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Processing Process

When you're doing philosophy (at least, in my limited experience) you get asked on a regular basis, "So, what are you doing in that class?" I have had no less than twelve recent opportunities to try and explain process theism to others, and I always end up falling back on "It is an attempt to bring ancient or classical notions about the attributes of God into a world that also has quantum theory, atomic observation, evolution and DNA in it without completely rendering either one irrelevant." Does it work? Ultimately, I think that the God of Aquinas qualifies Himself out of possible existence (like Flew's Invisible Gardener) but it doesn't mean that there's nothing useful about the process of process theism.

The major problem I had working with the classical attributes of God while thinking about them was not that they didn't explain things fairly logically in and of themselves, it was that as pieces of a puzzle wherein the ultimate goal is to assemble a picture of God to which a person can relate, they simply did not fit together, and the whole structure seemed to collapse under the weight of various factors, like building a structure on sand, to use a Biblical metaphor. That in mind, particular facets of process theism are quite useful taken separately, whether or not they assemble a picture of God.

One of the process theism ideas discussed in class was the idea of human beings, as a part of God, living harmoniously, and having less rich experiences, or risking harmony for more adventure in our experiences, but thus potentially providing a richer experience. Since God has no environment in which to be – nothing to which He can react that is not Him and in Him and of Him – then he experiences being by reacting to us, inasmuch as we are parts of Him. So, by having richer experiences, we not only generate more enjoyment in our lives selfishly (that is, simply for our own potential gain) but also for God. This raises the question set: Is living adventurously something we are built for? If that is true, is it morally indefensible (or at least, not living up to potential) to not live adventurously? Do we negatively impact the whole of existence when we eschew adventure in favor of increased harmony? In class, the phrase on the board was (and I may be paraphrasing) “Ought we to live more adventurously?”

The word “ought” grabs my attention because it is fraught with overtones of judgment and morality. Granted, these are connotations of the word granted it by its use in society (and possibly by events in my specific past) and not denotations of the word itself, but it has an authoritarian and patriarchal *feel* to it, and that's worth parsing, if, indeed, the point of process theism is to embrace more inclusive thought structures like tolerance (the way we use it now) and feminism.

Using Hartshorne's proposed understanding of how God experiences us within Him (if indeed, one can even define “us” separately from “Him”), one has to argue that if God experiences what we experience as we are all parts of Him, that he experiences us as “parts of the self” like the example we used in class, then enjoyment of experience from the subatomic level to the overall experience of God would be richer (increased?) by more adventurism, even if

that adventurism sometimes leads to disharmony. Even disharmony could be considered, by God, to be a part of the richness of existential experience, inasmuch as existence is incomplete without it. Classroom discussion seemed oriented on the supposed cataclysmic “end of all things” as an ideal of perfect harmony, when nothing is causing conflict. I strongly disagree, and see harmony as more akin to balance, where when “bad” things and “good” things are happening, and the interplay creates a depth richness of experience – even if that richness could be perceived by human beings, if we could perceive to the extent that God does, to be on balance, “bad” – I would still contend that this is a more enjoyable state of affairs to God than nothing going on. If He wanted nothing, he could have achieved that through non-creation. Harmony is not nothing happening, harmony is interplay. To extend the musical metaphor, there is harmony and disharmony, but when nothing is occurring, that is silence, and silence is opposite of richness in this case, not disharmony, which is a part of simply existing. The argument can (and has been made) that we do not properly appreciate the good times without some of the bad, and maybe this filtered appreciation is a human way of experiencing disharmony that is analogous to the way God does it. Or a way of approaching that kind of understanding. Perhaps not.

One additional consideration that seems here like a matter of perspective; disharmonious experiences often help us to prepare for future disharmonies – like a veteran of a war who fights better in the next war because of his having seen action previously. Perhaps this is what they are, in part, for. Not to argue that everything is a learning experience, but maybe everything has that potential. On the one hand, there is Hartshorne's argument that suffering is simply the culmination of human choices made after God makes creatures and sets them loose, but perhaps, the disharmonies experienced by us and felt as suffering are part of a “learning experience” for

someone else, or simply part of the overall tapestry of richly felt experience, if you'll permit me to switch art forms from music to weaving. To return to God's body as the metaphor; when I burn my fingers, I scar them and it hurts. I can learn not to touch hot stuff, but I can also turn to my kids and show them scars, years later, and teach a secondary lesson that way. And this happens all the time. If we are all part of an interlocking and symbiotic experiential body of God, then even disharmony has a function and should be experienced. I say all of that to say that disharmony is a poor reason to eschew adventurousness, and yes, if you accept that we are all a part of God, then we have a moral obligation dictated to us by the form of our creation to be adventurous, and potential disharmony be damned, as it, too, is part of the process.

Tying these ideas about experience into classical-versus-process ideas about immortality, the classical idea is obviously that people experience some kind of “eternal life” with the virtuous being rewarded after the death of their physicality and the contemptible being punished. This is taken literally in classical theology, probably because it is more attractive to cognitive beings than confronting their inevitable non-existence at some point and also because it provides a mechanism for motivating behavior, the carrot and stick. One could argue that this “non-existence” is impossible for us to really imagine in any meaningful framework, and that is why it generates fear – it is an unknown, intractable, unimaginable problem.

The process interpretation of this idea – from within the body of God – is actually much less arcane than the classical idea, because comparisons for it can be drawn from the everyday. Classically, when one got into ideas about the afterlife, the conversation got bogged down by our inability to really picture what this could be like. We were supplied with images of golden streets, circles of hell, rainbow bridges and virgins for the asking, but it is pretty clear that these

are all interpretations based on the materialistic; “things” we can lay our hands (avoiding the obvious “virgins and hands” joke) on in one way or another, or see with our eyes. This is much easier to explain than the idea that the richness and enjoyment of our experience adds not only to our own lives, but to the richness and enjoyment of God himself. Additionally, there is the interpretation of “living on” as our memories after death housed in the minds of others can enrich their experiences, and often do, either educationally or emotionally or both. What a person adds to “the body of God” remains and causes enjoyment of experience for Him and those a deceased person leaves behind.

Neither idea is too tough to reconcile with our day-to-day perceived existence if one is capable of getting past one's own ego, which develops the way it does as reactive to the environment. In order to use both ideas in tandem, one must accept that they (each individual) are only as “important” as the experiences they endeavor to create, and that being adventurous is built into our nature and that to deny it is unnatural. This last may also require some explicit re-definition of what is and is not truly adventurous, and indeed, that can subjectively vary from person to person. This is a part of process theism that works, even if it does not hold up to rigorous examination or combination with some of the other factors. It certainly works better at bringing God into a world of empirical observation than do classical ideas about the same things.