

## **AGAINST MEREOLOGICAL PANENTHEISM**

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**Abstract.** In this paper I offer an argument against one important version of panentheism, that is, mereological panentheism. Although panentheism has proven difficult to define, I provide a working definition of the view, and proceed to argue that given this way of thinking about the doctrine, mereological accounts of panentheism have serious theological drawbacks. I then explore some of these theological drawbacks. In a concluding section I give some reasons for thinking that the classical theistic alternative to panentheism is preferable, all things considered.

All the cool kids want to be panentheists. Or so it seems from a cursory reading of much contemporary theology — particularly (though by no means exclusively) the literature on science and religion. Yet panentheism is a doctrine that has proven very difficult to define, and that has generated a range of different responses in the literature.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I am interested in what Philip Clayton calls *Christian* panentheism.<sup>2</sup> Amongst the many different views that go under the name panentheism there are versions that are clearly inconsistent with Christian theism, including naturalistic accounts. I shall have nothing to say about those views here. But there are versions of panentheism that have been held by Christian theologians, including “orthodox” and evangelical theologians like Jonathan Edwards. I am interested in versions of panentheism that are consistent with broadly orthodox Christian theological commitments.

To this end, in the first section I will set out the problem of demarcating panentheism in relation to theism on the one hand, and pantheism on the other. I shall also provide one way of construing the doctrine that does, I think, reflect the way in which it is often understood in the Christian theological literature. This is the mereological version of panentheism. Then, in a second section, I give some account of the theological shape of the mereological version of panentheism, attempting to show how this might be thought to be consistent with a broadly orthodox Christian theology. Armed with a working definition of this version of the doctrine, I shall set out some serious theological problems with the doctrine in a third section, exploring why these render the doctrine unfit for theological purpose. In a short concluding section I turn to consider the theistic alternative to panentheism as a preferable account of God’s relation to the created order for the purposes of Christian systematic theology.

### **I. PROBLEMS DEMARCATING PANENTHEISM**

There is dispute about how to demarcate panentheism. As R. T. Mullins has put it in a recent essay on the topic, “One of the most notorious difficulties for panentheism is its vagueness. It is incredibly difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on the topic is vast and continues to expand. Panentheism has had such an important influence upon recent theology of various stripes that Gregory Peterson quips, “We are all panentheists now.” See Gregory R. Peterson, “Whither Panentheism?”, *Zygon* 36, no. 3 (2001): 395. Useful surveys of panentheism can be found in John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Baker Academic, 2006), and (more up to date) John Culp, “Panentheism”, last modified June 3, 2017, accessed March 5, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/panentheism/>. The latter includes a helpful bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> See Philip Clayton, “The Case for Christian Panentheism”, *Dialogue* 37, no. 3 (1998).

pin down exactly what panentheism is and how it differs from rival models of God.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Gregory Peterson writes, “panentheists must begin to look more closely at the *en* that holds the position together and distinguishes it from its rivals.”<sup>4</sup> Some scholars despair of giving any useful account of panentheism. Thus, for example, Patrick Hutchings writes, “I cannot *admit to being* a panentheist, unless there is something different (from the other possibilities) which can be specified as *being-a-panentheist*. I make my avowal of being a panentheist with a false geniality, since I am — as I see it — committing myself to nothing.”<sup>5</sup> There is, on his way of thinking, no clear, non-controversial way of demarcating panentheism from its near rivals in conceptions of God. Let us call this worry *the demarcation problem*.

Not everyone is quite as pessimistic as Mullins or Hutchings are in their assessment of the prospects for demarcating panentheism. In his widely read theological survey of panentheism, John W. Cooper begins by giving a working definition of panentheism that he then makes the basis of a taxonomy of different versions of the doctrine.<sup>6</sup> He writes, “In brief, panentheism affirms that although God and the world are ontologically distinct and God transcends the world, the world is ‘in’ God ontologically.”<sup>7</sup> This working definition of the doctrine informs the rest of his study. On Cooper’s reckoning, panentheism and theism share common roots in Plato and Neoplatonism, which is why they share certain features in common. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between them, having to do with how God relates to the world, which reflects different strands of Platonism.<sup>8</sup> These differences are expressed in two families of views that are pantheistic in nature, says Cooper. The first of these is Neoplatonism, which “is pantheistic because everything exists within God in a series of concentric emanations.”<sup>9</sup> A second branch of panentheism “equates God primarily with the World-Soul.”<sup>10</sup> On this view, God is a Life Force that generates other, created life. However, some Christian theologians, like Augustine, appropriate aspects of Neoplatonism without being panentheists. Hence, on Cooper’s way of thinking, one may not simply equate Christian Neoplatonism with panentheism. Yet, given this qualification about some Christian theological appropriations of Neoplatonism, Cooper writes that “it is accurate to say that the history of panentheism is largely the history of Neoplatonism.”<sup>11</sup>

To be fair to Cooper, he does recognize that the diversity of views that claim to be panentheist — and in particular, the difficulty in pinning down how God is said to transcend the created order and what the “being of God” entails — makes his task, “more complicated.”<sup>12</sup> But this he takes to be a problem that can be resolved by careful classification. Hence, he sets out five distinctions that he thinks help place particular versions of the doctrine within a taxonomy of different versions of the view. These are explicit and implicit panentheism; personal and nonpersonal panentheism; part-whole and relational panentheism; voluntary and/or natural panentheism; and classical (divine determinist) or modern (cooperative) panentheism.<sup>13</sup> These are helpful distinctions as far as they go. But they do tend to obscure the fundamental demarcation problem by providing a kind of quasi-Aristotelian way of categorizing the different species of panentheism into particular theological genera as if the real problem is just one of organizing the existing data according to a sufficiently comprehensive schema. This is beguiling because it is not clear that key terms that are common (perhaps, essential) in the literature on panentheism have a clear enough

3 R. T. Mullins, “The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism”, *Sophia* 55, no. 3 (2016): 325.

4 Peterson, “Whither Panentheism?”, 396.

5 Patrick Hutchings, “Postlude: Panentheism”, *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 299.

6 Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers*, no. ch. 1. A similarly sanguine view is taken by Culp, “Panentheism”.

7 Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers*, 18. This reflects the generally accepted definition Cooper later cites from F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (OUP, 1997), 1213, 1213, which states that panentheism is the view according to which “The Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part exists in Him, but His Being is more than, and not exhausted by, the universe.”

8 Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers*, 18.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, 19.

11 *Ibid.*, 19.

12 Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers*, 27.

13 Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers*, 27.

denotation for such categorization to be accurate. Cooper's survey of the history of the doctrine can only proceed if we accept that there is a clear enough working definition of the doctrine to begin with. But there is good reason to think that is far from obvious.

To see this, consider the words of Owen C. Thomas in an essay for the *Oxford Handbook to Science and Religion*. He writes,

There are some serious problems in the understanding and interpretation of pantheism in what has become a fairly widespread movement that has gathered under this banner. These problems arise from the fact that pantheism is not one particular view of the relationship of the divine to the world (universe), but rather, a large and diverse family of views involving quite different interpretations of the key metaphorical assertion that the world is *in* God. This is indicated by the common locution among pantheists that the world is 'in some sense' in God, and by the fact that few pantheists go on to specify clearly and in detail exactly what sense is intended.<sup>14</sup>

The problem seems to be with the locution "in" and the rather different ways in which the world is said to be "in" God by different thinkers who are supposed to be pantheists. (Cooper is aware of this problem, of course. But he does not appear to think it is a fundamental problem, as Mullins, Hutchings, and Thomas, amongst others, do.) Suppose we place pantheism as a middle way between the poles of classical theism on the one end, and pantheism at the other end (a common enough taxonomical conceit in the literature).<sup>15</sup> The classical theist maintains that God and the world are distinct; that God freely creates the world; that the world is contingent upon God's creative action; and that God is independent of the world, that is, he exists *a se*. For many theists it is also true to say that God is intimately involved in the sustenance of the world, without which the creation would simply cease to exist. *Classical* theism offers a metaphysically richer picture of God's relation to the world than mere theism *per se*, including claims about God's perfection, his relation to time, and so on.<sup>16</sup> But for present purposes this characterization of what we might call *bare theism* will do to distinguish it from alternatives.

At the other pole, so to speak, is pantheism. As I understand it pantheism (literally, *all-is-god*) is the view according to which the world, that is, the created order, compose the parts that make up God without remainder. Sometimes it is said that pantheism is the view that God and the creation are identical.<sup>17</sup> However, that does not seem to be a very helpful way of putting the point, since I suppose there are pantheists who think that God is not identical to the world, strictly speaking. For just as the marble composes the statue though it is distinct from it, so it may be that God is composed by the world, though he is distinct from it.

According to Michael Brierley, pantheism could include the notion that "God is totally dependent on, or coterminus with, the cosmos."<sup>18</sup> But to my way of thinking, being totally dependent on the creation is not a sufficient condition for pantheism. Suppose the sum of all the proper parts of the cosmos composes God. Under these conditions, what would it mean to say that God is totally *dependent on* the cosmos? Perhaps it means no more than that God has the same dependency relation to the cosmos that, say, a table has to the parts that make it up: if one of its legs is suddenly annihilated, the table is no longer whole, and (so one might think) the continued existence of the table depends on the continued existence of this leg. *Mutatis mutandis*, God's continued existence depends on the parts of the cosmos not being

14 Owen C. Thomas, "Problems in Pantheism", in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. Philip Clayton and Simpson Zachary (OUP, 2008), 654.

15 A good example of this is Michael W. Brierley, "The Potential of Pantheism for Dialogue Between Science and Religion", in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. Philip Clayton and Simpson Zachary (OUP, 2008), 637–38.

16 Mullins gives a good account of classical theism in his taxonomy. See Mullins, "The Difficulty with Demarcating Pantheism".

17 Thus Mullins: "On theism, God and the universe are distinct, whereas on pantheism, God and the universe are identical." in Mullins, "The Difficulty with Demarcating Pantheism", 326. Later he characterizes the core metaphysical commitment that informs pantheism thus, "The one substance that exists is God. All else is a mode or manifestation of God. This comprises the hard core of pantheism." (Mullins, "The Difficulty with Demarcating Pantheism", 333.) But this does not require that God and the world are *identical*. For one could think that statue is a mode of the marble from which it is carved.

18 Brierley, 638.

annihilated. What about the notion of the cosmos and God being “co-terminus”? Well, that gets closer to my claim about the composition of the cosmos and God, but two things can be coincident without being identical. The statue is spatially coincident with the block of marble, but it is not identical with the marble. It has different persistence conditions for one thing: I can efface the statue without thereby destroying the block of marble. Perhaps the relation between God and the cosmos is like that according to some versions of pantheism. Then, God and the world are not identical, though they are coincident.

Pantheism, so it is frequently said, falls somewhere between theism and pantheism. The world is not identical to God, according to pantheism. Nor is it the case that the world (i.e. the cosmos) comprises the parts that make up God without remainder. The world is not coincident with God either. Here the pantheist agrees with the theist that the world is distinct from God. Yet unlike the theist, the pantheist claims that the world exists “in” God — which is the problem to which Owen Thomas introduced us earlier. How does the world exist “in” God, exactly? At this juncture, different analogs or metaphors are cited, depending upon the version of pantheism under discussion. According to some pantheists, God is to the world as the soul is to the body. Yet this does not offer much by way of *explanation* of the God-world relation, which is what we are after. (Similar things could be said about other analogs used by pantheists to this end.)

Recently there have been several proposals that attempt to press beyond the appeal to metaphor, in order to provide some way of explicating how the world may be “in” God. One such argument has recently been put forward by Benedikt Göcke. He maintains that the only real distinction between theism and pantheism regards the modal status of the world. He writes,

According to pantheism, the world is an intrinsic property of God — necessarily there is a world — and according to classical theism the world is an extrinsic property of God — it is only contingently true that there is a world. Therefore, as long as we do not have an argument showing that necessarily there is a world, pantheism is not an attractive alternative to classical theism.<sup>19</sup>

So, on Göcke’s view, it seems that the “in” in pantheism has to do with an intrinsic property of the divine nature that entails that God necessarily creates the world — something not true of classical theism. But there appear to be counter-examples to this claim, such as Jonathan Edwards. He aligned himself with classical theism, yet also maintained that God is essentially creative such that he must create a world and must create this world.<sup>20</sup> On Edwards’s view, God has an essential disposition to create. But if that is right, then the world is a necessary output of the divine nature. It might be thought that whether Edwards held such a view or not, Göcke’s claim is about the internal logic of pantheism versus classical theism, which is an issue that is independent of the views of particular theologians. But the claim that God necessarily creates is not obviously inconsistent with classical theism. God may be the source of his action, and act in a manner that is free, and yet act from an internal necessity of some kind (such as Edwards’s notion of divine moral necessity). Provided one can show that there is a distinction between how God *in se* is logically independent of God acts *ad extra* in creation, one may (like Edwards) hold to a kind of theological compatibilism with respect to God’s creative action in bringing about the world and yet still be counted a classical theist of a sort.<sup>21</sup>

A more promising attempt to provide some account of “*en*” in pantheism is provided by R. T. Mullins. He suggests that one way a pantheist could make sense of the way in which the world is said to exist “in” God is by making space and time divine attributes.<sup>22</sup> Suppose, with Mullins, we distinguish between metaphysical space and time and physical space and time. Metaphysical time exists independent of any measurements we take of it and independent of the existence of any particular physical object. By contrast, physical space and time only exist if physical objects exist. We might say that physical space and time exist “within” metaphysical space and time. Given this distinction, says Mullins, “the pantheist

19 Benedikt P. Göcke, “Pantheism and Classical Theism,” *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 61. Mullins also offers a critique of Göcke’s work in Mullins, “The Difficulty with Demarcating Pantheism,” 338–42.

20 This matter is discussed in more detail by Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation* (OUP, 2012).

21 This point has recently been argued by Justin J. Daeley, “Creatio Ex Nihilo: A Solution to the Problem of the Necessity of Creation and Divine Aseity,” *Philosophia Christi* 19, no. 2 (2017); especially 311–312.

22 Mullins, “The Difficulty with Demarcating Pantheism,” 342.

would be saying that absolute space and time are to be construed as metaphysical space and time. These are divine attributes, whereas physical space and time are not. When God creates a universe, God creates physical space and time. Physical space and time exist within metaphysical space and time/God.”<sup>23</sup>

This is a better way of trying to get at the “in” of panentheism because it does not make a judgment about the necessity or contingency of the universe (which, as we have seen, is a matter of dispute in this debate). Yet, as Mullins points out, on his view “the universe is literally in God because the universe is spatially and temporally located in God. The universe is located in space and time, and space and time are divine attributes.”<sup>24</sup> Here the “in” of panentheism is not metaphorical, but metaphysical. Hence, unlike much of the literature on the topic, there is real explanatory power to Mullins’s proposal.

However, as attractive as this strategy is, it is not without theological cost. Orthodox Christian panentheists like Edwards will balk at making space and time divine attributes because it entails that God is located and has extension.<sup>25</sup> There are some recent philosophical proposals that suggest God is located at all points in space.<sup>26</sup> Yet, on this way of thinking, God’s presence is not so much *circumscriptive* as *definitive* (to borrow and repurpose a medieval eucharistic distinction<sup>27</sup>). That is, his presence is not such that he is *distributed* in a given area, with certain parts in certain distinct places like a human body has a hand in one place and a foot in another so that the whole body is distributed over a given area (which is a kind of circumscriptive presence). Instead, it may be that God’s presence entails his being wholly at a place without being extended or distributed into parts that are at a distance, or in different spatial regions from one another. In addition to this, Mullins’s account requires that time is a divine attribute, thereby making God temporal. This too will be a difficult pill to swallow for those panentheists who are of a *classical* orthodox theological persuasion. For these reasons, it may be better to try to find another metaphysical way to make sense of the way in which the world is said to exist “in” God.

One promising way to construe the sort of panentheism we are after — that is a panentheism consistent with traditional, orthodox Christian theology — is as a mereological claim, to wit, that the created order is a part of God. That is, God has a part that comprises the creation, and a part that does not. This would give some metaphysical explanation of the phrase “the world is ‘in’ God” used by panentheists that would also demarcate it from theism and pantheism. For, on this construal of the term, the world is “in” God in the sense that it exists as a part of God, though not the only part of God. This is clearly distinct from theism, since the theist claims that God and the world are not parts of one mereological whole. It is also distinct from pantheism, because the pantheist claims either that God and the world are identical (so that there is no non-trivial part-whole relation that applies to the God-world unity aside from the relation of identity), or that the world composes God, without remainder (which is more like the claim that God and the world are co-located, or share all and only the same parts).<sup>28</sup>

23 Mullins, “The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism”, 343.

24 Mullins, “The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism”, 343.

25 In an early notebook Edwards does endorse Henry More’s view that God is space. However, as his views developed, he left this notion behind for a more thoroughgoing immaterialism.

26 See, e.g. Hud Hudson, “Omnipresence”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (OUP, 2009); Alexander Pruss, “Omnipresence, Multilocation, the Real Presence and Time Travel”, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 1, no. 1 (2013); and Ross D. Inman, “Omnipresence and the Location of the Immaterial”, in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion Volume 8*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (OUP, 2017).

27 Thus, Marilyn McCord Adams: “Confronted with the problem of eucharistic presence, however, Aquinas, Scotus and Occam all reasoned that just because material things have parts and so can be and normally are in a place by being extended in it, it doesn’t follow that it is metaphysically impossible for material things to be located in a place without being extended in it. Why would it be impossible for Divine power to make a material thing to exist in a place definitively, so that the whole thing was in the whole of the place, and the whole thing was in each part of the place as well? Instead of making each part of a thing exist in a different part of the place, God could make all the parts of the thing exist in each and all parts of the place at once.” Marilyn M. Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (CUP, 2006), 300.

28 Objection: isn’t Mullins’s account a mereological account? If so, how is this suggestion distinct from that offered by Mullins? Response: Yes, Mullins’s account is a mereological account of a sort. But this mereological proposal does not make specific the way in which the world is a part of God. This is a benefit because of the worries about the theological costs involved in Mullins’s solution, previously discussed.

Nevertheless, on the face of it this mereological proposal is a rather strange notion, not least because it seems to require a very different conception of the divine from that held by the vast majority of historic orthodox Christian thinkers, for whom God is a being without composition.

## II. MERELOGICAL PANENTHEISM

Let us attempt to get a clearer picture of the mereological version of panentheism. To that end, here is a metaphysical just-so story that expresses one (but not the only) way of thinking about the mereological account and that borrows a number of key motifs from much recent theological discussion of panentheism.

God creates from a necessity of his own nature. Though he is free in his action, his freedom is consistent with the fact that he must act according to his nature: he is the source of his free choices. Yet God is also essentially creative. It is part of his nature to be creative, such that the creation is the necessary output of divinity. God does not create a world outside of Godself; he does not bring about something entirely distinct from Godself. Rather, he (somehow) “makes room” *within himself* for the created order. The creation is radically dependent upon God for its existence. Yet it is also the necessary output of the divine nature. God is not truly happy without the creation because it is by means of creation that he is able to express his love *ad extra* in a manner consistent with his essentially benevolent nature. Thus, creation is a “part” of God. There is God; and there is the world he creates; and these are two overlapping entities that together comprise one mereological whole that is God plus the world.

Although this is a toy version of the mereological account it shares much in common with a number of contemporary theologians who are said to be defenders of versions of panentheism. Several representative examples will make the point.

In *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes, “Christian panentheism ... started from the divine essence: Creation is a fruit of God’s longing for ‘his Other’ and for that Other’s free response to the divine love. That is why the idea of the world is inherent in the nature of God himself from eternity.”<sup>29</sup> Later he says, “In order to create something ‘outside’ himself, the infinite God must have made room for this finitude beforehand, ‘in himself.’”<sup>30</sup> This leads into his famous discussion of the notion of *zimzum*, that is, the divine contraction within Godself by means of which he makes an internal “space” in which the creation can come to be. It is, on his way of thinking, literally inconceivable that God could fail to create in this manner, such that “it is impossible to conceive of a God who is not a creative God.”<sup>31</sup> Whatever else we think of Moltmann’s discussion it should be tolerably clear that his view entails that there is God who is essentially creative, and that the creation is somehow eternally contained “within” God. These two — God and the world he creates — are distinct parts of one mereological whole that comprises *God plus the world*. Because God is by nature creative, the world he brings about is a kind of essential divine output, without which his eternal love would find no adequate fulfilment.<sup>32</sup>

The American Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson takes a rather different view of this matter. Nevertheless, he says something similar to Moltmann in connection with God’s relation to the created order. Jenson writes, “for God to create is for him to *make accommodation* in his triune life for other persons and things than the three whose mutual life he is. In himself, he *opens room*, and that act is the event of creation.”<sup>33</sup> He even identifies “roominess” in connection with the creation as a divine attribute.<sup>34</sup> Such

29 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (SCM Press, 1981), 106. A helpful discussion of Moltmann’s position is given in Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers*, no. ch. 10.

30 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 109.

31 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 106.

32 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 106, writes, “if God’s eternal being is love, then the divine love is also more blessed in giving than receiving. God cannot find bliss in eternal self-love if selflessness is part of God’s very nature.”

33 Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. 2: The Works of God* (OUP, 1999), 25. Emphasis original.

34 “God, to state it as boldly as possible, is roomy. Indeed, if we were to choose to list divine attributes, roominess would have to come next after jealousy. He can, if he chooses, distinguish himself from others not by excluding them but by including them.” Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1: The Triune God* (OUP, 1999), 226.

enthusiasm for what Colin Gunton has called “self-realization through the other”<sup>35</sup> strongly suggests that God somehow needs the world to be truly happy — a point not lost on Jenson’s critics (like George Hunsinger and Thomas H. McCall).<sup>36</sup>

Like Moltmann, Jenson seems to think that God somehow requires the creation — his nature is so constituted that he is only truly happy when “making room” for the created “Other.” But this means that God and creation are two “parts” of one symbiotic whole. Even though Jenson does not use mereological language as such, his views can plausibly be read as indicative of such a position.

Now, the question is: does the mereological account (or some version thereof) avoid the demarcation problem? Does it represent a stable theological alternative to bare theism on the one side, and pantheism on the other? If God and the world are two parts of a larger mereological whole then the view is clearly distinct from bare theism. For, recall, the bare theist is committed to the claim that God and the world are distinct, non-overlapping entities. The bare theist is also of the view that the world is contingent upon divine action (creation and conservation), whereas God is not dependent upon the world. Neither of these claims are consistent with mereological pantheism. So it seems that bare theism and mereological pantheism are distinct. What about the difference between mereological pantheism and pantheism? The pantheism thinks that the world is either identical to God, or composes God (like the marble composes the statue). Clearly the mereological pantheist denies both of these claims. God and the world are not identical. And the world does not compose God (nor, for that matter, does God compose the world). Instead, God and the world are two overlapping parts of one mereological whole.

However, the defender of something like Mullins’s account may raise an objection at this juncture. One of the merits of Mullins’s proposal is that it prescind from a judgment about whether or not the creation is the necessary output of the divine nature. This is an advantage because some versions of contemporary Christian pantheism (such as that of Philip Clayton) deny that God must create a world, or that the world is something intrinsic to the divine nature. But the mereological account we have sketched thus far seems to require this. (Certainly, the versions of pantheism put forward by Moltmann and Jenson seem to do so, and they have been cited here as paradigms of the sort of Christian pantheism that seem commensurate with the mereological account.)

But in fact we could adopt a mereological account that does not have this cost. Suppose God creates the world freely in the sense that although he is the source of his creative act, there is no necessity in the act of creation. God could have created some other world, and he could have refrained from creating any world. Suppose that is right. Given this way of thinking, it would still be true to say that the creation forms a part of the mereological whole God plus the world. It is just that the world is a contingent part of the whole, not a necessary part. In a similar way, a prosthetic limb is a contingent part of the whole human amputee. But, on one plausible way of thinking about such things, the instrumental union brought about by adding the prosthesis to the amputee generates a new mereological whole, that is, the *amputee plus prosthesis*. Though the union is a contingent one, the sum of the prosthesis and the amputee is nevertheless a mereological whole. Or, if the prosthesis example is objectionable, one might say that the hair of a person is a contingently related to the mereological whole of the person’s body in a way analogous to the contingent relation of the world to God.

Thus, it seems that there is reason to think that the mereological pantheist can distinguish her view from both bare theists on the one hand, and pantheists on the other. There is a metaphysical cost involved in doing so, of course. But provided one is willing to pay the price and embrace the view, it is possible to do so in the knowledge that mereological pantheism is distinct from these other two positions.

35 Colin E. Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (T&T Clark, 1991), 135.

36 For discussion of this point, see Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2010), ch. 4.

### III. THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS WITH MEREOLOGICAL PANENTHEISM

Well, then, what theological costs are involved in embracing mereological panentheism, and are they costs worth bearing? The most obvious theological problem for the mereological account is that it implies that God is part of a mereological sum, and this is contrary to the doctrine of divine simplicity. This is indeed a concern for those enamored of classical theism. However, our concern was not to provide some account of panentheism consistent with classical theism as such, but only with a broadly orthodox Christian theology. It is not clear to me that commitment to a broadly orthodox Christian theology implies or entails commitment to classical theism. For it seems to me that it is possible to be a theistic personalist and hold to the tenets of a broadly orthodox Christian theology. Theistic personalism is usually thought to be hostile to the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity. So, perhaps one could be a theistic personalist of a broadly orthodox theological persuasion, and entertain the prospect of Christian panentheism understood according to some version of the mereological account.

Another worry has to do with divine aseity. I take it that aseity is the claim that God is both metaphysically and psychologically independent of the created order. God is metaphysically independent of creation if it is possible for him to exist without the world. And God is psychologically independent of the created order if he does not need creatures in order to be happy or fulfilled or complete. However, if God and the world comprise a mereological sum then doesn't this jeopardize divine aseity? Doesn't it mean that God needs the created order in some sense? He needs it metaphysically if the created order is the necessary output of the divine nature; and he needs it psychologically if he can only be fulfilled by creating a world.

As to the question of metaphysical aseity, I have already pointed out that even if the creation is the necessary output of the divine nature, provided God is logically prior to the created order, he is metaphysically independent of it. To illustrate this point, we may compare the discussion of God's relation to abstract objects by those who defend a mild version of Christian platonism, according to which abstract objects like numbers are the eternal and necessary output of the divine nature.<sup>37</sup> Even if one thinks that there are abstract objects and that such objects are eternally generated by the divine nature as something like epiphenomenal outputs of God, one may still maintain that God is logically prior to the abstract objects thus generated. The idea is that they are logically dependent on God for their existence, though they are eternal and necessary objects. (Such a logical dependence does not necessarily imply metaphysical dependence.) In a similar way, God may be logically prior to the created order, though the creation is a necessary divine output.

Let us turn to the question of psychological necessity. What can we say about that? Suppose God may create the world, but may refrain from creating this world, or any other world. Then, even if he freely decides to create thereby bringing about the world as a contingent "prosthesis" to which he is related as a part to a whole, he does not appear to be psychologically dependent on such action. But what if, with many contemporary panentheists, we hold that God *must* create a world, and that this world is the necessary output of the divine nature? Here too there may still be some metaphysical wiggle room. It would be odd to think that by acting in accordance with his nature God is psychologically dependent. Human beings are dependent rational animals. In thinking, humans are acting in accordance with their natures. Does that make them psychologically dependent upon the exercise of their rationality? That would be an odd thing to say. Part of the reason it is odd has to do with the fact that human beings are inherently rational; they are by nature rational. So the dependency in question is a kind of ersatz or pickwikean sense of dependency. In a similar fashion, the panentheist drawn to the notion that God must create a world according to some necessity of his nature is not *thereby* necessarily committed to saying God is

37 See Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel, "Absolute Creation", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1986), 353-362, and discussion of this position in William L. Craig, *God Over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (OUP, 2016).



psychologically dependent upon the created order for his happiness. For it may be that the divine creative action is simply the consequence of having the sort of nature God has, of being the sort of being he is.

However, there are other objections in the neighborhood of this one that do seem to tell against the mereological account. For it seems very difficult to see how one could hold to the ultimacy of God and subscribe to a version of the mereological view. I take it that the ultimacy of God is the view according to which all that exists other than God exists *through* God. There are no entities other than God that exist independently of God. A closely related concern has to do with the sovereignty of God. If God is truly sovereign over creation then there is nothing in creation that is independent of God's creative power. He is the source of all that exists. Can the defenders of the mereological account uphold divine ultimacy and sovereignty?

It would appear that she cannot. Here is why. If *God plus the world* really is a mereological whole, then at least two significant theological consequences follow. First, *God plus the world* seems to imperil divine ultimacy, for it makes the mereological sum of God and the world something that seems to be greater than God without the world. In Hebrews 6:13 we are told that when God swore to Abraham he swore by himself because there was nothing greater for him to swear by — nothing more fundamental, and nothing more excellent, than Godself. But on the mereological account it looks like that is such a thing, namely the sum of God and the world. Second, and closely related to this point, the mereological account seems to be inconsistent with perfect being theology. If God is a maximally perfect and maximally excellent being independent of the creation, then the mereological account appears to be in trouble. For on one way of construing the view, there is an axiological sense in which God's perfection is something less (i.e., something of less *value*) than the mereological sum of *God and the world*. For those enamored of perfect being theology, this will be a serious problem.

The final objection we will consider here I shall call *the incorporeality objection*. According to the New Testament, God is a spirit (John 4:24). I take it that spirits are essentially immaterial and incorporeal beings. But essentially incorporeal beings cannot by definition have bodies. Yet, on the mereological version of panentheism, God has a body — or at least, God has a material part, namely, the world. We can put this worry more formally in numbered propositions. It comes in two parts. Here is the first part:

1. God is a Spirit (John 4:24). (Premise.)
2. Spirits are essentially immaterial beings. (Premise.)
3. God is an essentially immaterial being. (From (1) & (2).)

At this juncture, we may raise a complication. This is the complication of the incarnation. Suppose that God is immaterial. Christ has a physical (apparently, material) body. Does this imply that God the Son acquires location or extension on acquiring his physical body at the first moment of incarnation? No, it does not. The reason why it does not is that on any classical and orthodox Christology, in acquiring a human nature God the Son does not acquire physical (material) parts. Rather, he acquires the intimate relation of being hypostatically related to a particular human nature, the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth. But hypostatic or personal union with his human nature does not imply becoming physical or material, nor does it imply acquiring physical or material parts any more than on a Cartesian way of thinking about human souls, in acquiring a resurrected body a human soul acquires physical parts. Let us now turn to the second part of the argument:

4. The world is a material being. (Premise.)
5. For any x and y, if x is an essentially immaterial being and y is a material being, then x does not have y as a part. (Premise.)
6. God does not have the world as a part. (From (3)-(5).)

The reasoning is valid; is it sound? Yes it is — provided one thinks that the physical world is composed of matter. Not all Christian theologians have thought his is the case, however. Bishop George Berkeley and

Jonathan Edwards are two of the most celebrated examples of this. They were immaterialists. That is, they denied that the physical world was a world composed of matter. Instead, they proposed that the physical world is composed of ideas and percepts that are communicated to minds. In which case, one way to avoid the bind of the incorporeality objection is to adopt immaterialism (and there are the beginnings of a renewed interest in immaterialism and idealism more generally amongst Christian philosophers). If the defender of the mereological account of Christian pantheism were to do that, then God may have the world as a body, but because the body in question is not a material object, but a collection of created minds and their ideas, in creating the world God is not “embodied” (i.e., does not acquire a material part).

However, for those unwilling to adopt immaterialism, it seems that the incorporeality objection does provide a serious conceptual problem for the defender of a theistic, and more specifically, Christian version of mereological pantheism.

#### IV. CODA: THE THEISTIC ALTERNATIVE

We have seen that one way to characterize versions of pantheism consistent with a broadly orthodox Christian theology that avoids the demarcation problem is the mereological account. Nevertheless, this has significant theological costs. It is inconsistent with divine simplicity; it is inconsistent with divine ultimacy and sovereignty, and it can only meet the incorporeality objection by way of embracing immaterialism, which is unlikely to appeal to many Christian theologians not sympathetic to idealism.

In principle, theism suffers from none of these drawbacks. The theist, and the Christian theist in particular, has no demarcation problem to address; does not require that God’s relation to the world is analogous to a kind of part-whole relation; is able to affirm a doctrine of divine simplicity (given a particular construal of theism); and is consistent with divine ultimacy and sovereignty (again, given a particular construal of theism). Thus, there seem to be important theological reasons in favor of retaining theism, and rejecting the sort of mereological account of pantheism we have been considering.<sup>38</sup>

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