

## **PROSPECTS FOR PANENTHEISM AS RESEARCH PROGRAM**

PHILIP CLAYTON  
CLAREMONT SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

**Abstract.** Panentheism is best understood as a philosophical research program. Identifying the core of the research program offers a strong response to the demarcation objection. It also helps focus both objections to and defenses of panentheism — and to show why common objections are not actually criticisms of the position we are defending. The paper also addresses two common criticisms: the alleged inadequacy of panentheism’s double “in” specification of the relationship between God and world, and the “double God” objection. Once the research program framework is in place, topics like these become opportunities for panentheists to engage in the kind of careful constructive work in theology and philosophy — historical, analytic, and systematic — that is required for making long-term, positive contributions to our field.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Most readers will know the experience of working intensely on a particular philosophical or theological issue over a long period of time — the ontological proof, say, or temporality. What is interestingly different about publishing on panentheism, however, is that one frequently encounters the objection that one’s position does not exist. Unlike personal theism or materialist atheism, one is sometimes told, the term panentheism does not actually represent a distinct stance on the nature of the divine. According to the objection, panentheism cannot be sufficiently demarcated from its neighbors to the left and right — often labeled pantheism and classical theism — to stand as a position in its own right.

Of course, it can be perplexing to publish defenses of a position for several decades while having to argue continuously that there is even a position there to defend. Still, the “Demarcation Objection” is an important one, and panentheists are well advised to take time to address it. The strange feature of traveling the world as a panentheist, however, is that one spends the other half of one’s time addressing the objection that panentheism is deeply wrong. In 2018, for example, a lecture “Against Panentheism” delivered by the analytic theologian Oliver Crisp at multiple universities (as yet unpublished) gave rise to vocal demands that panentheists respond to the Crisp challenge. It would be somewhat paradoxical to be told both that one is not asserting anything and that one is at the same time mistaken.

In the following pages I attempt to address both kinds of objections. I first suggest that panentheism is best understood as a philosophical research program. Identifying the core of the research program offers the best possible response to the demarcation objection. It also helps opponents to formulate more relevant objections and defenders to sharpen their responses to important challenges — and to show why certain claims are not actually criticisms of the position we are defending. Finally, I turn to two of the most frequently heard objections: challenges to the adequacy of panentheism’s double “in” specification of the relationship between God and world, and the “double God” objection. Once the research program framework is in place, these two topics become opportunities for panentheists to engage in the kind of careful constructive work in theology and philosophy — historical, analytic, and systematic — that is required for making long-term, positive contributions to our field.

Put differently, my goal is not merely to criticize the critics’ claims and offer arguments in its defense (though I will do both), but also to step back from the current debate, better understand why the two sides

seem to be talking past each other, and find ways that the two might be able to debate constructively. The demand that panentheism be more sharply defined is closely associated with the demand for a principle of demarcation that will better distinguish panentheism from its closest neighbors. Responding allows us to specify what *kind* of a research program, or *programs*, panentheism is, to name the key interests and goals of its proponents, and to focus on profitable philosophical debates to which our publications give rise. I may or may not convince all readers to play a productive role in criticizing or defending the research program. But I do hope to convince at least some that the term *panentheism* specifies an important region along a continuum, a region well worth the attention of theologians, philosophers of religion, and analytic theologians.

## II. HOW NOT TO ARGUE AGAINST PANENTHEISM

It's interesting that many of the more recent critiques focus almost exclusively on the demarcation problem: how is panentheism different from its neighbors? Less often does one find arguments that panentheism is false. The closest approximation are treatments that maintain that panentheism is inconsistent with the scriptures or with the creeds. John Cooper's book is a good example of the former. Cooper argues that any panentheistic God is an "other God," the "God of the philosophers," who is incompatible with the biblical God, and he rejects panentheism for this reason.<sup>1</sup>

If one then assumed that appeals to scriptures are sufficient for adjudicating metaphysical debates, one would have a valid argument for the falsity of panentheism. But for those who dispute this premise, as I do, Cooper's book hardly constitutes a convincing proof.

A more common attack on panentheism is that it is not a position at all. It fails to clearly define its terms, or it fails to be consistent, or the methods for defending it are unacceptable, or it fails to differentiate itself adequately from one of a number of other metaphysical options. If panentheism fails in one or more of these respects, critics claim, it does not constitute a discrete enough position — or perhaps not a position at all! — and can therefore be set aside.

Let's look at two interesting examples in this genre: "The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism" by R.T. Mullins, and "Panentheism and Classical Theism" by Benedick Paul Göcke.<sup>2</sup> Both authors are clear that their goal is demarcation not refutation. Göcke writes that "the aim of this paper is not to decide between classical theism and panentheism,"<sup>3</sup> and Mullins closes with the question, "Is panentheism actually a position at all?"<sup>4</sup>

In light of the actual structure of these two articles, however, one might well find their argumentative strategies a bit surprising. Mullins structures his *Sophia* article around an implied rhetorical question — *Can* panentheism be demarcated from theism and pantheism? — and clearly expects a negative answer. Yet the main contribution of his article is to defend what he takes to be a *successful* proposal for demarcating panentheism from theism and panentheism, a proposal that I think is significant and fruitful. Göcke, who also brackets the truth question, likewise offers his own "modal" answer to the demarcation problem. Note that this is good news for panentheists: if both authors believe that they have found an *actual* satisfactory criterion for demarcation, then clearly it must be *possible* to demarcate.

But another important task arises here that does not seem to be addressed. Both authors acknowledge that multiple versions of panentheism are to be found in the literature. Isn't the challenge then to *find* effective criteria for distinguishing stronger from weaker versions and then to *apply* the criteria in order to separate the sheep from the goats? (Isn't this what philosophers do for a living?) It's therefore somewhat puzzling that the two authors set up their discussion of the issue in such a way as to imply that the plurality of options is in and of itself bad news. Rather than proceeding to apply their criteria to a range of panenthe-

1 John Cooper, *Panentheism — The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Baker Academic, 2006).

2 R.T. Mullins, "The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism", *Sophia* 55, no. 3 (2016); and Benedick Paul Göcke, "Panentheism and Classical Theism", *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013). See also Göcke, "There Is No Panentheistic Paradigm", *The Heythrop Journal* (2015).

3 See the final paragraph of Göcke, "Panentheism and Classical Theism."

4 This is derived from Mullins' penultimate sentence.

isms — cleaning up the mess, as it were — they treat the diversity of options as if it were already a presumptive defeater for panentheism. But multiplicity is no more problematic for one who possesses a selection criterion than a wall of books is for the one who knows which book she wants to read.

There is a second problematic argument lurking just below the surface in these two articles. It is the implication that “a position is as bad as its worst defender.” Not surprisingly, one finds terrible presentations and defenses of panentheism in the philosophical literature. Authors misdefine the term, misstate its sources, publish invalid arguments, contradict themselves, and in general wreak havoc upon the world. But arguing poorly is not a virus that spreads only among panentheists; embarrassingly weak versions of classical theism and pantheism abound as well. The fact that there are sloppy advocates for a position does not prove it false — or, for that matter, un-demarcatable.

In fact, the antidote is not difficult to administer. One selects the strongest options that she can find in the literature, explains to her readers why they are the most promising contenders, and then assesses the strengths and weaknesses of each one. Just as one would not conclude that, say, atheism as a whole fails because some of its proponents are lacking in philosophical sophistication, so also here we make the most long-term progress by focusing our critical attention on the strongest, most promising contenders.

## II. WHY THERE IS NOT JUST ONE NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CRITERION FOR PANENTHEISM

In the sciences there is often more than one theory that is consistent with the sum total of the available data. In philosophy, and especially in the philosophy of religion, the under-determination of theory by data is even more pronounced. Philosophers of science have long argued that even scientific explanations are interest-relative.<sup>5</sup>

What is true in the empirical disciplines is even more true in matters of religion. Clearly one’s view of the status of Scripture will affect her view of the nature of the God-world relation. But the connections are actually much more fine-tuned; even one’s particular hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture will influence her results. Kevin Vanhoozer’s divine speech act theory and emphasis on the multiple genres of Scripture yields different results than does a propositionalist approach; a salvation-historical (*heilsgeschichtliche*) hermeneutic yields different results than a liberationist approach; and so forth.

The contemporary social, spiritual, ethical, ecclesial, or political issues one wishes to address will also influence one’s preferences for describing the relationship between God and world. One’s theological location likewise matters. Niels Gregersen understands panentheism differently because of his commitment to “Deep Incarnation”; Marjorie Suchocki comes to panentheism from her location as a process theologian; and Moltmann’s espousal of panentheism in *God in Creation* is influenced by kenotic theologies (and, interestingly, also by Jewish Kaballah).<sup>6</sup> Certainly one’s preferences among the schools of philosophy — Continental, analytic, deconstruction, postcolonial thought — will function as selection criteria. Finally, not only do differences between Jews, Christians, and Muslims influence one’s response, but one’s location in a specific denomination or school of thought *within each religion* is equally influential. Add South Asian and Southeast Asian religious and philosophical options to the range of options, and the complexity explodes even more dramatically.

Given such a large number of interests, commitments and options, one *should* be skeptical about whether we will be able to identify a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions for deciding whether *any* given proposal about the God-world relationship is a sheep or a goat. Whose list of necessary and sufficient conditions should one use: Hegel’s? Peirce’s? Feuerbach’s? Barth’s? In facing the difficulty of assessment, panentheism is in good company. Unfortunately, it’s often only *within* a specified tradition

5 Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation, Second Edition* (Routledge, 2004).

6 Niels Gregersen, ed., *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Fortress Press, 2015); Marjorie Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology, New Revised Edition* (Crossroad, 1989); Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (SCM, 1985).

that one is able to agree on criteria of assessment — say, when one is among Thomists only, or Barthians only — and often not even then! Mullins' article tends to paint the three "theisms" as if a single set of criteria allows him to construct a single continuum along which each theism takes its rightful place.

The result of this range of pantheisms is not relativism, however; it is an invitation to more sophisticated analysis and more constructive work. One can identify the families of pantheisms and analyze the contributions and weaknesses of each one. Consider three examples. (1) In the Vedantic traditions, Ramanuja's "qualified non-dualism" is foundational for pantheisms that emphasize the reality of individuals on the one side and their existence within the all-encompassing Spirit (*Brahman*) on the other.<sup>7</sup> (2) Pantheisms that rely on dialectical philosophies exhibit interesting similarities. But it's not enough to say "I have a 'both/and' view of God"; one must specify *which* understanding of dialectic one has in mind, why it's required here, and exactly how it addresses and resolves the problem at hand. (3) Finally, in cases where philosophical theologians claim that their pantheisms are helpful for interpreting Scripture, their claims can be tested against the work of biblical scholars. In each of these individual cases, the analysis brings common themes to the surface, specifies shared criteria, identifies irreducible conflicts, and requires one to defend her preferred option over its rivals.

In short, rather than seeing the grey areas as a reason to give up on pantheism, I have found them to be the most philosophically interesting. Consider two brief examples. On one side, open theists have debated extensively with process pantheists. Both sides acknowledge significant common ground, which has allowed them over time to hone their disagreements and to develop sharper arguments. Although beginning on the process side of the fence, I have actually found many of the open theists' arguments to be compelling.<sup>8</sup>

On the other side, the borderland region between pantheism and Spinozism is equally fascinating. Spinoza's monism of the one substance, it has been argued, is philosophically more parsimonious, offers a reason-based theory of God (*deus siva natura*), and does not depend on a theological tradition. Yet I have argued in return that it lacks an adequate theory of agency for finite entities (Spinoza's "modes") and that Spinoza's account of the consciousness of God is inconsistent with his own metaphysical system.<sup>9</sup> Does Spinoza advance a form of pantheism in the *Ethics*? I think not, but I also admit that the question is sharp enough to allow for fruitful debate. I have to acknowledge the force of the arguments on the other side, and the possibility that they will eventually win. (By the way, the same is true of my ongoing debate with Keith Ward about whether the famous Advaitan, Shankara, is a pantheist or whether only Ramanuja is.)

#### IV. PANENTHEISM AS A RESEARCH PROGRAM

The philosopher of science Karl Popper is famous for arguing that hypotheses can be conclusively falsified. Mediating between this view on the one hand and the relativism of T.S. Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend on the other, Imre Lakatos argued that schools of thought are "research programmes."<sup>10</sup> The "hard core" of a research program (RP) consists of its most central affirmations, like the center of W.V.O. Quine's webs or T.S. Kuhn's paradigms. Note that Göcke repeatedly uses the term "research programs,"<sup>11</sup> and Mullins uses the Lakatosian term "hard core" no less than 21 times in his paper. I agree with these two philosophers that the

7 Philip Clayton, "Pantheisms East and West", *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010), 183–191.

8 See Philip Clayton, "Open Pantheism' and Creation as *Kenosis*", in *Adventures in the Spirit* (Fortress, 2011), 175 – 184.

9 Philip Clayton, "Spinoza's Religious Monism: Recognizing the Religious", in *The Enlightenment and Religion*, ed. Nathan Jacobs (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2009); Philip Clayton, "The Hiddenness of God in Spinoza: A Case Study in Transcendence and Immanence, Absence and Presence", in *The Hiddenness of God*, ed. Ingolf Dalferth, (Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

10 Imre Lakatos, *Philosophical Papers*, 2 Volumes (CUP, 1978); see also Philip Clayton, *Explanation from Physics to Theology: An Essay in Rationality and Religion* (YUP, 1989).

11 See Göcke's "There Is No Panentheistic Paradigm," especially as stated in the abstract. Göcke uses "research program" four times in this article.

research program framework is the most adequate one for discussions of panentheism. In this section I will argue that leads in some other, more positive directions.

The “hard core” of a RP can only be derived by studying the publications of scholars working in the field and attempting to identify the commitments that most share. Recall that, on Lakatos’ model, no RP can actually be falsified; the research community can generally only determine whether a research program is “progressive” or “degenerating.” The RP approach therefore does not allow for decisive, thumbs-up or thumbs-down judgments; it involves evaluating *degrees of agreement* among communities of scholars.

In an important recent paper, “Panentheism and its Neighbors,” Mikael Stenmark does not use the term “research programs,” but he does distinguish between “core claims” and “extension claims” of panentheistic conceptions of God.<sup>12</sup> This distinction allows him to lay out similarities and differences in a compelling way:

The essential difference is that traditional theists think that God is (ontologically) distinct from the world and does not depend on it for God’s own existence, whereas panentheists believe that God (ontologically) includes the world and depends on the world for God’s own existence. Both, in contrast to deists, stress the active presence of God in the world, but in different ways.<sup>13</sup>

Stenmark’s exploration of eight initial claims that are shared and not shared among deists, traditional theists, panentheists, and pantheists is a powerful analytic tool for identifying the hard core of each of these four positions.

How does one specify the hard core of a RP? One studies the publications of scholars working in the field and attempts to identify the commitments that most share. Note that one cannot succeed at this exercise *in any field* without a certain tolerance for plurality, since the positions of the various authors are not identical; multiple sub-programs are being pursued at any given time.

The task for the broader community of scholars is to assess whether a school of thought (say, classical theism) has ceased to produce new insights, or whether it continues to solve philosophical and theological problems. We ask: what are a program’s weaknesses, and are proponents able to respond to objections in satisfying ways? As with Kuhnian paradigms, each research program is judged relative to its own goals; unlike Kuhn, some shared agreement among advocates and opponents may be reached.

What then are the central goals of most panentheistic theologians?<sup>14</sup> They challenge the timelessness of God and affirm the pervasiveness of change, holding that real change occurs not in the divine nature but in the divine experience. They maximize divine immanence: God does not just enter the world, say through the Incarnation; God permeates the world to the greatest imaginable extent, short of falling into pantheism. Multiple models are used to express the maximal immanence of God and may be judged as more or less adequate relative to this goal. Is it better to say that God is as intimately linked to the world as the soul is to the body? Is it better to say that we are parts of the divine being? Shall we follow Georg Gasser in his recent paper on “God’s Omnipresence in the World” and link immanence to divine action, taking our clue from his intriguing phrase, “God is, where God acts”?<sup>15</sup> Should we say, as Ramanuja does, that the world must always remain separate enough from God that beings can still worship the Divine?

12 Mikael Stenmark, “Panentheism and its neighbors”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 85, no. 1 (2019), 23–41. Stenmark makes important use of minimal personal theism (MPT), a notion that Knapp and I also used in a central way in the argument in *The Predicament of Belief* (OUP, 2011).

13 Stenmark, “Panentheism and its neighbors”, 41.

14 I have argued that Lakatos’s distinction between “hard core” and “auxiliary hypotheses” is more difficult to draw outside of the empirical sciences; see Philip Clayton, “Disciplining Relativism and Truth”, *Zygon* 24, no. 3 (1989), 315–334.

15 Georg Gasser, “God’s omnipresence in the world: on possible meanings of ‘en’ in panentheism”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 85, no. 1 (2019), 43–62. Compare Gasser’s notion with the concept of “conjoined panentheism” also developed in a recent paper by Elizabeth Burns, “How to prove the existence of God: An argument for conjoined panentheism”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 85, no. 1 (2019), 5–21: “God the Good is an agent of change by providing human persons with a standard of Goodness against which to measure the goodness of their own actions, while God the World provides the physical embodiment through which God acts.”

Understanding these priorities helps one understand the philosophical challenges that panentheists have to take on, and overcome, in order to ensure that panentheism remains a progressive RP. For example, in his first critique of Göcke, Raphael Lataster argues that dialogues between Western and Eastern philosophy — dialogues that are still in their early stages<sup>16</sup> — will help deepen and extend panentheism as a research program.<sup>17</sup> My own work to show the usefulness of panentheism appeals to its ability to give convincing answers to a variety of contemporary challenges, for example: how to develop theologies that are relevant to the modern intellectual context, that are consistent with established scientific conclusions, that allow for some type of divine influence on the world, that can address challenges in both the Eastern and Western traditions, and (given my particular location) that can speak to core themes of the biblical traditions more adequately than the theologies of the creeds and the Scholastics have done. Tasks such as these help to define the RP.

By contrast, whether creation is necessary or contingent is a major point of debate between panentheists; hence, contra Göcke, neither answer should be used to define the panentheist RP. Instead, both necessary and contingent creation represent sub-research programs within panentheism, and each is thus to be judged by how much it strengthens the coherence of panentheism as a metaphysical account of the God-world relationship. Thomas Oord's excellent collection of essays on the debate, *Theologies of Creation: Creatio ex Nihilo and its New Rivals*, offers a good example of the debate.<sup>18</sup>

In short: the research program approach allows one to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a theistic metaphysic (in this case, panentheism) and of the sub-programs within it, without appealing to external criteria as the final judge. For example, many panentheisms make use of one of the traditions of dialectical reasoning. Panentheism is not falsified merely because a critic does not approve of dialectical modes of reasoning. Instead, the critic must engage the panentheist in the debate about dialectical argumentation, and only when *that debate* is resolved can a profitable discussion of panentheism itself begin.

## V. PANENTHEISM AND THE DOUBLE "IN"

Two criticisms of panentheism are raised with particular frequency: the “double God” objection, to which we will return, and challenges to the idea that all is in God and God is in all things. The research program framework allows panentheists to turn to these topics with a double intent, looking both “inside” and “outside,” as it were. We seek to show that the objections are not fatal to panentheism, of course. But the RP framework also turns the challenges into stimuli for significant new work in the history of philosophy, as in Benedikt Göcke's new book on Krause<sup>19</sup>; further refinements of existing types of arguments, such as dialectical ways of conceiving the God-world relation or panpsychist theories of the natural world; and creative advances in constructive theology.

Critics have often objected that panentheism turns on a spatial metaphor: everything is in God. But a being that is pure Spirit would not be spatially extended. The problem seems to be compounded when panentheists affirm both that the world is in God *and* that God is in the world. The little preposition

16 See Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton, eds., *Panentheism Across the World's Traditions* (OUP, 2013).

17 Raphael Lataster, “The Attractiveness of Panentheism — A Reply to Benedikt Paul Göcke”, *Sophia* 53, no. 3 (2014), 389–95. See also Raphael Lataster, “Theists Misrepresenting Panentheism — Another Reply to Benedikt Paul Göcke”, *Sophia* 54, no.1 (2015), 93–8.

18 Thomas J. Oord, ed., *Theologies of Creation: Creatio ex Nihilo and its New Rivals* (Routledge, 2014). The question of sub-research programs deserves a treatment in and of itself. For example, Mikael Stenmark is right to argue that both coercive and persuasive divine action can be sub-RPs within the panentheism RP. Similarly, I have held that the question of the necessary creation of the world is a debate *within* panentheism and hence should not be used to define panentheism as such. Mullins, “The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism”, is also critical of Göcke on this point, which he restates as follows: “His proposal is that classical theism and panentheism differ only over the modal status of the world. According to Göcke, panentheism says that the world is an intrinsic property of God. So, necessarily, there is a world.”

19 Benedikt Paul Göcke, *The Panentheism of Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781–1832): From Transcendental Philosophy to Metaphysics* (Peter Lang, 2018).

“in” is insufficient to bear such metaphysical weight, it is objected, and doubling the weight by using “in” twice only makes the insufficiency more obvious.

Mullins, despite the overall negative tone of his article, offers a compelling way to understand the double “in.”<sup>20</sup> It involves distinguishing between metaphysical space and time and physical space and time. It is clear that panentheists cannot maximize immanence by appealing to a pre-Thomist substance metaphysics, in part because, on the classical view, two substances cannot manifest the double “in” relationship that most panentheists emphasize. By contrast, Mullins rightly notes that panentheists

will affirm that the universe is literally in God because the universe is spatially and temporally located in God. The universe is located in absolute space and time, and space and time are divine attributes. This can actually capture the “in” of panentheism in metaphysical, instead of metaphorical, terms. The universe is literally in God since space and time are attributes of God. ... I believe that this proposal could be fleshed out to capture the hard core of panentheism as well as the diversity within panentheism.

In *God and Contemporary Science*, I had argued that “If space is an attribute of God, then God must be present at all points in space... If space is God’s space, then the world is not ‘outside him’ but by definition within him.”<sup>21</sup> Stressing the radical immanence of God only works, in other words, as long as God remains the absolute framework for all talk of space and time:

As God can be present to every now while still subsuming all Now’s within the eternal Now that transcends and encompasses finite time, so also God can be present here while still subsuming all Here’s within a divine space that transcends and encompasses physical space.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, even an endless (infinite) space could be included within God without being identified with God. In this case, we might say, “God encompasses infinite (created) space but ... God *is* absolute space.”<sup>23</sup>

This distinction makes it possible to think of God as coextensive with the world: all points of space are encompassed by God and are in this sense “within” the divine. Nonetheless, created space is precisely that — created, contingent. Only God has the ontological status to be absolute and to contain all space within Godself. In short: finite space is contained within absolute space, the world is contained within God; yet the world is not identical to God. I take this affirmation to be part of the core of the panentheistic RP.

The case for panentheism that I have just sketched is similar to the argument from infinity. Hegel’s formulation of this argument continues to be the most clear and compelling. It is impossible to conceive of God as fully infinite if God is limited by something outside of Godself. The infinite may without contradiction include within itself things that are by nature finite, but it may not stand *outside of or over against* the finite. Imagine that something exists and that it is “excluded” by the infinite. This kind of infinite would not be truly infinite, that is, without limit. (Hegel thus calls it the “bad infinite.”) There is simply no place for finite things to “be” outside of that which is *absolutely unlimited*. An infinite God must therefore *encompass* the finite world that God has created, which means that the world must be metaphysically within God. This thesis is also, I suggest, part of the “hard core” of panentheism.

Note that many non-panentheists affirm that the world exists in some sense “within” God (Eleonore Stump), and even more affirm that God is in the world in some sense. We should expect for panentheists to make the case that both “ins” are necessary to an adequate account of the God-world relation, and to provide sophisticated philosophical accounts of what “in” means in both cases — especially since the two senses are probably not identical.

The double “in” is thus a third component of the hard core of the panentheistic RP — the task to provide a coherent account of what the two “ins” mean and how they are related. Affirming both that God is

20 The argument that Mullins’s “The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism” singles out in his section entitled “Another Attempt at Demarcating Panentheism”, including one of six arguments on behalf of panentheistic theologies that I develop in *God and Contemporary Physics* (Eerdmans, 1997). These arguments are themselves part of a broader research program that includes the work of (for example) Jürgen Moltmann, Georg Cantor, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.

21 Clayton, *God and Contemporary Physics*, 89.

22 Clayton, *God and Contemporary Physics*, 89.

23 *Ibid.*, 90.

in the world and that the world is in God, panentheists are engaged in historical, comparativist, analytic, and systematic work on divine presence, agency, and inclusion, including topics such as human agency, freedom, temporality, and divine action.

## VI. THE "DOUBLE GOD" OBJECTION

One of the greatest challenges to theism in the modern period is the challenge raised by Fichte in 1799 that launched the *Atheismusstreit*, namely the criticism that the infinite cannot be a person. Persons must be in relationship with something outside themselves, but, as we saw in the previous section, there cannot be anything outside the infinite. A ground of all things can be infinite, but a personal being cannot.<sup>24</sup> Yet it seems that, for theists, God must be both a personal being *and* the infinite divine ground or source of all things that exist. There are significant costs for the theist to say that finite things are not grounded, or that something outside of God does the grounding. But, Fichte claims, it is incoherent to say that God is both the infinite divine ground of all that exists and a personal being. Although the criticism has been called "double God" objection, it might more accurately be called the "double divine" objection, namely: theists need to affirm both an infinite ground and a personal being, but these two have not been, and some would say cannot be, thought together into a single metaphysical entity.

Note that Fichte's challenge actually affects all theists who are not pantheists. If it cannot be answered, even in principle, then it's not just panentheists who are in trouble; classical theists also have a stake in this game. The only thing that would single out panentheists from other theists here, I think, is if panentheism is able to address the objection better than any other theistic option, and especially if *only* panentheism can answer it.

I would like to argue that there is indeed a way to answer the objection using the resources of panentheism. It starts with an insight from Alfred North Whitehead, which Charles Hartshorne later developed using the term "dipolar theism," theism with two "poles." The first pole is the "primordial" nature of God, which grounds all actual events in the universe; the second is the personal, responsive, and temporal "consequent" nature of God. Both poles are required for a complete panentheistic metaphysics.

I find this an attractive view and have been influenced by it. However, two concerns arise that should cause one to modify Hartshorne's conception. First, on this view one must say that the primordial nature of God is purely potential; it is "deficient in actuality," as Whitehead writes in another context.<sup>25</sup> For Whitehead, ground and personhood (to use the more traditional terms) are indeed reconciled, but only at the cost of making the primordial ground a mere ideal or possibility to be actualized — a set of initial aims that can guide the development of "actual entities," though only to the extent that these entities freely incorporate the initial aims in their becoming.

Second, Hartshorne's view implies that God is not actual but merely potential unless God is accompanied by a world. Hence there could be no initial creation by God, and hence no creation *ex nihilo*. I take this to be a weakness. Of course, many process thinkers do not agree that it is a weakness, including Anna Case-Winters and Thomas Oord.<sup>26</sup>

It might appear that dipolar theists have leapt from the frying pan into the fire; they avoid the double God objection only by making the primordial pole of God a matter of pure potentiality. For an "orthodox" process theologian, that result may not be problematic: no actual entity can exist that is not in relationship with other actual occasions; and besides, God has always been accompanied by *some* cosmos, which means that the "consequent" (personal, responsive) pole of God has always been present as well.

I remain more optimistic about the resources of a broadly Christian panentheism that retains a kenotic, contingent creation and real relationship within God. This starting point offers strong resources for answer-

<sup>24</sup> Godehard Brüntrup has labeled this counterargument the "double God" objection in conversations and an unpublished PowerPoint presentation.

<sup>25</sup> That is, God possesses only conceptual feelings and lacks the completion provided by a subjective aim.

<sup>26</sup> See their chapters in Thomas Oord, ed., *Theologies of Creation*.



ing the double God objection. What “grounds” is the eternal nature of God, the unchanging character of God. God’s personal, responsive being then evolves through God’s interactions with the universe as divine creation. God is not a person, or three persons, as we use the word; many features of human personhood do not apply to the divine. But God is also *not less than* personal.<sup>27</sup> The becoming personhood of God remains always consistent with the eternal divine nature. But it is also responsive to and affected by God’s interactions with all finite existing things. As I noted at the beginning, the panentheist RP seeks to maximize the immanence and relatedness of God, so that God might be thought of as permeating the world to the greatest imaginable extent, short of falling into pantheism.

## VII. CONCLUSION

I began with the dilemma: the panentheist spends half his time fighting to win acknowledgement that his title might actually pick out an identifiable position at all, and the other half answering the objection that his position is so clear that every philosopher should immediately recognize that it is obviously false. In these pages we have sketched a way in which the demarcation problem can be solved. Panentheism is best understood as a research program that in turn consists of a variety of sub-programs. I have argued that it is a research program that can make, and is making, multiple positive contributions to work in philosophy and theology.

Mullins shows where the line of demarcation lies for at least one region of the debate:

Can the panentheist demarcate herself from pantheism? Yes. The panentheist should not insist that God and the universe are the same substance. She can maintain that God and the universe are distinct substances. God and the universe are not identical. The universe is not identical to absolute space and time. The universe exists in absolute space and time. In identifying God and the universe, the pantheist is collapsing the distinction between absolute (or metaphysical) and physical space and time.<sup>28</sup>

Other regions will presumably require other survey teams.

Note that philosophers can emphasize panentheistic features in thinkers who may not themselves be panentheists, such as St. Thomas and the Vedantic philosopher Shankara, and conversely. Grey areas are inevitable. If there are families, there will be family resemblances; the importance of your family is not decreased if your second cousin Elvira bears an uncanny resemblance to individuals to whom she is not related. Our disagreements about where to locate Thomas and Shankara do not show that there is no such thing as panentheism or that it fails in the end to be a coherent position at all. Instead, they are invitations to constructive work within the RP. For example, they should place the burden of proof on me to show that *other parts* of Thomas’s work could not be panentheist, and I should accept that burden.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1956), 245: “[God] is not a person, but he [sic] is not less than personal.” Tillich’s “research program” has deeply influenced our work in Clayton and Steven Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*.

<sup>28</sup> Mullins, “The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism”.

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