

Divine Agency and Alternative Theodicies. Jan van der Veken on God and Creativity

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Van der Veken's Creative Appropriation of Whitehead and Hartshorne on God

1. Jan van der Veken has written prodigiously on philosophical theology, as an avid disciple, as well as a creative interpreter of Alfred North Whitehead and of Charles Hartshorne. He is no mere commentator, nor does he feel compelled merely to repeat them. He has creatively appropriated concepts central to process thinking, such as "creativity" and "God", and has contributed to philosophical discourse what he offers as a more coherent rendition of these philosophical themes as a process philosopher. Put otherwise Van der Veken's philosophy constitutes a "creative advance" in process thought.

2. "Divine agency" is, I will readily admit, controversial in the context of process philosophy. I think that more traditionally inclined thinkers remain wary of Hartshorne after his direct assault on what classical theodicy has always taken to be one of the distinguishing Divine attributes: *omnipotence*. In fact some, with less tolerance for the bold conceptual experimentation of process philosophy, have found fault with what they consider to be the relative "helplessness" of the God of process philosophy. Arguing that God is a fellow-sufferer in a theodicy that attempts to answer the disturbing question about where God is as men and women suffer the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" hardly contributes it seems, to the resolution of conceptual difficulties. Still less does it assuage the agony of the sufferer – for what good does it do him

to assure him that besides him there is one more who suffers – God?

3. Van der Veken is not alone in taking issue with Whitehead's God. John Cobb, Jr., undoubtedly one of Whitehead's most popular interpreters, proposes what he believes is a concept of God "more coherent with Whitehead's general cosmology and metaphysics than are some aspects of his own doctrine." (John Cobb, Jr., "A Whiteheadian Doctrine of God", *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, Brown, James and Reeves, Eds., The Bobbs-Merill Co., 1971, p. 215) Cobb is careful to point out that he does not accuse Whitehead of the paltry error of being logically inconsistent. His project at re-writing Whitehead is more ambitious: an attempt to re-establish coherence between the "first principles" of Whiteheadian philosophy.

4. Van der Veken says something similar in "Whitehead's God is not Whiteheadian Enough." In that article, important to my present remarks, Van der Veken complains that in developing his concept of God, Whitehead says too much in large measure because, Whitehead has allowed his metaphysical concept of God to be too easily tainted by the God of traditional religion. "Our contention is that even Whitehead cannot claim that all he says about God in his philosophical works, is indispensably relevant to the analysis of the metaphysical situation. He says rather too much about God than not enough. In fact, the religious meaning of the term God slips into Whitehead's metaphysics." I think it important though to emphasize that as far as I see it, Van der Veken's own concept of God is a creative appropriation of process philosophers two key icons: Whitehead and Hartshorne.

God and Divine Agency: Van der Veken's Proposal

5. Prof. Jan and I met for the first time at the conference of the *International Society of Metaphysics* in 1988. On the last day of that conference, he read a paper *in plenum* to which he gave the title, "The Difference Between the Philosophical and the Religious Ultimate – Implications for Intercultural Dialogue" that, to me, remains one of his most lucid expositions of his process concept of God. It is utterly consistent with his articulation, in various other

places, of his philosophical theology. I refer in particular to: "Whitehead's God is not Whiteheadian Enough"; "From Modal Language to Model Language: Charles Hartshorne and Linguistic Analysis"; "Creativity as Universal Activity" and "Toward a Dipolar View of the Whole of Reality." Before going further, I find it necessary to emphasize that for Prof. Jan, it is important that we recognize that between the Absolute which philosophy can affirm, and the God before whom the religious person falls in worship is more than just a logical inference. A particular vision – the vision of *homo religious* – and a particular tradition – the traditions of the great religions – must be in place to effect the transition.

6. Van der Veken employs a phrase beloved to Anselm and familiar to the history of philosophical theology: *Id Quod Majus cogitari nequit... That greater than which none can be thought*. Unlike Anselm, however, he takes this to be the appropriate label for All-Inclusive Reality – Everything. It will then be logically contradictory to assert of something that it exists, and yet that it is not part of All-Inclusive Reality, that it is not part of Everything. As such, *Id Quod Majus cogitari nequit* warrants the philosophical appellations – the Absolute, and Ultimate Reality. But Everything means exactly that: it will include all that we exult as good and beautiful, but regrettably also all that we dread and fear. This is the reason Van der Veken is less eager about identifying All Inclusive Reality with "God" than is Hartshorne, for example.

7. Ultimate Reality, however, is not merely assemblage. In fact, it can be this — the ensemble of all things — only because it is Creativity, it is universal activity. It is the initial flaring forth, the gathering of sub-atomic particles into critical masses, the cohesion of the cosmic egg; it is the Big Bang and the hurtling forth of the elemental constituents of planets, and galaxies and celestial bodies. It is the cooling of the earth's crust and the mysterious conjunction of ingredients for that soup from whence organic matter would emerge. It is what Cobb calls "the cry forward," borrowing from the powerful imagery of Nikos Kazantzakis, that pushes organic matter into plant life, and to the wonderful, dizzying array of animals, ever increasing in complexity and in consciousness. It is, in other words, the inherent creative restlessness of the universe. Whatever it is, is an instance of Creativity which is its own expla-

nation. Again, Van der Veken applies the brakes: Creativity is not *simpliciter* God.

8. Very astutely, Van der Veken, in one brief but philosophically pregnant paragraph, introduces God and Divine agency when, in his article "Creativity as Universal Activity," he writes:

If creativity within the system really comes to be understood as universal activity, which is necessarily limited ("some particular *how* is necessary) then it is not necessary to conceive of this limitation of creativity as a distinct actual entity, in the form of the Whiteheadian God. Rather the limitation of creativity is as ultimate as creativity itself; no single actual entity would ever be able to have the selfsame philosophically ultimate meaning.

Just as a color which is all colors is no color at all, a creativity that is all possible things is no creativity. An entity as an entity is a concrescence and, as such, is limited. It then also is the case that the on-goingness, the universal activity by which this definite entity – and other definite entities – comes about must itself be limited or qualified.

9. Commenting on Whitehead's *Science in the Modern World*, Van der Veken says in "Whitehead's God is Not Whiteheadian Enough":

... alongside substantial activity, Whitehead points out the necessity of a principle of limitation or a principle of determination. 'Some particular *how* is necessary and some particularization in the *what* of matter of fact is necessary'. The principle, providing a particular limitation of the wealth of possibilities, is itself not the metaphysical absolute. Whitehead calls this explicitly an *attribute* of substantial activity... Whitehead seems to equate God and the principle of limitation.

Not that Van der Veken is unwilling to do that, but he finds it necessary to emphasize that whether or not the principle of limitation is to be identified with God "cannot be decided on metaphysical grounds." It is decided by one's appreciation and valuation of creativity and its limitation. Like all other things, it is ultimately a question of *seeing as...*

10. It is the very on-goingness of the Universe that triggers the God-question. We of course have to take his reminder with utmost

seriousness that metaphysics alone cannot effect the passing from “sheer on-goingness” or “universal activity” to the God of religion. For this, a particular valuation of the universe, a particular appreciation of history against the background of religious sentiment and disposition as well as the history of the world’s religions is necessary. In his Taiwan paper, Jan van der Veken schematizes the transition:

It seems to me that the minimal requirement for characterizing the philosophical Absolute as “divine”, or for recognizing the God of religion at work in it, is that Reality be conceived as qualified or characterized not just by order and intelligence, but also by ethical demand, love and concern. The problem of philosophical theology is not to solve the question “whether there is a certain being called God” but whether there are enough reasons to conceive Reality, which exists anyway, as qualified by “divine” attributes, such as – minimally – rationality and concern, but probably ethical demand and the overcoming of evil as well.

11. Ultimate Reality exists – and this proposition belongs without doubt to the domain of modal logic. To say this is to affirm the on-goingness or universal activity of which every actual entity is an instance. The question then becomes whether or not Ultimate Reality can be *seen as* or valued as “worshipful” or “Divine.” Not only does Van der Veken take us towards a conclusion of philosophical theology. He also clarifies God-talk. The question about God’s existence is not the question about whether or not one *extra entity* – no matter how Supreme or Almighty – exists whom traditional religions call “God.” The question rather is whether or not Reality itself yields reasons for us to utter the name of God. God then *is not one more entity* added to the ensemble of entities, but the qualifier or the principle of limitation (which is to say, the intrinsic limitation) of the on-goingness, the universal activity, or the creativity itself that is Ultimate Reality. God is He because of whom creativity, despite its many curious twists and turns, brings forth order, intelligibility, intelligence, care, goodness and tremendous beauty. But “because of whom” does not refer to an entity. It refers to the limitation or qualification intrinsic to creativity itself; that about creativity without which it would not be creativity at all!

12. The novelty and promise of Prof. Jan’s approach stand out in relief against the background of a process rendition such as

Cobb's. Like Hartshorne and Van der Veken, it is to the "call forward" that Cobb looks as the proper setting for God-talk. But God, for him, is an individual agent, directing dynamism. Says Cobb:

Our account thus far has led to the view that the forward movement or creativity of the world involves the meeting in each moment of the settled facticity of the past and the relevant possibilities for the future. Out of this meeting emerges a new actuality. Our question now is, should we seek behind the experienced relevant possibilities the activity of a unitary actuality that confronts us with these possibilities, or can we attribute whatever agency is required to the possibilities themselves? The difficulty with attributing the requisite agency to possibilities is that in their on being – as merely possible – they are abstract...I share with most modern philosophy the view, called by Whitehead the "ontological principle" that only what is actual has agency. Hence, if possibilities unrealized in the past world have effective relevance for new occasions of experience, this is the agency of something actual. (John Cobb, Jr., *God and the World*, The Westminster Press, p. 98)

13. Van der Veken, to my mind, does not feel compelled to choose between the possibilities offered by Cobb: either an individual agent offers the possibility that creativity realizes, or it is the possibilities themselves that possess this agency. Cobb rejects the second, and so affirms the first. My own reading of Van der Veken is his proposal of a *tertium quid*. Neither an individual agent nor the abstract possibilities themselves are to be looked to as cause, but the very "cry forward", the very on-goingness, the very universal dynamism *insofar* as it is intrinsically qualified and limited. The clear advantage of this proposal is that it perfectly conforms to the prudential rule that philosophers learned from Occam, no matter the slander he sometimes receives: *Entia non sunt sine ratione multiplicanda*. Van der Veken, in other words, finds no need to postulate an individual agent "behind" the dynamism of reality, behind *Id Quod Majus cogitari nequit* because this very stuff of the universe, as limited or qualified, as intrinsically providing an answer to the "how" and "what" of the very drive forward, can do the job.

14. Clearly, the agency at work here is markedly different from the agency of the Unmoved Prime Mover, or the Uncaused First Efficient Cause, or the Necessary Being. What the *Quinquae Viae*

pointed to was a Being called God, cause to be sure of everything in being, but a being nevertheless distinct and separate from all that He had brought forth from nothing. Ultimate Reality is Ultimate and Absolute. As such there can be no *cause* behind it. God is a *qualification*, a *limitation* of this universal activity, this given dynamism of Ultimate Reality. There is a very charming line from Whitehead, that Hartshorne repeats, which I will also here repeat: The trouble with traditional theodicies is that *they rendered unto God the attributes that belonged to Caesar*.

15. I do not think Prof. Jan will have any serious objection to Hartshorne's characterization of agency:

The new idea is that causal order is not absolute but statistical. It admits an element of chance or randomness in nature ...All events are "caused," if that means that they had necessary conditions in the past, conditions without which they could not have happened, however, what is technically termed "sufficient condition," that which finally determines what happens, requires qualification. Where there is little freedom, as an inanimate nature, there are often conditions sufficient to determine approximately what happens, and for most purposes this is all we need to consider. Where there is much freedom, as in the behavior of higher, including human, animals, there are still necessary conditions in the past, but sufficient past conditions only for a considerable range of possibilities within which each decision maker finally determines what precisely and concretely happens at the moment in the agents own mind. (Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, State University of New York, 1984, pp. 16-17)

This is, quite clearly, the agency of creativity, of universal activity, but it also delineates the agency of God, because it suggests what we cannot attribute to God. For one thing, we cannot attribute to Him the decision-making of a despot who puts everything in its place. It is blasphemous, in other words, to fashion God in the image of Caesar!

16. In terms that are obviously Whiteheadian and Hartshornian, but employed to communicate a creative reading, Van der Veken summarizes his view on Divine agency in an article on Saul Kripke's theory of designators and referents which he applies to the term "God." There Van der Veken wrote:

For Whitehead, God and Creativity do not coincide. The fact of evil stands in the way, inexorably. All that is cannot be the result of the creative power of an omnipotent and benevolent God. God is not the world but the valuation of the world. This means that God is not equated with the creative process itself. God is the "first qualification of Creativity," i.e. the creative urge as far as directed towards values and ideals. God leads the world not by its power, but by its vision of beauty and harmony. (J. van der Veken, "The Referent of the Word 'God'", *Tradition and Renewal: The Centennial of Louvain's Institute of Philosophy*, Louvain University Press, 1992, p. 164).

17. Creativity, or universal activity, is what accounts for the emergence of our world, of worlds and all that they contain. In this sense, it is the *universal agent*. But creativity accounts for everything – and while the dazzling world of galaxies and the continuous wonderment that human consciousness is are its occasions, so too are the terrible viruses that snuff out infant life, and the processes and laws that wreck havoc on millions of lives all over the world – such as *El Niño*. It is in this sense "ambivalent." (cf. Jan van der Veken, "From Modal Language to Model Language: Charles Hartshorne and Linguistic Analysis"). But when the sum of it all is drawn and when the evidence is evaluated, then to the believer, there appears prevalent, dominant and characterizing the drive of universal activity towards higher order, greater intelligence, ethical demand, goodness and mercy. The believer then recognizes *in creativity* the Worshipful and the Unsurpassable Good. In "Creativity as Universal Activity," Van der Veken says:

Let us try to conceive the relationship between God and creativity differently, namely thus: that creativity is viewed as a universal activity, which is efficacious in all events, and that God as the primordial limitation of this process coordinates all events from within. Then it becomes much simpler to accept the immanence of creativity and the immanence of God in all events.

The causality of God can, I think, be properly described as the *causality of the offer of value, of goal, and of the beautiful possibilities* of ever increasing consciousness, heightened sensitivity to the demands of love, a tremendously awesome and awe-inspiring wonder, and a greater capacity for care and compassion. His causa-

lity is the agency of the “coordinative within” of creativity itself so that one who looks at the dazzling panorama that the universe is can say: “Surely, God must be at work here”!

Alternative Theodicies

18. *Summa Theologica* I, Q. 2. A. 3 that addresses itself resolutely to the question *Utrum Deus sit* acknowledges that the prime objection to the affirmation of God’s existence is the fact of evil. This is the reason that there is theodicy, and that there are theodicies. In a most interesting discussion on the process response to the problem of suffering, Johan Vanhoutte of the University of Louvain poses the vexatious problem even more dramatically: “What sort of silent-absent, detached God is that, who, above all grief, abandons his world to immeasurable misery?” (Johan Vanhoutte, “God as Companion and Fellow-Sufferer: An Image Emerging from Process Thought?” in *Teodicea Oggi?*, Olivetti, ed., *Archivio di Filosofia*, 1988, 190-225)

19. I have no interest in criticizing theodicies. I think the responsible versions we have had thus far are all valiant attempts at wrestling manfully, with the tremendous challenge that the fact of evil poses. What I do want to underscore, however, is the fact that there is a direct relation between the conceptuality of Divine agency and the problem of evil. An Omnipotent God triggers in his thoughtful creatures the question why he should allow them to suffer. The traditional theodicies then that commence with distinguishing between “physical evils” and “moral evils” – and consequently between what is *per se* good and only *per accidens* evil all endeavor to find clues as to why a God who can everything should in fact choose to permit the occurrence of evil.

20. Even Roth’s rather provocative and thoroughly interesting “theodicy of protest” rests on the presumption that God’s power is limitless. (John Roth, “A Theodicy of Protest,” in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, Davis, ed., John Knox Press, 1981, 7-37) The theodicy of protest Roth advocates is not a theodicy in the traditional sense – because it attempts no justification for the Divine tolerance of evil. What it does is to “hold God responsible” for the gore of the slaughter-house that this world is. True, we

humans are capable of terrible deeds, but our malice cannot account for the magnitude of this world's horror. God must be held to answer – even as we must acknowledge with Job, “Dominus est.” Quite clearly, though novel, this theodicy of protest is rather classical in its assumption: An all-powerful God who, as such, must answer for many things that have gone terribly wrong with our world and with our history!

21. Sia's rendition of Hartshorne's position points to the significant difference in the process approach:

Hartshorne thus tackles the problem of evil by reminding us that God's governance of the world cannot be conceived of as totally determining any part of it. The making of the world is not a simple act of God, but a fusion of divine and lesser acts, all in their fashion self-determining, creative or free. The world is not divinely decreed as to its details, but is the result of the divine decisions plus innumerable creaturely decisions. No one agent can decide a situation since every other agent involved contributes to the decision. If all creatures are free, then no divine directive, argues Hartshorne, could do more than set boundaries to the possibilities of discord and disorder in the world... Evil comes about because the partial self-determination of each and every actuality means genuine chance at the points of intersection between diverse free acts. (Santiago Sia, *God in Process Thought*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985, p. 96)

Van der Veken's exposition prepares us for this conclusion. God-at-work-in-the-world is the universal activity of all that is towards greater understanding, higher order, more boundless compassion and tender mercy. God cannot be charged with irresponsibility and malice – the irresponsibility and malice in the world notwithstanding – he is not the only agent at work in the world. The warming of ocean currents, the churning of cyclonic winds, the destructive undulations of earth, the emergence of resistant strains of pathogens, the skewed psyches of serial killers and rapists – all this is universal activity, all this is that great tide of on-goingness. But why it is that after every natural disaster, hands reach out to the stricken in genuine compassion, why it is that after so many twists and turns, the wonderful species of a self-reflective being, *homo sapiens* should emerge, why it is that despite the terrible

damage we visit on our planet, it somehow heals itself – when we are awestruck at the harmony, the intelligence, the goodness and the mercy that ultimately emerge and prevail, then we fall down in worship before the Worshipful, the Divine at work in the world.

22. There is no doubt that compared to the Omnipotent God of classical philosophical theologies, the God of process philosophers might seem rather helpless. But what is clear is that it is better and more coherently able to cope with the enduring, ever-vexatious and humanly problem of evil than a God who determines all things to their last detail would ever be. Furthermore, if I have in process thought who God who is unsurpassable in goodness because He is the name of that drive towards goodness that I, a believer, see to be at work in the world, if I have a God unsurpassable in power because He is the first qualification and limitation of universal creativity – giving the dynamism of all things a specific “how”, if I have a God who is worthy of Worship because he offers the world the goal, the values and the vision of greatness, nobility, excellence, beauty, grace and truth, and if I have God gone given to me by that “brief Galilean vision” as a loving Father, that is good enough for me! □