

Postlude: Panentheism

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... so thou shalt see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all and all things in himself.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge
'Frost at Midnight'

Having chaired the session on pan-en-theism at the World Parliament of Religions, emerging no wiser than when I entered, I was asked to write a postlude to the present issue of *Sophia*.

How pan-en-theism adds to the numerous and proverbially inadequate attempts to net God in words, this is the question. One, perhaps, that this issue of *Sophia* poses rather than answers.

A Couple of Models

If 'God is Everywhere' as the slightly incoherent nuns¹ taught me at primary school, then if 'everywhere' is taken in a high metaphysical sense, where is S/He not? *Outside us*, i.e., transcendent as in the monotheistic faiths (the good nuns insisted that God was *up* in Heaven)? Or is God *inside us* as Anglican Southbank Theology of 40 years ago posited—and as some 'Oriental' traditions have long maintained

¹The incoherent nuns of my long-ago youth had not yet been freed by Vatican II from religious penal servitude. Since Vatican II nuns have become very savvy about theology, childhood development—and things necessary to their vocation as teachers. In my youth nuns terrified children and polished linoleum.

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with reason and consistency. Or are we inside God—if only because God's *everywhere* is such that we could not but be? It's so large that everything is in it? The problem is that the phrase 'God is everywhere' has a logic open to contestation.

Pan-en-theism relates to pantheism[s], with which many of us are acquainted. But pan-en-theism don't say: *all is God, but we are all in God*. It says 'we are in God' whatever this 'in' may mean. What can it mean given the so loose topical grammar of 'everywhere' in 'God is *everywhere*'? This is a loose grammar that authorizes any locution that you may choose to indulge in: 'My fountain pen is in God.' And suchlike nonsense, 'God is in my fountain pen'—equally unprofitable.

The Platonic idea that cosmos is a living being—*Timaeus* 30b6–c1—is one which we may see as fanciful, or as useful. Here it is useful. My current attempt to grasp pan-en-theism relies on a metaphor about Plato's metaphor. The metaphor for pan-en-theism *or* the cosmos as a living being is the motion picture *Avatar*. In it a planet is hard-wired as a potential totality. Materally Ensouled, therefore? The synapses of every living-being can somehow plug in to the synapses of every other living thing. And—it seems—into those of the Goddess Eywa. Eywa is ambiguously 'in', 'around', 'continuous with' the planet. The film's hero praying to Eywa fears that he may be 'just praying to a tree', but he prays; and it works. Fabulous! Fables are so. Whether prayer answered is the equivalent to plugging a local god into the potential social-ecological-electrical unity is not made clear in the movie. It was fable for all, and not bespoke-made to outfit philosophers. A plugged-in god would, since god trumps not-god is most relevant language-games, provide a neatish model for panentheism. If we are *in* the system with a god, we might suppose that we are *in* god. Though the supposition is not logically watertight.

To neuroscientists, all this omni-wiring of a planet may be as boring a conjecture as are the dud bits of *Timaeus*. But the movie-as-metaphor gives us a sense of 'all living in a potential and realizable oneness—and doing this with a Deity'. Forget that Eywa is a mere local deity like one of Plato's stars, and hold on to the pan-en-theism that the film makes vivid.

Avatar is, of course, too good: as Plato is too good. The idea of a living cosmos with either a live-in god or a Transcendent but continuously creating God fails because there is little evidence that there is a *living cosmos*: this whether or not there is any kind of god/God. The best that a living cosmos may be cashed out as is: 'The world is an ecological whole, fiddle with one bit, and the whole thing may go phut'. Climate change is real: an ensouled cosmos may be a loose, because early and ancient, model of this. Plato was onto something? In *Avatar* the sole role of the Goddess Eywa is: to preserve the balance of Nature! 'Evolutionary Ecology' indeed.

What Would It Be to Be a Panentheist?

What is still up for me is the—I think bigger—issue: when you have a language-game in which 'pan-en-theism is defined, to what profitable uses may you put the word? What difference does it mark in my beliefs if I say, 'Now I am a pan-en-theist?' What would be the cash-value of my new beliefs? What acts would follow one's, 'I am now a panentheist?' What new dispositions would one acquire? *If one is to become an panentheist, what next?*

The argument that ‘if God is everywhere, then all—including us—is in God’ is *prima facie* non-trivial. But if to know what a proposition means is to know what to say next (i.e., consequentially), then one does not know what to say next after ‘If God is everywhere, everything is in God’. Thus the proposition looks, in its inconsequentiality, if not-trivial then non-useful. How propositional, even, is it? What is the logic of propositions which leave us speechless?

If pan-en-theism is different from theism or pantheism the difference that it makes must be *shown*.

A casual and genial ‘Well, if you insist, I’ll say [admit to being] a pan-en-theist’ must have some consequence. I cannot *admit to being* a panentheist, unless there is something different (from the other possibilities) which can be specified as *being-a-panentheist*. I make my avowal of being a panentheist with a false geniality, since I am—as I see it—committing myself to nothing.

Saying Next Related to Doing Next

The consequentialness of a proposition may be a necessary condition of its being non-trivial. The consequence of a proposition in the philosophy of religion should, therefore, (by parity of reasoning) be a change of disposition in the person who accepts, avows, etc., such-and-such proposition. To accept a religious proposition should entail: (a) a change in one’s religious-language game; (b) a change in one’s religious dispositions; and—questionably—(c) a change in one’s conduct. The transition from (b) to (c) is equivalent to one’s *real* assent as opposed to one’s *notional* assent [See Cardinal Newman].

Is Metaphysics Back?

In this issue of *Sophia*, Hegel turns up rather often. There is, even, a plea for the re-inclusion of metaphysics into modern discourse. When trying to talk about God and God’s relationship with the world, we need any insight that helps. So it’s, ‘Any lifeboat in a storm’: However, it’s also, ‘But I won’t join the navy’. Now that scientific cosmology replaces the speculations of *Timaeus* and the myths of *Genesis*, what we need is not—again—metaphysics, but a robust philosophy of science. Real cosmology may well raise philosophical problems, but cosmology itself has long since moved out of philosophy into the natural sciences. It has advanced beyond both Platonic and Hegelian dialectics. The question of where panentheism *is* at this time, this issue of *Sophia*—alas—leaves undecided. In philosophy? In theology? But not in science, certainly.

Definitions as Problematic

Even if pan-en-theists say to theists and pantheists ‘Not quite that’ (that is, to theism or to pantheism), it is incumbent upon them to specify further the *not quite*. If panentheism were content to define itself by the: ‘Not quite theism not quite

pantheism' move, then its definition would—it seems—be non-trivial if and only if one could say what would follow....

'God is everywhere, so all including us is in God' is non-trivial: but seems non-consequential. 'Panentheism is "neither theism nor pantheism"' may be non-trivial. The problem is to see how it can become better than non-consequential. Otherwise it will be no better than the 'God is everywhere ...' example. An example somewhere between a real point, and a mere jest.

Envoi

As a Christian, I am a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. And if Christ is part of—in any sense of 'part of'—the Godhead then I have all along been, in some sense, a pan-en-theist. Does the 'mystical' in 'Mystical Body' render philosophers speechless, or not? To believers the notion cashes out at the very least in the obligation to acts of charity. And it entails some degree of attachment to the sacraments. What else, one needs to ask a theologian; which I am not.