

# Towards a Sustainable Metaphysic of Faith

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*“Let peace begin with me*

*Let this be the moment now!”*

*(Furthermore, let it continue from there!)*

## 1. Introduction

One of the major principles embraced (explicitly or implicitly) by all New Thought philosophies is that you can achieve what you can believe. However, New Thought is strangely silent (and maybe a little confused) on what you can believe. In this essay, I argue that a major thesis in New Thought philosophy, the notion that thought or consciousness is omnipotent, is simply not believable. What we should do is to expand our notion of the Real to embrace God as *Experience*. This world-view is just as empowering and much more believable than the model of God as Mind or Consciousness. Moreover, because it is more believable, it might also serve to keep those people we lose to disillusionment involved in New Thought much longer. The remainder of this essay has six parts:

- *Some Working Definitions*: I clarify what I mean by terms such as philosophy and faith, and distinguish experience from mind or consciousness.
- *Can Faith and Philosophy Peacefully Co-exist?* I argue not only that they can, but that they must.
- *Criteria for Sustainable Faith*: I outline at least some of the characteristics that beliefs must have to serve as a desirable and sustainable foundation for faith.
- *Whitehead’s Process Model: An Ontology of Experience*: I briefly outline Whitehead’s metaphysics as an alternative to idealism.
- *Why Include the Process Ontology in New Thought*: I explain why New Thought should consider including Whitehead’s model in its teachings.
- *Objections and Replies*: I review and answer anticipated objections from New Thought philosophers.

## 2. Some Working Definitions

Because this essay is about the philosophy and faith, I define the two terms as they are used here.

### **Philosophy**

For purposes of this essay, philosophy means an attempt to understand ourselves and our experiences with intellectual honesty. It can take two basic forms, analytic and synthetic. Analytic philosophy seeks to ensure that our ideas are internally consistent and descriptive of what people actually experience. Synthetic philosophy seeks to discover

new ways of understanding the world, which are, hopefully, also internally consistent and descriptive of experience. In Western culture, philosophy has largely emphasized speculation and logic. Although philosophy itself is a Western concept, non-European cultures have also attempted to be honest in understanding the world. However, they focus less on logic and intellectual activity than Western philosophy and pay more attention to experiential practices such as meditation.

## **Faith**

It might be helpful to define what faith is not first. Faith is not knowledge. While I cannot precisely define knowledge in this essay, let alone get a consensus on my definition, knowledge entails some sort of certainty, as in the case of empirical facts or logical inferences. Faith pertains to the unknown, usually the future. (Knowledge of the future, if it exists, is not faith but precognition.) Faith is the willingness to act on the belief that something is so and will remain so, but faith is also different from belief. To believe means to hold a proposition, which can be expressed by a sentence, as true or false. Faith depends on belief, but it involves much more. Faith is always “in” something, in that to have faith means sincerely believing that certain propositions, e.g., that God exists and God is benevolent, are true. Faith in nothing is the same as no faith. However, unlike belief, it also entails decision, commitment, and action consistent with belief. To believe in a proposition is to accept it as true intellectually. To have faith in it is to be willing to act on the presumption of its truth, or presuppose its truth in practice.<sup>1</sup> Faith is a decision to trust something, some one, or some principle.

## **Differentiating Experience from Consciousness and Mind**

We also need to differentiate “experience” from “mind” or “consciousness.” Both experience and mind involve subjectivity, i.e., existence *for itself*, as opposed to the mere existence *for another*. It is being in the form of “I am.” Mind and consciousness are sophisticated forms of experience but only a small part of it. Even for humans, it is possible to have subconscious or even unconscious experiences. Experience can include any number of subliminal events, feelings, emotions, and body sensations that are not experienced consciously. Comatose people may still have experiences. Furthermore, consciousness is not ordinarily ascribed to plants, lower animals, and bacteria, but we do ascribe experience to these creatures, because they respond to their environment.

Finally, if we look at Descartes’s philosophy, from which the modern concept of mind developed, we find that mind is a *substance*, a self-existent entity that need not be part of anything else in order to exist. Experiences need not consist of substances. They can also be conceived in terms of *events*. This point becomes very important later.

### **3. Can Faith and Philosophy Peacefully Co-exist?**

Some say faith and philosophy are intractable if not mortal enemies. One could easily argue few philosophers, especially those in Western culture, know anything about faith. Philosophy is about suspending judgment, reaching conclusions only after carefully

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<sup>1</sup> One could also argue that the definition of faith here is synonymous with sincere belief, in that beliefs that we are unwilling to presuppose in practice are not sincerely held. I personally would agree with this argument, but it is not my purpose to debate this question here.

considering all the ramifications and implications, to ensure that we are not deceiving ourselves. Contrast this with the following passage from the New Testament: “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:2, KJV).

This passage, like many others, is subject to interpretation. If ‘as little children’ means naïve or gullible, then it suggests a potential conflict between philosophy and faith. However, ‘as little children’ could also connote innocence, a willingness to learn, and an openness to new ideas. None of the major paths of faith I have studied, be they Eastern or Western, advocate either naivete or gullibility. To be truly incompatible with philosophy, faith would have to entail some form of self-deceit. Although self-deceit makes some ideas easier to believe, experience eventually repudiates them. The ensuing disillusionment, often accompanied by feelings of betrayal, then makes the next leap of faith even more difficult. Today’s sucker is tomorrow’s cynic, and deceit in any form is no friend of faith.

Although faith and philosophy are compatible, formal study of philosophy is certainly not necessary to have faith. Philosophers should leave people who already have faith well enough alone. I personally am reluctant to burst people’s bubbles, because I prefer to avoid breaking things I can’t easily fix. The last thing I would want to do is educate the faith out of someone who can simply read the Bible, believe it, and thereby heal himself. That would be just plain cruel. However, such men of faith are usually not interested in philosophy in the first place. Philosophy appeals more to the disillusioned, the sick souls, and prodigal sons that have lost their faith and would like to reestablish it on a firmer foundation. It is for yesterday’s suckers who have come to realize that cynicism doesn’t work any better, if as well, as naivete.

Eventually, even philosophers must stop philosophizing and embrace faith. The world is too complex for us to base all our decisions on knowledge alone, and nothing is guaranteed. Everybody has faith in *something* unknown, if only in the power of their own ego or intellect. Some become religious; others act on the assumption that skepticism is the safest way to go. Whatever their faith commitment may be, honest philosophers admit it when they are acting on faith — and we all do it.

Unfortunately, some of us would like to think that philosophy can be a substitute for faith, and philosophers are some of the worst offenders here. People who have developed a fondness for certainty sometimes hope that philosophy can provide the knowledge they need in order to avoid having to operate on faith. This project inevitably fails. As philosophy is not faith, neither is it knowledge. Philosophy deals with models or theories. Its subject matter is not experience itself, but the ways in which we think about experience. It deals with menus, not meals, maps, not journeys. Eventually we have to order the food, or hit the road, and when we do, faith takes over. The philosopher may understand all the major ethical theories ever written, but he becomes a man of faith when he treats others as he would have them treat himself. However, faith is based on philosophy whenever the underlying beliefs are metaphysical or ethical. We commit to treating others as we would have them treat us *precisely because* we have decided to trust that certain religious or philosophical propositions are true, be they the teachings of the New Testament, the Ten Commandments, the *Bhagvad Gita*, utilitarianism, or Kant’s Categorical Imperative.

Furthermore, to be a power, faith must be sincere. Placebos don't work when the subject knows he's taking a sugar pill. Nor can faith commitments be random. They involve the willingness to act on *sincere beliefs*. Because the sincerity of the believer varies directly with the credibility of the belief, credibility is an essential element of faith. The best foundation for credibility, in turn, is intellectual integrity, and this is where philosophy can prove its worth. The proper relationship between philosophy and faith is one in which philosophy assists the believer in finding that point on the precipice from which he can sincerely take his leap of faith. Logic and analytical philosophy can verify the integrity of our faith. Religion and synthetic philosophy can help us find a suitable place to jump. In either case, however, philosophy is ultimately the servant of faith.

#### 4. Criteria for Sustainable Faith

Different people have different capacities for sincere belief. Some need only the word of an authority, be it scientific, scriptural, or a respected individual. Others remain skeptical to the point of paralysis. However, there are those propositions that are by their very nature impossible to believe and therefore cannot possibly sustain faith. Incoherent or inconsistent beliefs are one example. We may claim to believe in round squares, but whatever belief we may have in them disintegrates when we have to explain what we mean by them. Likewise, most people cannot believe things that clearly contradict facts they already know. If I am looking at a red car, I cannot believe it is green. I may redefine red so that it denotes a range of colors broad enough to include green, or vice versa, but I cannot trust a red car to be green in the ordinary sense.

There is at least one other factor that limits our capacity for sincere belief: what we are willing, or not willing, to presuppose in practice. No belief that is impossible to presuppose in practice can sustain faith — at least for very long. Taking a cue from Thomas Reid, my teacher and mentor David Griffin argues that humanity has developed a certain set of beliefs, which he calls “hard-core commonsense beliefs,” which we must necessarily presuppose in practice in order to survive. Hard-core commonsense beliefs can be denied only in hypocrisy or in self-contradiction. Some examples of hard-core commonsense beliefs are the existence of both the mind and the material world, as well as causation. We cannot presuppose in practice that these things do not exist and survive.

Not all commonsense beliefs are “hard-core.” When my mother was growing up, common sense said that going to the moon was impossible. Earlier it seemed impossible to sail around the earth. Griffin calls these “soft-core” common sense beliefs.<sup>2</sup> “Soft-core” commonsense beliefs, such as the flatness of the earth or the impossibility of going to the moon, may be widely or universally held, and even universally presupposed in practice. Nevertheless, it is still possible to deny them in practice, as both Ferdinand Magellan and the Apollo space program demonstrated.

From the foregoing, we can formulate some criteria defining what kinds of propositions are believable and therefore can sustain faith. Theoretically, a belief can sustain faith only if:

- It does not directly contradict facts that the believer knows.

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<sup>2</sup> David Ray Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot: Consciousness, Freedom, and the Mind-Body Problem* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998) 15–21.

- It is internally coherent, i.e., it does not include contradictions.
- It can be presupposed in practice.

Beyond these restrictions, almost anything is believable by some one, and what is and is not believable will depend largely on the individual.

In taking the principle of the self-fulfilling prophesy seriously, New Thought philosophy itself adds another dimension to the discussion. The self-fulfilling prophesy is the tendency for beliefs to become true. If the principle of the self-fulfilling prophesy principle is true — as a very large and growing body of evidence suggests — then faith needs to be more than sustainable. It must also be optimistic and lead to a general sense of well-being. Pessimistic and cynical world-views, although sustainable, are not desirable foundations of faith. They can make life more predictable, and thereby give us some feelings of security, but they make it unhappily predictable. Accordingly, we should reject them whenever we can find sustainable, uplifting alternatives.

## 5. Whitehead's Process Model: An Ontology of Experience

Considering the foregoing discussion, the New Thought movement would benefit from reinterpreting God as "Experience," as opposed to "Mind" or "Consciousness." The alternative I present here is the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, but he is not the only philosopher to hold this view. Spinoza and Leibnz, two of the great seventeenth-century rationalists, held similar views, as did more the recent philosophers William James and Henri Bergson in this century. However, I find Whitehead's metaphysic to be the most useful, because it directly addresses the two most critical concepts that define the power of faith: the mind-body relationship and efficient causation. Whitehead offers a metaphysic that is both sustainable and optimistic, whereas the idealist model may be optimistic, but not sustainable. Although I focus here on Whitehead's philosophy, I also draw extensively on David Griffin's work, as well as my own doctoral dissertation, *The Power of Thought to Heal*.<sup>3</sup>

### The Way It Works

I regard Whitehead's thought not so much as the last word, but more the first word, in the development of the ontology of experience.<sup>4</sup> His genius lies not so much in what he saw, which was significant in itself, as in *what he was able to see beyond*. Moreover, he developed his metaphysical system for the purpose of explaining two phenomena that are near and dear to New Thought: efficient causation and mind-matter interaction.

What I present here is but a thumbnail sketch of Whitehead's highly complex philosophy. At its heart is the ontological doctrine of *panpsychism*, in William James's words, or *panexperientialism* in David Griffin's. I use Griffin's term for his reasons:

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Preston Smith, *The Power of Thought to Heal: An Ontology of Personal Faith*, (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell Information, 1998). The dissertation is also available on the Internet at Alan Anderson's web site: [www.websyte.com/alan/dissert.htm](http://www.websyte.com/alan/dissert.htm). Hardcopy is available from Bell & Howell Information and Learning, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346, [www.umi.com](http://www.umi.com).

<sup>4</sup> By "first word" here I do not mean the *very* first word. He actually picks up where William James left off in this area.

“Panpsychism” is the term that has generally been used for this position. I find the term “panexperientialism” preferable for two reasons: (1) The term “psyche” suggests that the basic units endure through long stretches of time, whereas they may be momentary experiences; and (2) the term “psyche” inevitably suggests a higher form of experience than would be appropriate for the most elementary units of nature.<sup>5</sup>

Panexperientialism is the view that the Universe is alive, consisting entirely of the experiences of experiencing entities. That which has no experience, which Whitehead calls “vacuous actuality,” does not exist. Non-living matter appears to us to be vacuous actuality, but that is how it appears *for another*. To use Sartre’s terminology, it is *in itself* what it is *for itself*, the collective experiences of many experiencing entities, the same kind of entities that comprise ourselves.

It might seem, at first, that panexperientialists think you can have a two-way conversation with a fire hydrant. Were that the case, panexperientialism would appeal only to schizophrenics and possibly some mystics. However, this is not what it means. Panexperientialism neither says nor implies that fire hydrants can talk, think, or even feel pain. What it does claim is that what we know as a fire hydrant is composed of entities that have experience. Of course, this experience is probably much more primitive than ours. We don’t know for sure. It is here where Griffin’s distinction between “panpsychism” and “panexperientialism” becomes important. Panexperientialism says everything consists of entities that have at least *some* subjectivity, as well as some degree of self-determination. This does involve a leap of faith, but it is *no more* a leap of faith than the idealist claim that matter is a fantasy, or the materialist and dualist view of matter as vacuous actuality. In fact, we can never know what matter is in itself. We can only know what it is *for us*. It is equally an act of faith to believe it has experience as it is to believe it doesn’t.<sup>6</sup> It therefore makes just as much sense, if not more, to project our own form of reality onto the material universe that it does to deny it.

The other two key concepts in Whitehead’s philosophy are “prehension” and “actual occasion,” with the latter term often interchanged with “actual entity.” (The exception is God, who is an actual entity but not an actual occasion.) The best way to define an actual occasion is to call it an instant or moment in experience that includes the development and completion of a definite *feeling*. In that sense, it is more than a time slice or time segment. Whitehead never specified exactly how long actual occasions last. It varies. However, when I asked David Griffin this question, he speculated that for humans it is probably about a tenth of a second. For an electron, it would be much shorter. For Whitehead, each actual occasion is an entity that is whole and complete in itself.

As Whitehead uses the term, “toprehend” means to feel or to be affected by something. An occasion can prehend or feel other past occasions, and it can also feel what he calls “eternal objects” or universals, such as ideas or values. Whitehead defines the relationship between actual occasions and prehensions as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> Griffin, 78.

<sup>6</sup> I will not belabor this issue further; I and others have done so elsewhere. For more information, see Griffin, especially pp. 77–92, or my own dissertation, especially chs. 9–11.

An actual entity is a process, and is not describable in terms of the morphology of a 'stuff'.... In Cartesian language, the essence of an actual entity consists solely in the fact that it is a prehending thing (i.e., a substance whose whole essence or nature is to apprehend)."<sup>7</sup>

The process involved in each actual occasion is the unification of various prehensions into a final complex feeling, which Whitehead called "satisfaction." It is an act of unification reminiscent of the inscription found on U.S. coins: *E pluribus unum* (Out of many [emerges] one). All prehension must take place within an occasion of experience. Within any occasion, there are prehensions of both prior occasions and of meanings, values, or significance. A single occasion includes many prehensions of both types.

An occasion exists first as a subject, during which it prehends prior occasions (physical prehensions) and possibilities (conceptual prehensions) and then unifies these prehensions into a single feeling of "satisfaction." The physical and conceptual prehensions constitute the physical and mental "poles" of the occasion respectively. Satisfaction, in this context, does not necessarily mean satiation or pleasure, in the Rolling Stones' sense. A more accurate term might be "degree or level of satisfaction," which could also include levels of dissatisfaction as well. In any case, the satisfaction is a feeling of some level of *value*. Upon determining its level of satisfaction, the occasion ceases to be an experiencing subject per se and becomes a superject, an object or datum for subsequent occasions. In this way, its nature moves forward in time, and it continues to exist forever as a datum for subsequent occasions, in a state that Whitehead called "objective immortality." It is this aspect of actual occasions, i.e., inclusion in the experience of subsequent ones, that causes history to repeat itself.

Because his entire theory of causation rests on it, the dipolar nature of an actual occasion needs further explanation. Efficient causation comes entirely from the physical pole. It is nothing more than the present occasion's prehension of the past. It involves no self-determination whatsoever. As Griffin says:

The physical phase is the phase of compulsion, as it is the effect of the efficient causes from the past, which impose their in-formed energy upon the present occasion, which will in turn impose itself with compulsive force upon subsequent events.<sup>8</sup>

In this regard, physical does *not* mean having mass and taking up space. Ideas, beliefs, and many other notions normally regarded as "mental" can indeed exert efficient causation in the physical pole, in virtue of their inclusion in past occasions.

The mental pole, in the act of prehending non-actualized possibilities, can introduce novelty in determining what the occasion will finally become. The mental pole is therefore the self-determining aspect of the occasion. As Griffin puts it, "To attribute mentality to all actual entities is to attribute at least an iota of spontaneity to them, a germ of what becomes conscious self-determination in us."<sup>9</sup> The mental pole begins by prehending abstract notions of what is possible, which Whitehead calls "eternal objects," such as universals and values, and then integrates them with the physical pole. By relating occasions in the physical pole to possibilities lying outside time, the mental pole

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<sup>7</sup>Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition, David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1978) 40–1.

<sup>8</sup>Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot*, Unpublished Manuscript, Appendix A, 196. Passages omitted in published work.

<sup>9</sup>Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot*, Unpublished Manuscript, Appendix A, 196.

can inject novelty into the occasion. Its capacity to inject novelty varies directly with its complexity, i.e., the size and complexity of the set of available eternal objects, as well as the number and complexity of occasions it prehends from the physical pole. The more complex the occasion, the more novelty it can introduce, and the greater its degree of self-determination. Even the lowliest occasions — those that comprise molecules, subatomic particles, and even events in “empty space” — have a “mental” pole. However, this does not mean they make conscious choices or that we can converse with them. These primitive occasions exercise only minimal self-determination, with little more freedom than to pass what they experience on to the next occasion.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly enough, in this model God exerts no efficient or physical causation whatsoever, because God dwells in Eternity, not the past. Although God knows the past, God is not *in* the past. Accordingly, Whitehead called the creative power of God “persuasive” instead of “coercive.”

Whitehead’s definition of the terms “mental” and “physical” is completely novel. However, he also explains how minds and bodies, what we ordinarily call mental and physical substances, consist of actual occasions. *The difference between a mental substance (enduring individual) and a body (aggregate) in Whitehead’s philosophy is not that they consist of different kinds of things, but that they are different configurations of the same kind of things.* In other words, minds and bodies differ only because they are organized differently.<sup>11</sup> An enduring individual, or what we traditionally have called a mind, is a purely temporal series occasions, in which each successive occasion prehends its predecessor, and, in turn, is prehended by its successor. The distinguishing feature of these societies is their purely temporal connection. Thus, Whitehead says:

Societies of the [enduring individual] general type... are purely temporal and continuous, will be termed 'personal'. Any society of this type may be termed a 'person'. Thus, as defined above, a man is a person.<sup>12</sup>

It follows that not all persons are persons in the sense of being human. By this definition, any linear series of occasions in this configuration, even an atom or a molecule, is a “person.” Because only one occasion in the series is active at any given moment, the power of self-determination in these societies is much more visible. It takes only one choice in one occasion to transform the entire subsequent series.

What we understand as physical objects or bodies are called “aggregates,” or, more precisely, “aggregational societies.” Unlike enduring individuals, aggregates are multi-dimensional societies and include simultaneous occasions. They appear to us as solid physical objects because their constituent occasions all operate according to the same

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<sup>10</sup> This is why Griffin prefers the term “panexperientialism” to describe Whitehead’s philosophy over William James’s term “panpsychism.” The latter suggests that the world is composed of fully developed psyches, which endure over time and are capable of conscious experience. See Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot*, published version, 77–78.

<sup>11</sup> I use the term “mental substance” here instead of “mind” deliberately. What Descartes considered a “mind” would for Whitehead consist of a temporally ordered society of highly complex occasions. For Descartes, these sophisticated mental substances were the only form of mental substance in existence. (Even his dog lived without one.) However, for Whitehead there are temporally ordered societies of much simpler occasions as well, which would be present not only in dogs, but also, to varying degrees of complexity, in molecules and atoms as well.

<sup>12</sup> Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 205.

dynamic forces, not because a dominant occasion in the society directs all the others.  
Says Griffin:

[A] rock appears to be a single actuality, but modern science has taught us that it is comprised of billions of distinct individuals....The gravitational force causing the rock to fall operates on its individual atoms, not upon the rock as such.... But now we know that the apparent unity of action is an illusion generated by the behavior of billions of constituents.<sup>13</sup>

The society as a whole has no self-determination because the individual members' exercise of self-determination tends to cancel each other out. Thus, it is easier to describe the behavior of these societies in terms of the laws of averages than by individual choices. The laws of physics and chemistry are abstracted empirically from their collective behaviors. They appear to be "vacuous actualities" to us precisely because it is easier to understand and predict their behavior in terms of these macrocosmic laws than as individual experiencing subjects.<sup>14</sup>

### **Western Philosophy's Wrong Turn**

Actually, the commonsense understanding of the world as physical objects and minds or spirits is not wrong, just incomplete. When I look at the hill outside my window, I see rocks, cacti, grass, and bushes browning in the California summer sun. However, I can identify really only a very small part of my experience of the hillside. Many things pass unnoticed, especially if I include subliminal perceptions. The experience of a tree involves more than its tree-ness, a hill more than its hill-ness, etc. An actual experience of things involves much more than its essential or distinguishing characteristics, or even its accidental (non-essential) characteristics. When we see the world in terms of things and characteristics, or substances and attributes, we consider only what we understand to be there, not what actually is. We confuse our abstractions with the experience itself. This confusion of the menu with the meal, of the abstract with the concrete, is what Whitehead called "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness."

This fallacy led Western philosophy to see substances and attributes, as opposed to processes and events, as the basic components of experience. It is what led Descartes to conclude that there were two kinds of entities, those with essential attributes of mass and extension (matter) and those with essential attributes of thought and feeling (mind or spirit). Understood in these terms, the interaction of these two kinds of substance is at least enigmatic and maybe completely unintelligible. Yet, it happens. The mystery of mind-matter interaction arose from asking the wrong questions. If minds consisted only of thoughts and feelings, and bodies only mass and extension, interaction between them would indeed be impossible. However, thought and extension, or even substance and attribute in general, tell only part of story. As soon as we look beyond these abstractions into actual, concrete existence, we can reinterpret what appears to be interaction between two completely different kinds of things as interaction among things of the same kind. Whitehead speculates how the interaction between mind and body might happen in terms of actual occasions and prehensions. Occasions that comprise the enduring individual (i.e., the mind) act upon, or are prehended by, other occasions in the aggregational society we call the body, or vice versa.

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<sup>13</sup>Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot*, 173.

<sup>14</sup>Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 29.

All efficient causation, including that of mind-body interaction, is of this form. At the level of actual occasions, perception and causation are identical. Causation is really nothing more than perception in the passive voice, and vice versa. To cause is to be perceived by another. To perceive is to be affected by another. The attempt to understand causation and mind-body interaction in terms of substances and attributes, as opposed to processes and events, is where modern philosophy missed its cue on causation.

### **And What About God...?**

No discussion of New Thought is complete without God. In the language of Ernest Holmes, Whitehead understood God as the Love but not the Law. From the foregoing discussion, we found that God's power is only "persuasive." All "coercive" power comes from the past, and God, though aware of the past, is in Eternity and outside of it. Moreover, Whitehead did not believe the laws governing the way occasionsprehend were part of God or even authored by God. In fact, God, like the rest of us, is bound by both the laws arising from occasions' incapacity for novelty and their capacity for freedom and self-determination. God is not omnipotent, nor is the universe perfect. In each moment, God offers everything and forces nothing. God cannot override the decisions of the occasions, either individually or collectively. What God offers each occasion is Infinite possibility, but what the individual occasion will accept determines and limits what it becomes. What may surprise some people in New Thought is that very few Whiteheadians have a problem with their weak God. Imperfection, though costly, is a relatively small price to pay for freedom. However, New Thought people may find this price to high, an issue I address later in "Objections and Replies."

In Whitehead's world, God, the actual entity that experiences the total of all the experiences of all actual occasions, has two natures: the primordial and the consequent. The primordial nature of God is the seat of Infinite Possibility. It is pure love, beauty, and eternal truth, but only as possibility. It is the part of God that persuasively influences each occasion to be its best. Nothing is actual in the primordial nature of God. Only through creativity in actual occasions can God's ideas and values become actual in real things. God, after creativity, reflects on creation, and, in Whitehead's universe, says, "That's good — at least to some degree." The consequent nature of God is the experience of all occasions that have occurred to date and the satisfaction, at whatever level, that has resulted from them.

### **Spiritual Mind Treatment in the Process Model**

For the Religious Scientists in the audience, no discussion of Process metaphysics and New Thought would be complete without explaining how Spiritual Mind Treatment would work under it. Actually, a Whiteheadian would treat in the same way as Ernest Holmes would. The five-step model and one-step models would both apply.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Whiteheadians would see treatment as a form of mental rehearsal, which works through changing the mind of the practitioner.

The primary differences between Whitehead's and Holmes's model of prayer treatment, is that treatment in Whitehead's model is *transformation*, and under Holmes's it is *revelation*. In Whitehead's model, the practitioner is attempting to bring the Law,

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<sup>15</sup> I prefer a seven step model, in which there is a Step 0, quieting the mind, a the beginning, and a Step 6, acting in ways that are congruent with the treatment, added on to the end as a seventh step.

which is acting blindly, into alignment with the Love. The mental rehearsal builds a series of past occasions that resemble those of the demonstration. The perfection of Eternity is thereby deliberately brought into the past, usually in the form of affirmation and visualization, and the forces of coercion are harnessed to aid those of persuasion. It is an exercise of the Camelot principle, of invoking might to aid right. In Holmes's model, in which both God and Creator are already perfect, nothing needs to be redirected but the thinking of the practitioner and maybe the patient. The practitioner's job is to realize the perfection of what already is.

Secondly, in Holmes's model, there is a process *in* healing, but not a process *of* healing, whereas in Whitehead's model there would be both. Says Holmes:

Healing is not a process, it is a revelation, through the thought of the practitioner to the thought of the patient. There may be a process in healing, but not a process of healing. The process in healing is the mental work and the time it takes the practitioner to convince himself of the perfectness of his patient; and the length of time it takes the patient to realize this perfectness.<sup>16</sup>

In Holmes's terms, the process in healing is the revelation of God to the practitioner's and patient's lesser minds, which Whitehead would readily acknowledge as necessary to effect the demonstration. However, for Whitehead the process in healing would not be sufficient by itself, unless the demonstration itself consisted solely of a change in thoughts and feelings. For Holmes, faith need move only the mountains in the mind. For Whitehead it must also move real mountains that not only exist outside the mind of both the practitioner and the patient, but which also consist of entities that have wills of their own. A Whiteheadian practitioner is actually trying to change things.

Another area where Whitehead and Holmes would differ is in the certainty and timing of the demonstration. This follows from the difference between treatment as transformation and treatment as revelation. If treatment is revelation, then treatment can never fail. The demonstration itself, as part of Eternal Truth, is already actualized. The only failure in a treatment is the practitioner's inability or unwillingness to behold its success. In Holmes's metaphysics, the demonstration must necessarily follow, or more accurately, coincide, with a properly given treatment. For Whitehead, the demonstration might come much later or maybe not at all. The occasions that constitute the practitioner might not have sufficient influence on their surroundings, or the surrounding occasions, in having self-determination of their own, might do their own will in spite of the practitioner's best efforts. In Whitehead's model, even properly given treatments could fail without a sufficiently strong ripple effect on adjacent occasions. (This, incidentally, could explain why certain adepts are better at performing miracles than the rest of us. They may have somehow learned how to create more powerful ripple effects.)

## 6. Why Include the Process Ontology in New Thought

Many followers of New Thought would argue — and with some justification — that Process metaphysics carries too high a price. To accept limitations on God, let alone ourselves, would disempower us. As Richard Bach said, “Argue for your limitations, and

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<sup>16</sup> Ernest Holmes, *The Science of Mind*, Second Edition, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1938) 212.

sure enough, they're yours."<sup>17</sup> However, I do not believe that Process philosophy involves unnecessary resignation to limitations. In fact, I believe it is much more empowering to have limited power over real events than unlimited power over imaginary ones — especially if there are real events.

In the following paragraphs, I outline what I believe Process philosophy can contribute to New Thought. As I see it, there are five such contributions:

- It is a better metaphysical model than the prevailing idealist paradigm, because it offers more coherent theories of both mind-matter interaction and efficient causation.
- It describes the power of thought to shape our future as it actually works in real life much better than the idealist model, in that it explains the non-linear causal relationship between thoughts and things, and it takes the distinction between fantasy and reality into account.
- In granting causal efficacy to other things besides thoughts and beliefs, it is in some ways more inclusive than idealism. Not only is it more consistent with New Thought pantheism than the idealist model, it also more balanced and complete, in that attributes power to feelings and actions, along thoughts and beliefs.
- It removes the problem of a conflict between ideology and experience, and thereby renders New Thought more "scientific" in the contemporary sense. It would also help make New Thought more "grounded" and less prone to degenerate into hypocrisy.
- It explains some of New Thought's best ideas better, notably the relationship between the lesser and Greater selves, the notion of the "God within," the importance of believing in one's prayers, and the location of power in the here and now.

### **A Better Metaphysical Model**

I believe it was Einstein who said you cannot solve a problem at the level of thinking that is creating the problem. With respect to efficient causation and mind-body interaction, substance-attribute thinking is that kind of trap. As I suggested earlier, Whitehead's greatest contribution was his ability to see beyond the substance-attribute paradigm. Although this paradigm has been extremely useful in some ways, giving rise to logic, modern science, and common sense, it has left causation and mind-matter interaction as ineffable mysteries. The danger of substance-attribute thinking is not that it doesn't work, but that it works so well so much of the time. The categories of substance and attribute are absolutely indispensable for most human activities, including all meaningful conversation and rational thought. Deny them, and you have taken leave of your sanity.

It is only when we ask philosophical questions such as: how, exactly, *are* substances and attributes given to us in experience,<sup>18</sup> how causes bring about their effects, or how do

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Bach, *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1977) 100.

<sup>18</sup> Here I agree with William James in saying that they are indeed *given* in experience.

mind and matter interact, that the substance model breaks down. In short, substance-attribute thinking tells us almost everything we need to know about the world. Whitehead's genius, if anything, was his ability to see beyond a paradigm that has been so supremely useful. Many people can look beyond a bad model. It takes real imagination to see beyond a good one.

### *A Better Theory of Mind-Matter Interaction*

Modern philosophy has offered four basic theories of the mind-matter relationship: dualism and the three monistic alternatives of panexperientialism, materialism, and idealism. Dualism, the most popular ontology among people who never studied philosophy, is actually the position of common sense. Common sense tells us that there are two kinds of things in the world: experiencing entities or minds, and bodies or physical objects. In one sense, dualism is even *hard-core* common sense. In fact, the greatest challenge facing monists is to explain how we coherently deny either mind or matter. However, dualism cannot explain some very ordinary but important phenomena, the most important of which is mind-matter interaction, which is involved in things as important and as common as feeling pain or raising your right hand.

As a systems engineer, I was trained to fix problems, not remove them. Although removing a troublesome component can eliminate a problem, the component is usually there for a reason that soon becomes apparent when the component is missing. Nevertheless, removing the problem can be very tempting — to philosophers as well as systems engineers — and the monists have yielded to this temptation. They avoid having to explain mind-matter interaction by denying it. Mind and matter, they contend, are ultimately identical, and their apparent interaction, illusory. With materialism, mind becomes an illusion generated by matter, and with idealism, matter is reduced, in Mary Baker Eddy's terms, to an illusion of mortal mind. For the materialist, all is ultimately matter or a figment thereof, and, for the idealist, everything is ultimately mind. Either way, one of Descartes's two substances is reduced to the other, and only one is real.

However, like the engineer who first installed the troublesome component, Descartes included mind-matter interaction in his philosophy for a good reason. *It happens*, and our inability to explain it does not change that fact. By removing the problem, instead of solving it, the materialists and idealists create worse problems than the one they think they have solved, because their reductionism contradicts hard-core common sense. How could anyone presuppose in practice that either mind or matter is illusory? The denial itself immediately refutes the argument. If one denies mind, he denies his own ability to say anything intelligent — including his denial of the mind. On the other hand, should he deny matter, then he denies the existence of his mouth, hands, pencil, or whatever device he is using to make the statement. Neither works, and their troubles just get worse. The very idea, that one substance, which is so different from the other that their interaction is unintelligible, can actually *produce* that other substance — or even the illusion of it — is even more mysterious than their interaction.

I doubt that many materialists would read a journal on metaphysical religions, (Those that are must be spies!) so I will limit my critique to the idealist model. However, idealism suffers from many of the same problems as materialism, and for the same reason. Both attempt to take one of Descartes's two substances and reduce it to a figment of the other. Idealism and materialism are not really opposites. In addition to conflicting

with hard-core common sense, the idealist model, like its materialist counterpart, introduces a new mystery that is even more enigmatic than mind-matter interaction: mind-matter *creation*. If it is impossible to explain how mind and matter interact, it is even harder to explain how mind can *create* matter. One could argue that the mind produces material things in the same way that it produces fantasies, dreams, and hallucinations. However, this begs the question. We don't really know how the mind creates dreams and fantasies. Moreover, if the mind creates matter and fantasy by the same means, then the same thing, using the same process, is producing different results, which makes no sense. If mind really does create matter, then its means of doing so must be different from the one used to create fantasies, or it would produce the same results, in which case fantasy and reality would be indistinguishable.<sup>19</sup> I can't speak for everyone, but I can usually tell the difference.

Much has been said about the accuracy of first instincts, and it is not surprising that some of Descartes's immediate successors, notably Spinoza and Leibniz, were panexperientialists. Panexperientialism has some major advantages over both materialism and idealism, in that it does not try to reduce the whole to one of its parts. Instead, it seeks to incorporate both wholes into a larger one. Panexperientialism does not limit us to the Cartesian notions of mind and matter alone. Instead, it includes both, as aspects of experience or ways of understanding it. Mind and matter give up their status as substances that exist on their own, and take on the role of aspects or attributes of something that is both mental and physical.

However, panexperientialism is not without its problems. Like dualists and idealists, panexperientialists are still subject to the temptation of removing the problem instead of solving it. Panexperientialism says that mind and matter per se do not interact, but that experiencing body-minds do, and this is what gives rise to apparent mind-matter interaction. Because dualism is the position of common sense, panexperientialists face the daunting task of re-inventing the universe in panexperientialist terms — and then trying to sell their re-invention. The three most comprehensive panexperientialists to date, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Whitehead, all developed highly complex, technical theories, none of which would be likely to hold a congregation spellbound in a Sunday sermon.

In the final analysis, no theory of mind-body interaction is complete without a theory of causation, and it was their failure to address this issue that led to the demise of Leibniz's and Spinoza's systems. Moreover, as I will argue in the next section on causation, no theory of causation is complete without a theory of creation or creativity, or how the things that are come to be. To address this issue, we must look outside of not only Descartes but Aristotle as well. We can no longer work within the categories of substance and attribute, which describe things as they are, but begin thinking in terms of processes and events, i.e., the way things come to be. It is here where Whitehead's model is unique in Western philosophy.

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<sup>19</sup> I know that there are some people who have trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality. There are several terms for this disorder, the most politically correct of which is schizophrenia. Nevertheless, the fact that some people are delusional does not imply that fantasy and reality are indistinguishable in themselves, and therefore must be so for the rest of us.

### *A Better Theory of Causation*

The problem of efficient causation itself was first uncovered by Hume, when he found he could not explain how prior events could predictably bring about subsequent ones. The analysis of a moving cue ball on a pool table yielded no information whatsoever about what the 8-ball would do when the cue ball struck it. Hume's answer, which he himself admitted was weak, was to attribute apparent efficient causation to the thinking habits of the observer, a view not inconsistent with much of New Thought. For Kant, the very nature of the observer determines the conditions it can accept as intelligible, and existence in a causal series is one of those conditions. Christian Science and New Thought attribute it primarily to the belief systems of the observer, although habits also play a major part. However, all these explanations attribute the power of a cause to something outside the cause itself. The cause itself has no real influence. The real influence is a power outside the cause-effect relationship altogether, usually the mind or consciousness.

Within the context of substance and attribute, the external power explanation is probably the best that has ever been offered, and New Thought's version is as good as any. Unfortunately, the external power theory conflicts with hard-core common sense. It is impossible not to presuppose the reality of physical causation in practice. Even Hume's skeptic-hero Philo admitted that he planned to leave the building via the door and not an upper story window. One can argue that we can presuppose physical causation in practice without knowing how it works. The human race does seem to have survived the Humean race. I have no quarrel with this position. My disagreement is with those who believe external power theory is adequate. I recently saw a television documentary on the *Titanic*. As the rumors of the vessel's sinking trickled in, there were people who refused to believe the tragedy had happened. One of them argued that the *Titanic* could not have sunk — not because it had watertight compartments, or that the hole in the hull was really not that big, but because the power of mind, the most powerful force in the universe, would easily keep the ship afloat. In case you haven't seen the movie, he was wrong. We know the ship could sink because it did.

The problem with causation for philosophers, including Hume, is that we have been trying to understand it in the wrong context. That wrong context is in the analysis of *the way things are*. By the time any event has occurred, it is too late to observe causal influence in action. Causes, almost by definition, do their work in the moment of the effect's creation, neither sooner nor later. They exert their influence at the moment when the effect *comes to be*.

Whitehead's model is unique in explaining the influence of causes as part of the effect's creation, or coming to be. It includes the roles played by not only physical causes, but also those of thoughts and belief systems, and even God. It is more than a general theory of causation; it is a theory of causation integrated into a larger theory of creation or creativity. It may be, and probably is, possible to formulate a better general theory of this type, but Whitehead has taken a giant first step in the right direction.

### *It Describes the Power of Thought the Way We Observe It*

New Thought philosophy has found some allies in pop psychology and New Age writings. In some of these other writings, we can read that thoughts are like tractor beams, either attracting or repelling actual things. As bizarre as these ideas might seem in

theory, they nevertheless described the influence of thoughts on things better than the idealist model. According to the latter, the effect of our thoughts on our experiences is direct and immediate. Facts are not stubborn; we are stubborn in hanging onto our belief systems. A good treatment will therefore produce an immediate demonstration. However, in doing spiritual mind treatments, I found that the relationship between treatment and demonstration was neither immediate nor linear. I could treat for days, months, or even years before anything happened. Then, suddenly and often at random, the demonstration would occur. Other times, the demonstration would be immediate. However, its timing was never predictable.

Things don't respond to thinking in the same way thoughts do. Were that the case, it would be almost impossible to distinguish thoughts from things. Whitehead's model explains the non-linear relationship between my present thoughts and my future experiences. Between the two is the ripple effect, a whole series of causal events, each of which consists of actual occasions that have, in their own right, some degree of freedom and self-determination, as well as their own tendency to repeat the past. This ripple effect is also subject to outside interference, which makes both the results even more unpredictable. In actual experience, there does seem to be a process *of* healing as well as *in* healing.

### **A More Inclusive Ontology**

More things count in the panexperientialist model. According to idealism, matter is in mind, but not vice versa. Idealism denies vacuous actuality, not by denying the vacuity of matter, but by denying its actuality. The figments of the mind, i.e., material objects, are just as dead and devoid of experience as matter was for Descartes. The view that there are two kinds of entities, fully developed, conscious mind and vacuous phantasms ignores many important aspects of experience. Where do feelings, emotions, and matters of aesthetics fit? Was Descartes's dog, though not a machine, a mere fantasy? The panexperientialist model recognizes the causal significance of other kinds of things, such as emotions, sensations, and physical activity, giving us more complete explanations of events.

New Thought pantheism is more consistent with the panexperientialist view. An axiom of New Thought is that God is everywhere. However, under the idealist model, it would be more appropriate to say everywhere is in God, but not the converse. God is only in those entities that possess consciousness. On the other hand, were we to say that experience, the process of creativity itself, exists in all events throughout the Universe, then God really is everywhere.

Finally, a foundation in experience would definitely help prevent New Thought from degenerating into an exercise in hypocrisy and denial. As with any other religious philosophy, it is tempting not to walk the talk. One of the most troublesome aspects of New Thought philosophy is that it allows us to escape responsibility through denial. I know of no way to assume responsibility for a condition whose existence I deny. The mere claim that one is omnipotent over the problem is not the same as actually attempting to solve it. A metaphysical view that allows me to acknowledge the reality of my experience takes me one step closer to taking responsibility for it, and, in assuming responsibility for it, I can begin to assert whatever real power I have.

## **A More Scientific Perspective**

Both New Thought and Christian Science have claimed that their philosophical views are “scientific.” However, their use of the term comes from a seventeenth-century or even medieval understanding of science, especially when it is construed to mean governed by immutable laws. Science itself abandoned the notion immutable laws centuries ago, along with the notion that scientific laws even “govern” the universe at all. Scientific laws are not immutable, nor do they govern the universe. In their modern sense, scientific laws merely describe what we observe. Whenever and wherever they cease to describe experience, it is the laws, not the experience, that are denied. To argue ideology over experience in any form is completely unscientific.

If we assume that experience is Reality, that *samsara* really is *Nirvana*, then the tension between theory and fact disappears. Fact wins, end of story. That is how things work, or at least, how they should work, in science. However, it is sometimes hard to avoid confusing experience with our interpretation of it. The distinction between hard-core and soft-core common sense might help here. If we must necessarily presuppose the truth of a proposition in practice, then it is safe to assume that the proposition really is something given to us in experience. If we can behave under the presupposition that it is false, it is probably an interpretation. *Other than that, the ontology of experience gives us the intellectual authority to adopt any coherent belief system that we can effectively and beneficially presuppose in practice.* We still have much leeway in choosing our belief systems.

## **Better Explanations of Some Existing New Thought Principles**

In some ways, Whitehead explains the principles of New Thought better than the New Thought writers themselves. Specifically, it offers clearer, more complete explanations of the following ideas of New Thought:

- The relationship of the Greater and lesser selves
- The notion of the “God Within”
- The point of power in the here-and-now
- The importance of believing in one’s prayers

### *The Greater and Lesser Selves*

Whitehead’s model provides a ready-made distinction between the greater and lesser selves. The lesser self is the temporally-ordered series of occasions Whitehead called the “enduring individual.” The Greater Self would be the eternal presence of God in all individual actual occasions. Orthodox Whiteheadians would stop there. However, one could also argue that the creative process itself, as it takes place within any actual occasion in the making, might also be the Greater Self. Whitehead and his more loyal followers would reject this position, on the grounds that God and creativity are not the same. My suggestion here is a major departure from Whitehead’s model, and it could be the subject of another paper in itself. I return to it again, briefly, in the “Objections and Replies” section.

### *The Notion of the God Within*

The notion of the God within did not originate with New Thought. It has existed in the mystical branches of all major religions for millennia. Nevertheless, New Thought writers have done much to popularize the idea. In Whitehead's model, God exists within every occasion, at least as the grounds for the introduction of newness and possibility, if not as the Creative process itself. Accordingly, God is truly Zen — here, now, myself.

### *The Point of Power in the Here and Now*

One of the principles that all Religious Science students learn about prayer treatment is that one always treats in the present tense and speaks as if the desired condition is already present. Although in one sense, this involves reciting some false propositions, present tense affirmations are presumed to be more powerful than those stated in the future. Whitehead's philosophy offers a very clear explanation why the point of power is always in the present. *The present moment is where all creativity occurs.* There is no creativity in the past, and the future does not exist and therefore cannot be the seat of creation. Treatment is rehearsal in the present tense, because creation occurs only in the present.

### *The Importance of Believing in One's Prayers*

In Whiteheadian terms, the discussion of the importance of praying while believing could become quite technical, and I only offer a very cursory explanation of it here. An individual occasion can turn towards, or turn away from, any given possibility. A turn towards involves, to a greater or lesser degree, the inclusion of that possibility into itself as actual. Likewise, a turning away involves excluding the possibility as not actual. In the case of propositions, i.e., the kinds of declarative statements that comprise beliefs, belief systems, and affirmations, a turn towards would involve some degree of acceptance of the proposition as true and be accompanied by a feeling of truth. Likewise, a turning away would involve rejecting the proposition and a corresponding feeling of falsity. (For Whitehead, truth and falsity are experienced with particular feelings.)

Prayer treatment is rehearsal. We must practice believing, as well as conceptualizing, the desired events. We want to create, as Ernest Holmes said, a mental equivalent that is as close as possible to the real thing. That includes not only the idea or possibility of the demonstration, but all the feelings that would accompany its realization, including the feelings of its truth. Per the discussion of treatment given above, the more familiar this mental equivalent is, the more we can use the principle of efficient causation to bring the actual demonstration about.

## **7. Objections and Replies**

Here I address only objections that I would anticipate from people in New Thought. I make no attempt to answer objections from materialists and dualists, because I have done so elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> From that, and my general knowledge of both New Thought and Process philosophy, I would expect New Thought philosophers to object to the following aspects of Whitehead's philosophy:

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<sup>20</sup> Smith, ch. 11.

- Radical pluralism
- The existence of genuine evil
- The limitations of a God's power
- The omission of alternatives in Eastern philosophy
- The sheer difficulty in understanding what Whitehead wrote

### **Radical Pluralism**

The first objection would be to Whitehead's pluralism. Much of the problem here is one of semantics. The term "mind" for Whitehead means an enduring individual; it does not mean the Creative Power of the Universe. In Whitehead's ontology there are obviously many minds and many more actual occasions. However, there is only one principle of creativity that expresses itself in all actual occasions, and even in God. As long as that Creative Power is identified with God, the multiplicity of enduring individuals should not prove objectionable to people in New Thought. Only solipsists claim there is only one small self.

However, Whitehead himself was very clear about the distinction between God and creativity. They are definitely not the same. However, this difference alone should not justify rejecting Whitehead's whole philosophy. Moreover, I believe I can construct a Process ontology that is less radically pluralistic than Whitehead's, but still views experience as the ultimate nature of Reality. Such a philosophy would begin with a theory that holds that actual occasions, like substances, are also abstract. Once we take actual occasions to be abstractions, then an *E pluribus unum* ontology emerges, in which there are many actual occasions, but ultimately only one Actual Entity, i.e., God.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Existence of Genuine Evil**

New Thought theology faces the same challenges as traditional theology with respect to the problem of evil and God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence. If creation is imperfect, then so must be the Creator. In response to this problem, traditional theologians have attempted to reduce genuine evil to apparent evil. Apparent evil is suffering or immorality that is ultimately redeemed when seen from a wider perspective. Genuine evil is a real, unredeemed, flaw in the Cosmos. Traditional theology has attempted to reduce genuine evil to apparent evil by arguing along either of two lines: 1) that evil is a necessary by-product of genuine freedom, or 2) that it is a necessary process in the perfection of the world. From a Cosmic perspective, all evil is ultimately redeemed and therefore not genuine. These arguments are the "theodicies" of Saints Augustine and Irenaeus respectively. New Thought, on the other hand, offers a theodicy, in that denies the reality of evil at least in part by denying the ultimate reality of the material world in which evil is said to exist. While traditional theology attempts to deny genuine evil by justification, New Thought attempts to deny it by elimination. Both seek the same result for the same reason: God's Perfection precludes the possibility of genuine evil.

Process thought, on the other hand, blatantly accepts the reality of genuine evil. Poverty, disease, and loneliness are all real. True, they are neither person, place, nor

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<sup>21</sup> This is one of the central theses I advocate in the philosophical portion of my upcoming book, *The Power of Faith in a Real World*.

thing, nor are they permanent or necessary conditions, but they are processes. Although we are not powerless over them, they are both evil and real.

Process theologians offer no guarantees of a happy ending. *In fact there is no ending at all!* We don't know if the Nazi holocaust, the paradigm of evil used today in most theology classes, will ever be redeemed. Instead, it has initiated a causal chain of events that is ultimately unpredictable and will continue throughout eternity, some of which will be good and others, not so good. Apparent evil is therefore the same as genuine evil, because there is no Cosmic perspective from which one can see the final result. The last card has not been played, nor will it ever be.

The problem here is really one of conflicting values, reminiscent of the debates between William James and Josiah Royce a century ago. Royce was the champion of peace, serenity, and perfection. James was the champion of excitement, adventure, and the richness of life. I see the same tension here between Process and New Thought.<sup>22</sup> New Thought philosophy says simply, "Fear not, for all is well." Process philosophy says, "Feel the fear, in fact, feel everything — and do the right thing anyway. As Helen Keller once said, 'Life is a daring adventure or it's nothing.'" These values are not easily reconciled and reflect the temperament of the individual as much as anything. However, I do not see this conflict of values as irreconcilable. In fact, the reality of their ultimate reconciliation makes a very good article of faith.

### **The Limited Power of God**

New Thought practitioners might find the idea of a God whose power is so limited hard to accept. In Whitehead's model, the Love and the Law are not the same. God, the source of Love, is not the Creative Power described in New Thought theology as the Law. Creativity, the power that drives the Universe, is in the individual occasions themselves and the way theyprehend both the past and eternity. God neither controls the creative process nor did God invent it. And it gets worse. Most Process theologians even think God suffers.

Having been trained as a Religious Science practitioner, I personally found this notion of God more than a little hard to take. Who would put one's life in the hands of this hand-wringing wimp, a God that really has no more power than a good car salesman or a well-trained orator? What is the alcoholic supposed to do? Turn his life over to a higher power that is just another victim like himself? This seemed like an abdication of faith of the worst kind, but I did get some laughs for naming Process theology "the Church of the Marginally Competent God."

Obviously, my views have changed some since then, and I have reached a middle ground, in which the aims of New Thought and the metaphysics of Process theology can be at least partially compatible. I have conceded one point to the Process thinkers, and that is on God's inability to foresee the future. God cannot see the future because there's nothing there to see. The future per se is nothing but an anticipated fantasy. God sees Eternity, which is outside time altogether, as well as the past, but God does not see the unreal as real. To say that God either sees or pre-determines something that does not, and cannot, exist is sheer nonsense. Moreover, if God did see the future, there could be no freedom for individuals.

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<sup>22</sup> This is no coincidence. Royce was an Hegelian idealist, and James was one of the early, pre-Whiteheadian advocates of Process thought.

However, on the other side, I reject Whitehead's complete separation of God from creativity. Once an occasion is complete, what gives rise to its successors, if not the inspiration of Eternity in the Primordial Nature of God? I believe the influence of Eternity is what perpetuates the generation of time. Without novelty, all occasions would be identical and indistinguishable, and would therefore cease to exist as individuals. Also, I cannot accept the Process notion that God does not create. God may not be omnipotent, but that does not mean God is a mere observer of the creative process. In fact, if by "persuasion" one means "persuasion to come into existence," then persuasion sounds strikingly similar to creation. In short, I believe there is room to develop a doctrine of continuous Divine creation in Whitehead's overall model.

### **"Go East, Young Man..."**

...was Prof. Paul Laughlin's advice to me at the 1999 SSMR meeting, after reading *The Power of Thought to Heal*. Laughlin argued that my use of Whitehead's philosophy as a model for mental healing reminded him of training circus bears to ride bicycles — all while ignoring the many trained cyclists among Eastern thinkers. His point, that I neglected Eastern approaches to mental healing, is well taken, and any major treatise on the subject should include them. Nevertheless, a review of Eastern philosophies healing was beyond the scope of both the dissertation and this paper. My main purpose in writing both documents is to suggest that we need to look beyond Cartesian dualism, along with the crypto-dualist alternatives of materialism and idealism, to understand the power of thought to shape our destinies. Prof. Laughlin agreed with me on these points, as I agree with him that it is time we Westerners take the wisdom of other cultures more seriously.

However, I would also like to offer two additional responses to Laughlin's critique. The first is that Whitehead's metaphysic itself may serve as a link between East and West. In my own experience, it was only during my practice of Buddhist meditation that I actually experienced first hand what Whitehead called actual occasions themselves, although what I experienced were more like waves than particles. Moreover, Whitehead's model may also be helpful in relating certain Eastern concepts, such as the Chinese notion of *chi* or material force, with Western science. If the Universe really does consist of entities that are both mental and physical, we may yet find a place for *chi* in physics. Exactly how this might happen, however, is not my area of expertise. I am not a physicist.

Secondly, with respect to Indian philosophy, I have had the privilege of working with many Indians in the technology industry. When I described my dissertation to them, their response was universal. That the mind can both heal and shape our destinies is something every Indian child learns on his mother's knee, and they were surprised to learn that Western culture ever came to doubt it. However, they also had the same general critique of their own culture's philosophy: It listens well, but it does not pay the bills. I cannot speak for everyone in New Thought, but I want something that pays the bills. As we should not neglect the wisdom of the East, neither should we neglect that of the West.

### **The Difficulty in Teaching and Understanding Whitehead's Philosophy**

Laughlin's analogy of a bear trying to learning to ride a bicycle aptly describes most students' experience of studying Whitehead, including my own. It is both a complex and highly unnatural thing to learn. It is therefore unfair and unrealistic to ask most parishioners in New Thought churches to study and understand Whitehead. (For you

ministers, I can't think of a faster way to empty a church than to give sermons on subjects like physical purposes, propositional feelings, and the Reformed Subjectivist Principle.)

His writing is challenging in two ways. The fact that he wrote in the language of academic philosophy is only half, or perhaps less than half, of the problem. As soon as you have broken the language barrier, you immediately confront the challenge of the paradigm shift — and that's the really hard part. Substance-attribute thinking is an extremely difficult box to see outside. If you practice meditation for any length of time, you may (pardon the pun) actually experience actual occasions of experience, but not in ordinary waking life. Substance-attribute thinking is so useful that it is easy to confuse it with the all of experience itself. This is what Western philosophy itself did for over two millennia. It is also what makes Process thought a difficult sale to any audience.

The challenge of translating the philosophical jargon into intelligible English is one I have decided to take on myself, and I hope to have taken at least a step in that direction with this paper. The job is not easy, but by the grace of God, it will be done and done right. Accordingly, I ask for your prayers of support. And please be patient. God isn't finished with me yet.

The paradigm shift, however, challenges both one's intelligence and one's courage, and requires both inspiration and perspiration to grasp. This is where I ask for the help of New Thought ministers. However, what I ask of you is not to accept Whitehead's ideas, or even my own, without question. What I do ask is that you continue to teach a brand of New Thought that is "open at the top" and resist the temptation to cling to dogma. With God's grace, the sermons from New Thought pulpits will continue to inspire us to see outside boxes, to face confusion, doubt, and uncertainty with courage, faith, and inspiration. Should you succeed in doing that, I am confident that Process thought will find its rightful place in the New Thought movement, whatever that place may be.

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