not lose their value since God who is luring all creatures to achieving what is

14 Ford, *The Lure of God*, 16.

in any given situation the best – for themselves as well as for the world – continually benefits from the valuable experiences of his creatures making them part of his own eternal harmonious reality. In this way God makes sure that our “good” does not go down the drain “for good.” This promise of the ultimate preservation of everything valuable what we ourselves create or experience is the basis for claiming the meaningfulness of such creativity and experience.

Process cosmology and ontology thus allows speaking about God’s activity in the world, but it does not allow the idea of a “final solution” of the problem of evil and of the power of evil in the world that would be brought about forcefully by God. Lewis Ford, who clearly distinguishes between coercive and persuasive power,¹⁵ admits that in the Whiteheadian vision the final warrant of the “triumph of good” is missing, but he does not see it as a deficiency and concludes that a sense of such “triumph” may become the subject of faith, because such faith would be justified by the constant overcoming of the “triumph of evil” in the form of total destruction.

David Griffin comes in his theodicy to a similar conclusion. God as the initiator of novelty has at his disposal realistic possibilities which we would never have dreamt of and therefore even the hope for some “triumph of good” face to face with all the perils we keep experiencing is not unrealistic. Thus, process theodicy ends up as a matter of fact with the vindication of our experiences: Creation itself was a risk, for there is no absolute defense against evil, but if its alternative was only nonexistence, it was a risk that was worth it. It was – and still is – an adventure for Godself, but it was not “playing a dice with the universe”, an idea which the theoretical physicist Albert Einstein as a theist passionately opposed. What is essential is that all the risks of the creatures are risks that the Creator himself goes through. This frees God from the rebukes which he had to be facing as a mere “observer,” waiting with curiosity how it all ends up, and it is also a source of hope that the final outcome will be satisfying for all.¹⁶

15 Lewis S. Ford, “Divine Persuasion and the Triumph of Good,” *The Christian Scholar* 50:3 (1967), 235–50. Imprint in Delwin Brown, Ralph E. James and Gene Reeves (eds.), *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 287–304.

16 Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil*, 309n.

4. Life after death?

What about the hope of a life after death? Is it not just as important as the hope for the triumph of good? Process philosophy does not necessarily exclude the vision of some kind of life after death and David Griffin himself admits that a guarantee of ultimate meaningfulness of human life and a credible basis of the hope for the final victory of good over evil belong generically to the idea of God. Such hope can thus be for us the ultimate source of courage to face both death and the demonic forces of evil. Therefore, he looks for a possibility to strengthen these motives within Whitehead's "categorical scheme."¹⁷ God, he says, can use the same *modus operandi* which gave rise to life – including the human life as we know it – in order to preserve life or give rise to it after the bounds of personal death or after the termination of humanity. The advance to a new mode of existence, even though it presupposes an essential change, does not have to appear as a supernatural exception to God's graceful and creative initiative at all levels of things. God whose loving creativity continually provides some new and attractive opportunities, brings about or calls for radical changes all the time.

Theodicy is not a part of the usual theological discourse, at least not in the traditions where theology does not mean primarily "a doctrine of God" but rather an interpretation of the "Word of God" (theú-logos).¹⁸ Here the evil that must be overcome is primarily the breakup between God and humans caused by sin as pictured in the story of the fall. However, this discourse cannot avoid the question of other kinds of evil and process theodicy can assist this theology as well. The story it tells and the vision it offers correspond to the message about God the Creator and Provider who is in a dialogical relationship with his creation even after the fall. He not only saves it from the consequences of the fall by confronting them himself, but he keeps taking care of it and is summoning all perceptive creatures to participation in this care. This nonviolent summoning is finally once and for all carried out through the earthly pilgrimage of Jesus Christ with whom God fully and ultimately identifies.

17 Griffin, *Evil Revisited*, 31–40. Cf. Griffin, "Postmodern Animism and Life after Death," in David R. Griffin (ed.), *God and Religion in Postmodern World* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 83–108.

18 The possibilities of "Barthian theodicy" – in the sense of a theological response to the problems of evil and suffering – is the topic of the study of Scott Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

An abstract concept of “omnipotence” as it was developed primarily at times when the church closely cooperated with power structures of the state in order to dominate and annihilate all opposition does not fit the authentic religious intuition of God’s sovereignty. The Kingdom of God is not a totalitarianism as we witness it in the ambitions of the worldly powers all the time. Contrariwise, the image of God’s rule in the form of permanently resourceful and adequate guiding and assisting, as it is expressed both in the New Testament and in the Apostles’ Creed by the Greek word “Pantokrator” (the governor of everything), fits it quite well. It fits it even more when we realize that the purpose of this title – as well as of all the traditional Hebrew expressions which it was to convey for the Greek Christians – is not a description but *doxology* – the praise and adoration of the living God.¹⁹

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¹⁹ The late Czech theologian Jan M. Lochman is efficiently dealing with God’s “omnipotence” in connection with the Bonhoefferian notion of God’s “defenselessness” in his study “Reconsidering the Doctrine of Providence,” in Wallace M. Alston, Jr. and Michael Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 281–93.