

PANENTHEISM VS. PANTHEISM

The following is an excerpt from [New Thought: A Practical American Spirituality](#), pp. 89-92.

Pantheism and Panentheism

This universal arrangement is not *pantheism* (all is God), but *panentheism*, a term devised by Karl C. F. Krause (1781-1832) to describe his thought. It is best known for its use by [Charles Hartshorne](#) and recently by Matthew Fox. Panentheism says that all is *in* God, somewhat as if God were the ocean and we were fish. If one considers what is in God's body to be part of God, then we can say that God is all there is and then some. The universe is God's body, but God's awareness or personality is greater than the sum of all the parts of the universe. All the parts have some degree of freedom in co-creating with God. At the start of its momentary career as a subject, an experience is God--as the divine initial aim. As the experience carries on its choosing process, it is a freely aiming reality that is not strictly God, since it departs from God's purpose to some degree. Yet everything is within God.

The most practical value of pantheism is that it recognizes the presence of God everywhere, but it does this at an enormous cost. It provides for the presence of God as the only actor; God's presence is an overriding presence that cancels the possibility of the existence of anything else, of any genuine beloved, of any loving or unloving response to God. In pantheism, human existence or any other finite existence is at best a mystery. Explanation in any satisfying sense is impossible. There can be affirmation that there is nothing but God, but where that leaves the affirmer is unclear; his or her existence is no more than appearance, and enlightenment brings recognition of one's illusory status as a unique, permanent perspective in reality.

It is not necessary to go to pantheism, with a god that acts as a universal wet blanket, smothering the possibilities of everything else's genuine existence. Panentheism gives all that one could want: an all-encompassing, growing, perfect God, everywhere present and containing everywhere within himself; and the reality of oneself and others, freely deciding within God, responding to God's overtures in the process of co-creation. Theism denies that the world (including us) shares in God's being. Panentheism recognizes that everything shares God's being (or becoming) but that God's being operates from innumerable relatively freely-choosing centers or perspectives of existence. God and the world, which is God's body, are interdependent. To be is to be free, to be choosing, and to be enjoying (slightly or greatly, positively or negatively) the process of selecting from among competing influences. To be doing this is to be alive. To be doing it with the complexity of performing these tasks self-consciously, rationally, purposefully is to be doing it as a person. To have perfect awareness of all this, perfect memory, love, and preservation of it, and to be giving perfect guidance to the others who are involved in the process is to be the only perfect person, God.

Santiago Sia [in his *God in Process Thought*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985] summarizes Hartshorne's panentheism:

Panentheism . . . holds that God includes the world. But it sets itself apart from pantheism in that it does not maintain that God and the world are identical. . . . Hartshorne explains that God is a whole whose whole-properties are distinct from the properties of the constituents. While this is true of every whole, it is more so of God as the supreme whole. . . . The part is distinguishable from the whole although within it. The power of the parts is something suffered by the whole, not enacted by it. The whole has properties too which are not shared by the parts. Similarly, God *as whole* possesses attributes which are not shared by his creatures. . . . We perpetually create content not only in ourselves but also in God. And this gives significance to our presence in this world.

If we continue to say, as New Thinkers often do, that there is only one Presence and only one Power, God, the Good omnipotent, we should state it with an awareness of what it means in a panentheistic perspective. This affirmation may be made primarily as a recognition that there is no devil, no unified negative cosmic force in opposition to God. When we say that there is only one Power and Presence, we are saying that the whole and the part are present in each other. God is present **not** like a lump of clay or a piece of plastic that can have different shapes at different times yet remain exactly what it was originally. God is present as dynamic, loving, alluring divine purpose, as guidance uniquely offered to each of the innumerable many units of freely deciding experience. God's power—the attracting power of perfection—is exercised from within these innumerable centers of choice. In each of these is the dual power of divine offer and human or other response, neither of which could operate without the other. This is a contracting or covenanting process. The affirmation that God is working with us in some sense as us, as the initiator of each experience can be made much more meaningfully from a panentheistic perspective than from a pantheistic one.

Our linguistic or temperamental preference may determine whether or not we use the term *divine* for the power of response—and the responders, including ourselves. For most purposes we refer to God *and* ourselves, for we are free to decide how much we accept of what God offers to us. In mystical moments we emphasize unity, which is the complete or relatively complete acceptance of God's offers. When we consider the divine character of the whole creative process, we are justified in referring to it as only one Power and only one Presence. All unity is a unification of the many, and the many are meaningful only in relation to unity. In Hebrew, the word *achad* means *united one*, and is used to refer to God. The alternation of the one and the many is essential to the process of co-creation. E pluribus unum (out of many, one) appears on the Great Seal of the United States.

All this co-creating happens so quickly that we are unaware of the separate experiences, which are like the separate frames of a motion picture. Similarly, we are unaware of the separate cells of our bodies, to say nothing of the molecules and atoms that constitute them. We are unaware of most of what is going on within and around us, let alone throughout the universe. We don't need to know the subatomic structure of a kitchen table in order to put groceries onto it, but that doesn't mean that there is no such structure. So it is with the experiential nature of the world. Although we may not be able to focus on the individual frames of our lives, God does; and it is only in relation to them, one by one, that God can give or receive anything. We call this moment-by-moment, cumulative, personal existence *serial selfhood*.

Process New Thought

What we call [Process New Thought](#) is New Thought that uses traditional New Thought techniques, but substitutes insights of process philosophy for the traditional substance approaches to philosophy commonly employed in New Thought. In other words, the Process New Thinker does essentially the same things that the Substance New Thinker does, but has a different understanding of what is going on. The use of process thought also provides New Thought with new connections to the academic world. Of great importance, a process understanding can cut New Thought's Gordian knot of thinking about the creative process, especially the role of Law in it.

Created February 9, 1997, by Alan Anderson
caa@gis.net

[Research Sources on Concepts of Person and Self](#) contains information on personalistic metaphysics.

[Process Studies](#) pays tribute to Hartshorne in relation to his hundredth birthday.

[New Thought Movement Home Page](#), has links to other excerpts from the [book](#) quoted above.

Latest update June 23, 1998