

# GOD AS A SINGLE PROCESSING ACTUAL ENTITY

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*ABSTRACT: This article defends Marjorie Suchocki's position against two main objections raised by David E. Conner. Conner objects that God as a single actual entity (affirmed by Suchocki) must be temporal because there is succession in God's experience of the world. The reply is that time involves at least two successive occasions separated by perishing, but in God nothing ever perishes. Conner also objects that Suchocki's personalistic process theism is not experiential but is instead theoretical (based on what Whitehead says in Part V of PR) and not definitive. The reply is that his dismissal of Part V of PR is arbitrary, the interpretation of all experience is theoretical, and no metaphysical interpretations are absolutely definitive, including PR as a whole. Also, Conner ignores religious experience.*

In "The Plight of a Theoretical Deity: A Response to Suchocki's 'The Dynamic God'," David E. Conner perceptively called attention to a significant, but as yet unresolved, dispute in process theology. How can God, understood as a single everlasting actual entity, be in process or even be involved with process? As I explain in my *What Caused the Big Bang?*, process thinkers may need to go back to square one and totally rethink the very nature of time itself (*What* 242-74), but for present purposes I will answer this question within the framework of orthodox Whiteheadianism.

"Suchocki employs the term 'dynamic' to disguise an unresolved incompatibility between temporal and non-temporal process in God," Conner complains (Conner 112). This seeming "incompatibility" is indeed unresolved, and it dates back to Whitehead's own distinction between two kinds of process, the succession of actual occasions, which he variously called "time," "change," or "transition," and the internal processing or development of a single actual occasion or entity, which he variously called "becoming," "genetic process," or "concrecence" (*PR* 210-15). Just what these involve will be explained as we go along, but process

theologians have been sharply divided over whether to conceive of God's own processing as analogous to "time" or to "concrecence."

According to the "time" view, God is an everlasting society of temporally successive actual occasions. According to the "concrecence" view, God is not a society at all but is a single actual entity whose processing must be understood atemporally. Both Suchocki and Conner take their stand with the "concrecence" crowd and against the "time" crowd, best represented by Hartshorne and Cobb (until recently). Suchocki identifies William Christian, Lewis S. Ford, Jorge Nobo, Palmyre M. F. Oomen, Denis Hurtubise, and herself as subscribing to the single actual entity view (Suchocki 39). Bowman Clarke and others should doubtless be added to this list. In several publications, I have also explained my preference for the single actual entity everlasting continuous concrecence view, but I acknowledge the apparent paradox of making sense of "process" or "becoming" without "time." Conner finds Suchocki's position to be problematic for basically two reasons that invite further analysis and clarification.

### **A God Who is Not Temporal, and Yet is Temporal**

Suchocki's first and primary difficulty is, says Conner (Conner 115), that her "dynamic" God seems to be both "not temporal, and yet...temporal." Conner does not deny the validity of the distinction, but he argues that Suchocki wants to have it both ways when it comes to understanding what God is like. As Conner sees it, the main problem is that time involves succession, whereas concrecence does not, being instead an "all-at-onceness," the subordinate phases of which do not involve succession or what Conner calls "actual serial order" (Conner 116). Suchocki apparently thinks that there is an actual serial order in God's experience of and interaction with the created world, though this does not involve a succession of Divine temporal actual occasions, and God is only a single actual entity. Can we make good sense of this? I believe that we can.

We must begin with the very nature of time itself, as understood by Whitehead. He defined "time" in *Science and the Modern World* as the "sheer succession of epochal durations," (*SMW* 124, 126, also *PR* 68), "epochs" being "actual occasions," which have "duration," "temporal extensiveness," or "temporal thickness" (*PR* 77, 158, 169). Single actual occasions or entities are in one sense not "in time" because by definition time requires at least two actual occasions - in succession. Strangely, each

single actual occasion “takes time,” without being “in time.” No actual occasion is infinitesimally brief; each endures for a clockable amount of time. The conventional process view is that occasions within the human stream of consciousness endure for about a tenth of a second. This tenth is mentally or conceptually divisible into smaller parts, but temporally thick occasions are not physically or ontologically divisible into smaller actual entities or occasions. Internally, a single actual occasion or entity is processing, becoming, concreseing, but such processing is not in time. Why not? Conner’s answer is: because there is no succession, no “serial order,” in this processing (Conner 116). Would Suchocki agree, especially when the relevant actual entity is God? She should disagree if God is constantly assimilating data from and interacting directly with the created world and its creatures as they come into being and perish. Can there be succession or serial order without time? Or is all serial ordering temporal by definition, as Conner assumes?

Over a hundred years ago, James E. McTaggart (“The Unreality of Time”) suggested that our thinking about temporal order should be divided into two series. The “A” series, as he called it, consists of temporal distinctions between “past, present, and future.” The “B” series consists of ordered logical relations of “before and after.” Series “A” distinctions” are tensed, thus temporal; series “B” distinctions” are not tensed, thus not temporal. Returning to process theology, perhaps God’s experiences of and interactions of the world involve “before and after” awareness but not “past, present, and future” awareness; but what exactly would that mean, and is that correct?

Here we must abandon ordinary language, where “before and after without time” seems like doubletalk. If we limit “past, present, and future” to relations between actual occasions, and conceive of God as a single continuously concreseing “actual entity,” God could still logically recognize “before and after” relations without being himself divided into a series of successive “past, present, and future” actual occasions. Thus, it is logically possible for there to be a “serial order” or awareness of “before and after” that is not temporal, contra Conner. God could be perfectly aware that Bush was elected President before Obama without being himself divided into multiple actual occasions of experience.

Yet, this may not enough. Is there any sense in which something analogous to “future” could apply to a God who is not himself composed of past, present, and future events? When Bush was elected President, did

God know that someone else would be elected in the future? Process thinkers want to say that God, like a single actual occasion, “takes time” (all of it) without being “in time.” But can God recognize that some things, some “future” events, haven’t happened yet? Does God know the difference between actualities and unrealized possibilities? Or does God’s timelessness really consist of “all time all at once,” as in classical theological “eternity”?

Since process theologians want to say that God interacts with people or the occasions composing them as they come into being and pass away in time, does this not imply that some of God’s experiences are in some sense “future” to God? When God promised Abraham that all the world would be blessed through his descendants, were not these descendants still “future” to God at that point in human history? Did God not know future descendants would temporally succeed Abraham, and were not God’s later experiences of and interactions with Jacob future even to God when Jacob had not yet been born? Do we not want to say that God has no knowledge of future free and creative human decisions that have not yet been made? If so something analogous to “future” must make some sense to God, not just logically, but also experientially.

How can anything be “future” to an entity who is not divided into past, present, and future? How can anything be “future” to a being who is not temporal, not divided into multiple successive actual occasions? How could there be any successive experiences and creative decisions in a being devoid of all temporal successions? Here again we must go beyond ordinary language and stick with technical Whiteheadianese.

Part of the answer is that nothing comes before God and nothing comes after God, so God does not belong to a series of occasions having a past or a future even wider than God. But there is more to it than that. To understand how God could have a “future” even though not divided into multiple temporally successive actual occasions, we must be clear about what it is that separates actual occasions. Conner’s answer is: “succession,” but that may be the wrong answer, or only a minor part of the answer, or the answer to a slightly different question. The right answer is: “perpetual perishing” (*PR* 29, 81-82, 84-85, 147, 210, 340). So how does this apply to God?

God is not “temporal,” not because God has no knowledge or experience of succession, and not because everything is “all-at-onceness.” Rather, God is not temporal because in God there is no perishing. There

is non-temporal successiveness in God, but without perishing. God is everlastingly creative and receptive, but to God nothing ever perishes, not God's awareness of God's own self, and not God's awareness of events still happening in the world, some of which might be as yet "future" and uncreated, even to God. In God, all temporal actualization achieves "objective immortality" and never perishes or loses its immediacy to God. Why does God's everlasting processing or becoming never pass away? Aside from the logical fact that a necessary being could neither originate nor perish, it is because God's experiences and actions never reach "satisfaction" in part of Whitehead's technical sense of the term.

"God never reaches satisfaction" does not mean that God is never satisfied, pleased, or fulfilled by anything that actually happens. Indeed God is often very satisfied, pleased, and fulfilled, and in these ordinary-meaning respects, God's satisfactions are constantly increasing or growing. And it certainly does not mean that God is constantly frustrated by everything, though God is always frustrated by evil and sin. Here again we must go beyond ordinary language. In Whitehead's technical sense, "satisfaction" means being both (a) absolutely definite or determinate and (b) absolutely finished or completed (*PR* 26, 84-87, 219-20, 292). Whitehead says that satisfaction "closes up the entity" (*PR* 84).

Suchocki heavily and repeatedly emphasizes God's own satisfaction, in the sense of definiteness, both primordial and consequent, but her discussion of God's satisfaction makes no place for the completeness that characterizes the satisfaction of all temporal occasions. "Completion is the perishing of immediacy," Whitehead wrote (*PR* 85). An infinitely creative everlasting God is never finished, completed, or closed up, and the immediacy of everything to God never perishes, so God could never be fully "satisfied" with respect to both (a) and (b) above. Only (a) applies to God, and that is why God is only a single actual entity.

As they process and perish, all worldly occasions find "objective immortality" in God (*PR* 347) and are always immediately present to God without loss of structure, content, relations, or value. Time is both perpetual creation and perpetual perishing. Temporal occasions have both a beginning and an ending. God's becoming has no beginning or end. It is perpetual creation (hence involves as-yet-uncreated events), but it lacks perpetual perishing—an ending. Without perpetual perishing, there is no temporal succession, no twoness. One worldly occasion must perish to give rise to another, but without perishing there is no "another" and thus

no “time” as spoken in technical Whiteheadianese. Thus, God is a single, everlasting, enduring, creative, and constantly concreseing actual entity, and in God, there is real succession, but without loss.

God’s consequent nature consists of God’s interactions with the world. The primary point of denying “temporality” to God’s consequent nature is not that God has no knowledge or experience of “before and after” or “as yet uncreated.” The point is that everything that comes along never passes away to or in God. God is a single, everlasting, enduring, continuously concreseing actual entity whose processing or becoming is not temporal precisely because it involves no perishing, perpetual or otherwise. God’s assimilation of the changing world goes on forever without stopping, losing, and then starting up again. God’s consequent nature “receives a reaction from the world” and is “always in concreseing and never in the past” (*PR* 31) because nothing is ever past/perished to God. The world is constantly feeding new information into God, to which God always faithfully responds. In God, “the processes of the temporal world” are “bound together in an order in which novelty does not mean loss” (340). God exercises “a tender care that nothing be lost” (*PR* 346).

God’s own “duration” or “specious present” is forever, but this does not mean that God contains “all time all at once.” God’s consequent nature “evolves in its relationship to the evolving world,” and only the primordial nature has “eternal completion” (*PR* 12-13). The consequent nature is “incomplete,” and some things are “novel” to God (*PR* 345). God’s consequent nature is “always immediate, always many, always one, always with novel advance, moving onward and never perishing” (*PR* 346), but “Neither God, nor the World, reaches static completion” (*PR* 349). In God there is succession without multiple occasions because for God “succession does not mean loss of immediate union” (*PR* 350). Nothing ever comes before or after God, but God experiences before and after without loss. God’s prehensions of, decisions about, and responses to occasions in the world, as well as those worldly occasions themselves, come before and after one another, and some things have not yet occurred, even to God. Without perishing as a subject, without loss of subjective immediacy, and without loss of objects (and values) prehended, God constantly interacts with the world and is continuously enriched by it.

Seen in this light, Suchocki is fully justified in saying that “the unfolding of God’s consequent nature into the primordial yields an infinitely moving manifestation of adventure, truth, beauty, zest and peace” (*PR*

47). Conner complains that Suchocki's God is "'dynamic' but, in all honesty, a temporal being..." (*PR* 121). We must say instead that in all honesty God is dynamic, becoming, experientially aware of before, after, and future, yet not divided into an infinite number of personally ordered actual occasions.

### **Rationalism Versus Empiricism**

Conner's second objection to Suchocki is that her position is rationalistic, theoretical, and analytic rather than empirical, as if these are somehow mutually exclusive (Conner 112). In spelling this out, he introduces many minor motifs. I will critique several of these.

First, Conner objects to the "personalistic" overtones of Suchocki's theism, claiming that "personalism is not very Whiteheadian" (Conner 119). Her personalistic theism is too "rationalistic" or "deductive" rather than "empirical" (Conner 124), whereas Whitehead insisted that "metaphysical claims must find exemplification in experience" (Conner 125). Conner seems to mean that a personalistic process understanding of God is "deduced" from what Whitehead said about God in Part V of *Process and Reality*. But why not?

Conner makes this objection at the price of dismissing almost all of Part V of *PR* (the main discussion of God) as "not typical at all" (Conner 119) of Whitehead's thinking. Well, so what? If we include Part V, personalism is very Whiteheadian! Should we dismiss all the personalistic overtones of Whitehead's explicitly stated doctrine of God, including God's conscious provision of "initial aims" to world occasions, as well as God's conscious love, compassion, and purposes for the world, simply because Part V occupies "but one twentieth of the book," as Conner quotes Victor Lowe to say (Conner 119)? Such reasoning is flimsy indeed. According to the page number references in the Index to *PR*, "God - consequent nature" takes up seven lines (*PR* 366), but "reason" takes up only 3.5 lines (*PR* 381), so should we also dismiss what Whitehead says about reason because it is even less "typical" in *PR* than God's consequent nature? ("God" takes up almost a column and a half in the Index.)

We should have learned by now that the line between the theoretical and the empirical is very hard to draw, and not everyone would draw it where Conner does. An obvious case in point is his own example of clearly "empirical cosmology," namely "that the universe originated about fourteen

billion years ago as a ‘singularity’ - a dimensionless point” (Conner 127). A minor problem with this is that many cosmologists do not believe that the Big Bang originated from a singularity because other non-singularity explanations of the Big Bang are available and presumed viable (*What*, 94-115). The really serious problem is that “singularity” is about as far removed from an “empirical” property, state, or concept as you can get. If anything is a pure conceptual construct, this one is. Why so?

By definition, singularities are “dimensionless,” just as Conner says, but the situation is even more dismal empirically than that. Singularities, by definition, have no empirical (experiential) spatial, temporal, or causal properties at all, and since no known laws of nature (including causal laws) apply to or within them, no one has the faintest notion of what would make one “explode” to create a universe. Singularities are even more drastic than the “chaos” to which many process theologians appeal. We can perceive nothing that is totally devoid of all spatial, temporal, and causal features. “Singularity” is a crystal clear example of a non-empirical theoretical construct, akin to lines that have “length but not breadth.” Yet we must occasionally appeal to the more obviously non-empirical to explain the more obviously empirical. So “singularity” might be right, even if not empirical. The creation of the universe from a singularity would be creation from empirical nothingness. Maybe that’s the way God did it, rather than creating the world from an antecedent universe, as most process theologians presuppose (“How”).

All experiences have to be and are interpreted “theoretically.” It is a theory that sensations refer to objects that really exist in a vast independent-of-us spatiotemporal universe—rather than only in the mind of God (Berkeley), or only as mere appearances caused by unknowable “things in themselves” (Kant), or that they are simply of “unknown origin” (Hume). The need for theoretical construals connecting appearances with realities is just as great for sensory experiences as it is for religious experiences. All religious experiences have to be interpreted “theoretically,” but so do any and all experiences whatsoever. All of our beliefs are in some sense “deduced” from what Conner calls “abstract premises” (Conner 126). Just naming or classifying everything experienced is itself a theoretical enterprise embedded in language itself. The viability of any belief depends just as much on the overall adequacy of the theoretical system in which it is embedded as on the raw experiences that prompt it. Conner rightly says (Conner 130, n. 7) that Whitehead warned against (*PR* 343) the finality

of the theory of God developed in Part V of *PR*; but Whitehead also warned repeatedly against the finality of every metaphysical system in its entirety, including the one developed in *PR* as a whole (xiv, 4, 8, 9, 13, 14, 20, 193).

Conner calls for “checkable consequences” of Suchocki’s view that a personal God loves the creatures of the world (Conner 126-27), but he does not make it clear what would count as a checkable consequence. Just what would so count is always a personal judgment call. Personalistic theists might offer any of the following (among others) as checkable consequences:

that the world exists at all,

that someone who knew and cared about it created the world around 14 billion years ago,

that the world is ordered to support life in highly evolved forms,

that the world is designed for adventure, truth, beauty, zest, and peace (Suchocki 54, 56),

that experiences of God involve profound self-transcending peace (Suchocki 50),

that God provides initial aims weighted toward goodness, toward the “best for that impasse,” to all actual occasions (*PR* 244),

that God has interacted with people in innumerable ways, as reported in the world’s great religious literature, including the Bible,

that spiritually developed people regularly report direct experiences of the presence of overwhelming personalized love, etc.

Conner makes no place for religious experience, but Suchocki’s publications and those of other process theologians abound in discussions of experiencing God. Resources for dealing with human experiences of God also extend far beyond the writings of Whitehead and standard-brand process theologians. Consider the constructive work done on perceiving God by scholars like Alston and Plantinga, as well as the writings and testimonies of innumerable “Arminians,” mystics, and ordinary religious people who affirm that they experience the presence of a loving and caring God. All of these “consequences” involve interpretive theory as well as experience, but so do all judgments to the contrary. All appeals to experience involve theory.

Thus, there are many good reasons why Suchocki can claim that God is atemporally dynamic and assert that she begins from empirical as well as theoretical starting points.

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