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ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

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Charles Hartshorne,
"Reconceiving God,"
from Omnipotence and Other
Theological Mistakes

Arguments for the existence of God and accounts of God’s nature have come under increasing criticism over the last two centuries. One response to the intellectual challenges has been to propose radical revision of the theologian’s concept of God. According to Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000), the philosophical ideas behind traditional theology are mistaken or ill-conceived. The God of ordinary believers, encountered in Scripture, tradition, and ongoing religious life, is ill-served by the theoretical concoctions of the theologians. In a similar vein, many thinkers have responded to the problem of evil by adjusting their conception of God’s omnipotence while trying to deny the critics’ claim that the resulting picture of God cannot be satisfyingly a religious viewpoint. Hartshorne, however, goes on the offensive, claiming that the usual notion of omnipotence was a bad idea in the first place. The idea itself is a confused one, and therefore bad philosophy, and ordinary belief in God’s power does not require us to construe that power in such a way as to make it subject to these criticisms. In Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes, Hartshorne applies this kind of analysis to six major theological doctrines, three of which are addressed in the following excerpt: immutability, omnipotence, and omniscience. The keys to his stance are his notion of God as subject to change and his notion of the universe as the arena of emerging forms of beauty. His approach is informed by the doctrines of Process Philosophy originating in the work of Alfred North Whitehead. Hartshorne was the major proponent of this school of thought in the area of religion. He also helped revive interest in Anselm’s proof and wrote on metaphysical issues more generally.

First Mistake: God Is Absolutely Perfect and Therefore Unchangeable

In Plato’s Republic one finds the proposition: God, being perfect, cannot change (not for the better, since "perfect" means that there can be no better; not for the worse, since ability to change for the worse, to decay, degenerate, or become corrupt, is a weakness, an imperfection). The argument may seem cogent, but it is so only if two assumptions are valid: that it is possible to conceive of a meaning for "perfect" that excludes change in any and every respect and that we must conceive God as perfect in just this sense. Obviously the ordinary meanings of perfect do not entirely exclude change. Thus Wordsworth wrote of his wife that she was a "perfect woman," but he certainly did not mean that she was totally unchangeable. In many places in the Bible human beings are spoken of as perfect; again the entire exclusion of change cannot have been intended. Where in the Bible God is spoken of as perfect, the indications are that even here the exclusion of change in any and every respect was not implied. And where God is directly spoken of as strictly unchanging ("without shadow of turning"), there is still a possibility of ambiguity. God might be absolutely unchangeable in righteousness (which is what the context indicates is the intended meaning), but changeable in ways compatible with, neutral to, or even required by, this unswerving constancy in righteousness. Thus, God would be in no degree, however slight, alterable in the respect in question (the divine steadfastness in good will) and yet alterable, not necessarily in spite of, but even because of, this steadfastness. If the creatures behave according to God’s will, God will appreciate this behavior; if not, God will have

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a different response, equally appropriate and expressive of the divine goodness.

The Biblical writers were not discussing Greek philosophical issues, and it is at our peril that we interpret them as if they were discussing these, just as it is at our peril if we take them to be discussing various modern issues that had not arisen in ancient Palestine. It may even turn out on inquiry that perfection, if taken to imply an absolute maximum of value in every conceivable respect, does not make sense or is contradictory. In that case the argument of the Republic is an argument from an absurdity and proves nothing. Logicians have found that abstract definitions may seem harmless and yet be contradictory when their meanings are spelled out. Example, “the class of all classes.” Similarly, “actuality of all possible values,” to which no addition is possible, may have contradictory implications. If perfection cannot consistently mean this value maximum, then the Platonic argument is unsound. Nor was it necessarily Plato’s last word on the subject.

Second Mistake: Omnipotence

God, being defined as perfect in all respects must, it seems, be perfect in power; therefore, whatever happens is divinely made to happen. If I die of cancer this misfortune is God’s doing. The question then becomes, “Why has God done this to me?” Here everything depends on “perfect in power” or “omnipotent.” And here, too, there are possible ambiguities, as we shall see.

Third Mistake: Omnipotence

Since God is unchangeably perfect, whatever happens must be eternally known to God. Our tomorrow’s deeds, not yet decided upon by us, are yet always or eternally present to God, for whom there is no open future. Otherwise (the argument goes), God would be “ignorant,” imperfect in knowledge, waiting to observe what we may do. Hence, whatever freedom of decision we may have must be somehow reconciled with the alleged truth that our decisions bring about no additions to the divine life. Here perfect and unchanging knowledge, free from ignorance or increase, are the key terms. It can be shown that they are all seriously lacking in clarity, and that the theological tradition resolved the ambiguities in a question-begging way.

It is interesting that the idea of an unchangeable omniscience covering every detail of the world’s history is not to be found definitely stated in ancient Greek philosophy (unless in Stoicism, which denied human freedom) and is rejected by Aristotle. It is not clearly affirmed in the Bible. It is inconspicuous in the philosophies of India, China, and Japan. Like the idea of omnipotence, it is largely an invention of Western thought of the Dark or Middle Ages. It still goes unchallenged in much current religious thought. But many courageous and competent thinkers have rejected it, including Schelling and Whitehead.

Two Meanings of
“God Is Perfect and Unchanging”

The word ‘perfect’ literally means “completely made” or “finished.” But God is conceived as the maker or creator of all; so what could have made God (whether or not the making was properly completed)? ‘Perfect’ seems a poor word to describe the divine reality.

To describe something as “not perfect” seems a criticism, it implies fault finding; worship excludes criticism and fault finding. God is to be “loved with all one’s mind, heart, and soul.” Such love seems to rule out the possibility of criticism. Suppose we accept this. Do we then have to admit that God cannot change? Clearly yes, insofar as change is for the worse and capacity for it objectionable, a frail or weakness. God then cannot change for the worse. The view I wish to defend admits this. But does every conceivable kind of change show a fault or weakness? Is there not change for the better? We praise people when they change in this fashion. All healthy growth is such change. We are delighted in growth in infants and children. Is there nothing to learn from this about how to conceive God?

It is easy to reply that, whereas the human offspring starts as a mere fertilized single cell and before that as an unfertilized one, God is surely not to be so conceived. However, no analogy between something human and the worshipful God is to be taken in simple-minded literalness. There still may be an analogy between
growth as a wholly good form of change and the divine life. For it is arguable that even an infinite richness may be open to increase. The great logician Bertrand Russell expressed this opinion to me, although Russell was an atheist and had no interest in supporting my, or any, theology.

The traditional objection, already mentioned, to divine change was that if a being were already perfect, meaning that nothing better was possible, then change for the better must be impossible for the being. The unnoticed assumption here has been (for two thousand and more years) that it makes sense to think of a value so great or marvelous that it could in no sense whatever be excelled or surpassed. How do we know that this even makes sense? In my view it does not and is either a contradiction or mere nonsense.

Bishop Anselm sought to define God’s perfection as “that than which nothing greater (or better) can be conceived.” In other words, the divine worth is in all respects strictly unsurpassable, incapable of growth as well as of rivalry by another. The words are smoothly uttered; but do they convey a clear and consistent idea? Consider the phrase ‘greatest possible number.’ It, too, can be smoothly uttered, but does it say anything? It might be used to define infinity; but I am not aware of any mathematician who has thought this a good definition. There are in standard mathematics many infinities unequal to one another, but no highest infinity. “Infinite” was a favorite word among classical theists; but they cannot be said to have explored with due care its possible meanings. In any case “not finite” is a negation, and the significance of the negative depends on that of the positive which is negated. If being finite is in every sense a defect, something objectionable, then did not God in creating a world of finite things act objectionably? This seems to me to follow.

Do or do not finite things contribute something to the greatness of God? If so, then each such contribution is itself finite. Does this not mean that somehow finitude has a valid application to the divine life? Consider that, according to the tradition, God could have refrained from creating our world. Then whatever, if anything, this world contributes to the divine life would have been lacking. Moreover, if God could have created some other world instead of this one, God must actually lack what the other world would have contributed. If you reply that the world contributes nothing to the greatness of God, then I ask, What are we all doing, and why talk about “serving God,” who, you say, gains nothing whatever from our existence?

The simple conclusion from the foregoing, and still other lines of reasoning, is that the traditional idea of divine perfection or infinity is hopelessly unclear or ambiguous and that persisting in that tradition is bound to cause increasing skepticism, confusion, and human suffering. It has long bred, and must evermore breed, atheism as a natural reaction....

There are two senses in which freedom from faults, defects, or objectional features, and perfection in that sense, may be applied theologically. The divine, to be worthy of worship, must excel any conceivable being other than itself; it must be unsurpassable by another, exalted beyond all possible rivals. Hence all may worship God as in principle forever superior to any other being. This exaltation beyond possible rivals applies to both of the two senses of perfection that I have in mind. There are two kinds (or norms) of excellence, which differ as follows. With one kind it makes sense to talk of an absolute excellence, unsurpassable not only by another being but also by the being itself. This is what the tradition had in mind, and there was in it an important half truth. The neglected other truth, however, is that an absolute best, unsurpassable not only by others but by the being itself, is conceivable only in certain abstract aspects of value or greatness, not in fully concrete value or greatness. And God, I hold, is no mere abstraction.

The abstract aspects of value capable of an absolute maximum are goodness and wisdom, or what ought to be meant by the infallibility, righteousness, or holiness of God (one attribute variously expressed). We should conceive the divine knowledge of the world and divine decision-making about it as forever incapable of rivalry and in its infallible righteousness incapable of growth. God is not first more or less wicked or foolish (or, like the lower animals amoral, unaware of ethical principles) and then righteous and wise but is always beyond criticism in these abstract respects, always wholly wise and good in relating to the world. It is not in such attributes that God can grow. This is so because goodness and rightness are abstract, in a sense in which some values are not.

Put a man in prison. He is not thereby necessarily forced to entertain wrong beliefs, lose virtue, or make wrong decisions. What he is forced to lose is the aesthetic richness and variety of his impressions. He cannot in the same degree continue to enjoy the
beauty of the world. Similarly, a person suffering as Job did is not a happy person, but is not necessarily less virtuous than before. We can go further: ethical goodness and infallibility in knowledge have an upper or absolute limit. Whatever the world may be, God can know without error or ignorance what that world is and can respond to it, taking fully into account the actual and potential values which it involves, and thus be wholly righteous. But if the world first lacks and then acquires new harmonies, new forms of aesthetic richness, then the beauty of the world as divinely known increases. God would be defective in aesthetic capacity were the divine enjoyment not to increase in such a case. Aesthetic value is the most concrete form of value. Everything can contribute to and increase its An absolute maximum of beauty is a meaningless idea. Leibniz tried to define it. Who dares to say that he succeeded? Beauty is unity in variety of experiences. Absolute unity in absolute variety has no clear meaning. Either God lacks any aesthetic sense and then we surpass God in that respect, or there is no upper limit to the divine enjoyment of the beauty of the world.

Two Meanings of “All-Powerful”

The idea of omnipotence in the sense to be criticized came about as follows: to be God, that is, worthy of worship, God must in power excel all others (and be open to criticism by none). The highest conceivable form of power must be the divine power. So far so good. Next question: what is the highest conceivable form of power? This question was scarcely put seriously at all, the answer was felt to be so obvious: it must be the power to determine every detail of what happens in the world. Not, notice, to significantly influence the happenings; no, rather to strictly determine, decide, their every detail. Hence it is that people still today ask, when catastrophe strikes, Why did God do this to me? What mysterious divine reason could there be? Why me? I charge theologians with responsibility for this improper and really absurd question.

Without telling themselves so, the founders of the theological tradition were accepting and applying to deity the tyrant ideal of power. “I decide and determine everything, you (and your friends and enemies) merely do what I determine you (and them) to do. Your decision is simply mine for you. You only think you decide: in reality the decision is mine.”

Since the theologians were bright people we must not oversimplify. They half-realized they were in trouble. Like many a politician, they indulged in double-talk to hide their mistake even from themselves. They knew they had to define sin as freely deciding to do evil or the lesser good, and as disobeying the will of God. How could one disobey an omnipotent will? There were two devices. One was to say that God does not decide to bring about a sinful act; rather, God decides not to prevent it. God “permits” sin to take place. Taking advantage of this decision, the sinner does his deed. Yet stop! Remember that God is supposed to decide exactly what happens in the world. If someone murders me, God has decided there shall be precisely that murderous action. So it turns out that “permits” has here a meaning it ordinarily does not have. Ordinarily, when X gives Y permission to do such and such, there are at least details in the actual doing that are not specified by X (and could not be specified, since human language can give only outlines, not full details, of concrete occurrences). But omnipotence is defined as power to absolutely determine what happens. I have Thomas Aquinas especially in mind here. God gives a creature permission to perform act A, where A is no mere outline but is the act itself in its full concreteness. So nothing at all is left for the creature to decide? What then is left of creaturely freedom?

The most famous of all the scholastics finds the answer, and this is the second of the two devices referred to above. God decides that the creature shall perform act A, but the divine decision is that nevertheless the act shall be performed “freely.” Don’t laugh, the saintly theologian is serious. Serious, but engaging in double-talk. It is determined exactly what the creature will do, but determined that he or she will do it freely. As the gangsters sometimes say, after specifying what is to be done, “You are going to like it”—in other words, to do it with a will. If this is not the despot’s ideal of power, what is?

What, let us ask again, is the highest conceivable form of power? Is it the despot’s, magnified to infinity, and by hook or crook somehow reconciled with “benevolence,” also magnified to infinity? This seems to have been the (partly unconscious) decision of theologians. Is there no better way? Of course there is.

After all, the New Testament analogy—found also in Greek religions—for deity is the parental role, except that in those days of unchallenged male chauvinism it had to be the father role. What is the
ideal parental role? Is it that every detail is to be decided by the parent? The question answers itself. The ideal is that the child shall more and more decide its own behavior as its intelligence grows. Wise parents do not try to determine everything, even for the infant, much less for the half-matured or fully matured offspring. Those who do not understand this, and their victims, are among the ones who write agonized letters to Ann Landers. In trying to conceive God, are we to forget everything we know about values? To read some philosophers or theologians it almost seems so.

If the parent does not decide everything, there will be some risk of conflict and frustration in the result. The children are not infallibly wise and good. And indeed, as we shall argue later, even divine wisdom cannot completely foresee (or timelessly know) what others will decide. Life simply is a process of decision making, which means that risk is inherent in life itself. Not even God could make it otherwise. A world without risks is not conceivable. At best it would be a totally dead world, with neither good nor evil.

Is it the highest ideal of power to rule over puppets who are permitted to think they make decisions but who are really made by another to do exactly what they do? For twenty centuries we have had theologians who seem to say yes to this question.

Some theologians have said that, while God could determine everything, yet out of appreciation for the value of having free creatures, God chooses to create human beings to whom a certain freedom is granted. When things go badly, it is because these special creatures make ill use of the freedom granted them. As a solution of the problem of evil, this is perhaps better than the nothing that theorists of religion have mostly given us. But it is not good enough. Many ills cannot plausibly be attributed to human freedom. Diseases no doubt are made worse and more frequent by people’s not taking care of themselves, not exercising due care in handling food, and so forth. But surely they are not caused only by such misdoings. Human freedom does not cause all the suffering that animals undergo, partly from hunger, partly from wounds inflicted by sexual rivals or predators, also from diseases, parasites, and other causes not controlled by human beings.

There is only one solution of the problem of evil “worth writing home about.” It uses the idea of freedom, but generalizes it. Why suppose that only people make decisions? People are much more conscious of the process of decision making than the other animals need be supposed to be; but when it comes to that, how conscious is an infant in determining its activities? If chimpanzees have no freedom, how much freedom has an infant, which by every test that seems applicable is much less intelligent than an adult chimpanzee? (One would never guess this fact from what “pro-lifers” say about a fetus being without qualification a person, so loose is their criterion for personality.)

There are many lines of reasoning that support the conclusion to which theology has been tending for about a century now, which is that our having at least some freedom is not an absolute exception to an otherwise total lack of freedom in nature, but a special, intensified, magnified form of a general principle pervasive of reality, down to the very atoms and still farther. Current physics does not contradict this, as many physicists admit. When will the general culture at least begin to see the theological bearings of this fact?...

From childhood I learned to worship divine love. God’s power simply is the appeal of unsurpassable love. Again Whitehead put it well: “God’s power is the worship he inspires.” It is not that we hear Zeus’s fearful thunderbolt, see the lightning, and fall down at the sight of such power. No, we feel the divine beauty and majesty, and cannot but respond accordingly. Even the other animals feel it; what they cannot, and we can, do is to think it. Whitehead again: God leads the world by the “majesty” of the divine vision of each creature and its place in the world. God “shares with each actual entity its actual (past) world.” “God is the fellow sufferer who understands.”...

The new idea is that causal order is not absolute but statistical. It admits an element of chance or randomness in nature. Many of the leading physicists of recent times are quite explicit about this. But they were preceded in principle by some great Greek philosophers, some French philosophers of modern times, and the three most distinguished of purely American philosophers, Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey. 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 fully determines what happens, requires qualification. Where there is little freedom, as in 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 agent’s own mind, that is, what decision is made. Even God, as the French Catholic philosopher Lequier said more than a century ago, waits to see what the individual decides. “Thou hast created me creator of myself.” Many decades later Whitehead, also a believer in God, independently put the point with the phrase “the self-created creature”; and the atheist Sartre in France wrote of human consciousness as its own cause, causa sui... 

The root of evil, suffering, misfortune, wickedness, is the same as the root of all good, joy, happiness, and that is freedom, decision making. If, by a combination of good management and good luck, X and Y harmonize in their decisions, the AB they bring about may be good and happy; if not, not. To attribute all good to good luck, or all to good management, is equally erroneous. Life is not and cannot be other than a mixture of the two. God’s good management is the explanation of there being a cosmic order that limits the scope of freedom and hence of chance—limits, but does not reduce to zero. With too much freedom, with nothing like laws of nature (which, some of us believe, are divinely decided and sustained), there could be only meaningless chaos; with too little, there could be only such good as there may be in atoms and molecules by themselves, apart from all higher forms. With no creaturely freedom at all, there could not even be that, but at most God alone, making divine decisions—about what? It is the existence of many decision makers that produces everything, whether good or ill. It is the existence of God that makes it possible for the innumerable decisions to add up to a coherent and basically good world where opportunities justify the risks. Without freedom, no risks—and no opportunities. ...

Two Meanings of “All-Knowing”
The word ‘omniscient’ seems somewhat less badly tarnished by its historical usage than ‘omnipotent.’ Whereas having all power (of decision making) would be a monopoly, implying that the creatures had no such power, having all knowledge has no monopolistic implications. Only one agent can genuinely make a certain concrete decision; in contrast, many agents can know one and the same truth, e.g., that two and three is five, or that Julius Caesar was assassinated by Brutus. Hence that God knows all truth is quite compatible with you or your brother knowing many truths.

With omniscience there is one difficulty: either knowing about the future differs essentially from knowing about the past, and hence even God knows our past decisions in one way and knows about the future of our decision making in another way, or else it is merely our human weakness that for us the future is partly indefinite, a matter of what may or may not be, whereas God, exalted altogether beyond such a “limitation,” sees the future as completely definite. If God is to be thought in every respect immutable it is this second option that must be taken; but have we any other reason for rejecting the old Socinian proposition that even the highest conceivable form of knowledge is of the past-and-definite as past-and-definite and of the future and partly indefinite as future and partly indefinite? Otherwise would not God be “knowing” the future as what it is not, that is, knowing falsely? As we have seen, the arguments for the complete unchangeability of God are fallacious; hence, the arguments for growth in God’s knowledge, as the creative process produces new realities to know, are sound. Thus as Pechner, Berdyaev, Tillich, and, probably independently, Whitehead held (and Berdyaev most neatly formulated), our existence from moment to moment “enriches the divine life.” And this is the ultimate meaning of our existence.

Is God all-knowing? Yes, in the Socinian sense. Never has a great intellectual discovery passed with less notice by the world than the Socinian discovery of the proper meaning of omniscience. To this day works of reference fail to tell us about this.