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## A GUIDE TO ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AND THE UNIVERSE

I. All reality is energy, being composed of a complex combination of energy events. There is no such thing as spiritual matter versus physical matter. God and our spirits are both energy events, just as is everything else that is.

II. The building blocks of the universe are bursts of energy, each coming into being and fading away in a split second. Whitehead calls them energy events or actual occasions of experience.

A. Each energy event has a physical pole and a mental pole.

1. The physical pole is that aspect of it which is purely a repeat of past energy events.

2. The mental pole is an element of subjectivity and, therefore, of limited but genuine freedom that enables the energy event, in the process of becoming, to have some determination over the shape it will take, and to receive new possibilities from God (the initial aim—see point 4).

B. Rock, water, flesh, air, are all incredibly complex combinations of these energy events (societies of occasions).

C. God and our spirits or souls are each a series of these energy events that are highly developed in complexity, especially in regard to the mental pole.

III. Process is the becoming (or 'taking shape') of energy events and is determined by three factors.

A. Past energy events (cause and effect) influence present energy events (at the physical pole) as they take shape.

B. God, through the giving of the initial aim, influences the shaping of present energy events at the mental pole, which is the pole that receives and considers novelty.

C. The subjectivity (and therefore freedom or partial self-determination) of the mental pole of energy events in the process of becoming significantly effects the shapes these events take.

*The result of these three factors is the emergence of the subjective aim (for guiding principle) of the energy event, which finally determines how the energy event in the process of becoming, shall shape itself.*

IV. God's role in this continuing creation lies in God's giving of the initial aim to each energy event as it begins to create itself.

- A. The initial aim is a series of eternal objects (or 'possibilities' presented in graded relevance, from the ideal at that given moment downward. (God offers novelty and also limits, thus making growing complexity possible). The ideal is that possibility for this energy event at this moment that will lead it (and reality as a whole) to greater complexity and intensity of feeling, which Whitehead defines as beauty or enjoyment.
- B. God is the One Who Calls. The energy event Who calls all other energy events forward to greater complexity or beauty. Beauty = variety and intensity. (Whitehead: "The pure conservative is fighting against the essence of the universe.")

V. God never creates alone! Past energy events (cause end effect) and the subjectivity or freedom of present energy events in the process of becoming also effect the shape reality is taking.

VI. Therefore, there are limits on Divine power, as God has to work with what is given and is unable to exclusively determine the outcome at any given moment. God In the supreme, but not the exclusive factor, influencing the process or forward movement of reality.

- A. This is not a limitation God has chosen to place upon Godself in order to allow us to have some freedom.
- B. God's limitation and our freedom are simply 'givens' in the process of reality that neither God nor re asked for, but in fact find to be inherent in our situation.

VII. Consequently, God has no master plan that is slowly but surely being put into effect.

- A. The future is genuinely open, and neither God. nor re nor anything else, can know with definiteness what-tomorrow will be like.
- B. But God, nevertheless, is always at work seeing to create greater beauty.

VIII. It follows from the above points that God has a circumstantial will.

- A. That is, God must constantly readjust God's will to meet the changing circumstances of the rest of reality, seeking at every moment to influence through the initial aim) energy events to choose options that will lead reality toward greater beauty.
- B. In God, the physical pole is that aspect of God that is continually affected and influenced by the world.
- C. God's mental pole is that aspect dealing with novel possibilities. God's circumstantial will arises out of God's mental pole, and is circumstantial because God's physical pole is constantly being modified by the world, thus affecting God's decision as to which possibilities are relevant at any given moment and place.

IX. Creation (including humankind) is never the absolute ideal, from God's perspective, because God is often defied in the direction God desires energy events to take. Thus, reality at any given moment is simply, the best possible situation (from God's perspective) given the circumstances God has to work with.

X. The power of God is persuasion (calling energy events forward through the initial aim) and not force.

And, because that persuasion has been able to bring forth this magnificent creation, it is evident that God has the necessary power to profoundly affect and shape the universe, and to inspire awe/worship in us.

XI. All energy events are subjects, with some measure of control, over their own destinies. And God and our spirits, as extremely complex energy events, are capable of self-consciousness and the emotions that accompany self-consciousness.

XII. Process always has been, meaning there never was a start, or creation from nothing. And, there is no final end to creation—it shall go on eternally.

XIII. Given Whitehead's thought, evolution can be seen as a helpful guide to understanding God. Some possible implications:

- A. It documents the growing complexity and richness... This points to some "power" that has introduced novelty (initial aim) and yet given limits (graded relevance of possibilities).
- B. The fact that the trend of evolution is toward the incredible complexity of self-consciousness would seem logically to point toward a God who is also self-conscious and calling as much of physical reality as possible to join God at that level of richness.

XIV. There is ground for hope, because God is constantly at work seeking to lead all of reality toward a better tomorrow. But there is no room for sweeping optimism, for God's will can be frustrated by the events of the rest of physical reality.

## God's Power: Part I

### Monism, Dualism, Semi-Dualism: Reflections On God's Power

(based on the work of David Ray Griffin)

- I. Background: The church traditionally has held to the notion that God is the only center of inherent power in the universe.
  - A. The demonic is a mere creature operating finally with God's permission.
    1. Augustine, C S Lewis, and most Christian thinkers have taken this position.
  - B. The result: monotheism equals monism; God has all the, power, and what limited power the creatures (including Satan) demonstrate is strictly at the permission of God.
- II. The early Old Testament saw God in a monistic way: God was the source of both good and evil (see some of the early scriptural passages on God's ruthlessness).
  - A. Later, with the growth of moral consciousness, evil was attributed to angels or Satan, totally in opposition to God, and in temporary control of the world.
    1. The New Testament took this latter position but did not work it out in detailed, rational thought.
    2. Then the theologians stepped in with highly rational theology, and essentially said this evil only exists with God's permission.
  - B. Thus the early church put forth a duality with the left hand (there is evil), and cancelled: it out with the right (but only God has the power).
    1. Thus began a long history of confusion about evil.
      - a. That is, the "theology" of evil became unmanageable, and so it remains today.
      - b. To wit: If all power is finally inherent in God (monism) then evil exists only with God's permission which makes God responsible for evil.
      - c. One way to soften this has been to deny the reality of evil. That is, finally, if we could only see the, total picture we, would understand that all works for the good.
        1. Augustine, contemporary philosopher John Hicks, and most theologians, have embraced this sort of position.
          - a. The trouble is that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century this position rings a bit hollow, in the, midst of such staggering destructiveness and tragedy and hurt.
      - d. Liberals have tried to make sense of monism in relation to evil by arguing that God grants freedom to humans, for the sake of significant moral growth, and thus runs the risk of evil behavior on behalf of this important goal.
        1. The trouble is that this stance does not explain natural evil.
        2. And after the holocaust, this position raises moral questions about God That is, if God is all-powerful, then

surely God could have created a world with different ground rules that allowed for moral growth but prevented carnage.

- III. David Griffin sums up the problems with the traditional liberal stance: "Because this doctrine is essentially monistic, there is nothing-- no finite-actualities, no metaphysical principles (except perhaps logical ones)--to put any constraint upon the kind of world that could be created, aside from God's own nature and will.

Accordingly, God is solely responsible for the basic structure of the world, the structure that allows for drought, disease, earthquakes, and nuclear weapons. By hypothesis the world could have been essentially the same but without those ingredients. That by itself makes God's goodness difficult to defend. But also, God by hypothesis could have prevented any of the events we look at as examples of unspeakable evil, from: the sadistic torture- of a child to the Jewish holocaust, and yet God did not. All sorts of justifications are provided as to why it is better that God does not intervene. But they ring hollow in the face of the actual encounter with overwhelming evil. The- sensitive conscience can hardly resist the thought: "God should have prevented that" Or: "If God is not going to prevent such things, God should not have created the world so that such things were possible!" Many of the contemporary theologians who say that God must be partly evil do so after having taken into account the explanations that can be provided by the free-will defense. I agree with them: If reality is essentially monistic, then there is no perfectly good reality. And this means: there is no God no being worthy of-worship" (Griffin, unpublished).

- IV. Here's the big problem that has made the theology of evil unmanageable: the Church has been terrified of a dualistic position.

A. The early Church had to deal with Gnosticism and Manicheanism, with their understanding of an evil force in the universe really possessing inherent power and really standing over and against God in a great cosmic conflict, the outcome of which was unclear.

1. The Church rightly resisted such dualism, with its implications that evil might totally defeat God, that matter is inherently evil and that reality is split with different parts belonging to different cosmic powers (thus rendering the unity of the world unintelligible).

a. The Church, recoiling from such dualistic thinking, totally embraced monism, with all the problems that created for understanding evil.

- V. Genesis Chapter 1 and Plato both suggested another possibility; semi dualism or "soft" dualism.

A. Both suggested the possibility of a primordial unformed "stuff" coeternal with God, with no evil spirit in principle and matter not necessarily being evil.

1. However, the Genesis reference was left undeveloped and Platonism got mixed with Gnosticism and similar thought systems, so the early Church was not open to it.

B. So, the Church hardened into a monistic position, opposing all forms of dualism (as at the Council of Braga in 563 and the 4th Lateran Council in 1215), and strongly embracing creation *ex-nihilo*.

VI. What is needed: a semi-dualistic or soft dualistic position reflecting Genesis:1 and to some degree Plato.

A. Whitehead offers such a position: Besides God there is the creature, which is also more than creature

1. That is, the "stuff" of reality is co-eternal with God, with some inherent power, subject to the influence of God, and not inherently evil.
2. This "stuff" must be persuaded, and therefore can defy God at particular places and times, but the "whole thing" isn't an evil force co-eternally battling God.
3. Matter is not passive stuff ruled by an all-powerful God, but active experience subject to God's influence but not controlled by it.
  - a. Thus, an Adversary (Satan) is not necessary to explain evil; evil is very real, and at the same time God is not the cause of this destructive aspect of creation.

### **God's Power: Part Two ON GOD'S POWER COMPARED TO OURS**

from a Whiteheadian Perspective

1. Purely coercive = ontologically coercive

I.e., the real thing, unilaterally producing its effect without requiring any cooperation of the being upon whom the causal power is exerted.

Persuasive Coercion means the being upon whom the causal efficacy is exerted has some power of self-determination despite the coercion (*a teacher can coerce a student to study with the threat of failure, but the student still is able to resist*).

2. Pure coercion is possible between two aggregates (for example a hammer and nail or my fist and your face).

Objects composed of billions of individuals and held together by strong bonds between its molecules are subject to push and pull, can coerce or be coerced.

The laws of physics fully explain this.

3. Individuals (occasions of experience) as such never exert pure coercion. They can only persuade for each individual has some self-determination, and it is individuals who initiate deliberate activity. A hammer on its own cannot hit the nail. A corpse cannot hit another with its fist. It is the soul (the series of unifying and coordinating occasions of experience) that influence individual brain cells that move the body, and the individual brain cells can only do so by persuasion, not pure coercion. The body can, and does at times, defy the, soul's instructions (cancer, blushing, hiccupping, muscle spasms, muscular refusal to play piano notes correctly).

The soul clearly has an extraordinary type of persuasive relationship to the body, built over millions of years of evolutionary development, under God's persuasive influence. But it does not have pure coercive power over the body.

Individuals never do, which is a reminder that persuasive causation is the primary form of causal efficacy in the world.

4. To sum, the transition from persuasive to coercive causal power occurs only by means of a body. The carpenter persuades his hand to move in a certain way. Insofar as the persuasion is successful, his hand moves coercively upon the hammer, which moves coercively against the nail.
  - A. We have purely coercive power because we have bodies in a world of bodies. To the extent that my soul can persuade my body to enter into activity, it can inflict purely coercive force upon other bodies (but my soul does not have purely coercive power over another soul. They are both individuals with freedom of self-determination to some extent).
  - B. And our bodies were necessary in the evolutionary process or God could not have called forth our complex souls that rely on bodily message of an astounding complexity.
  
5. Why then, if we have purely coercive power (to the degree our souls can persuade our bodies), does God only have persuasive power?
  - A. The answer: We have bodies and hence coercive power in relation to others because there are bodies between us. But God cannot exert purely coercive power because there is no divine body between God and us.

We could think of God as the soul of the universe, and the universe, therefore, as a divine body, but this means the divine body is something of which we are a part, not something existing between God and the creatures, and through which God could act coercively upon worldly beings.
  - B. Supernaturalism is implicitly self-contradictory. It insists God is not physical, that God is not a body and does not have a body. The traditional doctrine of divine simplicity is that God, unlike a physical thing, is not composite, and hence not subject to decomposition. That is, God is an individual, not an aggregate, but individuals cannot use pure coercion.
  
6. By attributing pure, coercive omnipotence to God, supernaturalism assigns to God the kind of Causal power only exerted by bodies. This reflects ontological confusion.

The essence of mythological thinking is to treat the divine reality as a body among bodies, and therefore, a finite being. Supernaturalism, by insisting on the idea that God has purely coercive-power, thus seems to engage in thinking that could debatably be called mythological.

## Some Thoughts On Human Freedom

- I. Alfred North Whitehead's understanding of physical reality: It is composed of tiny rapid-fire bursts of energy, which then form "societies which produce atoms, molecules, etc. He believed each burst of energy has a degree (very slight in most cases) of freedom to do its own thing, and that therefore God is not all-powerful. There is a freedom inherent in the very structure of the universe, and God must deal with that freedom.
  - A. Evolution helps explain this whole matter. The process of evolution suggests God is seeking to create more and more beauty, complexity/variety, and intensity of experience (especially self-awareness). The reason, from Whitehead's perspective, that it has taken so long is because God just persuades energy events to shape themselves so as to forward God's efforts. That is because of the structural freedom of physical reality, God cannot simply force reality to do as God desires.
    1. Each event is shaped by three factors: its past (cause and effect), God's will for it, and its own freedom finally to "get itself together."
  - B. Human self-awareness (the "I" we normally think of) is a series of rapid-fire, and highly complex bursts of energy in the region of the brain (but not identical with the brain). Two factors lead this self-awareness to radical freedom.
    1. The series of "explosions" breaks continuity with the past, enabling each burst to significantly shape its present actuality (this is true of all energy events, but most intensely true in human awareness).
    2. The highly complex nature of this particular energy event, due to its interaction with our highly sophisticated brain cells, which feed it rich data.
    3. Our freedom in a profound sense is a gift of God.
      - a. Granted, freedom is a structural part of the universe.
        1. But that freedom is "primitive," very slight in most energy events.
        2. But in humans, and to a lesser degree in sub-human species, sweeping freedom to ponder and choose among options is possible.
          - a. This would seem to be a result of evolution and a major thrust of it, in which the complex brain structure developed and made possible the sophisticated energy event of self-awareness.
            1. And if God is the primary factor in determining the course of evolution, then this sweeping freedom must be a gift from God, a gift taking eons to develop.
  - C. Several implications:
    1. There is no master plan for us--we are predestined.

- a. There can be no master plan, for we have freedom, and -therefore God cannot absolutely predict the future.
  - b. If we sit back and assume we are predestined all we are doing is letting the past rule us.
  - c. In fact, the future is genuinely open, for God has given us a depth of freedom that offers us a significant say concerning the direction our life will take.
2. We are never completely trapped, cornered, out of options.
- a. O.K., so we're not predestined. Nevertheless there are times when we do get the feeling we have run out of options and are trapped.
    - 1. This is the worst feeling a human can experience, and leads to quiet despair, alcoholism, and even suicide.
    - 2. In effect, this feeling says the past has control over us and we are its helpless victims.
      - a. This is painful and emotion-tearing because God has made us to be free, and to feel otherwise is to run against our inherent nature, and God's constant call.
  - b. Whitehead's understanding is a concrete reminder that we are not completely trapped.
    - 1. Structurally, there are still options.
      - a. At every moment there is a gap, a break with the past.
      - b. At every moment God is signaling new options.
      - c. At every moment we have freedom to begin a shift.
        - 1. It may be a slow, tentative movement but it is possible.
    - 2. When you feel closed in) and panic arises remember that God has given you radical freedom and calls you to use this precious gift (again a primary reason we feel so torn within when we feel trapped is because we are then defying and denying our own freedom and God's call to use it).
      - a. Jesus understood this clearly and continually was calling persons away from a dead past into an open future.
    - 3. Prayer is important!
      - a. Many a person is messed up by his/her inability to handle this freedom and ends up in rigidity, anxiety) alcoholism) rootlessness, suicide) etc.
      - b. What shall we do with this freedom? Where shall we go with our lives?
        - 1. One crucial need: to allow God to contact us meaningfully.
          - a. At every moment, God signals what God would have us do to move toward purpose and richness.

1. If we would shape our lives with maximum beauty and purpose, we need to receive God's signal.
- b. The tragedy: usually we are not open to God -- we are so spiritually immature we do not significantly receive the incoming/indwelling message.
  1. Even so God does have some influence but how much more it would have both at the conscious and subconscious levels, if we gave it more of our deliberate attention.
- c. We need to develop spiritual sensitivity; we need to be acutely open, to God's signal, for we have a magnificent gift of freedom, but it can be a terrible curse if not handled with great care.

## **SOME QUOTES OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD**

God is the fellow sufferer.

Our understanding of God should illuminate, not confound, our experience of reality.

God is a bit oblivious to morals.

God is the great adventurer of the universe.

The pure conservative is fighting the essence of the universe.

The morally admirable being is one who promotes worthwhile experience to the quantitatively and qualitatively greatest extent possible.

What haunts our imagination is that the immediate facts of present action pass into permanent significance of the universe.

God is the basic source of unrest *in* the universe.

The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order.

God's purpose in the creative advance is the evocation of intensities.

If there is to be a progress, the course of history by way of escape must venture along the borders of Chaos.

The Adventure of the Universe starts with the dream and reaps tragic beauty.

God's basic creative purpose is the evocation actualities with greater and greater enjoyment.

The Church has retained the deeper idolatry of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman rulers, thereby giving unto God the attributes, which belonged exclusively to Caesar.

During a period of unprecedented intellectual progress, each development has found the religious thinkers unprepared.

A clash of doctrines is not a disaster, but an opportunity. Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit, as does science.

Worship the Creative Good, not the created good!

The life of Christ is not an exhibition of over-ruling power. Its glory lies in its absence of force. It has the decisiveness of a supreme idea.

In contrast with Buddhism, which began with the teaching of the way to enlightenment, Christianity began with the life of Jesus. As this was told, it had elements that have evoked a response from all that are best in human nature. The Mother, the Child, and the bare manger: the lowly man, homeless and self-forgetful, with his message of peace, love and sympathy: the suffering the agony, the tender words as life ebbed, the final despair: and the whole with the authority of supreme victory.

We are constituted by the adventures we take, and we are alive to the degree we incorporate novelty.

Jesus' message dwelt upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love. Through him Christians were led to affirm God's immanence in the world. But he did not express his teaching in the theoretical form. His reported sayings are not formularized thought. They are descriptions of direct insight. The ideas are in his mind as immediate pictures, and not as analyzed in terms of abstract concepts...His sayings are actions and not adjustments of concepts. He speaks in the lowest abstractions that language is capable of, if it is to be language at all and not the fact itself.

Jesus' teaching expresses a boundless naiveté possible only in the peasant community of Galilee. It was as irrelevant to the actual problems of power and order in the Roman Empire as it is in our own time. Precisely because of its impracticality it has constituted a standard that is a gauge by which to test the defects of an unrealized world, so long they must spread the infection of an uneasy spirit. Just because of the concreteness of the images, their radical and impractical meaning cannot be concealed. Over the centuries they have altered the structures of society.

It is the first step of wisdom to recognize that the major advances in civilization are processes, which all but wreck the society in which they occur. The art of a free society consists first in the maintenance of the symbolic code and secondly in fearlessness of revision. Those societies, which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay.