

# Kraus's Boethian Interpretation of Whitehead's God

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In reading Elizabeth M. Kraus's *The Metaphysics of Experience, A Companion to Whitehead's Process and Reality*, I was particularly disappointed by her concluding chapter on "God and the World," for there it becomes apparent that she has been reading Whitehead's remarks on theological topics through the jaundiced eyes of Boethius, St. Thomas Aquinas, and classical theology. After rejecting Hartshorne's temporalistic modification of Whitehead's theology, for reasons we shall soon examine, Kraus states her own position on God's relation to temporality as follows:

It seems closer to Whitehead's intentions, therefore, to infer that the divine actual world includes all actual worlds simultaneously and all spatio-temporal drops emerging from those actual worlds in unison of becoming. From the divine perspective, time becomes space in the sense that all "times" are co-present in divine feelings, although retaining, and related by, the various forms of extensive connection. (p. 164)

By what strange logic does Kraus manage to make Whitehead come out sounding like Boethius? Her position is that even in his consequent nature, God coexists simultaneously and changelessly with the entire past, present, and future of every occasion in every cosmic epoch. Her rationale for such a view seems to rest upon (1) a highly questionable interpretation of one text in *Process and Reality* and the claims (2) that only such a view is compatible with human freedom and (3) that only such a view is compatible with human faith. I think that she is mistaken on all three counts.

(1) On page 163, in discussing the scope of the divine actual world, Kraus tells us that "some Whiteheadian scholars, notably Charles Hartshorne, have rejected Whitehead's assertion that God is "always in concrescence and never in the past" (PR 47) and replaced it with an interpretation of God as a personal order of divine occasions." On page 169 she paraphrases this text to mean "the divine concrescence is never in the past of any occasion," which in turn is construed to mean that all times are copresent in the divine consequent nature. This excludes all real process or succession in the divine experience. The greatest difficulty with this construction is that it is clearly incompatible with the many passages in which Whitehead clearly affirms

such process and "novel advance" in the consequent nature. For example, God's consequent nature "evolves in its relationship to the evolving world without derogation to the eternal completion of its primordial conceptual nature" (PR 19) and "is always immediate, always many, always one, *always with novel advance, moving onward and never perishing*" (PR 525—italics mine). Whitehead insisted that "this final phase of passage in God's nature is *ever enlarging itself*" (PR 530—italics mine), that it is "an *unresting advance* beyond itself" (PR 531—italics mine), that "the actuality of God must also be understood as a multiplicity of actual components *in process of creation*" (PR 531—italics mine) and that "in every respect God and the World move conversely to each other in respect to *their process*" (PR 529—italics mine).

Such affirmations of endless development in the divine consequent nature cannot be reconciled with Kraus's interpretation of God as eternally complete in every respect, and another interpretation of God's being "always in concrescence and never in the past" is called for. Instead of meaning that all times are copresent with God, if Whitehead's consistency is to be preserved, this must mean simply that God absorbs past events of the world and all elements of his own antecedent activity and experience into his consequent nature without losing anything of them. Even after the events of the world perish for themselves, they do not perish for God. To be "past" in physical time is to have perished, but neither the world as objectively immortalized in God nor anything else in the divine nature and experience is ever "in the past" in this sense. "Why should there not be novelty without loss of this direct unison of immediacy among things? In the temporal world, it is the empirical fact that process entails loss: the past is present under an abstraction. But there is no reason, of any ultimate metaphysical generality, why this should be the whole story" (PR 517). God's relation to the world is one in which "succession does not mean loss of immediate unison" (PR 531). This clearly affirms succession in God but denies loss and perishing. God is "never in the past" in the sense in which being in the past involves loss and perishing, but there is real process in God, nevertheless, which enables Whitehead to affirm with perfect consistency that "neither God, nor the World, reaches static completion" (PR 529).

That there is real succession in God is compatible with there being no loss, but unending novel advance in God is precisely what classical theology has denied in conceiving of God's eternity as the simultaneity of the past, present, and future of all epochal universes all at once in God. The classical position has always had the net effect of making time a human illusion, something which adequate knowledge would transcend and overcome. Kraus herself makes just such a move, as she writes:

Thus, from the divine vantage point, the endless fruitions of the creativity are simultaneously co-present in the immediacies of their self-creative activities. The divine concrescence *quoad se* is

complete insofar as past and future are not relevant terms. In eternity, *interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio* (Boethius, *De consolatione Philosophiae*, V. 6); God's physical feeling IS complete. *Quoad, nos*, however, it is incomplete, in that the future from any perspective is not yet actual and is perpetually actualizing itself. (p. 171)

The view that the future is incomplete and indeterminate only from our finite perspective whereas it is complete and determinate from the divine perspective is just the view which process theology rejects rather than affirms, though there may be more than one way of developing an alternative metaphysics available to process thinkers. Process thinkers should not at any rate be trapped into denying the reality of time from *any* actual point of view, for as that great process thinker Benjamin Franklin once pointed out, time is "the stuff life is made of."

(2) Amazingly enough, Kraus maintains that only the "*tota simul*" in God is compatible with human freedom. Needless to say, the mainstream of process thought has insisted instead that it is the "block universe" of classical theology which is irreconcilable with human freedom. Kraus supports her view by producing an argument against what she apparently takes to be the only alternative position open to Whiteheadians, the "interpretation of God as a personal order of divine occasions" of Charles Hartshorne (p. 163). Her argument against this position, as best I can discern and summarize it, is that each new divine occasion would in turn be *irresistibly* objectified or "superjected" (she uses this as a verb) back into the world, which would "bind the present irrevocably to the past, to sacrifice spontaneity and autonomy at the altar of necessity" (p. 164). This deterministic outcome of Hartshorne's theology is supposedly entailed by "the principle of relativity" (p. 163). I must confess that I have never seen such an abuse of the principle of relativity! This principle, according to which "it belongs to the nature of a 'being' that it is a potential for every 'becoming'" (PR 33), is never allowed by Whitehead to have deterministic implications precisely because there are all sorts of degrees of relevance of one actual occasion to another. Whitehead pointed out in discussing the principle of relativity that "according to this principle an actual entity is present in other actual entities. In fact if we allow for degrees of relevance, and for negligible relevance, we must say that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity" (PR 79). Kraus's argument simply fails to allow for degrees of relevance and for negligible relevance.

(3) Kraus also insists that only a "*tota simul*" in God is compatible with faith, arguing much as she did above that the Hartshornean alternative is by the principle of relativity irreconcilable with faith as well as freedom—with free faith, that is. (Calvinists would tremble at the very thought of such.) Her discussion here is complicated by its relation to a view of how God redeems the world: "To be actual, God must take on a 'body' and in so doing, redeem: i.e. he must have physical feelings of the totality of each and all finite achievements,

integrating them into the ongoing unity of his consequent nature" (p. 163). Kraus's complaint about Hartshornean theology is that on this view "God would be compelled to perform successive redemptive acts" (p. 163) which would in turn be objectified back into the world.

In other words, an enduring creature would be confronted willy-nilly with the fact of its past redemption and compelled to accept it, to integrate it as part of its present determinateness in the same way as it must appropriate any other fact in its actual world. . . . To make redemption an historical series of acts rather than one overarching process takes it out of the realm of "faith" and into the realm of objective, inescapable fact. (p. 164)

Aside from the fact that the principle of relativity entails no such conclusions, it should also be observed that Kraus's position here entails a strange conflation of divine and human subjectivities. If our lives are objectively immortal in God, as they are on Whitehead's view, we really don't have the slightest bit of choice about the matter. There we are, embalmed forever, whether we like it or not. Even if we did make a choice about it, that choice would itself be objectively immortal in the divine subjectivity is not a choice open to human subjectivity. *Believing* that, having *faith* that, or accepting that we are so immortal is within our province, however. There is no causal or logical connection, thanks to degrees of relativity, between being objectively immortal and believing or accepting that we are so. If there were, we would all accept and believe it, whereas the only people in the world that I have ever met who actually do believe it are a handful of process theologians!

I conclude therefore that Kraus is quite unjustified when she writes that

This "withness" of God's concrescence, its simultaneity with that of all finite occasions, is the creature's guarantee of finite freedom and at the same time the keystone of creaturely faith and hope. All creatures, all spaces, and all times, past, present, and future, are everlastingly knit together in beauty in the divine consciousness. (p. 168)

Her position is totally irreconcilable with the many texts in which Whitehead suggests that there is real succession and process in God himself. This is most obvious in her own discussion of the text "God is fluent" (PR 528), which she interprets to mean that "the divine consequent nature acquires fluency as it ever expands in its ongoing absorption of finite achievement" (p. 170). No meaning can possibly be given to "ever expands" and "ongoing" if the consequent nature is understood to be a *"tota simul."* She recognizes the "paradox" involved in the thought that something is "always complete yet always growing" (p. 170), which she claims "results from the incapacity of the human mind to conceive non-temporal sequence" (p. 170). This is like saying that although there are round squares, the "paradox" involved in the thought that "something is a round square" results from the

incapacity of the human mind to conceive round squareness! We just can't let her get away with that. One of the greatest virtues of process theology has been its intense effort to eliminate such blatant self-contradiction in theology, and it is much less than helpful to start playing the same old fun and games all over again.