

GOD: SAVIOR, BUTCHER, OR OBLIVIOUS ARTIST? THE THEODICY OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

Laurence Rohrer

This paper is a critical examination of Alfred North Whitehead's attempt to solve the traditional problem of evil, and the correlative claim made by some process theologians who build on Whitehead, that Whitehead's theodicy is reconcilable with traditional Western theologies. Whitehead's conception of evil is crucial to his process cosmology because it is integral to his notion of creation in which evil is understood as part of the larger dynamic of God's creative activity. While Whitehead's process theodicy is interesting, he fails to successfully escape between the horns of the problem of evil as it is currently conceived as a trilemma. Instead, Whitehead's approach rejects at least two horns of the trilemma, and his solution to the problem of evil is ambiguous, and lends itself to at least two different interpretations, each resulting in the denial of at least one relation of the trilemma. Moreover, these interpretations raise serious concerns for traditional theology. In the first part of my paper I briefly discuss the features of this trilemma in relation to Whitehead's conception of evil, and discuss a possible inconsistency with Whitehead's notion of the role that it plays in his metaphysics. In the second part of the paper I address two different ways of viewing God relative to the concept of evil that Whitehead elucidates. Whitehead is often criticized for treating evil as merely apparent. While some process philosophers, notably Maurice Barineau, have defended Whitehead from this charge it can be shown that this is an implication of at least one interpretation of his approach. On a second interpretation of Whitehead's approach I show that Whitehead's remarks about God's relation to evil can be interpreted in a manner that escapes the charge that evil is not genuine, but contrary to the hopes of subsequent process theologians, not in a manner that is reconcilable with the traditional theistic conception of God's omnibenevolence.

Whitehead's approach is an attempt to solve the problem of evil with a rational theodicy. By "rational theodicy" I mean the attempt to account logically for the relationship between God and human suffering that avoids inconsistencies and paradoxes. In the traditional problem, evil is commonly thought to be inconsistent with either God's omnibenevolence or God's omnipotence, thus involving a destructive

dilemma. However, some contemporary philosophers, such as Barineau, prefer to represent the problem as a “trilemma” that occurs any time that three propositions are asserted to be true at the same time: evil occurs, God is omnipotent, and God is omnibenevolent.⁶² Whenever we try to resolve the problem by denying any of the three the propositions, we run into consequences that seem inconsistent with the traditional conception of God.

- P1 If evil occurs, then either God is not omnibenevolent or not omnipotent (the traditional dilemma).
- P2 If God is omnibenevolent and evil occurs, then either God is not omnipotent, or evil is only apparent (genuine evil does not really exist).
- P3 If God is omnipotent and evil occurs, then either evil is merely apparent, or God is not omnibenevolent.

The common way to resolve the trilemma without denying any of the propositions is by qualifying, i.e., redefining or supplementing one or more of the major terms. This has been the choice of a number of contemporary philosophers.⁶³ Some have asserted that the alleged contradictions involved in the trilemma depend on the meaning assigned to the terms involved.⁶⁴ For example, perhaps the most popular way traditional theologians attack the problem is by arguing that while God allows evil despite his omnipotence and goodness, evil is necessary for some greater purpose of God’s providence. Thus, there are some logically necessary evils that serve a greater good. Since God could not will it otherwise, and accomplish this greater good, God must allow these evils in order to be omnibenevolent. In the most common approach God tolerates these evils in order to allow for human freedom, which it is assumed requires that men must be able to disobey God’s will in order to be truly free, thus making moral evil a necessary possibility.

⁶² Barineau, Maurice, *The Theodicy of Alfred North Whitehead*, University Press of America, 1991, p. 5.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 8-9.

Another common way to attack the trilemma is to simply deny one of the propositions, e.g., that evil does not actually exist. In this approach it is argued that all evils are merely apparent and that genuine moral evil does not exist. Even though we may experience evil as genuine, if we had access to an omniscient vantage point, we would see that these apparent evils are actually consistent with the greatest good. It is sometimes added that humans do not have the intellectual capacity to understand the relationship between God and evil, and thus we continue to experience evils as genuine.⁶⁵ The problem that is commonly pointed out with this approach is that it seems to make God oblivious to the individual sufferings of humankind. Thus, the free-will approach discussed previously has been the more popular approach in traditional theologies. Finally, other less traditional theodicies have attempted to solve the problems by either denying God's omnipotence or omnibenevolence. All attempts to grasp the bull by the horns of the traditional dilemma present serious concerns for traditional theologies.

In examining Whitehead's process theodicy we must pay close attention to the way he defines both evil and the attributes of God in his process metaphysics. Two difficulties are immediately encountered when interpreting Whitehead's definition of evil. First, many of his remarks are somewhat vague and highly abstract and must be contextualized and cross referenced in order to build a coherent picture, and these remarks span several of his major works written over the course of his long career. Nowhere do we get a succinct statement of his view. This has led to many divergent readings of his work.

In *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead examines the phenomena in which evil appears; "evil is exhibited in physical suffering, mental suffering, and loss of the higher experience in favor of the lower experience."⁶⁶ Whitehead further states that we must focus on the suffering sentient being and he does not distinguish between natural evil on the one hand and moral evil on the other hand. Thus, Whitehead has an affective notion of evil: evil is found in the painful experiences or experiences of loss of sentient

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶⁶ Whitehead, Alfred North, *Religion in the Making*, New American Library, 1926, p. 92.

beings. While some approaches to the problem of evil distinguish between natural and moral evils, Whitehead argues that while evil is experienced with all the varied modalities of being, this does not mean that there is a different type of evil for every modality. Furthermore, Whitehead asserts that while evil is only found in the phenomena of suffering, the latter is not predicated on any notion of a Metaphysical or primordial evil, such that the world is evil due to its temporal and finite nature, or that there is destructive agency involved etc. Likewise, Whitehead rejects the notion of evil as privation of the good. Evil is real, tangible, and affective because human suffering is real.

After determining the phenomena in which evil occurs, Whitehead attempts to generalize from the various modalities, what he calls the “common character of evil.” He states that “the common character of all evil is that its realization in fact involves that there is some concurrent realization of a purpose towards elimination. The purpose is to secure the avoidance of evil.”⁶⁷

In this way, Whitehead locates all evil in a single fulcrum point between the sentient being who suffers, and the two purposes involved in the phenomenon at hand, including the goal of the perpetrator of the action or the cause of the suffering. He explains this rather cryptic and ironic reference with an abstract allusion to an act of moral evil. From the standpoint of the person who inflicts evil, the action is not evil, rather it is good in as much as it accomplishes his purpose, hence Whitehead states, “evil triumphant in its enjoyment, is so far good in itself; but beyond itself it is evil in its character of a destructive agent among things greater than itself.”⁶⁸ Thus, while evil may be subjectively perceived, the destructiveness of the evil inflicted is an objective fact. Based on these remarks it would seem that evil is not relative in Whitehead’s view. However, evil always appears in comparison to what could be and what is greater than itself. Whitehead states that “in the summation of the more complete fact it [evil] has secured a

⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 92-93.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 93.

descent towards nothingness, in contrast to the creativeness of what can without qualification be termed good...evil is positive and destructive; what is good is positive and creative.”⁶⁹

The next general trait of evil, according to Whitehead is that it contains an internal contradiction. It is “unstable.” While this is implied in the remarks we just examined, this notion of instability is not clearly spelled out. Though in and for itself evil is good, in so far as it is destructive, it eventually destroys even its own forms of attainment. Thus, evil is self-destructive. Whitehead states that it “promotes its own elimination by destruction, or degradation, or by elevation.”⁷⁰ By elevation Whitehead means the elevation of the agent of evil at the expense of others or of things greater than itself.

A third trait of evil is that it is a purely relational and relative concept at the metaphysical level in process cosmology. It is this notion that we must most carefully examine and inquire whether it logically coheres with his previous remarks regarding the objectivity of evil. Whitehead states that “it must be noted that the state of degradation to which evil leads, when accomplished, is not in itself evil, except by comparison with what might have been.”⁷¹ Hence evil is to be understood as a relation between what potentially could have been, and what the destruction, called evil after the comparison, and brought about. The medium of the relation is potentiality and the loss of creative potential and realized good remains of those evil for others. The “evil lies in the loss of social environment,” according to Whitehead.⁷² When we take these three general traits together we can infer that for Whitehead evil is a positive function of material annihilation. In terms of his cosmology, in the process of creation and re-creation, evil is the function of change via destruction, in contrast to the good which is positive and creative.

It should be clear from the remarks we have now examined that while Whitehead insists that there are genuine evils from the standpoint of sentient beings, and that these same actions actually are also ironically good in themselves, taken independently of the sufferer. While I think this is perhaps an apt

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 94.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

description of what we would normally associate with the suffering caused by accidents and natural hazards, such as tornados and earthquakes, that is, of natural evils, I am not convinced that this approach presents a consistent picture of moral evils. How is an action such as torture, to be considered good for the perpetrator? If the answer is that he takes pleasure in it, then first, it seems to imply a purely hedonistic and relativistic approach to evil, and second, it seems certain that such acts will simply further the moral deformation of the perpetrator, and this in itself is not good as Whitehead's remarks seems to suggest. Moreover, because Whitehead's cosmology involves evil as a function of change, this suggests that at the metaphysical level, evil is merely apparent, since no greater stages of perfection could be reached without such change. If so, then there seems to be an inconsistency in Whiteheads thinking about evil between the metaphysical level, a God's eye view of evil, and the human experience of moral evil.⁷³ However, in order to address the fairness of this criticism we also must examine the way God operates in Whitehead's metaphysics, since God is the nexus of all change in Whitehead's cosmology.

Whitehead describes God as a wholly immanent supratemporal being. God is an entity that enters into each moment of creation and who "prehends" every actuality and the totality of all actualities of existing things prior to their emergence into the actual occasions. Through this prehension God bridges the gap between the eternal order of pure potentialities and the concrete actualities of the world. "The abstract forms are thus the link between God and the actual world." God is the creative force and term of relation that brings potential being into fruition as concrete realities.⁷⁴ It is important to note that God is not transcendent in the traditional sense in Whitehead's view. God is supratemporal, but not independent of His creation. Temporal things arise by their participation in the things which are eternal and the process in which this takes place requires a definite entity, namely God. However, God is not found in the temporal order among things. Rather "God is the ground for concrete actuality."⁷⁵ Thus, God is the Being who is the ground of all particular beings, and is not equivalent with any particular being, but is not

⁷³ Barineau, p. 111.

⁷⁴ Whitehead, Alfred North, *Religion in the Making*, p. 150.

⁷⁵ Whitehead, Alfred North, *Science and the Modern World*, New York, McMillan Publishing Co., 1925, p. 178.

as Aquinas and others argued, the ground of Being itself. God is an instance of creativity, like all other actualities, but is not identified as creativity itself. For traditional theism, creativity is unified and transcendent, for Whitehead and the subsequent process theists, it is pluralized and wholly immanent.⁷⁶

Whitehead further postulates that God has three natures which are bound together in a single unity; God's primordial nature, consequent nature, and superject nature.⁷⁷ God is primordial and prefigures everything that becomes what it is by containing within Himself all eternal objects. In this primordial nature God is infinite, however God is, like all of creation, in process, and thus God is not complete. This marks another important difference between Whitehead's view of God and that of traditional Western theology. This is a point sometimes overlooked in subsequent works about Whitehead.

By consequent nature, Whitehead means that God is an actual entity, that is, the temporal world has an actual effect on God. In so far as creation is rooted in God, God shares in the experiences of the world. The consequent nature begins in the sentient experience derived from the world which then acquires synthesis in the primordial side of God's nature. Each actual occasion of the world is thus confronted with its own greatest potential. However, God does not determine which potentials will be fully realized. In terms of human occasions, this means we are free to act on any of the potential directions we can conceive. This notion of God's consequent nature is one of the more controversial points in Whitehead's metaphysics. Again, by actual entity we cannot assume that Whitehead's God is a personal God. God's metaphysical actuality is merely entailed by Whitehead's claim that God is wholly immanent. But "God" in Whitehead's sense is not an entity in the complete sense; rather God is represented as the "principle of concretion," whereby actual processes in reality take their rise. God is more like the glue that holds everything together as well as the source of the urge for everything that exists to come into being, and their formal causation. But God does not create individual entities. It is in

⁷⁶ Ford, Lewis, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Vol. 44, Philosophy and Christian Theology, 1970. Section III: Process Philosophy, pp. 141-151.

⁷⁷ Whitehead, Alfred North, *Process and Reality*, New York, McMillan Publishing Co., 1929, pp. 134-135.

this sense that God does not provide efficient causation in Whitehead's system; rather God and actual entities change together in a kind of symbiotic relationship.

In so far as God is non-temporal, God's nature is superject. By this Whitehead seems to mean that God's envisagement of the potentialities for the world becomes an object for the prehension of emerging creations. In this way all things follow from the prehension of God, but God's role is not in Whitehead's view, that of material causation. Rather, Whitehead sometimes speaks of God "persuading force" in creation. Hence, it is due to God that a moral agent is presented with the choice between a truly generative, creative act and a destructive creative act that may cause suffering, but God is not responsible for the agent's choice.

With these three natures in mind, we can see that in Whitehead's theodicy evil occasions can not take place outside of the God's envisagement but must emerge, like all other occasions, as part of what is prehended by God. At first blush this view seems to commit Whitehead to one of the relations of the trilemma: If God is omnibenevolent, then why does He not envisage and prehend the world in such a way that excludes the destructive element of evil? Since God does not, God is either not truly omnibenevolent or God lacks the power to do so. Thus, it would seem that Whitehead can either deny one of these propositions, or qualify them in some way. Whitehead already has qualified the notion of evil, and he attempts to make a corresponding change in regard to the notion of omnipotence. God is all powerful only in his primordial role as prehender of the forms, but God is incomplete in his consequent nature. He considers that if "God be an actual entity which enters in every creative phrase and yet is above change, He must be exempt from the internal inconstancy which is the true note of evil."⁷⁸ But we should ask how God is exempt from this internal inconsistency in this view? How does God enter into all events in which evil occurs and provides even the possibilities for such evils among all possibilities, and yet be the entity who prehends things in their totality to their formal possibilities only?

⁷⁸ Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, p. 95.

The usual move here, which Whitehead tries to avoid, is to simply say that all evil is merely apparent, or that it is necessary for some greater good etc. Instead, Whitehead further modifies his idea of evil. He distinguishes between two species of destruction, chaotic discord, and dominance of discord which leads to complete destruction. According to Whitehead some degree of discord is necessary for the introduction of change and novelty in the world. For this purpose destructive discord is necessary. If creation did not involve change, the world would be static and not dynamic. This chaotic discord is not evil in itself: rather it is evil only if there is a dominance of discord. The resultant destruction is evil in the ultimate sense. Whitehead proposes that God in his primordial activity somehow reconciles all things for the better. He calls this the “subjective aim of God.” In this role God is the care-taker of the temporal world that picks up the pieces of human tragedy from the wreckage of the world that is consequent upon chaotic discord. In the larger scheme of things, God is able to salvage the world and keep it harmonious. Whitehead states

The wisdom of the subjective aim prehends every actuality for what it can be in such a perfected system – its sufferings, its sorrows, its failures, its triumphs, its immediacies of joy – woven by rightness of feeling into the harmony of the universal feeling, which is always immediate, always many, always one, always with novel advance, moving onward and never perishing.⁷⁹

At this point, it is important to consider what has happened to the concreteness of Whitehead’s initial definition of evil, which he characterized as being very much a matter of the concrete experiences of sentient individuals. This being the case, we should ask, what then of the victims of radical moral evil, the tortured and murdered, the raped or oppressed? While Whitehead seems to console us by assuring us that all things are prehended in such a way that things work out for the best, this abstract, metaphysical solution does not address the individual lives and experiences that are destroyed by the dominance of destruction of moral evils. Things work out for the best only in the totality of creation, not in the salvation of individuals. In fact, sometimes Whitehead refers to the status of individual creations as

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 525.

“trivial.” It is at this point that Whitehead’s theodicy completely loses connection with traditional theologies. He further states that such events are not preventable by God, but maintains that God can nonetheless transform the world to greater ends by absorbing the extrinsic ends these evils accomplished into His prehension of a perfectible world.

The revolts of destructive evil, purely self-regarding are dismissed into their triviality of merely individual facts; and yet the good they did achieve in individual joy, in individual sorrow, in the introduction of the needed contrast, is yet to be saved by its relation to the completed whole. The image – and it is but an image – the image under which this operative growth of God’s nature is best conceived, is that of a tender care that nothing be lost.⁸⁰

Regardless of this mere image of tender care, because all evil rests in the necessity of discord, destruction and elimination are the concrete products of obstruction met within the unfolding of temporal reality, thus not all things can be saved. All that God can save, He saves. God does what He can in Whitehead’s theodicy “with infinite patience.”⁸¹ This points to the last element of Whitehead’s theodicy I wish to address. God is all-powerful only in a qualified sense. God cannot do the impossible, i.e., change nature and what proceeds from it. This is because God is not fully transcendent in Whitehead’s metaphysics, as discussed previously. God’s nature is wrapped up with all of creation which is governed by logical and material conditions. Thus, God is also not omnipotent in the classical sense. God saves the totality of the world in the primordial sense but, since the possibility of evil is unavoidable, God cannot prevent the occurrence of specific evils, and God’s tender care does not seem to have any conserving force that offers hope to individuals. In fact, such evils, like all actualities are prehended in God’s creative activity. Moreover, we must keep in mind that in Whitehead’s metaphysics, God’s prehension does not involve efficient causation, so in a way God saves the totality of the world in a purely conceptual sense—so the totality is always good relative to God’s creative development, but specific evils continue to occur and seem to be part of the process of change that God can only indirectly influence but not prevent. This is an

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

issue once addressed by process theologian Robert Neville.⁸² Neville points out that while God does not limit human freedom or any other finite occasion's creative activity, it is still difficult to entirely free God from responsibility for the evils that actually arise in the world, since in Whitehead's system God is responsible for contributing to the original concrescence of value that orients the subjective aim of every occasion. While human beings as such occasions may later modify these aims according to their own emphasis, God is an external limit on human freedom, just as other external things limit our freedom. As Neville states, God appears as a mammoth Jewish mother, structuring all possibilities and continually insisting on values of her own arbitrary choice, i.e. out of the plethora of her own creative largess. Even the specific evils, while not efficiently caused by God, must be possibilities that are commensurate with God's prehensions and unfolding design.

Two points of Whitehead's theodicy fail to fully escape the horns of the traditional problem of evil. First, by not distinguishing between moral and natural evils, and treating all evils as a species of destruction, generically considered, Whitehead fails to consider the peculiar features of *moral evil*, namely human volition and responsibility. Since Whitehead's God at least possesses omniscient foreknowledge of all possible evils that will ever occur, and is a factor in the actuality of all such occurrences, this would seem to imply that God affirms at least the joy that the perpetrator experiences even while he torments his victim. Similarly the negative effects of the evil are also useful to God in the unfolding of creation since they are a species of necessary change. What consolation does Whitehead offer to the victims? God salvages what He can, albeit not in the life of the individual victim, but in the persistence of the universe, its harmony and development. In relation to this, it is not clear that Whitehead's distinction between omnipotence within the bounds of logical possibility works in this context. The qualification of God's power in this manner seems to imply merely an even more lurid and complicated version of the trilemma. Since God is wholly immanent and prehends everything that occurs but does not have the power to prohibit chaotic discord from occasioning real destruction, then this

⁸² Neville, Robert Cummings, *The Impossibility of Whitehead's God in Christian Theology*, Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Vol. 44, Philosophy and Christian Theology, 1970.

implies that God's prehension is also suspect, since this discord must be among the possibilities that God conceives. Secondly, if God's nature unfolds in reality in the manner that Whitehead suggests, it is therefore difficult not to question God's omnibenevolence. It would seem that God's activities are intimately involved in the subjective aims of the perpetrators of evil, and the suffering of their victims, in order for the best possible world to actually unfold consummate with God's nature. This leaves us with two possibilities in the manner we understand Whitehead's notion of evil. If evil is real, and not merely apparent as Whitehead insists, then based on this analysis, it is difficult, if not impossible, to view God as wholly good. God is wholly good only in the primordial sense—but real evils, especially moral evils, are bound up with God's consequent and superject natures. This seems a specious and merely verbal distinction. God's nature should be treated as a uniform identity if God is an actual entity as Whitehead insists. God cannot be omnibenevolent in one part of His nature, while morally ambivalent in other parts of His nature. If on the other hand we interpret Whitehead to be suggesting that evil is merely apparent, (and at least part of Whitehead's theodicy does seem to imply that evil is merely apparent), then we seem to be confronting a God who has no stake or role in the wake of human suffering.

Thus, Whitehead's theodicy leaves us with two possible impressions of the nature of God—on the one hand God is perfect and omnibenevolent—but only in God's primordial nature from which all potentialities are perfectible. God is nonetheless not potent enough to manage to save individuals. This idea is clearly at odds with the traditional doctrine of salvation. On the other hand, there is the God who in consequent and superject natures is wholly immanent and unfolds in the course of history— and if evil is real, but ultimately useful in ongoing creation, then this God looks much like the one that makes a notorious appearance in *Hegel's Philosophy of History*, in which individuals are sacrificed on the butchering block of history.⁸³ The world in its totality

may be saved per hypothesis, and even tend toward perfection in the process of God's imagination, but the salvation of even one sufferer is forever a "mere image", a pleasant fiction of the human imagination,

⁸³ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, translated by J. Sibree, Dover Press, New York, 1956.

that is never consummated in Whitehead's system in any way that could be meaningful to human religious experience. Secondly, if we assume that human choice is independent entirely of God's causal agency, and we are entirely responsible for all finite occasions of evil as Whitehead insists, then this would imply that the course of human history is irrelevant to God's moral character. Put more precisely God would be amoral and human behavior would be of no concern to God's pursuit of perfection, since God is only capable of saving the totality of the process of creation, but can not prevent and does not compensate for the suffering and loss of individuals. This goes against the traditional view that our actions matter to God and that God is good in every way, rather than moral goodness being a metaphysical coincidence of God's arbitrary creative nature. This is completely at odds with the concept of sin, for on such a view, the idea that we need to atone for some purpose relevant to God's plan would be pointless. On this view God might be better imagined to be a creator who creates solely for creativity's sake—while humanity uses the ideas that God prehends for its own ends, even for evil and destructive purposes. God responds by continuing to paint and sculpt, using the suffering of humanity in His art, but is oblivious to the moral import of the individual suffering that actually results from such efforts. If we read Whitehead this way, God appears to be an amoral, oblivious artist.

In closing, if we read Whitehead with the emphasis that all evil is ultimately, merely apparent, then Whitehead's approach is merely another instance of attempting to address the trilemma by denying one of the propositions, and this does not cohere with traditional theology. If we interpret Whitehead emphasizing his insistence that specific evils are nonetheless real, then we seem to be left with two possible images of God. At worst Whitehead's God seems to be either a master butcher, or at best an oblivious artist. Neither of these two interpretations of Whitehead's theodicy is reconcilable with traditional theologies either, but both images seem to me to be more appropriate to Whitehead's notion of God, than the image of the tender, caring savior that is, moreover in Whitehead's view, merely a crude metaphor, "a mere image."