

Discussion of Palmyre M.F. Oomen's Recent Essays in Process Studies

Duane Voskuil

*Duane Voskuil, former Chair of the University of North Dakota's Philosophy Department and an advisee of Charles Hartshorne at Emory University, is a violin maker experimenting with sound theory at 1002 N. 8th St., Bismarck, ND 58501.
E-mail: dvoskuil@bis.midco.net*

I. Oomen's Proposal

Palmyre Oomen proposes to answer how God can be *one* actual entity, one subject primordially and forever, and still (1) continuously integrate multiple prehensions of the world successively, and (2) continuously present data for the world toprehend (PS 27/1-2:108-133). Her answer hinges on attributing to God (a) *one* satisfaction which remains eternally one yet alters since it grows, and (b) *one* subjective aim which remains eternally one yet alters since it adjusts to the world's new creations.

The apparent contradictions in God remaining one whole that changes by the additions of a "growing satisfaction" and retaining one aim that changes relative to new worldly data are supposedly resolved by Oomen's magic bullet, the "reversed polarity of God," which is "essential" for her view (PS 27/1-2:116,132).

II. Generic-Specific Confusion

Admittedly, God's satisfaction can grow and God's aim remain constant yet change, but only when referring to them generically as one does when speaking of a person's life's goal and the satisfaction acquired during its accomplishment. Each momentary satisfaction can include previous satisfactions without internally modifying them, but it (and what it includes) is the result of a new whole's satisfaction not numerically identical with the former satisfied entities included. "The many become one and are increased by one." (PR 21).

However, this is not Oomen's solution. Her single-entity view of God can only have one satisfaction, so it must keep changing.¹ She blurs the distinction between concrete states and their generic aspects. She either imputes concreteness to common, abstract factors found in a series of concrete moments, committing the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness, or equivocates on the meaning of basic concepts, denying, for example, that for God "the 'satisfaction' is the 'superject'...[which] closes up the entity" (PR 84).

God's "constant aim" can also be seen as an expression referring generically to the common element in all God's somewhat different specific aims. Since all of God's momentary aims necessarily have a common aspect, and since God can have no first nor last momentary aim, their common element is necessary and changeless. What this eternal element is is the matter under debate, though Whitehead's realm of eternal objects seems highly suspect. The only truly eternal aspects are the metaphysical Categories themselves. These Categories include the necessity to love and be loved.

Loving in an unsurpassable way is God's changeless and *abstract* (PS 27 330) primordial aim, an aim to embrace all and influence all to be lovable. But God's influence can never be fully determinate nor eliminate tragedy since the world's acts are necessarily somewhat self-directed, recalcitrant "matter," Plato would say. God's specific response to the world must wait

on its creations, the reason God's actual subjective aims can never be eternally established. That God has some aim or other is not dependent on any particular actual world. Neither are the completely generic aspects of God's specific aims dependent on any particular world, but God could not exist without some actual world *or other*, and every actual aim God does have is conditioned by all previous creations.

So why does Oomen think God is more rationally conceived as a single actual entity, an entity allowed to be a major exception to the principles applying to other actual entities (though, she maintains, not an exception to the metaphysical scheme)?² She claims the serial view of God has even greater problems (PS 27 115-116) because God viewed as a personal nexus (1) does not allow God to have a primordial conceptual pole and, therefore, a constant divine aim, nor (2) does it allow God to be prehensible at all times by the world since God would be momentarily indeterminate during each divine concrescence.

III. Primordial Aim

As for the first point, God, or every moment of God's series, must have the dipolarity required of all processes. "Primordial" can only refer to Categorical characteristics all actual entities have always exhibited, not a state of existence before concrete moments began. God "is the beginning and the end. He is not the beginning in the sense of being in the past of all members...He is...in unison of becoming with every other creative act" (PR 345). Contrary to Whitehead's mythical expression, there never could be "one non-derivative actuality, unbounded by its prehensions of an actual world" (PR 32). There have always been divine (and nondivine) creative processes. The primordial conditions for process are those absolutely abstract, metaphysical characteristics which all specific potencies must exhibit. Every process, divine and nondivine, must prehend this primordial condition which includes the primordial "valuation," the unavoidable purpose of existence.

Whitehead does write that God's "conceptual actuality at once exemplifies and establishes the categorical conditions" (PR 334). Certainly, God must exemplify the Categories, but God cannot "establish" them, if that means God creates them or decides what they are to be. They are eternal necessities, or they would not be Categorical.³ With a theory of eternal objects akin to Plato's Ideas,⁴ the primordial condition would be in need of a primordial valuation, an adjustment of their relative significance in light of some Form of the Good since "there can be no 'many things' which are not subordinated in a concrete unity" (PR 211). But a Hartshornean view of potentiality leaves only the mutually interdependent and equally important⁵ metaphysical abstractions as the primordial condition. Every other potency is more or less specific and has been created and valued at some time in the past, just as new potencies will be created forever.

Every subjective aim begins with a concrete situation and is, as Oomen says (but only of nondivine occasions), consequent upon physical prehensions. Likewise, every physical prehension is consequent upon a prior conceptual aim, or potency, that existed as a means to bring the satisfaction into existence. Here, too, Oomen is right. Potency or conceptual prehension is indeed prior to any *specific* actualization, just as some physical prehensions or other are necessarily prior to every actual aim, including God's. Both are, and have always been, required for anything to exist. Neither alone is fully actual or concrete. In this dipolar, primordial chicken and egg neither can be said to be temporally prior or more significant than the other: Each is "on the same level."⁶

All potency or valuation resides in some actual process or other, and since every process is dipolar, Whitehead's statement that "general potentiality is absolute" (PR 65) or pure can only be mythical. All potentiality is, and always has been, real, never pure. The primordial nature of God cannot be an "actual entity," despite Whitehead's use of that expression when he is opposing the world to God (PR 65). Since only actual entities act, it is impossible that "for the determination and providing of an initial aim, God's consequent nature⁷ is not needed" (PS 27 330) or that "God's aim is derived from God's primordial nature without any reference to a given actual world" (PS 27/1-2:116-117) unless these expressions mean that no a particular world is needed even though some world *or other* is necessary. Universal characteristics of all possible aims only exist as common aspects of actual aims, so physical prehensions are not added to an abstract primordial nature (as Oomen suggests, *ibid.* 115). There is no primordial entity as such to add to; abstractions cannot exist, much less be adjusted, apart from concrete wholes.

IV Process and Prehensibility

As for Oomen's second reservation with God conceived as a personal nexus, that God's objectified satisfactions would not always be available for the world toprehend, why is it necessary to maintain previous satisfactions (which are objectified and in the process of being added to by the new moment) are inaccessible and not prehensible by others? A process philosophy need only affirm: (1) the process of making a new object is not in itself an object, and (2) once a process begins, causally conditioned by objectified others, it cannot be further influenced. Beings created by others and prehended by a divine or nondivine process are maintained by that process. The maintenance keeps them available for others rather than hides them from others.⁸

To support her contention, she argues that "'always in concrescence and never in the past' [PR 31] should be read as 'always subject never merely object'" (PS 27/1-2:117). Indeed, God is always a subject, that is, always some subject *or other*; and yes, God is never merely object; but what logic requires the conclusion that God is only one subject through time? No person is ever *merely* object as long as still living,⁹ yet each moment of a person's series perishes and another begins prehending the satisfaction/superject of the previous moment of the series, together with other contemporaries.¹⁰ God's actual entities also perish, yet God is always a concrescing subject (though not the same momentary subject) since God's personal series could never have a first nor last moment.

Finally, although in the following paragraph Whitehead injudiciously uses "temporal" to refer only to fragmentary actual entities, he does come close to saying God is a personal series (a chain) functioning along the *same* principle (in the same way) as those in the world.

An enduring personality in the temporal world is a route of occasions in which the successors with some peculiar completeness sum up their predecessors. The correlate fact in God's nature is an even more complete unity of life in a *chain* of elements for which succession does not mean loss of immediate unison. This element in God's nature inherits from the temporal counterpart according to the *same principle* as in the temporal world the future [present] inherits from the past. (PR 350, emphases added.)

V. Problems With Oomen's Single-Entity View of God

Whether Oomen's view is more or less like Whitehead's, I hesitate to

say since Whitehead's view is not clear, but any formulation of a single-entity view of God will likely stumble into the illogic of substance philosophy, "the notion of an actual entity which is characterized by essential qualities, and remains numerically one amidst the changes of accidental relations and of accidental qualities" (PR 79).¹¹ New additions to God's satisfaction would certainly be accidental. They could not be essential to God without holding all that will be is already determined to be. But this predeterminism reduces to a Leibnizian monadic view of a changing whole or to a block universe with no temporal sequence.

...The actual entity terminates its becoming in one complex feeling involving a completely determinate bond with every item in the universe...the addition of another component alters [would alter] this synthetic 'givenness'. Any additional component is therefore contrary to this integral 'givenness' of the original...the final 'satisfaction' of an actual entity is intolerant of any addition...the completion of 'givenness' in actual fact converts the 'not-given' for that fact into 'impossibility' for that fact...This synthetic unity forbids the notion of mere addition to the included elements. (PR 44-45)

Is God *a* fact? Does "God" name *one* fact, one whole? If God is one fact, one actual entity, how can God not be a changing, altering or growing fact contrary to the meaning of an actual entity? "Actual entities perish, but do not change; they are what they are" (PR 35). If God is one fact, why isn't God's satisfaction "intolerant of any addition"? Further, how can Oomen's God be aware of God's "growing satisfaction" without again violating the definition of an "actual entity" since "no actual entity can be conscious of its own satisfaction; for such knowledge would be a component in the process, and would thereby alter the satisfaction" (PR 85)? If God is not one fact, then what can God be but a series of facts?

Oomen thinks God's constant initial aim avoids the contradiction of an altering whole since the unity of God (as with all actual entities) resides in God's aim and not in the multiple prehensions of others or the accumulating satisfaction. But a constant aim is only an abstraction from actual aims, not an actual aim itself. An actual aim is conditioned by the physical content of the process. The primordial nature has no aim, nor can it exist by itself because it is abstract, and abstractions are only characteristics of concretes. The one, concrete, living Actual Entity that supposedly is God would have a constantly changing aim adjusting to the ever-novel world, and so God, in Oomen's view, and likely all single-entity process views, is constantly one and many.¹²

As an additional complication, the "growing satisfaction" seems able to grow continually in spite of Zeno's Paradox and the logical necessity that all change be temporally atomized. "God includes *incessantly*, like a reservoir, which grows *incessantly*..." (PS 27 330) "...Physical prehensions are *constantly* added...(PS 27 115). However, "continuity concerns what is potential; whereas actuality is incurably atomic" (PR 61).

Oomen's God is not only an exception to all other actual entities, but is probably a Categorical exception, because "in God's case, the aim is never achieved in the sense that the process stops." (PS 27 331)¹³ This so-called "process" is not a concrescence aimed at a satisfaction, since God is always satisfied according to Oomen. Her use of "process" refers to a mysterious growth adding to God's "state(s)" of satisfaction. So God as one whole is always determinate (having a satisfaction) and yet always indeterminate (in "process" of acquiring more satisfaction). God is perfectly round

becoming rounder.

A final problem, Oomen seems to say God grows everlastingly, but not primordially. If God has always been growing (whether by concreting to a satisfaction or by “adding” more satisfaction), there never could be a Primordial Valuation prior to physical prehensions. When Whitehead’s says, “the non-temporal act [sic] of [an] all-inclusive unfettered valuation...” (PR 31), and God “in his primordial nature, is unmoved by love for this particular, or that particular; for in this foundational process [sic] of creativity, there are no preconstituted particulars” (PR 105), he again is using mythical expressions. There are no acts or processes except those of actual entities, and all actual entities are conditioned by physical prehensions of previous acts. As Whitehead himself says, as he continues the above quotation, this unfettered valuation

...is at once a creature of creativity and a condition for creativity. It shares this double character with *all* creatures. By reason of its character as a creature, *always in concrescence* and never in the past, it receives a reaction from the world; this reaction is its consequent nature. It is here termed ‘God’...*God has objective immortality* in respect to his primordial nature *and* his consequent nature. (PR 31-32, emphases added.)

When Whitehead speaks of a “non-temporal actuality,” he is either referring (with an unfortunate phrase) to an actual entity that is not all-inclusive (PR 75) or is speaking mythically of a “time” when the metaphysical characteristics were “established” (PR 334). But in his more careful and literal moments, he knows the metaphysical aspects of reality, with their primordial valuation, were never established. They have always been.¹⁴ Here again Whitehead’s realm of multiple, eternal and specific potencies causes his theory to be expressed vaguely if not incoherently. There is no need for a primordial valuation of the metaphysical “principles which actuality exemplifies [since they] all are on the same level” (PR 18), and all valuations of contingent potencies have occurred at some time in response to some actual world and all previous divine creations.

VI. Conclusion

The force of Oomen’s interpretation which allows Whitehead’s God a “growing satisfaction” plays on his vague and ambiguous statements about God’s so-called primordial nature. I doubt Whitehead can consistently mean there is a primordial “concrecence” of eternal objects (PR 87), though Whitehead can meaningful say God is “always in concrecence” (PR 31) as a series of concrecences with no first nor last member, and with no extensive pause between the satisfactions and their objectifications.

Whitehead does not speak of God’s “ever-growing satisfaction,” much less as an exception to other actual entities. All actual entities, including God, must “concrece as the transition from indeterminateness to determinateness” (PS 27/1-2:113), because bringing about “definition is the soul of actuality” (PR 223). A “dynamic satisfaction” (PS 27/1-2:112) is an oxymoron. Dynamism is the function of concrecent process that Oomen denies occurs in God (PS 27/1-2:114) except when she redefines “concrecence” as continually growing satisfaction” (PS 27/1-2:113). An actuality satisfied can be and do nothing more and still remain the same actual entity.

For theism to be taken seriously, God must be an unavoidable exemplification of the ultimate Categories in terms of which all reality is understood. Though God’s exemplification can and must exhibit the

Categories in an ideal and unique way, this uniqueness cannot equivocate on Categorical meanings or one has not moved beyond the *via negativa*. Oomen's effort only makes more clear the inevitable contradictions inherent in an altering whole, an insight generally ignored since Parmenides pointed it out.

Notes

1. (first "2" as printed) An altering whole is logically problematic and contrary to Whitehead's definition of "change:" "The fundamental meaning of the notion of 'change' is 'the difference between actual occasions comprised in some determinate event'...I shall use the term 'event' in the more general sense of a nexus of actual occasions...An actual occasion is the limiting type of an event with only one member" (PR 73). Need Whitehead here make an exception for God?

2. Whitehead says, "The metaphysical characteristics of an actual entity--in the proper general sense of 'metaphysics'--should be those which apply to all [possible] actual entities" (PR 90). "God is not to be treated as an exception to all [sic] metaphysical principles invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification" (PR 313). I read Whitehead to mean "any" where he says "all." All metaphysical categories either apply to all that does or could exist, or they are simply not universal, the hallmark of metaphysical. He also says, "There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real. They differ among themselves: God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space. But though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in *the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level*" (PR 18, emphasis added. Also see PR 350).

"The description of the generic character of an actual entity should include God, as well as the lowliest actual occasion," and though there will be differences, differences arise from their inclusiveness...In the philosophy of organism as here developed, God's existence is not generically different from that of other actual entities, except that he is 'primordial' in a sense to be gradually explained" (PR 75). I doubt Whitehead ever really explained this, and I am not convinced Oomen has either.

3. Neither can God, as the Principle of Concretion, initiate a "*definite* outcome from a situation otherwise riddled with ambiguity" (PR 345, emphasis added). God, as is necessarily (Categorically) the case with any subject, can only condition the world superjectively to have this or that *kind* of outcome. Of course, God is unique since only God conditions every successive moment.

4. "Idea," I-dea, which roughly means "Goddess in me," is something, however, that process philosophy can mean literally.

5. Note again Whitehead's statement quoted above in footnote 2 that when it comes to "the principles which actuality exemplifies "*all are on the same level*" (PR 18, emphasis added).

6. Unless reality is non-temporal, one must either assert reality had an absolute beginning, or maintain some form of infinite regress. An infinite regress of self-creating entities seems least objectionable: Some actual entities or other have always been; all inherit and exhibit the same generic characteristics; and only one at each moment does so in an unsurpassable

way.

7. God's consequent aspect is God's prehension of some state of the world or other.

8. See "Hartshorne, God and Metaphysics" PS 28/3-4 for further elaboration of this point.

9. Of course, neither is any subject, including God, merely subject, since all subjects must include objects.

10. For God the next moment must begin immediately or the just perished moment would be "mere object" or "nonbeing," that is, meaningless.

11. Whitehead continues, "There then remain two alternatives for philosophy: (i) a monistic universe with the illusion of change; and (ii) a pluralistic universe in which 'change' means the diversities among the actual entities which belong to some one society of a definite [personal] type" (PR 79). How does Oomen's entitive view avoid this alternative?

12. Hartshorne writes in *Chance Love and Incompatibility*: "The first step toward a more intelligible view is to recognize with Scholz and a number of other logicians that absolute identity of the concrete or particular is given in an event or occasion, not in a thing enduring through time, like a person or a body. The merely relative identity of the latter may be called, with Levin and Scholz, genetic identity, *Genidentität*." This essay can be found in *Philosophers of Process*, D. Browning and W. Myers, eds., Fordham Press, 1998, 442.

13. Oomen argues that no Categoreal Condition requires a process to perish to be objectively immortal (PS 27/1-2:117). If she is right, this would seem to weigh heavily against Whitehead's having adequately expressed the Categories. He does say, however, God has "objective immortality" (PR 32, quoted below), and that satisfaction "closes up the entity" making it "intolerant of any addition," and even if sense could be made of God's "reversed polarity," I fail to see how it would avoid the problem of a changing whole. Whitehead's epochal theory of process is likely his greatest insight.

14. If they were adjusted and subordinated, it would have to be in an actual entity not in a primordial time before any actual world existed because "there can be no 'many things' which are not subordinated in a *concrete* unity" (PR 211, emphasis added), and only actual entities are concrete.

References

PS 27: Palmyre M. F. Oomen, "The Prehensibility of God's Consequent Nature," *Process Studies* 27 (1998), 108-133; Palmyre M.F. Oomen, "Consequences of Prehending God's Consequent Nature in a Different Key," *Process Studies* 27 (1998), 329-331.

Editor's note: The essays by Palmyre Oomen in PS 27 were based, in part, on her Ph.D. dissertation which has been published in Dutch as *Doet God ertoe: Een interpretatie van Whitehead als bijdrage aan een theologie van Gods handelen* (Does God Matter? An Interpretation of Whitehead's Philosophy as a Contribution to a Theology of God's Agency) Kampen (The Netherlands): Kok, 1998: 602 pages, including a summary in English.