

# WHITEHEAD'S ORGANISMIC CONCEPTION OF GOD AND ITS RELIGIOUS AVAILABILITY

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*Religion will not regain its old power  
until it can face change in the same  
spirit as does science.*  
*A. N. Whitehead*

## God as the third formative element

Whitehead conceives God, as the third formative element which binds together the two other formative elements, namely, creativity and eternal objects. It emerges, as in the case of Aristotle's Prime Mover, from the metaphysical demand for a unique actual entity which binds together the realms of actuality and potentiality, providing for the actuality the definiteness without which no single actual occasion could exist, and for potentiality the relationship to actuality, to agency, without which the resulting violation of the ontological principle would make an incoherence of the notion of a "realm" of eternal objects. Whitehead's system internally requires a First Principle to relate the realms of actuality and potentiality, thereby providing a metaphysical basis for the emergence of definiteness. As he notes, "nothing, within any limited type of experience, can give intelligence to shape our ideas of any entity at the base of all actual things, unless the general character of things requires that there is such an entity" (Whitehead 1925, 174). In what follows will be shown the manner in which the "general character of things" requires that there is a God. Thus God cannot be arbitrarily introduced *deus ex machina*, else the system itself lapses into incoherence. Whitehead argues that the exact opposite is the case: "God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification" (Whitehead 1929, 521). This system demands that the eternal objects which constitute a Category of Existence (Whitehead 1929, 32), will obtain its link with actuality. Hence the scope of the ontological principle: Everything must be somewhere; and here 'somewhere' means 'some actual entity'. Accordingly the general potentiality of the universe must be somewhere, since it retains its proximate relevance to actual entities for which is unrealized. This 'proximate relevance' reappears in subsequent concrescence as final causation regulative of the emergence of novelty. This 'somewhere' is the non-temporal actual entity. Thus 'proximate relevance' means 'relevance as in the primordial mind of God' (Whitehead 1929, 73).

The system therefore requires God to preserve the ontological principle. But God plays a far more crucial role in the operation of eternal objects than this rather obvious relationship suggests by itself. A more basic question concerns how it is possible for unrealized, abstract forms to be relevant to emerging actual entities. Whitehead asks: "In what sense can unrealized abstract form be relevant?"

What is the basis of relevance? 'Relevance' must express some real fact of togetherness among forms. The ontological principle can be expressed as: "All real togetherness is togetherness in the formal constitution of an actuality". So if there is relevance of what in the temporal world is unrealized, the relevance must express a fact of togetherness in the formal constitution of non-temporal actuality (Whitehead 1929, 48).

For eternal objects to be relevant to creative process it is required a "real togetherness" of eternal objects, namely a web of general relationships of eternal objects. This real togetherness must be a formal aspect of God. Whitehead makes this point clear in another context: "The general relationships of eternal objects to each other, relationships of diversity and of pattern, are their relationships in God's conceptual realization. Apart from this realization, there is mere isolation indistinguishable from nonentity" (Whitehead 1929, 392).

So far God's primordial valuation of the realm of eternal objects is identical with the web of relationships constituted by the internal relatedness of eternal objects. This complies with Whitehead's main basis of his system that God links concrescing actualities with the eternal objects. Whitehead's doctrine of the primordial nature of God is strengthened by his claim that God's conceptual valuation is identical with the web of relationships constituted by the internal relatedness of eternal objects: "Things which are temporal arise by their participation in the things which are eternal".

The two sets are mediated by a thing which combines the actuality of what is temporal with the timelessness of what is potential. This final entity [God] is the divine element in the world, by which the barren inefficient disjunction of abstract potentialities obtains primordially the efficient conjunction of ideal realization... By reason of the actuality of this primordial valuation of pure potentials, each eternal object has a definite, effective relevance to each concrescence process. Apart from such orderings, there would be complete disjunction of eternal objects unrealized in the temporal world. Novelty would be meaningless, and inconceivable (Whitehead 1929, 63-64).

It is clear from the above that the dynamic surge of the creativity into novel concrescence presupposes not simply a realm of possibility but also the primordial valuation of pure potentials which generates the relevance of each pure potential to each instance of concrescence process. God, however, according to Whitehead, 'does not create eternal objects; for his nature requires them in the same degree that they require him. This is an exemplifica-

tion of the coherence of the categorical types of existence” (Whitehead 1929, 392). If it is true that apart from God’s primordial existence eternal objects are ‘indistinguishable from nonentity” it is also true that God’s primordial existence is impossible without eternal objects: “Eternal objects are inseparable from God’s primordial existence; they are the primordial ‘definiteness’ apart from which no existence or creativity, even in the primordial instance of God, is possible at all” (Leclerc 1958, 199–200). Actuality, even the primordial instance of actuality which is God, presupposes definiteness; hence creativity also presupposes eternal objects even in its primordial, aboriginal instance. This scheme of eternal objects in the “isolation indistinguishable from nonentity” inert, lifeless, and ungraded in relevance to God’s primordial vision can be compared with Plato’s *Timaeus*. According to Cornford’s interpretation: “Both the Demiurge and chaos are symbols: neither is to be taken quite literally, yet both stand for real elements in the world as it exists...” (Cornford 1937, 37 and 176).

These three formative elements have the same role to play in Whitehead’s philosophical system. Each formative element stands for some element that is now and always present in the working of a world without beginning or end. Their interaction are mutually interdependent; the universe of actual occasions emerges from their mutual interaction. In what follows we will describe the basic facet of the interaction that produces the process of concrescence, the coming-to-be, which is common to all actual occasions, beginning with the study of the formative element, God, through a consideration of how concrescence initiates with the concrescing actual occasion acquiring a subjective aim from its prehension of God (Sherburne 1961, 40).

As we have seen, from “concrescence”, the generic characteristic of the process, results the mutual interaction of the formative elements from which emerges the concrete actual entity. We have also seen that God was related to eternal objects; he will now be related to actual occasions by showing how, as final cause, he initiates the concrescence of each and every actual occasion via subjective aims.

An actual occasion, to begin with, to be mature, has to be fully definite. Basically, this means that all actual occasions are depended upon God, for without God the forms of definiteness would be indistinguishable from non entity and decisions productive to concreteness would be impossible. But there is more to it, since in a limited sense can be said that God can “create” all actual occasions. As the aboriginal instance of creativity, God is the eternal primordial character (Whitehead 1929, 344), which means that in addition to each ordinary actual entity ‘conditioning’ creativity, God also ‘conditions’ creativity in every instance of its individualization. This happens through God’s basic metaphysical role of providing the subjective aim of every actual entity (Leclerc 1958, 195).

Whitehead, then, is insisting that God has a crucial role in the birth of every actual occasion. By playing this role, God does in a very real sense "create" each actual occasion, though Whitehead warns us that the phrase "God as creator" is apt to be misleading by its suggestion that the ultimate creativity of the universe is to be ascribed to God's volition (Whitehead 1929, 343–344).

God is also conceived as an objectification of hybrid physical feeling, the third type of prehension—the other two are the physical and conceptual. In its hybrid physical prehension of God, this actual occasion prehends not God in his full concreteness as an actual entity but God as objectified by those conceptual prehensions of eternal objects which constitute relevant alternatives capable of leading to the satisfaction of that particular actual occasion conditioned by its particular antecedent circumstances.

God, in Whitehead's technical term, "lures" the actual occasion towards the realization which will result in the achievement of maximum value in the world. "God's immanence in the world in respect to its primordial nature is an urge towards the future based upon an appetite in the present" (Whitehead 1929, 47). Where this lure is successful the actual occasion in question realizes in its satisfaction the relevant possibility leading to the greatest intensity of value.

### **God as the Principle of Concretion**

God is the principle of concretion in the sense that he is the actual entity from which each temporal concrescence receives that initial aim from which its self-causation starts. That aim determines the initial gradations of relevance of eternal objects for conceptual feeling; and constitutes the autonomous subject in its primary phase of feelings with its conceptual valuations, and with its initial physical purposes (Whitehead 1929, 374). From the point of view of the initial stage of the subjective aim it can be said that it is rooted in the nature of God, and its completion depends on the self-causation of the subject-superject (Whitehead 1929, 373). In the words of Whitehead, "each temporal entity derives from God its basic conceptual aim, relevant to its actual world, yet with indeterminations awaiting its own decisions. This subjective aim, in its successive modification, remains the unifying factor governing the successive phases of interplay between physical and conceptual feelings" (Whitehead 1929, 343).

Modification of actual occasion the initial vision of itself derived from God however may fail to realize the full intensity of value present in God's appetite. This is the freedom in the universe. It may also be the case that events have reached an impasse where the most desirable alternative is bad: if the best is bad, then the truthfulness of God can be personified in *Ate, the goddess of mischief. The chaff is burnt*" (Whitehead 1929, 373). The formal aspect of novelty in the world is then derived from God's primordial

conceptual valuation of eternal objects which constitutes the relevance for the concreting actual occasion. Such a coupling of the concrete and the abstract, Whitehead calls a proposition, as it can be seen in the formal definition of subjective aim: “The ‘subjective aim,’ which controls the becoming of a subject, is the subject feeling a proposition with the subjective form of purpose to realize it in the process of self-creation” (Whitehead 1929, 37). Thus, the subjective aim of any given actual occasion is derived from God and constitutes the goal toward which that entity directs its self-creative process. The attainment of the goal constitutes the satisfaction of that actual occasion. From the hybrid physical prehension of God may, finally, arise a conceptual feeling of a novel eternal object: “The light that never was, on sea or land” (Whitehead 1933, 270). Only God can conjure up conceptual feelings that do not depend on prior physical feelings. “Unfettered conceptual valuation... is only possible once in the universe, since that creative act is objectively immortal as an inescapable condition characterizing creative action” (Whitehead 1929, 378).

### **God’s Consequent Nature**

As we have pointed out, God preserves the opposition of physical and mental pole, synthesized in a final “satisfaction”. We have also seen that mental pole comes first and constitutes the “primordial appetition”, which is timeless pattern of order pervading the creative process, and determining the mental pole of each successive occasion. The Primordial Nature is the repositum of all possible values, but only as possible. As N. Lawrence points out (1963, 172), “in this repositum there lies the entire multiplicity of eternal objects, which are all the qualities, characteristics, or properties that could characterize any event or set of events.” God as primordial is mental in that the concepts of all possibilities lie in Him, only ideally, not actually (Whitehead 1929, 521–522). It is the realm to which the formation of the process of events is drawn as it proceeds from its fixed background of fact. The Primordial Nature of God is like Aristotle’s Prime Mover in that it is eternal, complete, and the object of desire towards which all things are drawn. They differ, however, in that it is not conscious, for consciousness requires the fusion of conceptual and physical feeling. It is the aspect of God not available for religious purposes. Hence the importance of the Consequent Nature of God.

The Consequent Nature of God, the Physical pole, is “the physical prehension by God of the actualities of the evolving universe” (Whitehead 1929, 134). Where the Primordial Nature is complete, the Consequent Nature is incomplete. Where the Primordial Nature is nonconscious and complete, the Consequent Nature is conscious and incomplete. Where the Primordial Nature proffers possible values and it is eternal, the Consequent Nature conserves actual values and is everlasting (Whitehead 1929, 521–524).

The fusion of the two Natures, the Primordial and the Consequent, constitutes "the ultimate unity of the multiplicity of actual fact with the primordial conceptual fact." It is the reconciliation of permanence and flux" (Whitehead 1929, 525) in an everlasting reality.

### **The Religious availability of God**

The next question to consider refers to the religious availability of God. Whitehead himself had once questioned Aristotle's metaphysical deity as "available for religious purposes" (Whitehead 1925, 249). In what follows will be an attempt to show that Whitehead's task was to fill in the gap between God of thought and a God of feeling. The idea of a felt God, Himself capable of feeling and therefore a God not wholly remote or intellectually defined, seems to be Whitehead's correction of Aristotle's barren conception of a Prime Mover.

In particular, God is the "nontemporal actual entity, otherwise called the "supreme rationalized religion" (Whitehead 1929b, 90). God's nontemporality should not be confused with His eternity, that is, the property of His Primordial Nature. The eternal is nonfactual, in the sense that is not time-structured or time-dependent in order to be what it is. The Consequent Nature of God is derived "from the temporal world" with the characteristics of "permanence" and "perfection" but without completion for God and the world (Whitehead 1929, 529). The static characteristics of completion belong to the Primordial Nature. In the words of Whitehead, "The purpose of God is the attainment of value in the temporal world" (Whitehead 1929b, 100). In the words of Lawrence (Whitehead 1929b, 173) "the incompleteness of the everlasting nature of God rests on the fact that time is real, and the Consequent Nature of God constantly receives the datum of completed actual into the unending completion of Consequent Nature." Thus, besides the time-free of the eternal objects of the Primordial Nature of God, and the time-structured actual occasions, there is the time-concerned and time-dependent type of existence of the Consequent Nature of God, abiding, everlasting, temporal and incomplete.

The objects of God's will, therefore, when complete, slip backward into the stream of time by replacing one another. What does not change is the will to harmonize them, the unchanged by the time will, which is everlastingly the same, yet always engaged in the struggle with what is temporal. What these temporal entities become in some sense free for them and irrevocable, in so far as they are individual. It is evident that Whitehead tries so far to incorporate and rationalize the familiar Christian language by substituting concepts like "eternal" and "will" with "everlasting" and "aim" correspondingly.

Whitehead's statement, for example, that God "saves" the world (Whitehead 1929, 525) through harmonizing, points to an inseparable con-

nection of morality with art. This is explicitly stated in his words, that “The canons of art are merely the expression, in specialized forms, of the requisites for depth of experience. The principles of morality are allied to the canons of art, in that they also express, in another connection, the same requisites (Whitehead 1929, 483). The connection seems to save the morals from self-interestedness and irrationalism. He argues that the “defense of morals is the battle-cry which best rallies stupidity against change. Perhaps countless ages ago respectable amoebae refused to migrate from ocean to dry land – refusing in defense of morals” (Whitehead 1933, 345). This allows Whitehead to distinguish between “rational” and “rationalized religion”. The latter points to the rational coherence with the rest of experience. Thus the temporality of God leads to “the Supreme God of rationalized religion, that is rational coherence with the religious experience, in the sense that disparate elements of experience must be rendered coherent. His metaphysical description makes this organismic coherence abundantly clear in that it sets out for immediate comparison with “deliverances of religious experience” (Whitehead 1929b, 89), considered as a “fact” (Whitehead 1929b, 86) as the “Religious Consciousness in History” and the “Quest of God” phrases which point to a religious experience within the whole of experience. One of these levels, the most significant from existential point of view, is the aesthetic vision of the Consequent Nature of God, forever completing His own existence by a harmony which rescinds the objective evil, but without a comfort in return, because it is not likely to give anyone much comfort to know that no matter what happens in this world, God can see it in an ideal setting that makes it an enjoyable sight. From the point of view of those who have reached a state of stable goodness in so far as their own interior life is concerned and of the type of their moral correctitude is, on a larger view, so like evil that the distinction is trivial.

God however, as actual entity which enters into every creative phase and yet is above change, He must be exempt from internal inconsistency which is the note of evil. Since God is actual, He must include in himself a synthesis of the total universe. “There is, therefore, in God’s nature the aspect of the realm of forms as qualified by the world, and the aspect of the world as qualified by the forms” (Whitehead 1929b, 98).

Whitehead’s main concern then is to explain the relation of religious experience to experience generally. The latter includes the former, namely the religious aspect. We can trace the relation genetically: “The moment of religious consciousness,” Whitehead states, “starts from self-evaluation, but it broadens into the concept of the world as a realm of adjusted values, mutually intensifying or mutually destructive. The intuition into the actual world gives a particular definite content to the bare notion of a principle determining the grading of values. It also exhibits emotions, purposes, and physical conditions, as subservient factors in the emergence of values (Whitehead 1929b, 58-59).

The edifice of this metaphysics of religious experience has to overcome certain facts, and entertain the ability of the subjective purposes in consciousness to raise their common limits, trans-personally or even trans-morally to a grasp of value that erases temporal losses. It entertains not only private authenticity but also publicly noticeable beatification. The correlation of the two movements are apparent: the subjective persuasion of religious experience, which stretches beyond standard conception of value and the worth of lives so guided. The correlation of these facts is what Whitehead call *rationalization*. Some men have such vision beyond average values, and it has publicly noticeable consequences. As N. Lawrence points out, "any metaphysics worthy of the name must accommodate these facts. The primary role of a metaphysics is to describe what is, systematically and rationally. Derivatively it may lead men to deeper insight" (1963, 176).

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