

ON THE VALUE OF THE PANENTHEISTIC ANALOGY: A RESPONSE TO WILLEM DREES

by Philip Clayton

Abstract. The author expresses appreciation to Professor Drees for his careful and mostly accurate reading of *God and Contemporary Science*. The exchange provides the opportunity to step back from the specifics of the debate and clarify what it is that gives rise to the increasing talk of panentheism within religion-science discussions today. What is the central challenge that the natural sciences raise for theistic belief? How far does panentheism go toward answering this challenge, and what work still needs to be done? Locating the book in this way clarifies questions of where the burden of proof lies, especially with regard to the relation of physical, mental, and spiritual qualities.

Keywords: Willem Drees; *God and Contemporary Science*; the mind/body problem; naturalism; panentheism; theological models.

No defense of panentheism can get off the ground without agreement that there is a problem to be addressed. The three central questions, then, are: (1) What is the nature of the problem that theism faces in our scientific age? (2) How is this problem exacerbated by developments in science, and how in principle might the field of religion and science provide resources for addressing it? (3) In what ways does panentheism help in solving the problem, or where do the existing versions of panentheism—including my own—need to be altered or improved if they are to do so?

First, the problem. The crisis that panentheism addresses is that it has become increasingly difficult to conceive of the God of classical theism—the God believed in by orthodox Jews, Christians and Muslims. So many authors have presented these difficulties that it would be redundant to provide a bibliography here. In *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*

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(Clayton 2000a) I give one version of the story using the failure of perfection-based metaphysics as my guide; others have done equally convincing jobs citing difficulties with the knowability of God, transcendence, the problem of evil, and the problem of divine action. Among them all one point bears emphasizing: the problem of conceiving God is not foisted on innocent believers by nihilistic atheists. Jewish and Christian theologians have continually been among the major voices to proclaim the urgency of the difficulties.

Note that conceiving God will not count as a problem for two groups in particular. One consists of orthodox Jewish, Christian, and Muslim believers who deny that advances in science (or religious pluralism, or philosophical critiques) have raised *any* serious difficulties for classical theism. Some hold, for example, that the nature of God is known through biblical revelation alone, and indeed in such a way that science and philosophy cannot affect it adversely; one simply could not, they maintain, discover counter-instances that would seriously weaken or threaten theism. The other group consists of those who are not worried about rethinking the God-world relation because they think that the problems for theism are so overwhelming that it has already lost all credibility. Drees, I take it, belongs in this category. As I read him, Drees prefers a sort of ecstatic or religious naturalism—a naturalism that grants the significance and importance of human religious belief and practice—as a replacement for theism, which he views as no longer able to stand up under the burden of its own difficulties.

Second, how is the problem of conceiving God exacerbated by developments in science? The difficulties start with the problem of divine action. The more phenomena in the natural world we can account for through rigorous scientific explanations, the less it is necessary, or even plausible, to introduce God as their cause. If I do not know why thunder and lightning fill the sky, I may conclude that the gods are angry; if I do not know the laws for the refraction of light, I may suggest that God brought forth the rainbow as a sign of divine promise. Of course, there will always be holes of mystery in the garment of scientific explanation, limits beyond which human understanding does not reach. Still, an inverse correlation remains between the expanding web of natural explanations and the number and kind of things that one is inclined to attribute to God's direct action.

Less often acknowledged is that this question about divine action is closely tied to the problem of God's relation to the world and that the latter in turn fundamentally affects how one conceives God. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have placed great weight on defending theism and rejecting deism: God is active in the world, these traditions hold, providentially guiding creatures toward a divinely intended outcome. Such divine actions must be based on full knowledge of matters *in* the world; thus the traditions have held that God is omni-aware, which means being present

to every part of creation at every moment. Unfortunately, such phrases slide a bit too easily off theologians' tongues, for it is by no means easy to say how God is related to the world in this way. One can always assert by faith that God is "infinite in being and perfection" (Westminster Confession, chap. 2). But what does this mean? What kind of a being is it whose existence one thereby asserts? Is there any analogy between this mode of presence and any other type of presence of which we have any experience?

Here is where religion-and-science can be helpful. Theologians and philosophers from the medieval through the modern period have employed the so-called way of eminence, or *via eminentiae*. The method involves (1) beginning with patterns and phenomena that are a part of our experience in the natural world, (2) negating those features that would not or could not apply to a supernatural being, and (3) augmenting those features that remain in a manner consistent with the being in question (see Clayton 1996, 96 and 141). This means that scientific results about the nature of the natural world are more than incidental to the task of theology; they become the constraints, the initial suppliers of content, for theology. In fact, there is nothing particularly modern about this approach: even a Scholastic theologian like Thomas Aquinas began with the "science" of his day, Aristotelian natural philosophy, which was based on essences and on transitions from potentiality to actuality. When we read that a perfect God could not contain any potentiality, hence that God must be understood as pure actuality and as the power that is the ultimate cause of potentials becoming actual in the world, we encounter an example of science constraining theology.

In our day, as recent scholarship in religion and science has shown, theology must be equally responsive to the central themes of what we now know about the world: pervasive change, a developmental picture of the cosmos, the fundamental lawfulness of the natural world, spacetime, the intertranslatability of mass and energy, the evolution of complex structures, environmental constraints on particles and organisms, the emergence of new types of properties in the world. In each case, science *constrains but does not determine* the resulting theological proposals. It cannot be "business as usual" for theism, because direct physical causality in the natural world as we have come to understand it is massively more difficult than in (say) the natural world of medieval natural philosophy. To solve these difficulties, theologians will have to think anew and more deeply about the God/world relation.

Judging from his published work, Drees and I agree on many of these constraints. We both accept the methodological presumption of naturalism, the importance of metaphysical reflection in the religion-science debate, the necessity of some caution about assertions of divine action in the physical world, the weight of the problem of evil, and the urgency of rethinking classical philosophical theism in light of these changes. Drees

thinks I do not go far enough in leaving theism behind; I think he goes too far. Perhaps it will help to put the differences more precisely if I formulate the guiding principle that underlies the position in *God and Contemporary Science*: when it comes to knowledge claims, *maximize the control of natural knowledge except when required otherwise*. To expect theologians to employ such a principle is part of what I mean by doing theology in a new key. Recalling that venerable principle of medieval philosophy, *don't multiply entities without need*, one might now say, *don't multiply denials of natural knowledge without need*.

However the point is put, note that it amounts to a dual restriction. To the overeager theist, I say: respect more fully our knowledge of the natural world. Theism does not need to be defined in opposition to scientific results; it complements and supplements them. The break with natural knowledge does not need to define theology from the outset, like the "No!" with which Karl Barth's theology begins; rather it comes gradually, as natural principles may need to be stretched and augmented until they *could* be applied to a supernatural being or dimension. Conversely, to the naturalist I say: don't block the move to the theological or metaphysical level when it is required by the nature of the case, lest you rule out the theological enterprise by caveat. There is no argumentative value in excluding the idea of God in advance. If the notion of God requires creation and providence, divine action before the world and within it, then let's at least develop a theology, however hypothetical, that includes these features.

In what ways, then, might panentheism offer a *via media* between the naturalist and the classical theist? It begins by taking on the problem of how to conceive God as an agent at all, since if that fails, theism fails. Using the principle, *maximize the control of natural knowledge except when required otherwise*, the panentheist first studies what we know about human agents. The qualities of human conscious life, of our cognitive and emotional experience, emerge out of our physical structure: the shape of our central nervous system and the anatomy and chemistry of the brain (see the summaries in Russell, Murphy, Meyering, and Arbib 1999). Human subjective experience is more than the biochemistry of the brain; the mental life is not reducible to the hardware on which it runs (Clayton 2000b). Still, compromises to brain functioning (through lesions, illness, or death) alter or eliminate one's mental life. Just as important, we have no experience of agency without the intermediary of the body. Not only everyday experience in the world but also recent cognitive science—and, apparently, the results of biblical scholarship (Brown 1998)—conceive human agency via this psychophysical unity.

Understanding divine agency in the world must therefore start here. As our mental life is to our bodies, so also is God's mental life to the world as a whole or parts thereof. This similarity, which I call the Panentheistic Analogy, brings with it an updated conception of God's relation to the

world. It suggests a model not of God “breaking into” the world from outside but of God being organically related to the world as we are organically related to our own bodies. There will be disanalogies, of course: one does not find signs of God’s central nervous system in the cosmos (see Polkinghorne 1998 for a similar criticism of my view), and theists believe that God’s existence precedes the physical universe, even if the divine experience becomes richer through the course of cosmic evolution. (For other refinements of panentheism see Clayton 1998b; 1999.)

I do not think that my critic and I are very far apart on body-mind questions. We agree that mental properties are emergent—dependent yet irreducible—and that science by itself does not give adequate reason to substantivize the mental life into Mind or Soul. We disagree, however, on one item of natural theology: whether the existence of the mental life suggests a level of reality that breaks the bonds of naturalism. I think that it does, that human mental and religious experience is best explained by an ontology that, in the end, includes more than natural objects. Note that this is a *metaphysical* disagreement, however: it is not about any scientific explanation but about whether science will ultimately explain all that needs explaining.

Theists and naturalists who study religion and science will continue to disagree on this question, as Drees and I might still disagree after he has read this response. But let us not be guilty of one confusion: let’s not confuse *whether* one is justified in believing in supernatural realities with the question of how adequate a given conception of God is. Drees has offered no criticisms of the conceptual adequacy of my theology as such. He has only argued that my views of human personhood do not mandate the move to theology in the first place. He—and other naturalists in the religion-science field—should continue to demand arguments for why human experience as we know it should support introducing God as an explanatory concept. The probing of agnostics can help theists do better natural theology—or even ultimately cause us to drop our theistic claims and reassume the mantle of naturalism. I hope that theists of whatever stripe can rise to this challenge. But seeing no need for theology is not the same as showing that a given theological conception is incoherent. This Drees has not done. The task remains. Can other theists do a better job than panentheism at providing a viable understanding of the divine in dialogue with the methods and the results of recent natural science?

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