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► **To cite this version:**

Roseline Elorm Adzogle. Resurrecting Whitehead: A theodicy in the wake of global crisis. Global Solidarity Crisis Symposium September 2022, Catholic University of Widya Mandala in Surabaya, Sep 2022, Surabaya, Thailand. hal-04027718

HAL Id: hal-04027718

<https://hal.science/hal-04027718v1>

Submitted on 14 Mar 2023

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Resurrecting Whitehead: A theodicy in the wake of global crisis

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Abstract

The global covid-19 pandemic earnestly reminds us of the fragility of existence in the face of disaster. The question of evil has engaged theologians, philosophers, and ordinary folk either in defense of a belief in a benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient supreme being or to turn towards atheism. Admitting the presence of evil while insisting on the existence of God requires what has come to be called a *theodicy*, understood as the task of justifying the role of an ultimate being in the face of evil. We soon realize, while attempting this, that the classical theistic stance presents logical contradictions by holding God to a strict independence and unilateral power. If we pursue the idea that God is independent of the world, determining entirely its reality by sheer volition, we are challenged by the problem of how a benevolent being causes evil to befall a world that he supposedly loves unconditionally. Creating a logically coherent theodicy requires a reassessment of classical attributes of God that disallow a cohabitation of God and an evil-ridden world, such is the aim of process thought. Process philosophy, largely construed, goes as far back as the pre-Socratic era in the ideas of Anaximander, through to Socrates, much later Spinoza and more systematically elucidated by Alfred North Whitehead. Its leading proponents about the problem of evil are Charles Hartshorne, David Griffin, and John Cobb among a few others.

The present paper explores and critically examines process theism with focus on the relationship between God and natural evil i.e., covid-19. It aims, firstly, to offer an understanding of the metaphysical structure of process philosophy and define the role of God in such a world. Secondly, to contrast this image with classical theology on the nature of God, showing why its notions inevitably lead to contradictions. Lastly, I explain process theodicy as a remedy to the daunting questions of theodicy as well as illustrating its limitations.

1. Moral versus Natural Evil

This preliminary section will be dedicated towards the problematic of natural evil in contrast with moral evil. The term moral evil refers to evil resulting from the ill use of free will by some moral agent leading to acts such as murder, theft, false witnessing, dishonesty and greed.

In a similar vein, natural evil is the consequence of natural processes for which no human agent can be held morally accountable. Some classic examples of natural evil are disasters like the tsunamis, movement of tectonic plates and earthquakes that lead to suffering and loss of life. However, some natural evils are argued as brought on by human wrongdoing or negligence. For instance, cancers, accidents, floods, droughts and earthquakes are occasioned by human irresponsibility, dishonesty and lack of knowledge. Nevertheless, for the purpose of our discussions, natural evil will be defined as an evil resulting solely or chiefly from the operation of the laws of nature. The prevalent position in contemporary theology is that for evil to be considered

natural, no non-divine agent can be held morally responsible for its occurrence. Although some events can be traced to human frailties, if the agents involved could not have reasonably foreseen the consequences of their ways, they are deemed natural instead of moral evil.

On the issue of the current pandemic of covid-19 and whether it qualifies as natural or moral evil. We will require the analysis of the source of the virus as well as its propagation. According to official sources, the Wuhan virus was an accidental transfer from animals to human. Thus, we can effectively classify it as natural evil on that front. Although, the virus spreads rapidly through contact, the question of intentionality can be ruled out because it is less likely that untested asymptomatic people could deliberately spread the disease. Using the above criterion of natural evil, it appears that the covid-19 virus fits squarely in its descriptions.

The general position of religious sects mainly of Judaic, Christian and Islamic origins is that there exists one perfect being, God, who necessarily possesses attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, ontological independence and eternity. This God according to traditional theism is also considered the (sole) creator and sustainer of the life in the universe. This position coupled with the understanding of natural evil raises a plethora of conundrums which the current paper attempts to explore and answer. I will first discuss, briefly, responses to the question of natural evil such as Hick's soul-making theory, Swinburne's free will theodicy, and the natural law defense advanced by Bruce Reichenbach. Further, I will show why such theodicies do not adequately account for the presence of natural evil.

On Hick's soul making theory (Hick, 1966), he argues that for the making of the soul, God requires a certain amount of evil. While the presence of evil is displeasing to God, for the soul to attain perfection i.e. the likeness of God, it requires refinement of which evil plays an essential part. If we consider this position, Hick argues that the necessary condition is a by-product of God's grand plan to bring man to his level of perfection. Yet, does moral evil and its associated mishaps not offer enough religious ambiguity to favor the forging of the soul? Others argue that natural evils are brought about by free agents other than men, viz. fallen angels, and hence evil, whether described as moral or natural, is by pure act of free-will either by human or other free-willed forces (Swinburne, 1978). However, without the evidence of fallen angels, and demons to prove as sources of natural evil, such a defense fails to hold adequate sway in the matter. The soul-making theory fails to explain why moral evil alone does not suffice for the soul to attain perfection.

Accordingly, Swinburne (1978) develops a free-will theodicy in which he argues that the knowledge of moral evil is reliant on the preexistence of natural evil, so the free-will defense is equally valid for natural evil. Here is how he defends his position: Our knowledge from present experience gives us a perspective on future events through inductive reasoning; so, to purposely bring about events or negligently allow them to occur, we must know what consequences will follow from our actions. There must have been an initial event at which this (evil act) occurred that did not come from the intentional act of any agent. Hence, there must be natural evils (whether caused accidentally by persons or by natural processes) if we are to know how to bring about or prevent moral evil. And there must be many natural evils, for our knowledge of the future comes only by induction from many past instances. Swinburne claims that the existence of natural evil is a logical precondition for knowledge of good and evil. Thus, that there is good reason for the existence of natural evil. If God wanted to create a world with free-will in the hopes of claiming the soul towards goodness, then he had no hand in the creation of natural evil purposely to harm humans, but it was the inevitable price to pay for a free-will world. However, this theory begs the question of at what point will the knowledge from the occurrence natural evil be deemed enough?

Lastly, Reichenbach (1982) presents a theory of natural evil as the 'outworking upon sentient creatures of the natural laws according to which God's creation operates'. Through experience, we can agree that the world that we live in operates according to natural laws. Therefore, if we assert that this world was created by God, then it was installed by God to have such a natural order. This natural law according to Reichenbach's theory is binding on all entities in the world. Thus, instead of implying a bifurcated world with natural law determinacy and free willed agents, one must understand that the natural laws allow human beings to make free choices concerning good and evil. Accordingly, creating a world where these free choices occur is better than the alternative. In a world operating according to natural law, natural evil can occur without precipitation.

Now, the obvious question is why God created a world with such a natural order while he could have created an alternative that run entirely on miracles instead of natural law. Again, according to Madden and Hare (1968), God could have created a world where the natural evils that occur from the outworking of the natural law create minimal evil enough to sustain the operations of natural law without causing so much misery. For the sustenance of a hypothetical miracle world, God, by direct intervention, would prevent all-natural evil from occurring. Reichenbach rejects this

option because he claims it would require a constant intervention of God thus jeopardizing the rational choices of worldly beings. God will have to give up free will in order to fulfill the purpose of creating a world where human beings had no suffering. Similarly, no rational choice could be attained because humans will lose the capacity to weigh the outcomes of their choices since events in the world will be dictated by how God chooses to intervene. By introducing the intervention of God, this hypothetical world of miracles will be entirely deterministic both in its natural order and in human action.

Even if a world ran entirely on miracles is not viable, how about the ‘best of both worlds’? This means a world in which natural laws operated while God intervened in the natural course of events in order to eliminate natural evil. This appears consistent with the traditional conception that religious people have of the world. There is a natural scheme of things nonetheless punctuated with acts of miracles. However, this fuels atheistic arguments on why miracles occur sparingly while evils are ever present. The interaction of the natural and the spiritual causal schemes appears to be a difficult stance to take because it requires determining causal superiority. For example, if the cosmos was organized by both natural law and theistic interventions, then for existence and order, one of the two must hold causal power over the other. The temptation is to say that they co-exist through some Leibnizian pre-established harmony¹. This will imply that by this imposed harmony, spiritual laws take precedence. Again, one could assert that both natural and mystical laws exist, yet the latter holds more causal power, in which case we are confronted with an unbalanced miracle world scenario that is not reflective of our reality. The reverse of natural law superseding unnatural decree in causality, although may offer understanding of why natural evil exists, describes a completely nonchalant creator.

It may appear that a theodicy is unattainable based on our knowledge of the world. However, we can conceive of a cosmos that runs on mutual causality between natural law and God. This mutuality implies that both realms i.e. natural and supernatural must share some key features that allow their interaction.

First, there is the question of ontologies. The question of interaction hinges on the ontological natures of the interacting entities.² For God to affect the world and for the world to affect God, both God and the world should share ontological similarities. Second, is the argument

¹ In the *Monadology*, Leibniz argues that God pre-programs monads to accommodate each other’s actions in a harmony established at creation.

² C.f Schaffer, J., *The Metaphysics of Causation*, In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

of the direction of the causal interaction some of which we have earlier seen. We agreed that a form of Malebranche's occasionalism³ that requires the intermittent intervention of God to remove natural evil is a threat to free-will. Again, the Leibnizian preestablished harmony results also in spiritual supervenience over natural law thus undermining rational choice. The final available option for interaction is mutuality. The causal path between the natural world and God goes both ways: God influences the world and the world influences God, and He is as much an entity as all others - influenced as much as he influences. Whitehead's position (Whitehead, 1929) on the nature and the function of the world contradicts the classical perception of God's nature as purely eternal, immutable, omniscient, and all-powerful.

2. Process Metaphysics

The process idea of God contradicts the Aquinas transcendent God in classical theology. Process Metaphysics argues against the impassibility of God while replacing it with a *dipolar* God who is both temporal and eternal. This contingent character of the process God allows a logical response to key theological questions such as prayer, the reciprocity of love, free-will, omnipotence and evil.

Again, process theology pushes the idea of *co-creation* as the basis of an evolutive world. God shares the same nature as the actual entities of the world. These actual entities are in themselves subjective experiences that relate to each other by *feeling*⁴. In this way, God is immanent in the world as a higher degree actual entity who *feels* the other entities of the world and is in turn felt by the world. There is reciprocity in the causal structure of the world between God and man.

In addition, process theology claims that all actual entities by their nature *become*⁵. Thus, God is both changing and evolutive. An evolutive actual entity strives towards some perfecting end. Such is the case of finite entities while God is for himself his final aim- his self-surpassing nature. This seems compatible with the free-will character of the world that ensures that finite beings are free to choose acts that feed a perfected end without compulsion.

How do we justify natural evil? Based on the premise that the world is made of actual entities who possess a modicum of experience, we can argue that this subjectivity may produce certain unintended effects. This is not to say that atoms choose to use their free-will to do evil

³ Sukjae,L. Occasionalism, In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁴ Here 'feeling' is used in Process and Reality to express the basic generic operation of passing from the objectivity of the data to the subjectivity of the actual entity in question.

⁵ Embodies the processual path of all actual entities.

instead of good- which is an absurd position to hold- but to advance the position that feeling and self-causation is in-built in actual entities over which God cannot exert force.

2.1 God as a functional entity

The question of the function of God in process philosophy takes its roots in the philosophy of the organism that Whitehead proposes. The pivotal basis is that everything that is, is a process, and nothing escapes the creative process. If we consider anything as not in this processual reality, it is because they are abstractions therefore are incomplete expressions of reality.

Again, Whitehead distinguishes the concept of concrescence⁶ as the finality to actual entities. An individual entity is first of significance to itself because it self-generates its processes. Whitehead argues that we may observe these events as one constitutive act but upon further analysis we can recognize that they are made up of several individual processes (prehensions). When these events attain such a unity and identity of a given thing, it is termed a concrescence. Through this, everything in the world is linked both by a common space-time frame as well as the dominance of some general “relatedness” of all things that ensures order and uniformity of reality.

The question of how self-causing entities achieve a unified finality without taking a disparate course or possibly resulting in complete randomness and chaos echoes the function of God. God is the arbitrator of this unified process of reality who gives direction to this development of entities. He, “principle of concretion; the principle that initiates a definitive outcome from a situation that is otherwise marked by ambiguity...” is no exception to all metaphysical principles invoked to save them from collapse (Whitehead, 1978. pp.344-345).

2.2 God as an actual entity

God as the essential explanation of the metaphysical principles by exhibiting the summit of their natures and the substantial coherence that such a system must undergo. Nevertheless, for Whitehead, God does not “create” the current events by his own activity, because each of them denotes a self-creation process. His existence and being as an actual entity are denoted by the existence of other actualities. Controversial consequences stem from such a thesis especially for attributes of God such as his immutability, eternal nature, omnipotence and omniscience. This is because understanding God as part of the metaphysical system and being all the same an actual entity, implies firstly an inevitable ‘dependence’ of God on actual entities. Secondly, that he is not

⁶ ‘Concrescence’ is the name for the process in which the universe of many things acquires an individual unity in a determinate relegation of each item of the ‘many’ to its subordination in the constitution of the novel ‘one.’ (Whitehead, 1929)

the creator, at least not in the sense of independently ensuring their existence through an act of pure volition. Thirdly, if he is dependent on the world, then there is active reciprocity. This means that actual entities influence God as much as he does them. Then God must rather be changeable not immutable, or he must be a *co-creator* with actual entities rather than the *sole creator*. Finally, his potency is limited because of this necessary correlation with actual entities and his omniscience does not imply foreknowledge.

What distinguishes God, *primus inter pares*, and the actual entity? Two key differences are argued: 1) Immutability and 2) Omniscience. Here, by immutability we hold that in the realm of awareness by *degree* of explicitness and clarity – only God has the ability of permanence and eternal changelessness. Again, by omniscience we refer to the realm of God's inclusiveness – because there always exist entities in the universe that do not feel each other, but God perceives them all. It is imperative to reiterate that the property of permanence is as present in God as it is in actual entities. Due to the interrelation between actual entities that involves their feeling of the past and their concrescence-becoming objects for future prehensions, they enjoy some immortality, permanence and immutability. It is in the same vein that the knowledge of the past, present and partial future is embodied by the actual entity because it is itself the subject and superject⁷ of its own concrescence. It takes in the past by feeling previous actual entities and it knows the future (partially) because it determines its own direction. So, for God-only varying in degree of intensity—there is more clarity and an endless array of actual entities to feel.

For the purpose of this paper, we will set aside the difference of permanence and eternal changelessness as it is not directly implicated in the question of natural evil, although in some measure all the attributes are linked. We will focus on the question of omniscience and omnipresence.

2.3 The Scope of the knowledge of God

We have argued for the conception of a relative God over an immutable one, a social God over a transcendently distant one and a co-creative God who intimately relates with all other entities other than merely presiding over them.

However, reassessing the classical attributes does not eliminate their underlying significance. God being changing does not nullify his immutability or his timeless existence, nor does his social

⁷ The satisfaction of an actual entity determines its character as superject—i.e., the character it has as objectively immortal, its character as an object encountered as initial datum by succeeding actual entities. (Whitehead, 1929)

nature undermine his transcendence. These seemingly opposing attributes are mere aspects of the same God just as ordinary entities exhibit a similar dipolarity. The ontological structure to actual entities implies that they are constituted of two interactive and inseparable extremities. These poles are the physical and the mental aspects of an actual entity. We are bound by this structure to extend a similar theory to the nature of God. This dual quality in God is represented by his consequent and primordial nature. As with the physical and mental poles of actual entities, so are the two “natures” distinguishable yet inseparable aspects of God. So, while the primordial nature is God’s envisagement of all possibilities as Leibniz calls God’s knowledge of all possible worlds or Spinoza the extent of the idea of God, it embodies the classical themes of eternity, permanence, etc. The primordial aspect expresses God as untethered to the actual course of events. For Whitehead the primordial nature is the aspect of God that signifies a logical space, deficient in actuality. On the other hand, the consequent nature is God’s prehensions of the actual processes of the world which is his interaction and dependence on the actual world. The social aspect of God also known as the consequent nature imbibes the world of actual occasions into its experience; then, by interaction with his primordial aspect—a hub of possibilities—supplies the world with new ideals (new aims), for each actual entity. This function of God is to *lure* creatures towards an attainable perfection.

The quality of omniscience has long been discussed in theological circles and has solicited several theories. However, we will tackle omniscience only from the angle of foreknowledge- does divine foreknowledge follow from the the attributive feature of omniscience?

The classical position on omniscience drawn from theologians such as Thomas Aquinas held that God knows all things because he is the cause of all things. This knowledge is what Aquinas claims is not “discursive” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 14, 7), which means that God’s thoughts are not sequential to each other but he “sees all things together and not successively”. Boethius expressed the relation between God and the knowledge of time and time-bound events as that between points on the circumference of a circle and its center⁸.

However, such a position deprives God of any personal relations with man and again omniscience as simply possessing informational content results in strict determinism and absence of free-will.

Process theologian, Hartshorne (1945), defines "omniscience" as "knowledge of all things, perfect knowledge". For him, omniscience does not necessarily imply foreknowledge, where divine

⁸ C.f Anderson (1963) On Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy.

foreknowledge is God's view of all events that, from our standpoint, are future events (Hartshorne, 1945, p.284).

Hartshorne argues against the actual possibility of foreknowledge and asserts that divine foreknowledge is not conceivable unless future events exist, as fully determinate, to be known. We can say that God's omniscience means that he possesses complete knowledge of the past as fully determinate, of the present in the process of determination and the future as partially determinate. The future is irreducibly potential rather than actual, thus is not fully determinate and any perfect knower having perfect knowledge must know reality in this way. Similarly, considering our position on a God whose existence is temporal and changing must conform to the actual reality of the time sequence as we know it. If perfect knowledge is knowledge of the world as it actually exists, then "omniscience is only possible as itself temporal -- as knowing new facts when there are new facts to know, but always knowing all the facts there are at the time" (Hartshorne, 1945, p.284). God knows the world by acquaintance⁹ through his feeling of the experiences of the world at every point in the time sequence and because time is continually advancing as a line to which points are added, there is no moment of completeness.

In times of natural evil, God knows all that needs to be known in the actual reality of time. God did not know ahead of time the occurrence of Covid-19 and its effects wholly because the future even for God is partially determined, all though he knows the laws that govern it and the extent of those laws, its completion remains open-ended over which God has no control. We have shown that defining omniscience in terms of informational content drives a deterministic agenda that undermines free-will while questioning the love of God if we are mere puppets in a grand design.

2.4 Can God avert evil?

We discussed to some extent the scope and definitions of evil firstly by distinguishing its features thus having moral evil emanate from man and natural evil as not directly induced by any recognizable causal agent. Here, the question of the present- precisely the covid-19 pandemic- posing much suffering to the world revives the question of the extent of God's power in the world. We must first look at the definition of omnipotence. The etymology of the word implies surpassing power or possessing ability to bring about any state or event without restriction. Omnipotence as unrestricted ability has been criticized because it implies that God could bring about states or events

⁹ Here, we refer to knowledge by acquaintance employed by Russell (1973).

that are logically incoherent. It appears that God himself is bound by logical coherence thus it is impossible for him to create illogical states such as a circle with unequal radii (*Summa Contra Gentiles* II, ch. 25, para. 14).

Process theologians (Griffin, 1976) argue against the assumption that any logically possible state—that is, its description involves no contradiction—can be *single-handedly* brought about by an omnipotent being. In fact, Griffin denies entirely any autonomous causal power. Accordingly, even God's decision cannot totally determine the acts of another. God acts by persuasion rather than by coercion. To act by persuasion implies God cannot and does not act unilaterally.

Persuasion and coercion differ in nature rather than degree. To persuade is to convince others to do something of their own will while to coerce is to force one's will upon others against their will. In the case of the current pandemic, as an actual event with a host of related events, God can by way of partial intervention supply the subjective aims that lure aggregates of actual entities towards a certain end that is beneficial to them (eliminating evil). This response to the lure will require acceptance and disposition on the part of the actual entities themselves to advance in the direction of that aim. Nevertheless, according to Bassinger, if omnipotence implies surpassing power and God possesses only persuasive power, then it implies that any being that possesses both persuasive and coercive power will be greater than God. It is often misinterpreted as God being only a final cause and never an efficient cause. Here, again the process response would be to reiterate the dipolar nature of God as bearing both coercive and persuasive power in a way that does not interrupt human freedom. Much like Whitney (1985) argues, there is a coercive aspect of God's power in insofar as the laws of nature are the result of a divine decision that no creature is free to abrogate. This is the aspect of God that is responsible for efficient causation, order and creative advance which requires or required no other creature's decision. While his consequent nature acts through persuasion as a formal cause. Hartshorne expresses this as "God decides upon the basic outlines of creaturely actions, and guaranteed limits within which freedom is to operate. That not everything can be guaranteed does not mean that nothing can be" (Hartshorne 1966, p. 206). So just like other actual entities can persuade other events to achieve a certain aim, God as the ultimate lure of feeling and the provider of subjective aims is merely an intensified form of that power. As much as God wills it that we may not suffer and loves us intensely, His consequent aspect is incapable of forcing any actual entity or aggregate entities to attain some end.

3. Conclusion

Based on the description so far analyzed, it is certain that the process God is not exactly the God of religions (at least in the classical sense). Nevertheless, it offers an opportunity to revisit conventional ideas of God and the universe in a way that resets the stage for a dialogue between scientific, religious, social and political spheres. Very often issues of faith are isolated from rigorous scrutiny by the common mantra that *faith and God defy logic*. However, like Hartshorne (1948) says, the terms and concepts with which we characterize religious doctrines are essentially human, thus it is incumbent upon us to set these ideas rationally in order to offer clarity to our understanding. The Whiteheadian process conception of God does present some weaknesses that should be highlighted. Although the grand axes of process philosophy agree with biblical teachings, others are clearly at odds. For instance, accounts of occasions of miracles and swift responses of God such as Jesus (believed as God) instantaneously turning water into wine, or Moses parting the red sea, seem to signify the use of unilateral force on elements. If actual entities do possess some modicum of subjectivity, aggregate actual entities, collectively, are self-causing and self-directing. How then does God perform such acts if he can only exert persuasive power not coercive? How does God decide which events fall under the general structure and ordering of the universe thus require coercive power and which ones require only persuasive power? Process theologians might argue that some societies¹⁰ experience higher level subjectivity so require persuasive force rather than coercive. That notwithstanding, in some cases, coercive force is a moral obligation especially when the subject does not have the capacity to determine the importance of a decision. Therefore, ordinarily as human beings, when another is incapacitated, decisions are imposed for her own benefit. God being the giver of subjective aims drawn from a vast array of potentialities possesses ample information to determine what future events are probable and what are not, to inform his choice.

Nevertheless, what is distinguishingly comforting about process theodicy, in times like these, is the idea that God is the fellow sufferer who understands our sorrows(Whitehead, 1978,p.351) and who the bible says, is not a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weakness(Hebrews 4:15) but He feeleth for our sadness, and He shareth in our gladness.¹¹

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¹⁰ They represent the grouping of actual entities into aggregates also termed nexus which are the macrocosmic entities.

¹¹ Once in Royal David City, Popular Christmas carol written by C. F Alexander.

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