

## THE PROBLEM OF THE ULTIMATE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

Dr. Jan Van der Veken\*

### Abstract

*Different contemporary philosophical and theological authors try to disconnect the problem of being and the problem of God. Heidegger says explicitly: Being is not God. He criticizes the onto-theological structure of Western metaphysics, which reduces God to a highest Being (yet still a being amongst other beings). When Whitehead develops the idea of God as an actual entity, be it an eternal one, there is a real danger that he falls back into an onto-theological understanding of God. In the last chapter of Process and Reality, however, there are beautiful intuitions which make God far more than an Eternal Actual Entity, providing "initial aims". God shares in his own concrete being what happens in the world, as far as His ideals are concerned. Here we see what the immanence of God in the world might mean. Yet, it looks that this immanence is not yet complete: God is not yet "all in all."*

"The rock of Evil" is the great problem of all theodicy. Theodicy itself, introduced by Leibniz, is the endeavour to excuse God from the accusation of evil. Whitehead's

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\* Dr. Jan Van der Veken is the Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Higher Institute of Philosophy, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, E-mail: Jan.vanderveken@hiw.kuleuven.be

solution of the problem is the clear distinction between the philosophical ultimate and the religious ultimate. This is exactly the reason why Whitehead introduces the distinction between 'substantial activity' and the principle of concretion or limitation in *Science and the Modern World* (SMW). In this sense God is not the source of the metaphysical situation but rather its valuation. In a more understandable form, we can phrase this question as follows: what can we say about Ultimate Reality on philosophical and on religious grounds?

To say that God is not in all respects to be identified with Absolute Reality is a serious break with the traditional doctrine of creation. Contemporary theologians tend to agree that "creation" is not an *explication* for the being-there of the world (that explanation we should leave to science). An appeal to the Biblical creation story cannot solve the philosophical problem of the coming into being of the actual universe. With regard to the bringing into being of the world the creation story wavers: the *tohu wabohu* seems to pre-exist the divine word (*dabar*), which should be rather understood as the ordering of things (day and night, water and land etc.). Divine creation does not seem to bring into being everything. Divine creation –by the *dabar* of God– orders the original chaos. In this way, the world –as an ordered togetherness of things– comes to existence. Whitehead seems to point to this ordering function of God in the last sentence of the God-chapter XI of SMW: "If He be conceived as the supreme ground for limitation, it stands in His very nature to divide the Good from Evil and to establish Reason 'within her dominions supreme'".

To divide Good from the Evil resonates in the biblical creation story when the text repeatedly expresses the divine appraisal: "and God saw that it was good". The divine fiat seems to result in the goodness of creation. It is a recurrent theme in contemporary accounts of the doctrine of creation that creation is not an explanation of the fact that there is an actual universe, but that the very essence of the religious doctrine of creation is "that God saw that it was good". That seems very much in line with Whitehead's contention that God is the valuation of the world.

In their own way different contemporary philosophical-theological authors try to disconnect the problem of being and the problem of God. For Heidegger, God is not Being, and certainly not the Highest Being or the *Causa Prima*. The God of religion is rather the God for whom we can dance and to whom we can pray. For Heidegger, God is so to say the Holy Face of Being, turned towards us, or "*das Heilige*". This sacredness is for Hölderlin and Heidegger more eminently present in the "gods" of ancient Greece than in the biblical monotheism.

Not surprisingly, Emmanuel Levinas takes his distance from the Heideggerian "Holy", which is the Holiness of No-one; it is the pagan face of Being as Neutrum, which is the source of all violence and cruelty against the other. Emmanuel Levinas opts for a departure from the identification of Being and God, which is clearly expressed

in the title of his second great book, *Autrement qu'Être*. (Levinas calls it a "departure from Parmenides, which is daring").

Levinas has reflected upon the biblical creation story, and—as all other philosophical themes- he interprets it in his own original way. Interestingly enough, Levinas does not see creation as an ontological dependency, as it is traditionally understood; quite the contrary: creation is the bringing about of a sphere of autonomy: "It is not a minor glory of God to bring about a being capable to be an atheist." A-theism, in the sense of standing on one's own feet, is the very possibility to be addressed by the divine "Other". Jean-Luc Marion, in the line of Levinas, has titled his first great book: *Dieu sans l'Être*.

The long-standing traditional conflation of the problem of God with the problem of Being, or—to put it in the terminology of this paper- the identification of the religious Absolute with the philosophical Absolute is the great problem of contemporary thinking about God (or Theodicy). Whitehead sees this conflation as a metaphysical compliment given to the God of religion. But to make God the source of the metaphysical situation as such is only seemingly a compliment: it contains as a Trojan horse- the very core of the unsolvable problem of theodicy.

Let us first focus on the question of Being. Why is there anything at all? Or, why is there anything rather than nothing? is often considered to be the most ultimate question of philosophy. It is Leibniz's question. Cornelius Verhoeven, a Dutch philosopher, has called it the Devil's question. There is almost no way to ask it correctly.

First of all, the question does not apply to all-encompassing Being, or to all there is, or to God. The well-known question stopper—to the question 'but why is it that God exists?' The answer is: God does not need a reason in order to exist. God has the reason of His existence in Himself. In any philosophy, there is an Ultimate which does not need a further explanation. It can be Being (Parmenides), or God (in medieval philosophy) or Substance (in Spinoza). In fact, the "devil's question" concerns only finite beings (to which the why-question does apply).

In Whitehead's philosophy, the ultimate—or that which does not need any 'extrinsic' reason, is called Creativity. Creativity does not need a reason for its existence. It is itself the reason (of all actualities). Whitehead says that in all philosophies there is an ultimate which is only actual in virtue of its instances. Those instances (called occasions of experience or actual entities) are the really real 'things' (*res verae*). According to the ontological principle, actual entities are the sole reasons: if no actual entities, then no reason. Whitehead even goes so far to call actual entities *causa sui*. This has puzzled many commentators. Of course, *causa sui* reminds us

of Spinoza's Substance, which is –alone- *causa sui*. The modes follow from the Substance by necessity. In this sense, they are, indeed, not *causa sui* but modifications of Substance.

In SMW Substantial activity points clearly to Spinoza's Substance, conceived in a more dynamic way. So it would be more understandable to conceive Substantial activity as *causa sui*, and as the ultimate reason why there are actual entities at all. The question of Leibniz could be phrased in Whitehead's framework as: Why happenings happen at all? The question would be: because there is creativity, or the creative advance into novelty. Creativity is also understood as "ongoingness": the reason why something goes on at all.

In traditional Philosophy of Being there is no reason (outside of being) why Being should be there: it is the groundless Ground of everything that exists. The ontological argument points to this Reality which is such that no greater can be conceived (*Id quo major cogitari nequit*, IQM). In the Christian understanding of Being according to Anselm, IQM and God are identified. But that can clearly be done only in a religious context, where God is already conceived as the Absolute or the Ultimate. God shares now in the prerogatives of Being, to be the groundless of ground of everything.

In traditional Philosophy of Being a difference comes to the fore between Being (identified with God, and labelled as 'Esse subsistens) and beings, conceived as created. When finite beings are "added" to subsistent Being (or God), there is no more "being": there are only more "beings": *dantur plura entia, non datur plus entis*. In this sense, beings do not 'add' anything to Being. Being is already fully actual, also without beings (or without Creation).

Spinoza brings Beings and beings more closely together: the modes follow from Substance with necessity. Hence they could not be otherwise than they are. When one looks at all there is '*sub specie aeternitatis*', one sees that things happen exactly the way they happen. The so called problem of evil is the result of a biased –or not illumined- look at the way things are. If we look at everything from the point of view of eternity –"*sub specie aeternitatis*"- we realize that everything happens necessarily –*ex necessitate divinae naturae*. In this sense, evil is not real.

Whitehead adopts basically the scheme of Spinoza, but adapts it in a significant way, with a very different view of evil. Substance –conceived dynamically- is the ultimate, and all occurrences are its modes. But Substance (or substantial activity) and God no longer coincide: Substantial activity is the reason for the occurrences, which are now somehow putting themselves together. They are (partly) accountable

for what they are doing (their concrescences). Whitehead says that a more simple philosophy is possible (he means clearly Spinoza's own system). For Spinoza the philosophical absolute and the religious absolute coincide: *Deus sive natura*. Not so for Whitehead. God is not the ground of the metaphysical situation. He is responsible for the concrete "how" of the Universe. Hence, God is not Creativity itself, but *the first qualification of creativity* (labelled the principle of Concretion or of limitation). Exactly because of the problem of evil Whitehead takes his distance from Spinoza's Absolute monism. For Whitehead there is not just one Instance that acts according its own nature. Every actual entity "puts itself together". It is possible that what actual entities do conflicts with another actual entity does. Their ends may "at cross purposes". For Whitehead God is not the only agent. He "lures" every actual entity to be, and to be as good as possible. But God does not decide whether its invitation will be accepted.

For Whitehead, the problem of evil is the great divide between traditional theism, Spinoza and his own speculative system.

Substantial activity (in SMW) is called Creativity in *Religion in the Making* (RM). Creativity becomes now a formative element, which is a serious shift from SMW. "The temporal World and its formative elements constitute for us the all-inclusive universe" (RM 90). These formative elements are:

1. The creativity whereby the actual world has its character of temporal passage to novelty.
2. The realm of ideal entities, or forms, which are in themselves not actual, but are such that they are exemplified in everything that is actual, according to some proportion of relevance.
3. The actual but non-temporal entity whereby the indetermination of mere creativity is transmuted into a determinate freedom. This non-temporal actual entity is what men call God - the supreme God of rationalized religion.

Creativity has become a formative element: it is the reason for "the temporal character of the actual world" (RM 90), i.e. creativity makes possible concrescence and transition. "Creativity is not separable from its creatures" (RM 90).

Whitehead talks now about "the protean character of the creativity". It has no character of its own. That is the reason why creativity has been interpreted as the universal of universals, and even as an "eternal object". We are far away here from Substantial Activity (in a Spinozistic vein). God is now -for the first time in Whitehead's philosophy - conceived as an actual entity. The status of this non-

temporal actual entity is far from clear. Whitehead identifies it too readily with the "Supreme God of rationalized religion" (RM 90).

We are now not far away from what Heidegger has called :the God of onto-theology: God is an actuality, and in this sense only an actual entity amongst other actual entities (be it that He is the only non-temporal actual entity is open to Heidegger's objection that God has been reduced to "Seiendes" ("a Being of an actual entity"). The distinction between *Sein/Seiendes*, or the distinction between Being and beings - has been overlooked. God is now the Highest "Being", and Being-in-the-verbal sense has been overlooked. The analogon of Being (in the Heideggerian sense) in Whitehead's system is not God, but Creativity.

There are theological objections, too. How God can be at the same time the Creator of everything, omnipotent and good? Leibniz' position is the exemplar of this understanding of God. Hence it is understandable that he asks in an explicit way the problem of theodicy. How an omnipotent God can create such a world? We know the answer: this is not a perfect, but "the best possible" world.

Whitehead has his own way to answer the problem of theodicy: God offers only "the initial aim" to each concrescing occasion. An occasion (or an actual entity) is self-creative, or *causa sui*. So God is not responsible for the discrepancy between the offered initial aim and the realized subjective aim. God is rather the great companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands.

This is mainly elaborated in Whiteheadian Magnum Opus, *Process and Reality* (PR). One cannot but be impressed by the great achievement of this speculative treatise in which in a very short time he tried out his speculative scheme. It seems to me, however, that the speculative system as elaborated in PR has in no way the finality that many have attributed to it.

Whitehead, in one of the few surviving personal letters, said: "There is no suggestion in my mind - nor (I hope) in my works - of a clear-cut adequate philosophical system. All we can do is to gaze dimly in the infinitude of things, which lies beyond our finite apprehension. Words are inadequate for experience, and experience is inadequate to grasp the infinitude of the universe. Of course, this is commonplace : but it cannot be repeated too often" (Letter to Guy Emerson [1937], Houghton Library, MS Am 1850, 1-10 (I owe this quote to Kenneth Mason, who wrote a doctoral dissertation with my colleague André Cloots).

The problems which were discussed right after the appearance of *Process and Reality* were the status of the eternal objects and the exact nature of Creativity. I was impressed that in an early discussion with Allison H. Johnson -in his notes of

graduate study with Whitehead- those problems came already to the fore. A problem which occurs again and again in the discussion is the conception of God, offering an initial aim. One can easily see that Whitehead wants in that way to offer a solution for the problem of theodicy. If God is "the Lord of possibilities" (as I like to name this conception) can he really being excused for the evil in the world? Can we say that God also offers an "initial aim" to a devastative virus such as HIV? Or to each drop of water that "causes" the Tsunami?

Whitehead's proposal is very inspiring, but eventually, I am afraid, not satisfying. The combination of offered possibilities and human freedom and responsibility, makes a lot of sense. But I do not think that you can extrapolate this idea to the entire material world. In the last part of PR, *God and the World*, Whitehead tries out the way that Christian idea of God –the brief Galilean vision-can be constructed within the confines of the speculative system of PR. As I surmised in an early article, presented at the first (in fact: the second) International Whitehead Conference in Cologne, 1981) "Whitehead's God is not Whiteheadian enough"<sup>1</sup>. His understanding of God as presented in the last chapter follows in no way from the speculative metaphysical scheme, presented in the body of PR. Whitehead introduces, for the first time, it seems, the idea of the distinction between the primordial and consequent nature. (We owe to the painstaking analysis by Lewis Ford this insight into the emergence of the main themes in Whitehead's *Process and Reality*.) My contention is that Whitehead felt compelled to say something about "God", because PR was presented as the Gifford Lectures, devoted to natural theology.

Whitehead gave his intuition full sway, and he writes a beautiful essay –I have heard that he said that this was his best essay ever- but goes far further that the conceptuality of PR can allow for. It is clear that Whitehead wants to "recover" so to say, the basic insights of a Christian understanding of God. That last chapter of PR has inspired numerous theologians, and rightly so. There is, however, a basic theme of Christian theology that is not explicitly treated in that chapter, namely the theology of incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity. They are some analogies, however. Ivor Leclerc has suggested that the Christian theologian who comes closest to Whitehead's position is Scotus Eriugena. His description of the four phases of the realization of the divine nature coincides very closely with Whitehead's four phases in the last chapter of *Process and Reality*.

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<sup>1</sup> "Whitehead's God is not 'Whiteheadian' enough", *Whitehead und der Prozessbegriff. Beiträge zur Philosophie Alfred North Whiteheads auf dem Ersten Internationales Whitehead-Symposium in Bonn, 1981, Freiburg and München, Karl Alber Verlag, 300-311.*

It seems to me that Whitehead introduces here a new theme, which makes God far more than an Eternal Actual Entity, providing "initial aims" to each creature. God shares in his own (consequent) being what happens to the world. God and world are now really related. This goes in the direction of the Christian doctrine of incarnation which, (unhappily enough) has never been elaborated by Whitehead.

According to the traditional doctrine of the incarnation "God becomes Man". But this narrow interpretation of the incarnation should be broadened to the whole cosmic body of Christ. According to a beautiful saying of the mystic Angelus Silesius, "God has only one Son, all of us in Christ" (unhappily enough I do not have the exact reference of that quote). Saint Augustine has similar expressions: "*Et erit unus Christus amans Patrem*". This an eschatological vision, to be sure, but it offers a broad perspective. God is not yet "all in all". The hope expressed by Paul in Corinthians that God will be all in all ("*ut sit Deus omnia in omnibus*") is one of the most quoted expressions in contemporary theology. I do not know one serious book of theology in which this quote is not prominently present.

Many authors have tried to interpret Whitehead creatively. It is in itself a proof that Whitehead's system is in no way "closed", but that it is always open to new revisions. Of course, one of the most inspiring revisions of Whitehead's speculative system is Hartshorne's *panentheism*. I owe a lot to Hartshorne, but eventually I cannot share his idealistic assumptions, as if perfect knowledge would be perfect inclusion.

Instead of panentheism I suggest that we should rather talk about *eschatological theo-en-pantism*. The world as exists today is not yet good enough to be conceived as coinciding with God or to being "in God" (pantheism or pan-en-theism). But the Christian, with Saint Paul, hopes that God eventually will be "everything in everything". This implies that, at present, God is not yet everything in everything. Or, in Whiteheadian jargon, God's ideals are not yet fully realized. Lots of things happen in this universe which are not "created or intended by God". In his *Timaeus* Plato talks about "erring causes". For Plato, too, God is only good. So He cannot be the cause of everything (*Politeia*, II). So there must be other causes, which are "erring", i.e. happening, but intended by no one, and for that reason wreaking a lot of havoc. I think that "the erring causes" of Plato will have a great future. Erring causes are intersections of causal strains which are intended by no one. In this sense they are due to "chance". Chance, however, is not an agent. It is just a way to say that what happens "by chance" has not been intended by an Intelligent Agent. Biological mutations, e.g., can be understood as chance occurrences. That does not imply that they are not obeying the rules of the game (the laws of nature), but they are not "intended". I think that it is very important to accept the existence of these erring causes. Otherwise Whitehead could be very well seen as an advocate of the Intelligent design movement, which would be a disaster.



To summarize: God is, within the Whiteheadian system, to be conceived not as an actual Entity (not even the highest or the eternal One). God is not to be conceived as coinciding with Creativity, either. If God were Creativity itself, or the Creator of Creativity as some Thomistic interpretations have suggested, then, again, the problem of theodicy (the problem of evil) would arise.

I see "God" (within the Whiteheadian system), as the first qualification of Creativity, i.e.: creativity as far it is permeated by Truth, Beauty and Goodness (this seems very much in line with a faith-understanding of God who is love, i.e. only good). There are enough sayings of Whitehead to support such an understanding. God rules the world by His ideals, i.e. by persuasion and not by force. "There is, therefore, in God's nature the aspect of the realm of forms as qualified by the world, and the aspect of the world as qualified by the forms". There is "a rightness in things, partially conformed to and partially disregarded" (RM 66). "God is the valuation of the world".

Or to put it in plain language: "God" is the term that the religious person uses to talk about the world as far it is –partly- permeated by truth, goodness and beauty. The religious person lives in the hope that –in the end- "God will be everything in everything". "Thus God is the measure of the aesthetic consistency of the world. There is some consistency in creative action, because it is conditioned by his immanence" (RM 99). The immanence will be seen in AI as a great step by the Alexandrian Fathers "beyond Plato", and beyond *Process and Reality*.