

## **The Priority of God: A Speculation on First Being**

### **Part One: Personalism and process**

#### **Introduction**

In this paper I explore two distinct but related ideas: firstly the notion of a personalist God as viewed through the lens of process thinking; and secondly, whether the traditional temporal primacy given to God by western theology can be sustained both in terms of a personalist construction and also, albeit with some stretching of the seams, within a broad interpretation of Whitehead's philosophy. In adopting this approach I pay, in the first part, particular attention to the metaphysical personalism of Austin Farrer<sup>1</sup>, whose work is influenced by, and has in turn influenced, a number of process thinkers; and in the second, I take as a particular point of focus Lewis Ford's radical reconstruction of God as future creativity. Overall, I take my understanding of God to be something worthy of human worship; that is, the exploration enters the ground of religious considerations although at the same time remaining grounded in philosophical thinking.

As I have said, I am taking as given that God must be, at the very least, appropriate to religious conviction. I should also, for the sake of clarity, set out at the beginning that, in the context of process conceptions, I also regard it as essential that whatever notion of God is brought forward it must remain within the broad parameters of Whitehead's system. These can be summarised by reference to the following quotations drawn from Process and Reality:

Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. (3)

God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification. (343)

Taking these dual criteria together (appropriateness to religious conviction and a broad consistency with Whiteheadian process), we are thus obliged to seek out a God which is capable of existence according to the terms of the general metaphysical scheme and which is something

rather more than the necessary summation of whatever it is that happens to be our reality (that is, there must be some special characteristic of this divine being that is, I suggest, both agentive with regard to our own being and which might appropriately engage our religious concern). Whitehead, it must be said, seems less than certain that this is achievable:

The concept of God is certainly one essential element in religious feeling. But the converse is not true; the concept of religious feeling is not an essential element in the concept of God's function in the universe. In this respect religious literature has been sadly misleading to philosophic theory, partly by attraction and partly by repulsion. (emphasis added, 207)

In this revealing statement Whitehead seems to be attempting to free God of the constraints of human frailty and wish; nevertheless, it begs the question of whether his God can be meaningful qua 'God of religion'. I would suggest, however, that if God is not capable of answering to the religious context then the notion of God is rendered invalid and might better be treated strictly as a particular configuration of metaphysical principles or ground. I will refer to this again in one of the speculative positions I set out in Part Two.

Indeed, Whitehead is aware of this and accordingly also talks of God in very much the language of religion. He refers to God's 'necessary goodness' (345), and is able to say:

He does not create the world, he saves it: or, more accurately, he is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness. (346).

The heart of the conflict resides in the words 'He does not create the world'. The counterpoint is in the qualification, in the salvatory 'tender patience' and calming 'vision of truth, beauty and goodness', which sits so easily within the language and tenor of religious belief and worship. Such tension, which resonates throughout Process and Reality, exemplifies the central focus of the debate between philosophy and religion: that if one so systemizes God to ensure philosophical coherence, little room is left for the believer to invest with faith, or from which the effects of a divine grace might emerge. It is as though the attempt to bring God within the frame of human

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<sup>1</sup> Farrer is undeniably not a process philosopher in the Whiteheadian sense. However, there is considerable common ground between Farrer and Whitehead as drawn out in Charles Conti's book Metaphysical Personalism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) Farrer's work has also influenced Robert Neville, notably through the discussion of Farrer in Ray L Hart's Unfinished Man and the Imagination (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968).

understanding leaves God devoid of status, or reduced to a collection of attributes that lack effective meaning because so readily grasped.

It is not, however, the denial of God's role as creator that is critical, nor God's contingency on creation. It is not even that God is metaphysically no different from any other existent being which leaves so little on which to gain any religious purchase, either for God or the believer. The problem is not in the grand scheme, but in the detail and in the conceptual determinants driving it forward. My aim here will, therefore, be to examine the impact of Whitehead's drive to treat God simultaneously as the exemplification of the metaphysical scheme, its unitive expression, and as essential to the emergence of actualizing reality. The proposition is that by prioritizing these goals, Whitehead fails to answer to the most pressing need of all: that a meaningful God must answer to the human religious imperative.

### **The God of religion**

I will begin with the words of Austin Farrer, the Oxford philosopher and theologian whose development of an active, personalist metaphysics defined by the phrase esse est operari, brought him into close contact with process thought. In Farrer's words:

[W]e argue that God, however and wherever indicated, must be understood as a being about whom we have something to do. (Faith and Speculation 104)

A God in this sense is not necessarily supreme, nor necessarily the creator of the worshipping subject. Thus the Judaeo-Christian God may be regarded as a deity, but so also may those deities existing in more extensive and complex pantheisms. In reviewing Whitehead's God in the context outlined above, we need to consider whether his formal scheme allows for meaningful relationship between God and the world. Taking account of both the primordial and consequent natures of God put forward in Process and Reality, the simple answer would appear to be in the affirmative. The primordial nature of God is there taken to be both the complete ordering of eternal and conceptual potentialities and the drawing of these into the 'perfection of... subjective aim' (345) in the process of the concrescence of actualities. Equally, the consequent nature is characterized as 'that of a tender care that nothing be lost' (346). Thus, prima facie, God both

assures and orders the eternal realm from which actuality draws and formulates its subjective aim in becoming, and is responsively changed by taking into objective immortality all that has become.

But Whitehead requires of his God a totalizing role, and therein lies the problem. It is not the duality that ultimately proves so damaging, but that the dual aspects must tend to a definitional unity; that is, in the need to consider the consequent nature as the summative expression of all becomings and at the same time to treat the primordial nature as the ultimate ordering of possibilities, the scheme risks becoming defined retrospectively by its results. The possibility of a human–divine relationship of co-determination is thus significantly undermined. It is true that Whitehead presses to maintain the religiosity of his God as the saviour of the world, the sustainer of order. And it is equally true that he saw, and sought to address, the problem inherent in the notion of an absolute creator. But the tension between religious need and philosophical demand is always near the surface, and it is the demand that runs ahead of the need.

### **The Process God**

It is appropriate at this point to review some of the formal aspects of Whitehead's God, and in particular the conception of a primordial and consequent nature. It is important to keep in mind that we are dealing not with a God of two halves, but with the abstracted aspects of a unity.

First, the primordial nature. This, as has been stated, effects the complete ordering of the process of concrescence. It is a necessary function, as:

[a]part from God, eternal objects unrealized in the actual world would be relatively non-existent for the concrescence in question. (31)

That is, the primordial nature by embodying the 'complete envisagement of eternal objects' (44) serves as the effective framework for coherent actualization. An actual entity emerging into and through a process of concrescence is not free to enact any possibility upon which it alights, but is drawn to value most highly those possibilities which best effect a fulfilment of its subjective aim. Whitehead describes the primordial role as follows:

It is the conceptual adjustment of all appetites in the form of aversions and adversions. It constitutes the meaning of relevance. Its status as an actual efficient fact is recognized by terming it the 'primordial nature of God.' (32)

The difficulty with this is that it seems to lack any deliberative agency. To be fair, Whitehead does not require agency, which 'belongs exclusively to actual occasions' (31); and he acknowledges that in the primordial nature:

God's 'primordial nature' is abstracted from his commerce with 'particulars,'... It is God in abstraction, alone with himself. As such it is a mere factor in God, deficient in actuality. (34)

So, the primordial nature lacks agency, and moreover is isolate, 'alone with himself'. This is the classical problem of the God of Philosophy, of the eternal principle that cannot but be, and yet 'can' not.

Whitehead uses the concept of God's consequent nature to avoid the potentially terminal deficiency of an absented God. This nature is regarded as:

the physical prehension by God of the actualities of the evolving universe. (88)

This is God in God's awareness of the actualized world. Whereas the primordial nature is unconscious, the consequent is conscious:

One side of God's nature is constituted by his conceptual experience. This experience is the primordial fact in the world, limited by no actuality which it presupposes. It is therefore infinite, devoid of all negative prehensions. This side of his nature is free, complete, primordial, eternal, actually deficient, and unconscious. The other side originates with physical experience derived from the temporal world, and then acquires integration with the primordial side. It is determined, incomplete, consequent, 'everlasting', fully actual, and conscious. (345)

The consequent nature thus grants God a contingent nature, reflective of what 'is' in the world, and changed and developed through the experience of actual occasions of real, worldly experience.

Of special significance for the religious context is the claim that the consequent nature is 'conscious', which we must take as a claim for rather more than the sense of being 'functionally affected by'. Whitehead again:

The consequent nature of God is his judgment on the world. He saves the world as it passes into the immediacy of his own life. It is the judgment of a tenderness which

loses nothing that can be saved. It is also the judgment of a wisdom which uses what in the temporal world is mere wreckage. (346)

Here we have claims for the ‘judgment of a tenderness’ and the ‘judgment of a wisdom’, and a description of the temporal world as ‘mere wreckage’. Such language demands interpretation extending beyond mechanistic functionality. Accordingly, for God to make meaningful judgments in terms of human expression, God must have some stake in the outcome, some measure against which to judge. However, Whitehead fails to offer a meaningful basis for differentiation in the making and taking of the decision, and I would argue that his God therefore has no true interest, no true stake in the outcome. Whatever happens, happens through God primordially; and in the consequent nature, God is whatever happens<sup>2</sup>.

It is by this requirement, that God serve as necessary exemplification of his system, that Whitehead reduces God to a principle of coherence. The result is a lack of agency, a lack of God’s voluntary responsiveness to the human condition. In this functional conditioning the religious sensitivity of the concept of God is lost. The formulation of the process God is descriptive, it is explanatory, but it matters not one bit whether it is paid any heed. And if we need pay no heed to God (since the principle is effective irrespective of our regard for it), then where is the locus of religious purchase? We are mired in monism, and the effect is not lessened by such phrases as ‘His necessary goodness’ (345) and ‘the poet of the world’ (346). The result, despite the language, is God as a definition of unitive existence, rather than its cause, support, goal or willing co-agent.

In light of the above it may appear that the process God is but second cousin to Aristotle’s unmoved ‘mover’, though related through the monist rather than transcendent branch of the family. The problem, so far as the religious imperative is concerned, is Whitehead’s failure properly to separate God-as-exemplification from the structural concepts underpinning the efficient dynamics of process. This error is amplified by a problematic philosophy of mind, and the resultant relegation of the significance of consciousness and will.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting here that Ford prioritizes the subjectivity of God whilst, through his notion of God as future creativity, doing away with the need for the duality of the primordial and consequent natures. See Transforming Process Theism.

### **Consciousness and will**

For Whitehead, the consciousness of God resides in God's consequent nature, not the primordial. It is the consequent nature that regards the particulars of the experiencing world; and, as noted above, God is also the enacted principle of unity. In contrast, Farrer argues, in Freedom of the Will, that consciousness resides not in one part of the body or the other, but that it must be regarded as embodied in the entirety of the organism as 'a sequence of activity' (26) of which it is the unitive realization. Noting that Whitehead cannot allow the consequent to exist without the primordial, it is instructive to treat Whitehead's function for God in relation to the world as similar to that offered by Farrer for consciousness in the human. In saying this I have regard for our inclination to implicate the whole person in an act of consciousness, despite the Cartesian divide or Kantian retreat; and am extending the idea to embrace Whitehead's God, which can then be presented as the principle of universal creative advance being aware of its own advance. This is an overt move towards personalism, and entails that the nature of such a God will be that of an entity which *strives* to ensure the efficient transmission of the creative principle into, and through the response of, the actualizing world. In Whitehead the awareness is perhaps present; but the striving is singularly absent because not required.

A distinguishing feature in Farrer's understanding of 'will' is that:

The intending is ahead of the intended, though it be by a hairsbreadth (Freedom 48).

Implicit in this is a choice between possibles, and the deliberated selection and implementation of an intentional or determined outcome towards which the organism as a whole strives. It is important to note that Farrer requires that acts of will 'take shape in events' (112) so as to avoid the loss of coherence between 'willing' and 'acting'. It may be argued that in Whitehead the notion of a subjective aim (and the necessary inclusion of an intended future realization in that aim), combined in particular with the superject (which carries that nascent aim into the realizable future), performs the function of will. If we allow that the subjective aim seeks to maximize the satisfaction and fulfilment of itself as achievement, and that the process is itself one of selective valuation (as Whitehead's position suggests), then this is so. It is nonetheless difficult to equate

Whitehead's 'aim' with the enduring subjective orientation of will.

The difficulty for Whitehead is that the subjective aim is necessarily achieved, and that whatever becomes must answer to it. Any analysis is thus bound in retrospective engagement. The aim is also particular to the individual concrescence. Moreover, in the example of an actual entity Whitehead requires that God, in the mode of the primordial realm of ordered potentiality, has a necessary role in the triggering of that aim and a not insignificant role in its final articulation. It is true that a degree of 'self'-determination is afforded to the prospective actual entity, and indeed also true that proper account must be taken of the complex environment for actualization; but what might thus at first appear as agentive in the role granted to God is, on closer inspection, no more than a required function. By this last I mean that although the role of assuring the ordered and appropriate selection of eternal objects for the fulfilment of the subjective aim is necessary, it adds nothing except 'permission to be'<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, 'will' suggests the possibility of will-thwarted (which is nonetheless will); and although it can be judged according to the extent of its application, ultimately it is defined by its initiating aim. To summarize: in Whitehead, the subjective aim is definitionally obtained by reference to its achievement of satisfaction; will, however, need never be satisfied.

[Will is] the pattern of action directly operated by intentional behaviour exercis[ing] a real directive sway over the minute physical energies in our body, causing them to do what, left to themselves, they would not do. (Freedom 82)

In offering the above as a working definition of will, Farrer properly prioritized the requirement for intentionality. In terms of implementation the position is not so very distant from a practical application of Whitehead, although Whitehead would resist Farrer's 'left to themselves' as contrary to the ontological principle of inclusiveness (Farrer's terminology betrays the residue of substance-thinking). So far as 'intention' itself goes, Farrer's position suggests that what is described as 'intentional' cannot be, in any fundamental sense, also 'necessary' or 'ontologically required'. Intentionality does, however, require a moral stance and the retention of subjective duration through which the process of valuation is factored.

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<sup>3</sup> Whatever is denied 'permission' fails of actualization and can therefore be discounted.



In presenting this view, the distance between Whitehead's 'subjective aim' and Farrer's 'intentional act of will' becomes clear. Intention presupposes subjective duration; and the process of valuation in the formulation of an intention is therefore based on more than the immediacy of prehension, and on more than the drive to actualization of the focal point for a particularized or abstracted focus of the emerging universe. Valuation, as integral to an act of will, particularly moral will, embraces and sustains a solid, enduring subjectivity whilst, I would argue, at the same time requiring that its own subjective stance is subsumed within the transcendent objectivity with which it deals. This is not mere absorption by or of the 'other', but an active self-knowing in the very act of attempted self-transcendence. It is this that provides the existential intensity of will-activity, which intensity is characterized by the feeling of the self-as-agent pressing against and through the borderline of possibility. Will, in this sense, reflects Whitehead's principle of creative advance in that the formulation incorporates the notion of pressing beyond the limit of the already existent. It is distinct from Whitehead's concept in that it goes beyond the formal self-transcendence of an actual entity via its superject, and incorporates the idea of an enduring subjectivity which seeks to transcend knowingly its own subjective limitations in an effecting act. The process God is capable of growth through the extension of the consequent nature, but because of the necessary completeness of that nature cannot transcend it.

It is interesting to note that Lewis Ford addresses a number of these issues in Transforming Process Theism<sup>4</sup>, and seeks to outflank the very real difficulties in Whitehead's formulation of God by making much greater use of the realm of the future. I do not propose to enter into a detailed discussion of Ford's position here, but a few factors are worth highlighting. We have noted that, in Farrer's words, the 'intending must be ahead of the intended'. Taking God as 'future creativity', Ford provides a temporal framework for God in which this is necessarily the case: any aim derived from the future must be 'ahead' of its instantiation in the present. Moreover, as Ford stresses throughout his book, his transformation of process theism seeks to establish (or perhaps re-affirm) the Whiteheadian notion of an ever-concreasing God; that is, a God which fails of

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<sup>4</sup> See in particular Chapter 8.

'satisfaction' in the technical sense. Without wishing to stretch the point too far, if we are to attribute to the idea of will the characteristic of continual striving (i.e, it conditions behaviour but in itself fails of actualization (we cannot 'grasp' it except through its effects)), then it should be possible to equate the very generalized notion of creativity as explored in Ford with an equally generalized notion of will. True, the notion of will is more complex than that of bare creativity in that the former constitutes a directed creative impulse; but having said that, it is difficult to understand Ford's retention of theistic terminology unless God-as-future-creativity draws on something rather more than bare creativity itself. Indeed, Ford acknowledges this in his defence of the continuing subjectivity of the future-God<sup>5</sup>.

### **God, agency, will and subjective extension**

I have emphasized that for God to have any religious meaning the concept of will must be embraced, and implied that this must involve an effective degree of subjective duration and identity. The will must act in and for the subject, and upon and through an object (though this latter might be self-objectification). So, rather than being a principle of 'pure will' (definitional), God must have self-knowledge and contingency: self-knowledge in order to have a sense of will (the self as intending agent), and contingency so that the exercise of will is meaningful (that is, the outcome is uncertain). I say that the outcome must be uncertain, for if it is not then against what is the will pushing? What is its role? The certainty of the outcome by the mere holding of the thought runs counter to any natural understanding of will, and if attributed to God obscures, if not denies, the will of the human.

Hence I am arguing, if not precisely with Farrer, at least within the more general idea of conceiving God in personalist terms. Such a God must intend, and have knowledge of the act and implementation of that intending. There is implicit integration within the formulation in that the subjective awareness of intending stretches across the conventional (though arbitrary) divide of mental and physical activity. It is at this point that Whitehead's conceptual determinants are again problematic. I refer here to his suggestion that:

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<sup>5</sup> See Ford 240-243.

The origination of God is from the mental pole, the origination of an actual occasion is from the physical pole; but in either case these elements, consciousness, thought, sense-perception, belong to the derivative 'impure' phases of the concrescence, if in any effective sense they enter at all. (36)

If God's origination is indeed precipitated from the mental pole, then we must either treat the mental pole as an aspect of the consequent nature (which is conscious and responsive) and so deepen the divide between the two natures, or we must treat the mental pole as the primordial nature despite this nature being devoid of just those attributes that are suggestive of mental activity. If the former, we are faced with the problem of the outcome 'acquiring integration with the primordial side', which is 'constituted by his conceptual experience' (both 345). In that the primordial is 'complete', it is difficult to understand just what such experience might be, or indeed how any 'integration' can be allowed. If the latter, the activity fails of meaningful intention and informative (i.e., choice-offering) significance. As Whitehead notes of the primordial nature:

It has within it no components which are standards for comparison.  
(47)

Judith Jones identifies a related inconsistency in Whitehead regarding the concept of 'individuality', pointing out that he denies that individuality 'applies to any entity, including God' (Intensity 24). Jones further comments on how (in PR 84) Whitehead severs the relationship between the concrescence and its satisfaction:

Adopting the Cartesian distinction between 'formal and objective reality' undermines Whitehead's repudiation of the Cartesian definition of the individuality of existents, and leads to an inability to define individuality coherently within the organic atomism being advanced. (26)

The significance of this is that it highlights the difficulty in establishing true identity within Whitehead's scheme, which difficulty necessarily impacts on notions of voluntarism and subjectivity.

This need to establish some form of persisting identity is in part behind Ford's innovative reconstruction:

For God to be personal, God must be an individualized instance of creativity, which is only possible if creativity has a future instance. (240)

Ford is bound to this move as a result of his alignment of God with creativity and the related risk of the loss of God's distinctiveness in the face of the necessary all-pervasiveness of creativity in the present. The manoeuvre enables Ford to retain the all-inclusiveness of God (as the infinite indefiniteness of the future) whilst avoiding the problem of entitive duality in the present, whereby God and the actual entity co-exist within a single locus. By placing God in a different temporal mode, the primacy of the concreting actual entity within its presentness is maintained.

For all that, Ford's position allows no more than a 'soft' notion of agency. God infuses the present with creativity and this infusion is the mode through which the subjective aim is carried. God thus serves as a lure, responsive in God's private subjectivity to the prehensible actualities of the past and the contextual demands of the present; but the final decision to determinateness remains with the present concrecence. This is appropriate in that it does minimal damage to the autonomy of the self-creating entity at the heart of Whitehead's thinking. It is also a clear advance on Whitehead in that God's role is more explicitly brought within the larger metaphysical framework. The problem remains, however, that although there is some clear transport between God and the world, each is confined to its specific temporal mode. This is unproblematic in terms of the metaphysics, but to recur to Austin Farrer's words, 'God, however and wherever indicated, must be understood as a being about whom we have something to do.' It is difficult to see how Ford's God can so serve.

### **Part Two: A speculation**

I have thus far focused on some of the problems inherent in Whitehead's position, and how they impact on our endeavour to establish a viable God of religion within the process matrix without undermining that matrix utterly. Lewis Ford offers one possible solution via the mechanism of radicalizing the role of the future, but in so doing he risks compromising the possibility for the co-existence of the human and the divine; his solution provides something rather more akin to a sequence of influences, each mutually informed but separate (with the caveat that God's contribution is continuous rather than temporally atomistic). Charles Hartshorne's serialization of

God, on the other hand, ensures the possibility of a more direct co-existence of the human and the divine, but at the cost of the coherence of God's being; each rendering of God is distinct, and distinct with regard to each expression of actuality with which it engages. In the following speculation I take a rather different tack to either of these positions. Certainly, in effecting the transition there will be some reduction in God's status, but this is implicit in Whitehead's position in so far as his God fails of metaphysical priority (something that can be utilized in Ford's defence, as it happens). My aim is nonetheless to remain close to a religious conception of God, whilst at the same time maintaining the central tenets of a process model.

I will begin by setting out a basic scenario. Let us conceive of God as the exemplification of the unity and consciousness of the first moment of becoming. This has the advantage of reflecting the religious conviction of God's temporal primacy. In that we allow the notion of 'a first moment' at all, we need not be running counter to the basic notion of concrescence (although, as will become clear, not all the elements of a standard concrescence will be brought into play). An alternative exploration would be to concretize the human projections of deity in the manner of Feuerbach<sup>6</sup>, but such a route (whilst in my view tenable, and empirically persuasive) takes us a considerable distance from both Whitehead and Farrer in that the unique status of God is likely to be irreparably undermined. Taking God as the exemplification of the unity of the first moment does not preclude the second option, but the second might effectively discount the possibility of the first.

If the above is granted, any re-formulation of Whitehead's God requires not only the implantation of agentive and voluntarist functions, but also (to protect the specifically process formulation) the retention, to as high a degree as possible, of God's status as the exemplification of creative process. To achieve this requires establishing the possibility of each aspect of agentive voluntarism occurring within a process context, and reviewing whether the application of such an aspect precludes the putative God from being regarded as an essential God of the type required by

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<sup>6</sup> See [The Essence of Christianity](#), [passim](#).

both Whitehead and more traditional theologies<sup>7</sup>.

I suggest therefore that the God we are seeking requires enduring self-knowledge, effective agency, contingency and will. There may be other factors, but these four might be regarded as primary in establishing, in various degrees, identity, effectiveness, responsiveness and purpose. I will begin by taking each criterion in turn. In doing so I will be seeking to do no more than establish the possibility that individually each can be appropriately constituted within a process structure. The following summaries are intended simply to indicate the broad thrust of the argument.

### **1 Enduring self-knowledge**

Since God is required to exemplify the unitive process of becoming, and is defined in those terms, God never ceases to be (or more accurately, never ceases in the process of becoming). Thus God endures, and endures through the consequent nature in the knowledge of all that is (which necessarily includes both God's own becoming and the activity of the actualizing world). This is Whitehead's basic position, and as a primary function of a unitive or essential God it can reasonably be considered as appropriate to religious focus.

There are of course various ways in which this core position can be played out. The Hartshornian model retains God's enduring self-awareness by allowing God's perfect prehension of the societal predecessor, thus allowing one to argue that at any particular moment God has a perfect knowledge of all that has previously occurred (including God's own previous responses to those occurrences). This is not quite the same as enduring subjectivity, since there is an explicit process of objectification; but certainly, if self-knowledge is possible then God's perfect prehensive capability allows of it in this instance.

Ford's contrast to this position is to regard God as always in the process of concrescence. God

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<sup>7</sup> In this context I should be clear that I do not mean by 'essential' that God may not also be contingent. I simply mean to indicate that traditional and process conceptions of God alike regard God as central to the possibility of worldly existence.

fails of objectification and is thus impenetrable. Nonetheless, Ford preserves God's internal and private subjectivity:

I intend that God should be conceived as absolutely impenetrable, and hence as purely subjective. (188)

In that the concrescence never achieves satisfaction, the subjectivity for which we are searching and which allows of a continuity of self-knowledge is possible in that God is forever in a process of becoming. True, one might argue that self-knowledge without self-objectification (i.e., without 'satisfaction' in Whitehead's sense) is problematic, especially in Ford's model which does away with the primordial and consequent natures in favour of a future and monistic concept of God. However, the purpose here is not to dig away at the technical issues of particular models, but rather to seek a general position whereby our principal criteria are endorsed and supported. It is reasonably self-evident that in the case of enduring self-knowledge, and despite the difficulties presented by Whitehead in terms of 'identity', that the underlying intent of Whitehead's metaphysics is able, in a general sense, to respond affirmatively to our requirement.

## **2 Effective agency**

Working from the assumption that a God of religion ought to be a God capable of directed interaction with the world we can, in the context of this speculation, treat agency with a broad brush. Some of the earlier discussion concerning subjective will indicates possible areas of difficulty in Whitehead's model (particularly with regard to the notion of intentionality), but it is nonetheless the case that 'agency' of a sort remains at the heart of Whiteheadian metaphysics.

The classical mode requires that the emergence of an actual entity can, through its emergence in activity, serve as an influence on other actual entities in the process of becoming. The specifically agentive (or better, intentionally agentive) aspect of this can be found in that part of the process which strives to achieve fulfilment of the initial aim and at the same time to ensure that there is broad conformity to the immediately future reality into which the entity will emerge. Moreover, the function of eternal objects is agentive in any particular process of concrescence and, with regard to the development of a theistic model, is mediated via God's valuation and ordering of eternal objects and the provision of the initial aim for concrescence. Thus, not only is there a

mode of agency available to actual entities, but there is also a specific (and special) agency attributed to God.

I commented earlier that Ford's defence of the self-determining of the emergent entity allows no more than a 'soft' notion of agency on the part of God, and should now add that Whitehead indeed restricts the notion of agency to actual occasions (Process 31). It should be no surprise therefore that the nature of the interaction is altered as a result of Ford's insistence that God fails to reach objectification. Thus the normal mode of interaction (i.e., prehension) cannot be brought into play. Given God's imprehensibility, we are left in a quandary. We are forced to ask how it is that the finite entity receives God's influence. In response, Ford argues that we are wrong to treat prehension as the only medium of communication. This is a radical departure from Whitehead, perhaps even more so than the positing of God's futurity. In its place Ford offers the idea of 'infusion' (251-255). It is important in reading the following quote to keep in mind that Ford is treating the future as active:

Future creativity can influence the nascent occasion because both occupy the same locus successively. Future creativity can influence the present in that locus by continuing its creativity into the present, thereby empowering the present concrescence toprehend. (252)

Unpacking this slightly, what it appears to suggest is that if we allow the future to be ontologically existent then it is necessarily the case that the same 'locus' is occupied first by a future (though indefinite) articulation for the entity and then by the definite and determinate entity itself. The key to this is in Ford's treatment of temporal modality through which he avoids the 'potentially conflicting determinations, rather than successive determinations' (252). It is freely admitted by Ford that the 'future determination' is not very much determinate at all; but for all that, Ford's future determination is able to support my general call for agentive potential. This is also consistent with the notion of a divine lure<sup>8</sup>.

### **3 Contingency**

The need for contingency is a priority for religious interaction in that God must be able to respond in some way to the worshipper in order to give meaning to that worship. There is no need to



recount here the many philosophical arguments concerning God's perfection and impassibility, although it is of course central to process theism that God is massively contingent on the world in that whatsoever occurs enters into God. For Whitehead this is the salvatory nature of God, in that all that must perish must also pass into the objective immortality of the consequent nature.

In the context of this essay, however, Ford again presents us with a not insignificant question. As mentioned earlier, Ford has removed the polarity of the primordial and consequent natures from his model, and has indeed done away with the notion of God's objectification. God as creativity is a wholly subjective becoming. Thus the interplay between a continuing primordial core and a contingent consequent nature is lost. Ford's response to this is to note that God in God's subjectivity can and does engage in just the same concrescent behaviour as other entities, by which is meant that the conditioning influence of the world informs the subjective content of God's emerging subjective state. In this sense then, God's internal (and wholly private) valuations are capable of response to the past and present temporal modes. Capable perhaps, but not necessarily obliged to respond. God therefore might fullyprehend the past and present modes of actuality but value them not at all. This contrasts with the more usual interpretations of Whitehead wherein God's ordering is precisely required for, and wholly related to, the contingent world.

What I find particularly interesting in Ford's position is that it serves to strengthen the religious imperative. Whereas there is an uneasy (to my mind) necessity underlying God's particular ordering of eternal objects in the traditional interpretations, and an equally required determination of God's consequent nature, Ford has not only eliminated the latter but has ensured that God's role in the emergence of actuality remains fluid. It is this level of potential uncertainty that provides the impetus for religious acknowledgement. And as with the more traditional renderings, contingency of a sort is affirmed.

#### **4 Subjectively determined will**

The burden of the endeavour falls ultimately on the last of the attributes I have brought forward,

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<sup>8</sup> See Ford's *The Lure of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

that of subjectively determined will. The last, and most complex; for it is in establishing this for God that we establish intentionality, and, if successful, transform the burden of existential essence into the enjoyment of existential being. To effect this transformation requires taking from God the twin roles of ultimate creator and definitional embodiment: the role of ultimate creator because, as Whitehead would agree, this removes God from the metaphysical frame; and definitional embodiment because such embodiment leaves no room for effective meaning. Thus God must come inside creative reality, rather than stand outside or along with such a principle. In effect, God too must be a creature, though possibly one that enjoys the status of first actualizing being. Ford's position, although radically different from the speculation I set out below, might indeed answer this description if we accept his treatment of temporality wherein the past is strongly linked to determinateness of being and the future to the indeterminate status of becoming<sup>9</sup>.

#### **God as first (created) being: a speculation**

It is now time to proceed with the speculative outline. We need, if we are to adhere to the personalist implications discussed in the earlier part of this essay, first of all to proceed from the assumption that God be regarded as an effective, coherent and distinct being (as one human is regarded by another as effective, coherent and distinct). This grants us scope for the interpenetration of subjects, and therefore informative and agentive co-relationship between worshipped and worshipper. A condition of this speculation is that it must also offer a coherent explanation for God being a primary exemplification of process. Specifically, this means that the resultant God must serve as an exemplification of the principle of 'creative advance'.

Additionally, in order to offer a sense of religious purchase, the God must be agentive with regard to that principle. More important though, the assumption must be made that there is a point of

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<sup>9</sup> See Ford 185-186.

beginning<sup>10</sup>.

Thus we are assuming that where once there was literally nothing, a something has emerged (or is in the process of emerging) into being; or, if more explicitly process oriented language is preferred, we might say that there has been a change from absolute passivity to initial activity. However we term it, such primordality might reasonably be regarded as being naïve. By this I mean that the sophisticated valuations and decisions which lead more complexly related entities to be selective in their prehending are absent. I am here making the supposition that decision is an advanced function, related to (if not derived from) experience; that is, it must be based on something (which is precisely what we lack in this first instance). And, if nothing else can be said about a first being, we must accept that it lacks experience of prior events.

Given the above, we can regard the first actualizing being as fully prehensive of all that arises in its becoming. That it will be 'fully prehensive' (i.e., have no negative prehensions) is necessary, since there will be nothing other than its own emerging state to prehend, and only that which is prehend is considered as constitutive of the emerging entity. One might argue that such an entity might negatively prehend aspects of its own phasal becoming, but that would be tantamount to denying the occurrence of those particular phases. We can also allow that the superject of the first actual entity seeks to repeat or extend the satisfaction from which it is derived; that is, in its enjoyment of its own becoming it will seek to repeat the experience. This is only barely a decision, since 'becoming' is all the experience that is available to it. Thus the process will

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<sup>10</sup> I have explored some theoretical notions relating to this in a series of on-line discussions. We can either simply allow the proposal for the purposes of speculative thinking, or if the concept of ex nihilo creation is rejected per se, use can be made of Whitehead's allowance for epochal shifts, or accidents. The point of a new epoch would be an effective, if not truly actual, beginning. In a formal sense, Whitehead's metaphysics rejects the notion of 'beginning', but the notion of self-creativity enables us to consider actualization in the absence of any actualized prior. We may need to allow the use of a logical prior (perhaps in the sense of Whitehead's treatment of creativity as the 'ultimate of ultimates'), and I accept that this in itself may be problematic. My purpose here is not to defend this particular concept, or argue how the first occasion of actuality might be theoretically possible. Rather it is to move forward from that point, and to examine the nature of whatever might arise from such an occurrence. Accordingly, I hope that a certain forbearance will be exercised in following through the argument. I should add that thanks are due to Lewis Ford and Judith Jones in helping develop my thinking in these areas through the medium of the process-philosophy mailbase list. I cannot claim their support for what follows, but without their close questioning I would not have come this far. The discussion can be viewed at <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/process-philosophy> (see February/March 1999).

continue and will be informed by the character of the primal moment.

An argument against the above might properly question how such a process is initiated, and in particular raise the point about the role of eternal objects. It is here that Ford's position is most helpful. In Transforming Process Theism he treats eternal objects as contingent on actuality; that is, he denies their uncreated state and treats them as abstractions from created actuality:

Eternal objects are timeless or atemporal because they are features mostly abstracted from actual occasions in accordance with the fourth categorial obligation of conceptual valuation. Since they abstract from all traces of their temporal origination, they appear to have none, whether from occasions or from God. (212)

This treatment of eternal objects removes them from the equation of first becoming, but also ensures that the act of that first becoming significantly informs the nature of the derived eternal objects. The importance of this can be seen in the role that this initiating instance has on subsequent events and in the support which such abstractive eternal entities might have for the notion of a divine realm.

We must of course acknowledge that Ford treats the future (rather than the present) as the temporal mode of God's activity. In the position I have set out, we have two options: either to regard the future as eternally emergent; or to regard it as a condition of the move into temporality or activity. Taking a strict line for the purposes of this speculation, I would tend to the latter position. To do otherwise would be to suggest that in some way God is prior to the first becoming, and indeed to imply (perhaps) that God is the initiator of such creative action. It might however be possible to argue that the lack of prehensive data available to the first instance leaves it incapable of self-objectification, at least of the order recognizable in more normal emergence. Since the first being can only make use of whatsoever is available to its experience, a specific and fully determinate concreteness may be denied to it in a way that it would not of necessity be denied to subsequent events. Thus the future (as conceived by Ford) might be the initial mode of temporal existence.

I mentioned above that events subsequent to the first moment will be informed by the first

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moment's 'character'. This too would accord with Whitehead, who comments in the case of an enduring entity that the superject adds 'its character to the creativity whereby there is a becoming of entities superseding the one in question' (84). We might usefully think of the 'character' as broadly equivalent to the enacting of the principle of 'creative advance'. We have already seen that the primal entity can have nothing but itself to regard, and that whatever it does regard must inform the superject (and thereby influence subsequent becomings). Since there is nothing other than the self-becoming of the primal entity to inform its character, then that creative drive is necessarily its character. It follows then that anything which derives an influence from such an initial act will take as that influence the very creativity of primal becoming. Since this is the case, and since without such an informant the very notion of a move through becoming into being fails, it is not unreasonable to suppose that this initial superjective content will be transmitted through all subsequent actualizations so long as they embrace the aim of self-realization. Thus this characteristic of creative advance and self-actualizing may also be regarded as the characteristic of general and maximal intensity. If we treat this primal entity as God, it:

- is within the general scheme of process metaphysics;
- exemplifies that scheme, and in particular 'creative advance' since that is its character;
- is agentive to future and diverse becomings through the maximal intensity of its character of creativity.

Having set out this basic scheme, two additional points are worth bringing forward. The first relates to the superject, which I utilize above to transmit a maximal characteristic. In Lewis Ford's construction, God is denied superjective satisfaction. If Ford is right, and assuming that we may treat temporality as contingent on activity, then my notion of initial becoming serving as the founding character for all subsequent becoming would appear to fail. There is, however, an alternative way of looking at this. I have already suggested that to conform to Ford's model we might need to forgo fully determinate concreteness in the primal entity (for reason of the lack of prehensible objects in its formation). If we accept Ford's argument for the effective role of non-actual entities (and given Whitehead's notion of eternal objects, I think we must), then the lack of

superjective satisfaction might not be fatal. True, full objectification may be wanting; but the engagement in processive becoming can properly be understood as a move to determinateness. This is a point Ford makes on numerous occasions. Allowing such, we are presented with the possibility that incomplete concrescence may yet be adequate in delivering a temporality which falls short of present finality, but which is temporal nonetheless. If this is indeed the case, then the lack of superjective completion may be less of an obstacle than at first thought. This would require a revision to Whitehead in that it pushes us towards treating the subjectivity of a continuing concrescence as less than wholly private. To be fair, the public face will be, in Ford's words, not very much determinate; but even this is far from the complete impenetrability normally ascribed to concrescence.

The second point I wish to address, and one which I have thus far mentioned only briefly, is that of subjectively determined will. At its most basic level, the difficulty in establishing will differs only marginally from that of establishing personal identity. With the latter comes continuity and self awareness, and from that it becomes possible to envisage a sense of intentionality spreading forward in time. The question to be posed therefore is whether either model of first being (the more traditional first actuality, or my treatment of Ford's notion of the future), will carry the burden. I will deal first with the more standard treatment.

In the case of a first actuality, any notion of subjectively determined will must be very slight indeed. I can see little way around this, except perhaps via a bifurcation of evolutionary development. By this I mean that the 'first being' retains its specific character through serialization, but that alongside this process there is a quite separate mode of actualization for more conventional entities. Even if we stretch our notion of Whitehead's metaphysics, this is unworkable and constitutes a return to just the kind of dualism Whitehead was striving to avoid. The only viable alternative would be to treat the primal entity truly as a single and primary occasion. Although this cannot establish anything approaching subjectively determined will, the entity might nonetheless, through both its expressive character and self-determining drive, propagate its originary creativity and thereby to engender a creative and unitive world. This broad aim would be transmitted via its superjective mode which would carry the supremely

intensive character of the first moment into subsequent concrescence. Given the intensity of the creative character we might suppose that this characteristic would continue as a repeated informant of subsequent occasions; that is, all subsequent occasions would share something of the original moment. The emergence of other agentive characteristics in the increasing complexity of becomings might support or counter such essential creativity. The resulting interplay between this primal intensive characteristic and subsequent complex aims forms something akin to a mutual (if asymmetric) relationship. This is, however, not the relationship of the divine and the mundane. We are obliged therefore to accept that any first being so constituted can be valued only as a legacy, albeit one which, through its initiating and pervasive creative character, is worthy of, if not worshipful regard, then some due recognition of its high import. A God, however, it is not.

Which brings me to the final part of this speculative excursion, and once again to Lewis Ford's tantalising suggestion of God as future creativity. The problems of a 'first being' as discussed above relate to the necessary determinateness of that being, and its subsequent loss of priority on the one hand and its exclusion on the other. With Ford's conceptualization, however, these difficulties are avoided. I acknowledge that what I am pressing at goes beyond the detailed and carefully structured position presented in Transforming Process Theism, but I think nonetheless that there is some ground to be made.

I referred earlier to the state of continual concrescence enjoyed by God as future creativity. I also indicated that because of the lack of a determinate informant, the first being might fail, at least in its initial stage, of full determinateness. The reasoning behind this reflects the principle that only those elements constitutive of a concrescence can inform its outcome. Accordingly, that there are no prior determinate features leads us to a position where the first being (or better, becoming) cannot reach a determinate status. Broadly, this accords with Ford's description of God.

A second element we might consider is the notion of temporality, and in particular the relationship of linear time. Again, I am speculating; but it seems to me that the notion of a first becoming requires a move into the future in that it must of necessity lack either a present or a past. Thus futurity is embedded in its creative characteristic. Again relying on the ontological

principle, it is difficult to understand how something lacking any notion, reference to, or experience of the present could manifest itself as present. Thus in terms of its likely mode of expression, the first being (now, becoming) will tend to sustain the temporal mode of the future. However, in that any subsequent concrescence will have something objectified for it (not the first becoming, but the temporal state of the future which does now exist), the idea of objectification becomes viable, leading to the possibility of self-objectification and determinateness. This defines, in the process of concrescence the second temporal mode (presentness), and in its completion effects the third mode of pastness. Time can thus be treated properly as contingent on becoming and process.

A third point in Ford's favour is that his conception of God, through the introduction of the idea of infusion, allows some degree of agency. Moreover, this is regarded as responsive agency in that God must reflect, in part, the prior determinateness of the fully actualized entity for which creativity and initial aim is supplied. It is less obvious, however, that is wholly adequate in answering my call for God to exhibit subjectively determined will. The agency is slight; and the determinateness, in Ford's words, is 'not very much at all'. Additionally, we must not lose sight of the fact that the overwhelming weight of decision in achieving determinateness remains with the present becoming and not with God. This is in accord with the principle of self-creation at the centre of Whitehead's thought. It seems then that God's contribution carries at most only the most general form of purposeful intent, and this would seem to fall far short of what we require here. There are advantages however: God's subjectivity is continuous, and the final actualization of the infused initial aim is uncertain (thus reflecting my earlier comments concerning the nature of will). There is also the general drive to creativity which is passed from God to the creature, and, if we treat this creativity as a primary characteristic of first being, we might be able to regard it as a contingent (and subjectively formulated) potency rather than as the general ground underlying all else. This brings us close to the notion of subjectively determined will; possibly close enough if we allow that 'will' in this context is very generalized indeed.

It remains only to see whether the position I have outlined answers the religious need. Ford (at least with regard to his own more structured conception of God as future creativity) believes it



does, but I am less certain. It will be recalled that the notion of First Being is being used explicitly to support the religious notion of Creator. True, I have argued that my criteria are to a lesser and greater extent met; but for all this there seems to be a lack of available purchase for the religious sensibility. By filtering First Being through Ford's model we have retained the formal and sequential priority of God, and enabled God to enjoy continued relationship to worldly creative advance. But is this enough? It is likely that Austin Farrer would think not, because God's role is insufficiently determined with regard to the divine-human personal relationship. This is a God that cannot intervene, and cannot be influenced to so do.

Perhaps my demand here is too great; or perhaps Whitehead was right after all when he said that 'the concept of religious feeling is not an essential element in the concept of God's function in the universe'. It may well be that our religious feelings and conceptions are but projections of our effort to understand, to develop appropriate codes of human conduct; and that therefore all we can draw from theology is metaphor. This is not to deride its value, but rather to place religion in an altogether less absolute realm. As Whitehead implies, religions need God, but a God does not need religion. A First Being there might be; and it might persist and continue in its creative advance. It might even sustain the world through its lure to actualization. But it has scant religious significance. It is but an accident from which our determinateness derives. As such, it may be sufficient in its exemplification of process and thereby answer the process conception of God; but for a God of Religion I think the answer must lie elsewhere.

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