

# The Human Self: An Actual Entity or a Society?

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Having had both Charles Hartshorne and John B. Cobb, Jr. as teachers at Emory University, I have been for many years intrigued and even convinced by the Whitehead-Hartshorne-Cobb thesis that the human "soul" is the dominant society of actual occasions in the human body. However, I have finally come to share the discontent expressed by such critics of this theory as Edward Pols (WM), Frank Kirkpatrick (PS 3:15-26), Peter Bertocci (PS 2:216-21), and others. I wish in this essay to give expression to my discontent in a slightly different way from the way in which they have formulated theirs.

The problem which I wish to explore may be stated as follows: Is the human self, i.e., the stream of human awareness of consciousness, an actual entity, or is it a *society* of actual occasions? Whitehead, Hartshorne, and Cobb doubtless conceive of it as a society of actual occasions. However, Whitehead and William Christian both seem to believe in the existence of at least one self, having a temporal or consequent nature—that of God, which is *an* actual entity, but which is not just one actual occasion or even one society of actual occasions having an infinite number of members. My problem is, could there be more than one temporal actual entity in existence which is neither an actual occasion or a society of actual occasions, or is God the only one? This question cannot be answered very well until we explore further what Whitehead and Christian might have had in mind in insisting that God is *an* actual entity.

Whitehead's insistence that God is not to be treated as an exception to (at least *some* of) our metaphysical categories or principles has never meant for him or his interpreters that there were no important differences between God and other created actual entities. Yet, most of the obvious differences between God and created entities in the world are not relevant to understanding what is meant in claiming that God is *an* actual entity rather than a society of actual occasions, on the supposed analogy with human souls. Most of the differences between human and divine souls which might be cited fail to explain why God cannot be thought of as a society of actual occasions rather than *an* actual entity. For example, human souls come into existence and pass away (are born and die), whereas God is everlasting and does not perish. But this does not explain why God is not a society of actual occasions, for he could be a society with an inexhaustably infinite, rather than a finite, number of members. Again, it may be true that human experience originates with the physical pole, whereas the divine experience originates with the primordial mental pole, but this in itself does nothing to require us to believe that *our* experience of real change is atomized into a succession of distinct but causally connected occasions, whereas *God's* experience is not so atomized. Again, God has a nonderivative subjective aim, whereas every other

actual entity has a subjective aim which is derived from God. Yet, this in itself does nothing to explain why God's experience is not atomized into actual occasions, each of which necessarily reiterates the divine subjective aim at harmonious intensifications of experience. Actually, none of these important differences between God and the world are really *incompatible* with his being a society of actual occasions or *require* that he be *an* actual entity. Then what important difference between God and other actual entities is required?

The main point of thinking about God as *an* actual entity instead of a society of actual occasions is that *the epochal theory of time just does not apply to God at all*. I am raising the question *whether it fails to apply to man as well*. God is an actual entity and not a society of actual occasions because his temporal experience is not atomized into occasions at all, and I am wondering if human experience is really so atomized.

Before discussing human experience in any detail, we must first explore further the claims that the epochal theory of time does not apply to God at all. We must be clear first of all that this claim does not entail the consequence that *some* notion of temporality as involving sequential change or development does not apply to God at all. Whitehead held that the primordial nature of God is nontemporal but that the consequent nature is temporal in some sense. In the second place, we must be clear that the notion of God's temporality as nonepochal does not entail the classical supernaturalistic view that God prehends the whole of time, past, present, and future, "all at once" in a single *totum simul*. God prehends the world only as it develops, but not in advance. Whitehead tells us that God's consequent nature "evolves in its relationship to the evolving world" (PR 19). God's "tenderness is directed towards each actual occasion, as it arises" (PR 161). He "shares with every new creation its actual world" (PR 523). It is true that the world is fluent, but it is equally true to say that "God is fluent" (PR 528). Temporality, in the sense of sequential change, is of the very essence of God's consequent nature, for "his derivative nature is consequent upon the creative advance of the world" (PR 523).

William Christian never takes the doctrine that God is *an* actual entity to mean that there is no sequential change in God's consequent nature. What it does mean is that in God's consequent nature concrescence is continuous rather than discontinuous. The idea of continuous concrescence in the divine consequent nature is expressed in the following passages from Christian's *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics*:

God . . . has his own satisfaction, which is one, continuous and everlasting. (IWM 408)

Thus the relation between God and the world is not the relation between a whole and a part. It is a relation between (a) an actual entity in unison with every becoming with a continuous though changing satisfaction, and (b) actual entities which become and perish at particular where-whens in the course of nature. (IWM 409)

Further, God is actual *now*, for any meaning of "now." He is "in uni-

son of becoming with every other creative act" (PR 523), and is thus "everlasting." His existence as a concrete actuality is not timeless, in the sense of being out of relation to temporal process. He exists *formally* or immediately (which is to say actually) at all times (PR 524-5). Therefore at any time, that is to say with respect to any particular concrescence, it is categorically possible for God to function as an ontological ground of some condition to which this concrescence conforms. (IWM 323)<sup>1</sup>

Whitehead himself seemed to express a doctrine of divine continuous concrescence when he wrote that God is "always in concrescence and never in the past" (PR 47) and that in God's nature "succession does not mean loss of immediate unison" (PR 531). What exactly is the difference between the continuous concrescence which Whitehead and Christian seem to attribute to God and the discontinuous concrescence which they attribute to entities within the world? To answer this question adequately, we must recall that the epochal or atomic theory of time had its origin in Whitehead's reflections on the phenomena of quantum physics (SMW 219f) and that by some process of "descriptive generalization" it was extended to cover the "human soul" as well as photons, electrons, protons, etc. Microscopic pulsations of energy which constitute the subject matter of quantum physics do seem to exist discontinuously, but to say this is to acknowledge that between any two successive occasions at this microscopic level *there is a gap during which nothing exists*. The occasions do not touch or overlap. The real difference between *an* actual entity which concresces continuously and a *society* of actual entities which concresce discontinuously is that the experiences and activities of the former are not interrupted, whereas the experiences and activities of the latter are interrupted. There are short intervals or gaps during which the latter does not exist. Whitehead calls attention to the gaps between microscopic quantum events when he writes:

an electron does not continuously traverse its path in space . . . it appears at a series of discrete positions in space which it occupies for successive durations of time. It is as though an automobile, moving at the average rate of thirty miles an hour along a road, did not traverse the road continuously; but appeared successively at the successive milestones, remaining for two minutes at each milestone. (SMW 52)

The path in space of such a vibratory entity—where the entity is *constituted* by the vibrations—must be represented by a series of detached positions in space, analogously to the automobile which is found at successive milestones and at nowhere between. (SMW 54)

The discontinuities introduced by the quantum theory require revision of physical concepts in order to meet them. In particular, it has been pointed out that some theory of discontinuous existence is required. What is asked from such a theory, is that an orbit of an electron can be regarded as a series of detached positions, and not as a continuous line. (SMW 196)

If it [a quantum primate] is to be considered as one thing, its orbit is to be diagrammatically exhibited by a series of detached dots. Thus the locomotion of the primate is discontinuous in space and time. (SMW 197)

If real temporal change at the microscopic level of quantum phenomena does occur discontinuously, does it follow inevitably that real temporal change at *every* level of existence is also atomic in its structure? Whitehead generalized, perhaps over-hastily, that all temporal change within the created world has this structure, including changes within the stream of human experience and activity. It is very significant, however, that he did not extend his generalization of the atomic structure of time all the way to God. How then did Whitehead himself view his atomic theory of time? Did he view it as a cosmological theory of time, or as a metaphysical theory of time? If we accept Hartshorne's distinction between cosmological and metaphysical theories, the former applying only to entities in our (or at least *some*) given cosmic epoch and the latter applying to entities in all possible worlds, then it seems that the most that can be claimed for the epochal theory of time is that it is a cosmological theory, not a metaphysical theory. Whitehead applies it to all actual entities in our cosmic epoch, but not to all actual entities whatsoever, i.e., not to God. Furthermore, when he presented the theory at the end of his chapter on "The Quantum Theory" in *Science and the Modern World*, he clearly offered it as an *empirical* theory, subject to confirmation or disconfirmation by experience. He wrote:

The justification of the concept of vibratory existence must be purely experimental. The point illustrated by this example is that the cosmological outlook, which is here adopted, is perfectly consistent with the demands for discontinuity which have been urged from the side of physics. Also if this concept of temporalisation as a successive realization of epochal durations be adopted, the difficulty of Zeno is evaded. (SMW 198)

There is no evidence that Whitehead later revised his views on this question and came to regard the epochal theory of time as a metaphysical theory, for even in *Process and Reality* he clearly exempts God from its application. There are no gaps in God's existence. He does not discontinuously flash in and out of existence, as do objects composed of societies of actual occasions. God is *always* there *continuously* assimilating data coming to him from the world and continuously acting upon the world. God does not exist in spurts, flashes, squirts, drops, or buds. He is a continuously concrescing actual entity. There are no gaps, however small, during which God does not exist.

Once we realize that even for Whitehead himself, the epochal theory of time was not a metaphysically necessary theory of time, being at best true for entities within our given cosmic epoch or other epochs like ours in this contingent respect, the door is wide open for a reexamination of the question of whether it applies to *all* entities within our own epoch or merely to *some* of them. The epochal theory of time may not be even a cosmological theory applicable to all entities within our epoch. It may

be merely a limited scientific theory applicable only to a limited number of entities within our epoch. It does *seem* to apply to the phenomena of quantum physics, but does it really apply to the stream of human experience and activity? Does the analogy with quantum phenomena hold here, or is it more appropriate to conceive of the human "soul" as a continuously concreting actual entity, by analogy with God?

First of all, we must clearly understand that Whitehead, Hartshorne, Cobb, and even Christian have accepted the claim that the analogy with physics instead of theology *does* hold. To quote Christian, as one example,

Finally we should notice that the unity of God differs in mode from that of an "enduring object," and in particular from that of a human person as interpreted in Whitehead's system (PR 50-2, 163-7). The unity of a human person is indeed a composite unity. Its parts are the actual occasions that are members of a complex occasion that compose it. This is not true of God. He is not a society but a single actual entity with a unity of satisfaction. Hence his unity differs from the unity of a human person not in degree but in kind. (IWM 392)

I wish to suggest that the theory of human soulhood accepted by Whitehead, Hartshorne, Cobb, and Christian is mistaken. It is my belief that human personality differs *from electrons*, but *not from God*, "not in degree but in kind." Without denying any of the significant differences between God and the human soul which were sketched in the third paragraph of this article, it nevertheless seems to me that it is more in accord with the "brute facts," and less of an instance of the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," to think of the stream of human experience and activity on the model of continuous concrecence rather than on the model of discontinuous pulsations. Now let me further explain and defend this radical departure from the Whiteheadian theory of the human soul.

Granted that there are many important differences between God and the human soul, there are nevertheless many important similarities. For present purposes, let us note that a continuously concreting actual entity nevertheless shares all the generic defining characteristics of an actual entity. Whitehead recognizes two species of actual entities, God and actual occasions. The latter exist discontinuously, the former continuously; but they both exemplify and are not exceptions to the *generic* characteristics of an actual entity. In God's case at least, we see that it is possible for a continuously concreting actual entity to be an actual entity, to have continuous immediacy of self-enjoyment, to have continuous significance for itself, to have continuous subjective aims, continuous subjective forms, and continuous satisfactions, to synthesize data continuously (concrete), to be continuously *causa sui* or self-creative (at least in part), and so on—*without sputtering in and out of existence every fraction of a second*. My suggestion is that the human soul also is an actual entity in precisely the same sense. Human experience and self-activity is the self-experience of a continuously existing acting entity with *continuous* immediacy of self enjoyment, significance for itself, subjective aims, subjective forms, satisfactions, synthetic exper-

encing, and self-creativity. *We* exist and do *our* thing without sputtering in and out of existence every fraction of a second.

In dealing with the stream of human experience and activity, a distinction is called for which is *roughly* analogous to the distinction between the primordial and consequent natures of God. Unlike God, our *primordial self* "slumbers and sleeps" and is not necessary, eternal, or nontemporal. Nevertheless, it seems to exist and to consist of certain continuously enduring powers to act and the continuously enduring exercise of those powers during our wakeful moments. This "agency" aspect of selfhood consists of those powers to think, feel, choose, synthesize multifarious causal and sensory data into unified experience, etc. This self as primordial agent is *not* a Cartesian thinking substance or a Kantian noumenal ego outside of all space and time which *underlies* such continuing activities. The difference from Whitehead is that they continue rather than are recreated every tenth of a second or so. Somewhere between Kant and Whitehead, a viable theory of human selfhood must be found. The primordial human self *is* in space-time, contrary to Descartes and Kant; but it also has a continuous existence, contrary to Whitehead. As human agency persists, the self is one, but there is also a sense in which the self is many and consequent. *The consequent* self consists of the *specific* thoughts, emotions, feelings, choices, sensations, and experiences entertained by the enduring self from moment to moment. It is the concrete totality of the activities plus their objects at any given moment or during any given period of time. Any given duration which is to count as such a moment is an abstraction from the continuous flow, however.

It seems to me that *this* theory of human selfhood is the one which is best confirmed by experience and philosophical reflection and that the theory of discontinuous human experience is the one which really confronts us with "high abstractions." The brand new, atomically existing, subjects or selves appearing every tenth of a second or so with which the orthodox Whiteheadians<sup>2</sup> confront us are the empty abstractions from the continuous flow of human experience and activity. *They* are the ones who commit the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness." Some of them come very close to conceding that concrete human experience fails to confirm the theory that we flash in and out of existence every fraction of a second. Hartshorne, for example, first acknowledges that it is possible to be a "process philosopher" who "takes time seriously" without subscribing to the epochal theory of time. He then further acknowledges that such process thinkers as Peirce, Bergson, Dewey, and others are convinced that *experience* confirms the theory of the continuity of human experience. In reply to the view that any assignment of number to human events during a certain period of time is arbitrary, he explains:

We here confront one of the subtlest problems which event pluralism has to face, that of the apparent continuity of process, its apparent lack of distinct units. Dewey, Bergson, Peirce, all three careful thinkers much interested in the analysis of experience as such (and to them Husserl and Heidegger could, so far as I know, be added), found no definite discreteness in the becoming of human experience. And no process directly exhibited in human experience

seems to come in clearly discrete units. Here is a splendid example of a seemingly strong (empirical) case for a philosophical view, a case which is nevertheless inconclusive, and indeed can be opposed by perhaps a still stronger though non-empirical case. No better example of the difficulty of philosophical issues is needed. (CSPM 192)

Hartshorne's "non-empirical case" against the view of the continuity of time as humanly experienced consists in the following. First of all, he points out quite correctly that Bergson's claim that events "interpenetrate" is much too simple minded—"[p]ast states may penetrate into present ones, but never present ones into past" (CSPM 192). Next, in reply to the refinement that this one way penetration is incompatible with discreteness, Hartshorne points out, again correctly, that continuity in the sense of "intrinsic connectedness" is not the same thing as a mathematical continuum. He then argues that the infinity of mathematical continuity applies only to what is possible, never to what is actual (CSPM 193). Actual time, as Whitehead maintained, is atomized—only the potential subdivisions of time are infinite. This issue does need more examination. It is not *strictly* true for Whitehead or for Hartshorne that "[c]ontinuity concerns what is potential; whereas actuality is incurably atomic" (PR 95). For Whitehead, God's actualized consequent nature exists continuously, and it is simply false to make the *unrestricted* claim that "actuality is incurably atomic." God is not a society of atomic (i.e., discontinuous) actual occasions. For Hartshorne, the infinite does *not* apply *merely* to the potential. Infinity applies to the actuality of God, who has not been merely finitely creative, but who has been infinitely creative through an infinity of past eons of time. Hartshorne acknowledges that this is a serious problem which he does not know how to solve (CSPM 63, 65, 125, 235). I suggest that solving it requires abandoning the view that the concepts of continuity and infinity apply only to the realm of the potential and not to the actual. But if this move is made, Hartshorne loses one significant "non-empirical" objection to the theory of humanly experienced time as a continuum. Even the theory that God is a society of actual occasions will not help Hartshorne avoid the doctrine of an actualized infinity. If the past is infinite, and if God's present occasion perfectly prehends the past, then God's present occasion will be an actualized infinity; and furthermore, there will actually be an infinite number of such infinitely rich members of God's society of actual occasions.

When he finally confronts the *empirical* question of the continuity of human experience, Hartshorne argues that human experience is vague and that for this reason it cannot discriminate the atoms of which it is composed. Human experience is not *really* given as continuous—it is merely *not* given as discrete (CSPM 194). The problem here is, does not this admission concede far too much, especially when conjoined with the consideration that it is also possible to make a strong "non-empirical case" *against* the epochal theory of time? I shall not attempt to develop this case here in detail, but I would like to end my discussion by outlining what I believe to be some of the important elements of this case. All of this put together, I think, adds up to the view that we don't notice the gaps because they just are not there to be noticed.

(1) First, the epochal theory of time must be given up because the doctrine of the successive, i.e., “earlier” and “later,” but nevertheless co-existing, *phases* in the internal development of an actual occasion is utterly unintelligible, and even perhaps outright self-contradictory. There are passages in Whitehead in which the priority and posteriority of these phases to others involves succession and clearly has a temporal import (PR 108, 227f, 323, 335, 433f) and other passages in which such succession and temporal import is denied (PR 107, 434). These passages contradict one another. If the denial of temporal import for the “first, middle, and final” phases of the becoming of an actual occasion is accepted, we are confronted with the dubious notion of a becoming in which everything happens all at once. And this notion of becoming is not made more intelligible by labeling it “genetic” succession as opposed to “temporal” or “logical” succession, as Whitehead, Christian, and Cobb try to do.

(2) Experience fails to confirm the doctrine of the “phases” in the development of an actual occasion. Talk about a primary phase in which data and subjective aims are received, a later (but not temporally later) phase in which self-creative assimilation of data and selection among possibilities occurs, and a final phase in which absolute completeness of attainment is achieved before perishing is itself a “high abstraction” which commits the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” for the simple reason that nothing in concrete human experience corresponds to all this. This becomes patently obvious when we realize that these “phases” all are supposed to occur together all at once rather than sequentially and that the whole process is supposed to repeat itself many times each second.

(3) The “orthodox” Whiteheadians all seem to accept the suggestion that the human actual occasion enjoys a “specious present” which lasts for about a tenth of a second (by clock time). They have never addressed themselves to the question of *how long the gap is between occasions*. To say that events *A* and *B* exist discontinuously is to say that there is a short interval between them during which nothing exists. How long *between* occasions are we *not* in existence? And how do we *test* the answer which we give to this question? Without an answer, the theory is at best incomplete and the evidence for it inconclusive.

(4) The dilemma is, either there is *a gap between occasions*, or there is not. If there is a gap between occasions, if occasions are “divided from each other” (PR 96), then it would appear that *a completely perished* occasion could not function causally to present data to its successor. Such a difficulty has prompted Christian to develop the theory that God is the ground of the givenness of the past since he continuously exists to bridge all such gaps. Donald Sherburne has correctly argued that this will not work, since there is no divine prehension of contemporaries and since the same gap exists between an occasion in the world and God as between two occasions within the world. The epochal theory of time actually seems to make it impossible for God to know the world and thus creates more problems for theology than it solves. Better in my opinion to give up the epochal theory of time than to give up God! Better God without Whitehead than Whitehead without God!

On the other hand, if there are no gaps between occasions, if occa-

sions do partly overlap, then the atomic theory of time has been abandoned. There are no *discrete* events. Time is a continuous flow. When Donald Sherburne offers the theory that "the past contiguous occasion is still actual, is still its own ground, as the concreting occasion initiates its primary phase" (PPCT 322), he should be fully aware of the fact that he is abandoning the epochal theory of time and opting for time as a continuous flow. At the same time he is also opting for the prehension of contemporaries (i.e., coexisting events), since occasion *A still exists* when it is prehended by occasion *B*.<sup>3</sup> There are no gaps to be bridged between occasions, and an occasion does not perish before it presents its data to its successor.

(5) It seems to me that the Hartshorne-Cobb doctrine that God is a society of actual occasions can be collapsed into the doctrine that God is a continuously concreting actual entity in the following way. If the human specious present is about a tenth of a second long, then how long is the divine specious present? Hartshorne and Cobb have agreed that the divine specious present must be *much shorter* than ours, if God is to be present at the beginning of each worldly occasion to present it with a subjective aim and at the end of each worldly occasion to receive it as objectively immortal into himself. The problem is, how short? (Also, how long are the intervals between divine occasions)? John R. Baker has recently shown that in a universe containing entities with twenty-four different specious presents, God would have to have "2,042,042 occasions of experience per second" (PS 2:207). We may project that in a much more complex universe (such as ours?) God's actual occasions would have to be infinitely dense! But an entity with infinitely dense actual occasions is a continuum! Such a God would simply be a continuously concreting actual entity!

I am sure that there are other important objections to the epochal theory of time, but this will do for now. Let me say that I fully realize that all this involves a radical departure from orthodox Whiteheadianism, but I do not regard that as an objection, since I am offering the proposal that such a radical departure is precisely what is called for.

## REFERENCES

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is not my purpose here to discuss Christian's doctrine that God is the ground of the givenness of the past, which was paramount for him as he wrote this paragraph. My point is that a doctrine of continuous concrecence is also developed here.

<sup>2</sup> I regard myself as an unorthodox Whiteheadian.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to my student, Mrs. Sharon Carter, for pointing this out to me.