3. God and Process

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The central philosophical thesis of process philosophy is that process is a fundamental element in the constitution of all actualities, both worldly and divine. However, process thinkers do not agree about the nature of process itself, especially in its application to God. The enduring contribution of process theology will be the insight that process or time is a fundamental feature of divine actuality, not some specific analysis of the nature of process or time. What is really important is that God is in process, rather than any particular way of conceiving of that process. As commonly recognized, in his philosophical maturity, Whitehead conceived of two kinds of process: (1) the internal development or becoming of individual occasions or entities, and (2) the relation of succession between two or more individual occasions. The former he called "becoming", "genetic process" or "concrescence;" the latter he called "time", "change", or "transition". Later, these notions will be further explained.

Recent process theology has been sharply divided between two views of God and process. The dominant view, developed by Charles Hartshorne and shared by John Cobb, applies both of the foregoing types of process to God. It conceives of God as an everlasting society of concrescing actual occasions. Whitehead's alternative view conceives of God as a single, everlasting, non-temporal, actual entity. It recognizes no time or transition in God because God is not composed of a plurality of successive occasions. Whitehead's view is susceptible to more than one interpretation, however.

Bowman Clarke is perhaps the ablest proponent of one version of Whitehead's view that God is a single, non-temporal, actual entity. In four important articles, he developed and defended a version of this view and repudiated Hartshorne's understanding of God as an infinite series of divine actual occasions. Clarke maintains that if we are to comprehend Whitehead's view of God's relation to process we must understand his contention that there are two types of process. Clarke's essay titled "God and Whitehead" begins with these words.

It is generally recognized by Alfred North Whitehead's interpreters that in

Process and Reality he has two types of process: the genetic process of becoming which is nontemporal, and the temporal process of transition. Not keeping these two types of process distinct has, I fear, caused some confusion in interpreting Whitehead, particularly his conception of God.²

Clarke believes that Whitehead's understanding of God is distorted if we liken Divine process to the plurality of occasions constituting transition or time. The only proper analogy is with the internal becoming of a single actual entity. Whitehead's epochal theory of time does not apply to God, but his concept of becoming does apply. As Clarke explains:

For Whitehead, God is an actual entity. This means that God, like any other actual entity, does not change. He is where he is and what he is; he neither changes position nor definiteness. In short, no characteristic or relation of God changes, they merely become. This immediately raises the question: How are the two processes, the genetic process of becoming and the temporal process of transition, illustrative of God?³

In many published articles, Clarke has answered his own question in depth. I will examine three elements of Whitehead's position according to Clarke, which I also believe to be Clarke's position, each of which denies what Hartshorne affirms about God. I shall call these (1) The No Time Factor, (2) The No Future Factor, and (3) The No Efficient Causation (or Wimp) Factor. If Clarke protests that he has only been explaining Whitehead's views, but not his own, he has not made that distinction clear in his published writings.

1. THE NO TIME FACTOR

Both Whitehead and Clarke affirm the paradoxical view that concepts of time, change, or transition do not apply to God, yet seemingly temporalistic concepts such as becoming, process, flux, supersession, duration, etc. do apply to God and all other actual entities. Clark affirms that in two senses the temporal relationship of “before and after”, i.e., McTaggart's “B series”, does not apply to God. It applies to the world as known by God, but not to God himself.

First, “No before and after in God” means that nothing comes before or after God, though God knows that events within the world are ordered in before and after relationships. Clarke explains that

as for the process of transition, God is not a spatio-temporal part of a process of transition. There is no actual entity before him and no actual entity after him. He is not located in any B series. For this reason Whitehead refers to God as the “nontemporal actual entity”. He is not a member of the field of the relation, “x is before y”.⁴