

Some Platonic implications of Whitehead's concept of God

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the important reservations Whitehead had about those aspects of Platonic thought which have been assumed to be fundamental to Process philosophy. While the Platonic Receptacle seemed to have a formative influence on Whitehead's metaphysical speculations, other aspects of Platonic thought in relation to ideas about the divine were no more than suggestive.

Plato was far and away A.N. Whitehead's favourite philosopher, and Whitehead's carefully worded but often misquoted claim that 'the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato'¹ assumes a very personal connotation when one recalls how closely related was Whitehead's methodology to Plato's. But the two philosophers are separated by more than two thousand years of intense activity in philosophy, not to mention other attendant revolutions, especially in science, a fact that should warn us not to ally these two great figures too closely. Like Plato, Whitehead was a mathematician, and this influenced him in his neo-Platonic approach towards the world and reality. His linking of Plato with Newton (in his assertion that the *Timaeus* and the *Scholium generale* were 'the two statements of cosmological theory which have had the chief influence on western thought')² shows value judgement operating at a high level of generality, and confirms Whitehead's regard for Plato as a mathematician. Furthermore, in *Adventures of Ideas* Whitehead acknowledges Plato's success in illustrating the chief connections between science and philosophy.³ Whitehead too was interested in the relation between the world as described by physics, on the one hand, and the realities of life, on the other, and the relation of both to moral, aesthetic and religious experiences. We do not know if Whitehead agreed with Bertrand Russell's comment on the *Timaeus* (that it 'contains more that is simply silly than is to be found in his other writings'),⁴ but he would certainly have been unfazed by it, confident in his belief that 'what it lacks in superficial detail, it makes up for by its philosophic depth'.⁵ Thus, the strange fancifulness of parts of the *Timaeus* fails to conceal how potently its integrative metaphysics anticipates Whitehead's position concerning the unification of the events of nature. But behind Whitehead's adoption of a Platonic temper of mind, and his endorsement of a welter of Platonic suggestions, the inheritance from the classical past is no more

¹ A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, revised edition, ed. D.R. Griffin and D.W. Sherburne (New York 1978), 39.

² *ibid.*, 93.

³ A.N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (Cambridge 1933).

⁴ B. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London 1946), 165.

⁵ *Process and Reality*, 93.

than suggestive. For Whitehead, Plato might have been a formative influence, but, as we shall see below, much of Whiteheadian speculative philosophy can be regarded as a reaction against the Platonic archetypes.

1. Whitehead's philosophy of organism and the perceived Platonic model

Whitehead's claim that his theory of organism correlates the realities of 'actual events' with the doctrine of non-temporal 'eternal objects' was undoubtedly conceived in a Platonic context, but his position was essentially in opposition to Plato's idea that antecedent Forms are always more real and of higher absolute value than the actual world. In contrast, Whitehead's innovative theory claimed that the individual being, or actual event (often termed 'actual occasion'), is the only reality. The nature of the 'ingredience' of Whitehead's eternal objects into individual events and the way universals act as conditioning agents on finite, temporal and constantly changing individual units of reality contradicts the Platonic view (as encapsulated by A.E. Taylor) of what is permanent and what fluctuates. Taylor wrote: 'Discourse about the fixed and unchanging archetype, or model, can be exact and final; it has the definitiveness of its object: discourse about its sensible copy, which is continually varying and changing, can only be approximate.'⁶ But Whitehead's conclusion is the exact opposite. So it would be an error to regard Plato's dualism as applicable to what is at the core of Whitehead's Process philosophy and, as we shall see later, to its metaphysical substrate, which involves the discussion about God that is so eloquently expounded in his greatest book, *Process and Reality*. In order to appreciate the relation of Whitehead's unPlatonic conclusions to the Platonic elements in his thinking we need to describe the main tenets of Whiteheadian Process thought and explain some of his technical terms.

In *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929)⁷ we have an exposition where Whitehead asserts that ultimate components of reality are 'events' in time, not static situations or particles of matter. An event is never instantaneous, for it always lasts over a certain duration (although perhaps an infinitesimally short period of time, as when a molecule in this paper reacts to another). This is an event and a process in time. An instant of time and a point in space have no place in his scheme. Thus, with events we do not talk of how things are (what they are made of) but of how things become. The process of events, their 'becoming', is fundamental. Those events of which the world is made are called 'actual entities'. In older philosophies substance plays a fundamental role, but unlike substance (which endures), an actual entity has no permanence. The provenance of this concept in classical antiquity is immediately apparent when we recall Heraclitus' assertion that no man can step twice in the same river. Here is encapsulated the hypothesis that the only absolute which exists is change. Only process and change can be counted on as the basis of reality.

⁶ A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (London 1926), 440-1.

⁷ This book, Whitehead's *magnum opus*, is based on the Gifford Lectures which he delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1927-8.

The actual entity 'becomes' as it absorbs influences from other entities in its environment, including God. As we shall see later, God also can become. This absorption or takeover is termed 'prehension' or 'feeling', literally meaning a grasping (which need not necessarily be conscious). The table on which I am writing prehends its surroundings, since its molecules react to others. The entity prehends objects from its environment. Those objects in turn are said to exert 'causal efficacy' on the subject. Clearly this is not some easily understood effect such as we might consciously experience in the temporal progress of events in our daily lives, but rather, as the description of the table suggests, is fundamental to all aspects of existence, in a multitude of different ways and down to the sub-atomic level. In 'seeing', for instance, the eye's enjoyment of a reddish feeling is intensified and transmuted and interpreted by complex occasions of the brain into definite colours and other instances of qualitative 'eternal objects'. The original physical feeling of causal efficacy is submerged but not eliminated by an ingression of 'conceptual feelings'. As we shall see later, conceptual prehensions allow the objective scale of values given by the primordial nature of God to enter the decision, i.e. to have a role *via* various eternal objects. It is then that we have a display of qualities presented to us during the process of concrescence.

'Concrescence' is the term Whitehead applies to the becoming of an actual entity. This is an integration as a result of prehending other things or as a result of experiencing the causal efficacy of other things on it. Thus it is a two way process. Actual entities, or actual occasions (which, because of the implication of temporality, might be a more appropriate term), are the final real things of which the world is made up. There may be gradations of importance, or diversities of function, but in principle all are on the same level.

When the concrescence is complete, an actual entity's private life, during which it has been prehending, comes to an end. In perishing it embarks on a public career and the cycle starts again. This 'novel occasion' now becomes the object for another subject toprehend, and, if consciously, with aspirations of a kind of immortality. An important distinction should be made between physical prehension and conceptual prehension: actual entities are physically prehended, eternal objects conceptually prehended.

Whitehead sees eternal objects as ingredients in an experience similar to Plato's ideal Forms. They are patterns and qualities like squareness, blueness, hope or love. Whitehead's definition of eternal objects has its source in classical Greek thought, for 'eternal objects of the objective species are the mathematical Platonic forms'.⁸ But here he is referring to what he termed the *objective* forms of numerical relationships and geometrical shapes. Eternal objects of the *subjective* species function in a more complicated manner. They are the qualitative clothing to the raw quantitative data of the objective species. Such a subjective species is 'an emotion, or an intensity, or an adversion, or an aversion, or a pleasure, or a pain',⁹ and so on.

⁸ *Process and Reality*, 291.

⁹ *ibid.*

When an actual entity undergoes concrescence it acquires a definite character to the exclusion of other possible characters by selecting some eternal objects (rather than others) to conceptuallyprehend. So if I say that this pencil is green, then this is a proposition where the subject is a society (nexus, or group) of molecular actual entities and the predicate is the eternal object 'green'. The fusion of the two is the combining of something real with something ideal. An eternal object refers only to 'pure possibilities' of 'definiteness' and lacks purity when ingressing into the real world since it is mixed with many other eternal objects. The process is therefore ambiguous and Whitehead's system is not Platonic in that it clearly does not allow an eminent reality to the realm of the eternal objects. Also, in carrying out its role of objectifying the actual world the eternal object is not coercive, since each actual entity is free to enjoy its concrescence in a manner appropriate to itself (e.g. according to the laws of nature or some other logical expectation, which obviously draw on numerous other eternal objects). In this crucial synthesis of eternal object and actual entity 'the eternal object has suffered the elimination of its absolute generality of reference',¹⁰ and the reason for this is because it is actualised in the real world and is also interweaving with other eternal objects.

2. Whitehead's God and Plato's Receptacle

Actual entities and eternal objects play a central role in Whitehead's concept of the divine. In tracing Whitehead's thoughts about God we note a subtle evolution from *Science and the Modern World* (1925) through *Religion in the Making* (1926) to *Process and Reality* (1929), and beyond to *Adventures of Ideas* (1933). A culmination of his metaphysical position may be seen in the famous assertion in *Process and Reality* that 'God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles ... He is their chief exemplification'.¹¹ We note the startling assertion that there is no going behind actual entities/occasions to find anything more real: 'God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space.'¹² Later, in *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead indicated that in dealing with the two ultimates, actual events and eternal objects, he was aware not only of Plato's formulation of actualities and Forms respectively, but of a mysterious third category in Plato. This was the Receptacle, a kind of 'general activity' underlying everything. There are three categories in Whitehead too, and for Whitehead the counterpart to the 'third category' is God.

In the *Timaeus* Plato had great difficulty in describing his third category, in that it is 'a form difficult and obscure to express in words. What power and nature must it be supposed to have? This most particularly: it is the receptacle and as it were the nurse of all generation' (49a). This obscurity was compounded by a common underlying assumption, namely that earth, water, air and fire were the basic elements 'contained' in the Receptacle. This assumption must be misconceived since they are liable to transformation and therefore are not fixed.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 258.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 343.

¹² *ibid.*, 18.

So there must be something more fundamental, for 'anything which we see to be continually changing, as, for example, fire, we must not call "this" or "that", but rather say that it is "of such a nature"' (49d). In other words there is a dilemma as to whether fire and the other elements have ultimacy, and Plato aimed to resolve the misconception by proceeding to generate the fundamental elements differently, beginning from abstract geometry. In relation to the misconception it is clear that the assumed permanence of what were previously deemed to be fixed elements was seen to have a precarious fluidity which compromised the metaphysical argument.

Another pre-organisational level was required in order to deal intelligibly with the ultimate nature of the 'new' fundamental elements and this was termed the Receptacle. Therefore, a new category was added to the existing two. There must be three, which are described in the *Timaeus* as 'that which is generated, that in which it is generated, and that in the likeness of which that which is generated is made' (50c-d). This new component, the Receptacle (the middle one in the last quotation), was added to provide the means of linking the first and the third, and connect the first ('becoming', in their fluidity, of what is generated, which are just imitations) with the third ('being', in their fixity, of Forms). The Receptacle acts as a necessary vessel, as 'that in which' all becoming takes place. In his *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Greek Thought*, R.J. Hankinson has questioned the necessity for Plato to postulate

this preliminary, pre-organizational stage of development: but one answer that suggests itself is this. The world, even after the intervention of the Artisan, must still roll forward under its own steam (Plato does not envisage the continual intervention of God in the world as a conserving cause): it must, then, have a dynamism built into it, after the manner of Anaximander ... and Empedocles.¹³

Since the Receptacle is 'apprehended without sensation' (*Timaeus* 52b), its relationship with the world is very abstract. It is ineffable in not being matter but a potency of matter. Plato describes the Receptacle as a space 'which is everlasting, not admitting destruction; providing a situation for all things that come into being, but itself apprehended without the senses by a sort of bastard reasoning, and hardly an object of belief' (52b). Space is a 'realm' for forms to be instantiated in actualities. So space is the receptacle of becoming. But becoming is time; so space and time are logically aligned.

In *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead's absorption with this alignment is seen in the way he compares Plato's Receptacle with the function of space-time in modern conceptions of the universe. Whitehead takes over Plato's Receptacle as 'the matrix for all begetting, and whose essence is process with retention of connectedness'.¹⁴ For Whitehead the general intercommunication between things rests on the Receptacle imposing 'a common relationship on all that happens' without imposing 'what that relationship shall be'.¹⁵ The idea of a real communication between ultimate realities which inheres in the Receptacle, 'which

¹³ R.J. Hankinson, *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Greek Thought* (Oxford 2001), 118.

¹⁴ *Adventures of Ideas*, 192.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

participates in no Forms',¹⁶ becomes central to Whitehead's development of his philosophy in that actual entitiesprehend other entities and the eternal objects and, both through physical and conceptual prehension, seem to search for a somewhat ineffable correspondence with Plato's doctrine of the 'medium of intercommunication'. In *Adventures of Ideas* Whitehead pays tribute to Plato's scientific and metaphysical foresight concerning the Receptacle because,

at the present moment, physical science is nearer to it than at any period since Plato's death. The space-time of modern mathematical physics, conceived in abstraction from the particular mathematical formulae which applies to the happenings in it, is almost exactly Plato's Receptacle.¹⁷

The Platonic idea is metaphysically enhanced by an important corollary in the *Timaeus* (28a), where it is asserted that 'now everything that becomes or is created must of necessity be created by some cause, for without a cause nothing can be created'. We may ask if, in this analogy, and with the implication of the divide between creator and created being eliminated (or almost eliminated), the Receptacle in Plato's sense of the concept is so encompassing and inclusive as to invoke God. Whitehead seems to believe so and goes on to compare this principle of concretion with Lucretius's Void and Leibniz's God. Simply put, it is a metaphysical concept which, because it is the locus of creation, conjures up the divine. Unlike Plato's concept, God's intervention as 'a conserving cause' is envisaged.

Despite Plato's characteristically tangential approach to God in the *Timaeus* the assertion that 'without a cause nothing can be created' must have been an irresistible stimulus for Whitehead's bold and simple clarification in *Adventures of Ideas* of the Platonic Receptacle as a model for the divine participation. The importance of the Receptacle for Whitehead is substantiated by the fact that Plato's other metaphysical speculations in the *Timaeus*, surrounding the World-Soul and the Demiurge, prompted no particular reaction from Whitehead, except for one categorical dismissal of the World-Soul which highlights the rather unPlatonic stance Whitehead occasionally assumed in *Adventures of Ideas*, and which corroborates his reaction against a Platonic dualism:

In the *Timaeus*, Plato provides a soul of the world who is definitely not the ultimate creator ... In the *Timaeus* the doctrine can be read as an allegory. In that case it was Plato's most unfortunate essay in mythology. The World-Soul, as an emanation, has been the parent of puerile metaphysics, which only obscures the ultimate question of the relation of reality as permanent with reality as fluent: the mediator must be a component in common, and not a transcendent emanation.¹⁸

3. God as the principle of limitation

Although Whitehead could have borrowed or adapted or elaborated the Receptacle, he devised a rather different concept, which evokes more directly the divine participation than was ever possible in Plato, that of the 'principle of

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 171.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 192-3.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 166.

limitation' (see the chapters on 'Abstraction' and 'God' in *Science and the Modern World*).¹⁹ This defines the general limitations which seem to be imposed on the very structure of ultimate reality, not just of the final real things of which the world is made, but of the eternal objects as well. Eternal objects are limited in scope and Whitehead's consideration of this limitation formed his view that 'in the place of Aristotle's God as Prime Mover, we require God as the Principle of Concretion [i.e. limitation]'.²⁰ Whitehead claims that God grades the eternal objects in terms of their relevance to one another:

The general relationships of eternal objects to each other, relationships of diversity and of pattern, are their relationships in God's conceptual realization. Apart from this realization, there is mere isolation indistinguishable from nonentity.²¹

God also grades the eternal objects in terms of their relevance for inclusion in particular actual occasions. 'By reason of the actuality of this primordial valuation of pure potentials, each eternal object has a definite, effective relevance to each concrescent process.'²² The relation between eternal objects and actual entities is what ensures both order and novelty in the world. It is God in His primordial nature 'as the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality'²³ that makes this graded relevance effective in the world through creatively providing the initial aim for each concrescing occasion. Later we shall see how the initial aim 'is a direct derivative from God's primordial nature'.²⁴ The idea of limitation is clarified further, and significantly, so as to introduce the notion of value:

Restriction is the price of value. There cannot be value without antecedent standards of value, to discriminate the acceptance or rejection of what is before the envisaging mode of activity. Thus there is an antecedent limitation among values, introducing contraries, grades, and oppositions.²⁵

Some eternal objects naturally differ from others and are therefore graded differently. When they intermingle (for, as we have noted, there is a plurality of activity involved in the ingression of eternal objects), Whitehead claims that there is inevitably a gradation of relevance. We noted in the first section of the paper that an eternal object refers only to 'pure possibilities' of 'definiteness'. But which possibilities are relevant? And how are they chosen? The realm of eternal objects must be graded and the agency for this to occur intelligibly cannot be the object itself but, rather, another persuasive power, namely God. So under the divine auspices valuation occurs, and this must be effected in the context of the determined and actual, since the only reality is actual events belonging to finitude and not to undetermined infinity and abstraction, hence the fundamental role of

¹⁹ *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge 1926), 195-214 and 215-23 respectively.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 216.

²¹ *Process and Reality*, 257.

²² *ibid.*, 40.

²³ *ibid.*, 343.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 67.

²⁵ *Science and the Modern World*, 221.

the actual entity. If the actual event is so fundamental then this inevitably leads to an examination of God Himself as an actual entity.

4. God as an actual entity

In his paper 'The problem of God in Whitehead's system',²⁶ Ivor Leclerc refers to Whitehead's discussion in *Religion in the Making* of the three 'formative elements' (which we have touched upon in 'Whitehead's God and Plato's Receptacle'). Defined precisely, these formative elements are: first, 'the creativity whereby the actual world has its character of temporal passage to novelty'; second, 'the realm of ideal entities, or forms, which are in themselves not actual, but are such that they are exemplified in everything that is actual according to some proportion of relevance'; and third, 'the actual but non-temporal entity whereby the indetermination of mere creativity is transmuted into a determinate freedom. This non-temporal actual entity is what men call God—the supreme God of rationalized religion.'²⁷ Leclerc shows how Whitehead characterised the third formative element, God, as the actual but non-temporal entity, a characterisation which was maintained throughout the systematic elaboration of his metaphysics and cosmology in *Process and Reality*. However, Leclerc posits that in *Process and Reality* there was a crucial change to the Whiteheadian God as described in *Religion in the Making*. He explains that

the second of his 'formative elements', namely 'eternal objects' appears in *Process and Reality* listed fifth among his 'Categories of Existence,' the first of these being 'actual entities.' At the end of this list Whitehead stated that: 'Among these eight categories of existence, actual entities and eternal objects stand out with a certain extreme finality. The other types of existence have a certain intermediate character' [*Process and Reality*, 22]. The third 'formative element,' God, is listed nowhere in the entire scheme of categories. God appears only in the following chapter, entitled 'Some Derivative Notions.' It therefore becomes evident that Whitehead had subsumed God under the general category of 'actual entity,' and that actual entities were thus divided into the plurality of temporal actual entities, and one non-temporal actual entity, God.²⁸

But we recall that actual entities 'are devoid of all indetermination',²⁹ i.e. they enjoy actuality. With reference to God, Leclerc sees a contradiction here. He claims that if the general character of the physical universe requires certain ultimates if it is to have coherence and be understood, then these ultimates have of necessity to *transcend* the physical, 'and that they are themselves not to be grasped, understood, in terms of the categories in which the physical is understood'.³⁰ (Leclerc goes on, in passing, to recognise that 'Plato's, in the *Timaeus*, was the first, and possibly the greatest, insight into this'.) But in *Process and Reality* Whitehead is positing the opposite, i.e. that God *is* to be understood

²⁶ I. Leclerc, 'The problem of God in Whitehead's system', *Process Studies* 14.4 (1985), 301-15. On line: <http://www.religion.online.showarticle.asp?title=2571>.

²⁷ *Religion in the Making* (new impression, Cambridge 1927), 77-8.

²⁸ 'The problem of God in Whitehead's system', online version, section IV.

²⁹ *Process and Reality*, 29.

³⁰ 'The problem of God in Whitehead's system', online version, section VI.

according to the terms of his (revised) metaphysical categories, i.e. as an actual entity. Here Whitehead shows his discontent with the Platonic view as previously considered in *Religion in the Making* and abandons the less controversial theory of the three formative elements. Leclerc deplores this abandonment and argues against Whitehead's new concept of God. He concludes: 'if one takes into account Plato's insight, which was also that of Plotinus, that a principle, source, of actuality cannot itself be an actual being, it is clear that Whitehead's conception of God as an "actual entity" is unacceptable.'³¹

When Whitehead asserted that God 'is that actual entity from which each temporal concrescence receives that initial aim from which its self-causation starts',³² we should enquire, as Leclerc does, as to how this concurs with God's primordial nature. In *Process and Reality* there is the assumption that only something actual could perform the role of the principle of limitation and this is codified in the 'ontological principle', whereby (and as if in answer to doubters like Leclerc) "'decision" must be referable to an actual entity. Everything must be somewhere; and "somewhere" means "some actual entity". Accordingly the general potentiality of the universe must be somewhere ... This "somewhere" is the non-temporal actual entity.'³³ Elsewhere he was more blunt and wrote that 'the notion of God ... is that of an actual entity immanent in the actual world'.³⁴ We can therefore deduce that, if it is fruitless to aim to discover anything about what is outside the world, about the transcendental God, for instance, we can certainly seek to learn about the immanent God. This poses a grave problem, since God must act as a whole so as not to be self-contradictory. Each of His two aspects, the primordial and the consequent, must surely be related modes. More than one commentator has sought to deflect the problem by suggesting that 'primordial' and 'consequent' should be taken as adjectives rather than nouns.³⁵ But the problem remains.

5. Value in Whitehead and the Good in Plato

We have previously noted that restriction 'is the price of value'. If we consider a passage from the *Republic* (509b) about the Form of the Good and how it is an ultimate standard against which things can be measured or assessed we sense that this Form has a special position as a necessary condition for all that is valuable. It is the highest of the Forms, and consequently the hypothesis of it goes much further than merely seeing it as identical with knowledge or pleasure (see *Republic* 505b-d). The Form of the Good is a measure which directs actualities as they aspire to conform to a standard. Some have inferred (perhaps cautiously, since there is much dispute about this) that the Form of the Good is not only the fundamental condition of experience, but must surely be God. Whatever it might be it is certainly ineffable, a view reflected in Socrates' hesitation in explaining its

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *Process and Reality*, 244.

³³ *ibid.*, 46.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 93.

³⁵ See, for instance, J.W. Lansing, 'The "natures" of Whitehead's God', *Process Studies* 3.3 (1974), 143-52. On line: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2431>.

essential nature (506e), when he does no more than describe 'what seems to be the offspring of the good and most nearly made in its likeness'. It seems that its inherent nature can only be intuited, hence the metaphorical or, indeed, mystical tone which Plato assumes. In the famous analogy of the sun Plato seeks to clarify. He aims to make Glaucon apprehend the visible and the intelligible by conceiving the sun as the cause of light and recognising how right it is 'to deem light and vision sunlike' (509b). But the sun 'not only furnishes to visibles the power of visibility but it also provides for their generation and growth and nurture'. Analogously 'the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power'. For Glaucon this is all hyperbole, but in its sensuous imagery the passage succeeds in affirming the transcendent status accorded to the Good among the Forms, confirming the metaphysical necessity of a principle of 'good'. In discussing the good, sometimes it is difficult to determine whether Plato means by it an idea, an attribute, a principle, a power, or a personal God. But it is not surprising that many later thinkers, like Plotinus, interpreted it as referring to the divine. In *Adventures of Ideas* Whitehead acknowledges that the Good is 'an ultimate qualification not to be analysed in terms of any things more final than itself',³⁶ but he does not amplify further on the metaphysical implications. While he often talks of the goodness and perfection of God he does not specifically connect the Platonic Good with the Whiteheadian God. In his writings generally the Good does not have the weighty significance of the Receptacle, and, while Whitehead appreciates how the Good subsumes or epitomises 'value' and is part of God's self-limitation', he fails (in one or two asides) to heed Plato's warning in *Republic* about seeing it as merely identical with knowledge and pleasure.

6. Whitehead's God as primordial *and* consequent

If there is a transcendent God who is also an actual entity we must accept that He is dipolar. He is both transcendent and immanent, primordial and consequent. In *Process and Reality* one of the major amendments to Whitehead's ideas about God previously suggested in *Science and the Modern World* and *Religion in the Making* was with reference to His primordial nature. In Part III, Chapter III of *Process and Reality* an entity's 'initial aim' is seen as an endowment inherited from 'the inevitable ordering of things, conceptually realized in the nature of [the primordial] God'.³⁷ This presupposes an important modification of, or extension to, the principle of limitation, so as to include something more creative (defined by Charles Hartshorne as a principle of 'unbounded possibility'). In Hartshorne's view God is 'a principle of unbounded possibility *and* concretion' [or limitation]. (Hartshorne's italics).

In his paper 'Whitehead's Idea of God' Hartshorne maintains that 'it is somewhat unfortunate that Whitehead's view of God was chiefly associated, for some years, with the phrase "principle of limitation" (or of concretion). This is an

³⁶ See *Adventures of Ideas*, 190.

³⁷ *Process and Reality*, 244.

inadequate description of his view.'³⁸ The reason for this is that unbounded possibility or creativity, with its shifting character, profoundly and subtly enriches the divine instigation, because for Whitehead the 'purpose of God is the attainment of value in the temporal world'.³⁹ Whitehead recognises that God's limitation involves values—since the 'limitation of God is his goodness',⁴⁰ and He is, and chooses to be, limited. In Whitehead's words, if this were not the case 'he would be evil as well as good. Also this unlimited fusion of evil with good would mean mere nothingness. He is something decided and is thereby limited.'⁴¹ If so, such a statement as the following has a strange logic that epitomises Whitehead's thoughts about God's self-imposed limitations at their most rarefied (in being either profound or obscure, depending on one's attitude):

It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent ... It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God.⁴²

These statements, and other similar ones towards the end of *Process and Reality*, indicate how the principle of abstraction elicits an increasingly emotional style.

The proposal that it is God who produces new possibilities, i.e. novelty in actual entities, recurs constantly in Whitehead's metaphysical speculations. This is rationalised by means of the theory of 'hybrid physical prehensions'. A hybrid physical prehension of God is a prehension by the concreting entity of an eternal object simultaneously with a prehension of an eternal object by God. Whitehead's description of this difficult concept is as follows:

A hybrid physical feeling originates for its subject a conceptual feeling with the same datum as that of the conceptual feeling of the antecedent subject. But the two conceptual feelings [prehensions] in the two subjects respectively may have different subjective forms ... There are evidently two sub-species of hybrid feelings: (i) those which feel the conceptual feelings of temporal actual entities, and (ii) those which feel the conceptual feelings of God.⁴³

We have noted that physical prehensions are prehensions whose data involve actual entities, while conceptual prehensions are prehensions whose data involve eternal objects. Both physical and conceptual prehensions are spoken of as pure; an impure prehension integrates the prehensions of the two pure types. Whitehead puts it like this: 'A "hybrid" prehension is the prehension by one subject of a conceptual prehension, or of an "impure" prehension, belonging to the mentality of another subject.'⁴⁴ It seems that 'God's mentality' can be accessed! And one imagines that this conjecture of Whitehead's must surely have been as fraught with as much difficulty as that experienced by Plato when he formulated his notion of the Receptacle.

³⁸ C. Hartshorne, 'Whitehead's idea of God', in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead* (New York 1951), 515-59, at 550.

³⁹ *Religion in the Making*, 87.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 138.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *Process and Reality*, 348.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 246.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 107.

RICHARD ELFYN JONES, WHITEHEAD'S CONCEPT OF GOD

It is God who produces novelty in actual entities. More accurately, God provides the 'initial aim', for what is consequent evolves freely within the realm of the actual entity ('an originality in the temporal world is conditioned *though not determined* by an initial subjective aim supplied by the ground of all order and of all originality').⁴⁵ In Whitehead's view the transition from God's persuasive initiation and the taking over by the actual entity involves a hybrid physical prehension of God by the concreting actual entity. In his book *A Christian Natural Theology*, John B. Cobb sees this as God entertaining 'for each new occasion the aim for its ideal satisfaction':

Such an aim is the feeling of a proposition of which the novel occasion is the logical subject and the appropriate eternal object is the predicate. The subjective form of the propositional feeling is appetite, that is, the desire for its realization. If God entertains such a propositional feeling, we may conjecture that the new occasion prehends God in terms of this propositional feeling about itself and does so with a subjective form of appetite conformal to that of God.⁴⁶

In this assumption we sense the necessity for the primordial God toprehend the temporal world. But that is not all. God's primordial nature is balanced by His consequent nature. Here are Whitehead's words about these two aspects of God:

The consequent nature of God is conscious; and it is the realization of the actual world in the unity of his nature, and through the transformation of his wisdom. The primordial nature is conceptual, the consequent nature is the weaving of God's physical feelings upon his primordial concepts.⁴⁷

Obviously, the only way that actual entities can process in the temporal world is successively. Although the idea of God as an eternal actual entity was formulated in relation to His primordial nature, it is clear that there must be a successiveness in the divine nature and hence a temporality. This is what prompted Whitehead to visualise another aspect of God, namely His consequent nature. In this form, and by means of hybrid physical prehensions, the sequence of contingent experiences of the world brings together the deity and the *de facto* events of the world that God experiences. This is a necessity in order that He can share with every new creation its actual world; and the concreting creature 'is objectified in God as a novel element in God's objectification of that actual world'.⁴⁸ Consequently, because God is dipolar, the consequent nature is constantly relating to His primordial nature. This insight into God's temporal nature came very near to the end of *Process and Reality*, as Lewis Ford argued:

Process and Reality was substantially complete before Whitehead discovered the consequent nature of God ... In terms of Whitehead's total philosophy the move toward a temporal nature of God seems easy enough, but it was such a novel departure from traditional Western classical theism that it is no wonder that

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 108 (my italics).

⁴⁶ J.B. Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia 1965), 156-7. On line: <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1085&C=1118>.

⁴⁷ *Process and Reality*, 345.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

Whitehead was so long blind to these possibilities. After all, God had been for him 'the non-temporal actual entity'.⁴⁹

But there is a difference between the temporal concrescence of God and that of another actual entity, because God is 'above change'. At the same time He is conscious, He has physical feelings, and must logically be affected by the world. God therefore feels all events; He is necessarily dependent on them, as a result of the inevitable decision to limit Himself. Whitehead does not see this as incompatible with His conceptual, eternal, primordial nature, and, as we have noted before, this presents a dilemma, unresolved by Whitehead, concerning the God of 'being' and the God of 'becoming'. In the final section of *Process and Reality* ('God and the World'),⁵⁰ Whitehead deplores the Platonic separation of 'the flux' from 'the permanence' which has led to a static God. He recognises an interplay between that which is static and the things which are fluent and this produces contradictions and logical dilemmas. Words like 'illusion', 'mere appearance', and 'heights which block our vision' underlie Whitehead's intuitions about Hebrew and Christian thought, and of classical Greek thought too. The general tone becomes more poetical than analytical and, despite the many differences between these two philosophers, often reflects the similar instances in Plato where the metaphorical and poetic serve to engage one's imagination in an aesthetic rather than elucidatory manner.

7. Conclusion

Whitehead frequently referred to the Platonic 'Seven Notions', namely 'The Ideas, The Physical Elements, The Psyche, The Eros, The Harmony, The Mathematical Relations, The Receptacle',⁵¹ and expressly adduced that 'all philosophical systems are endeavours to express the interweaving of these components'.⁵² Like Plato, Whitehead was intent both on differentiating between the eternal and the temporal and on bringing them together. But unlike Plato Whitehead emphasises the fact that uniting them is the fundamental aim. Therefore he argued that Plato failed to bring God completely into this world, because in Plato only images of Him or imitations of Him penetrate actuality.⁵³ Plato did not go far enough, was not systematic enough, and, while the attempt to overcome the separation of the permanent and the flux is seen as encouraging, it is no more than a stimulus for Whitehead's own very original departure from Platonic thought. The prescience of Plato's formulation of the Receptacle was certainly inspirational for Whitehead and, in contrast to many historians of science, he saw Plato's mathematical speculations generally as 'the products of genius brooding on the future of intellect exploring a world of mystery'.⁵⁴ But ultimately Plato failed in his attempts at systematisation. For Whitehead, while he

⁴⁹ L. Ford, 'Some proposals concerning the composition of *Process and Reality*', *Process Studies* 8.3 (1979), 146-56, at 152. On-line: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2465>.

⁵⁰ *Process and Reality*, 346.

⁵¹ See *Adventures of Ideas*, 188.

⁵² *ibid.*, 203.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 215.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 195.

was 'the greatest metaphysician [he was] the poorest systematic thinker'.⁵⁵ To the modern reader Plato's references to the deity are obviously much more ambivalent than Whitehead's, and inevitably so when one considers the historical distance between Plato and us. But this does not prevent us from apprehending the affecting spiritual tone of Plato's work as a whole. Despite what has been said above about his caution (at least to modern readers) when referring to God, his philosophy is essentially theistic.

We note also that, in keeping with the Platonic implication, Whitehead himself very often asserted the persuasive rather than coercive nature of God. God 'is the lure for feeling',⁵⁶ and can only produce such order as possible. Thus the notion, for instance, of *creatio ex nihilo* was anathema to Whitehead, whose metaphysics in this respect was much more Platonic in accepting some sort of creation out of chaos. This serves to remind us of the specifically Christian aspect which evolved out of Process and which led to an influential Process theology inspired mainly by Charles Hartshorne. Hartshorne had much more than Whitehead to say about God, but Whitehead also expressed a fascination for Christianity. We see that for him the life of Christ was 'not an exhibition of overruling power', but rather was persuasive: 'Its glory is for those who can discern it, and not for the world. Its power lies in its absence of force. It has the decisiveness of a supreme ideal.'⁵⁷ And, undoubtedly, that supreme ideal was really Plato's. 'Christianity rapidly assimilated the Platonic doctrine of the human soul',⁵⁸ and in Whitehead's opinion Plato's insight and Jesus' life embody the central intuitions which underpin the growth of recent civilisation. The ideas about God's immanence which I have discussed above did not derive from Plato but rather from his followers, as Whitehead himself acknowledged when he wrote of those Christian theologians who had 'the distinction of being the only thinkers who in a fundamental metaphysical doctrine have improved on Plato'.⁵⁹ But Plato was not to be diminished as Whitehead asked his fundamental question: 'Can there be any doubt that the power of Christianity lies in its revelation in act, of that which Plato divined in theory?'⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁶ *Process and Reality*, 344.

⁵⁷ *Religion in the Making*, 47.

⁵⁸ *Adventures of Ideas*, 18.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 214-5.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 214.