

Deducing Panentheism from Hegel's God via Whitehead's "Philosophy of Organism"

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Abstract

Critics have passed Hegel's discussion of God and Its relationship with the world as pantheistic. Even when there have been attempts by Hegelians, in recent times, to defend Hegel against the charge of pantheism, such attempts have not only become futile but also assist in making Heidegger's onto-theological critique of Hegel lucid. The present inquiry, then seeks to reconstruct Hegel's God as a distinct personality from the Absolute Spirit. Such an effort is made intelligible when Hegel is revised from the prism of Whitehead's 'philosophy of organism.' If this reconstruction effort is successful, Hegel's God will become panentheistic and not pantheistic. More so, the revision will also excuse Hegel from the onto-theological warrant initiated against him by Heidegger.

Keywords: God, Hegel, Heidegger, Process Metaphysics, Whitehead.

Introduction

In his 2017 book on Friedrich Georg Wilhelm Hegel's notion of God and the self, Paolo Diego Bubbio contends that Hegel's notion of God is central to understanding various aspect of Hegelianism. This outlook has been interpreted to have the singular intention of revealing that:

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“Hegel’s conception of God and the self hold the key to overcoming subjectivism in both philosophy of religion and metaphysics” (Thibodeau 2017, 361). Here we argue that Heidegger’s charge of Hegel’s notion of God as an infinite entity whose infinity is actualized in human finitude is an instance of onto-theology for failing to tackle directly, the fundamental question of Being. Hegel locates the ultimate reality in the Absolute Spirit who is no different from God and this is where Heidegger’s onto-theological critique enters the fray. In his commentary over the non-distinction between the Absolute Spirit and God in Hegel’s system, renowned Hegelian, Quentin Lauer has adjudged that God in Hegel’s system is no different from the Absolute Spirit. In his words: “Only in the light of ‘absolute spirit’ is anything Hegel says intelligible...in Hegel’s view, ‘absolute spirit’ is in fact to be identified with God...” (Quentin 1983, 3). Against Hegel, this study offers Whitehead’s version of metaphysics and how it treats God (as a being) and the ultimate question or category, which he calls Creativity (as Being) distinctly.

The first task to explore is Hegel’s conception of God’s activity in the world and why the charge of pantheism suffices with Heidegger’s onto-theological critique. This is what the paper considers in the first section. The second section shifts to Whitehead’s system as it strives to illustrate how it conceives God in his version of event metaphysics which he calls “philosophy of organism” (Whitehead 1978, v). The last part of this inquiry then considers some crucial places of semblances and radical departures between Hegel and Whitehead which supposes that Hegel’s system passes as a form of process metaphysics. The fourth part is the conclusion of this intellectual exertion.

Hegel's God, Pantheism and Heidegger's Onto-theological Warrant

In order to understand how Hegel's God, this study focuses mainly on a very narrow aspect of Hegel's discussion on God laid out mainly in his *Wissenschaft der Logik*, where he discloses his discourse on God and how God conflates with the Absolute Spirit. Before going too far, it is important to state from the outset that Hegel's philosophy is one of the most difficult to understand. This is not unconnected from his manner of writing as well as the misrepresentations of his ideas (Wallace 2011). More so, his philosophy is so open-ended that scholars have used relevant passages to justify their stance. For instance, whereas Laurer (1964) does not see any trace of pantheism in Hegel's system, Franz Gregoire (1959) does. Gregoire (1959) is convinced that Hegel's reduction of all proofs of God to the ontological argument just like Immanuel Kant and then the affirmation that all of the world's finite entities are identifiable with the infinite God. Gregoire's (1959) conviction, for this study, is more comprehensive vis-à-vis that of Lauer (1964) that Hegel's system is pantheism in spite of the spirited effort on the part of the Lauer to deny this. My position, however, is that when Hegel's system is examined from the angle of process metaphysics and contrasted with Whitehead's system, pantheism can be replaced with panentheism, more on this later. On this showing, it is pertinent to concern with how Hegel tries to establish the proof for God and God's place in his system.

First, Hegel (1959), just like Kant, is convinced that all arguments concerning God are reducible to the ontological argument. However, unlike Kant who had said all these arguments are equally invalid, Hegel thinks otherwise. For Hegel, these arguments, so long as they reduced to the ontological argument they share in the ontological argument's validity "as a description of the human spirit's elevation to God" (Lauer 1964, 444). It therefore comes as no surprise, when he, in

the earlier passages of his *Wissenschaft der Logik*, says his aim is to engage in “the presentation of God, as He is in His eternal essence before the creation of nature or of one finite spirit” (Hegel 1932, 31).

Second, Hegel (1959) argues that the ultimate reality is not substance as most scholars like Benedict de Spinoza and Rene Descartes have argued. The ultimate reality is Absolute Spirit (*Idee Absolue*) and the expression of this ultimate reality is “spiritual activity” (Hegel 1932, 216). The implication which Hegel draws from this understanding is that if humans can think or even conceive God, then it is possible that God also thinks through humans (see Lauer 1964). Hegel stresses that this entire exercise does not imply that humans are thinking about God. What it actually means however is that the entire exercise is a process through which God uses to express Himself in thought. In the work, *Philosophie der religion*, Hegel (1959, 398) provides a convincing analysis:

Therein is contained more precisely, that it is not so-called human reason with its limitations which knows God but rather the Spirit of God in man. To use the previously mentioned speculative expression, it is God’s self-consciousness which knows itself in man’s knowledge

In another work, *System der philosophie III*, Hegel (1988, 454) reflects: “God is God only to the extent that He knows Himself, and His self-knowing is, moreover, His consciousness of self in man, and it is man’s knowledge of God which becomes man’s knowledge of himself in God.” This is why Lauer (1964, 448) reminds us that “...Hegel is not, as we said, much concerned with whether God exists; he is very much concerned with *what God does*. What God does, however, is God’s self-

manifestation (God “proves” Himself), and this self-manifestation is complete in man, who thinks, and whose thoughts are God’s thoughts.”

Hegel makes the case that God is revealed mainly in thought and neither in nature nor the teleological ordering of all physical and finite beings. It is on this basis that Hegel has been accused of being a pantheist by scholars such as Franz Gregoire (1959). Lauer (1964) is however, of the outlook that one must be careful to realize a subtle distinction which is usually overlooked. Lauer argues that Hegel’s God is revealed mainly in *thought* but not in nature or the ends usually ascribed to entities. This, for him exonerates Hegel from pantheism. The implication of the argument provided by Lauer, then, is that God and nature in Hegel are dissimilar so that a pantheistic deduction is futile. Perhaps it is worth considering that the pantheistic reading of Hegel is not unconnected from the intricate manner of his writing which is most times difficult to follow if one is not patient. However, when one considers Lauer’s effort to salvage Hegel from the charge of pantheism through the distinction between “rational proof” and “proof of understanding,” the situation does not improve.

Lauer (1964) is of the outlook that it is actually the “proof of understanding” that leads to pantheism but not the “rational proof.” The former, as Hegel argues, tries to establish the existence of God on an objective ground that makes God’s infinite being to depend on the finite nature of this objective ground. This ends up confusing God’s infinity with the finite nature of the world (see Hegel 1959, 477-478). Hegel (1959, 73-74) expatiates: “If thinking God somehow *depends* on thinking the world, then the being of God somehow depends on the being of the world.” As Lauer (1964, 450) puts it, “The result of this is not so much a divinizing of the world as it is finitizing of God, as an object *over* against the thinking subject. And the knowledge of which the subject has of such a God consists in nothing more than an

accumulation of finite predicates, quantitatively increased and attributed “*eminentiorimodo*” to God.” Hegel sees any effort made toward the establishment of God’s infinite existence on finite beings elevates one over the other which in turn is another means of arguing that they are both limiting one another. It is like inferring the existence of God from nature as inseparable elements and this is why pantheistic charge suffices. One would think that indeed the proof of understanding is the culprit. However a careful assessment of the rational proof is even more worrisome as it does not excuse Hegel’s God from pantheism.

The “rational proof,” on the other hand which, for Lauer (1964) avoids pantheism has been seen to not be a process of inference at all. It is a thinking process which begins with reflecting over the finite world to the extent that the thought process is elevated the sensible realm “thus passing from the finite to the infinite” (Hegel 1959, 74-75). Hegel (1959, 447-448) sees this process to mean recognition that “the finite can be *thought* only when the infinite is thought.” For Lauer (1964, 450):

This means ultimately that the empirical form of the world as experienced is transformed – **which is not to say that the world of experience is not, but that the being it has is in God, who alone truly is.** Hegel emphasizes this by asking why it is considered reasonable to accept a system which affirms the world and denies God but unreasonable to accept one which affirms God and denies the world. As shown, Lauer, while offering his argument that the rational proof excuses Hegel’s God from pantheism ends up affirming it (**bold emphasis authors’**).

There is no doubt that the foregoing reeks of pantheism and Lauer's attempt to defend Hegel's God from pantheism is a failed project. It is because of the fact that Hegel sees no difference between God and the Absolute Spirit that he considers Hegel's vision to be onto-theological.

Specifically, Heidegger (1991) laments, beginning from the first of the four volumes of one of his later intellectual masterpiece, *Nietzsche*, that Metaphysics has left *Being, Sein*, the chief focus of ontology, for entities, *ontas, beings (seiende)*. This character is one that "Heidegger finds to be replete in the history of traditional metaphysics as Being is replaced with God, the entity that accounts for and guarantees all *seiende, ontas, entities, non-God*" (Ofuasia 2023, 15-16). In this case, God, *Theos*, infiltrated traditional metaphysics and the study of *seiende, ontas, entities* as Being. This is where *Theos*, God, intersected with *ontas, seiende, beings*. This is where the formulation of Heidegger's neologism, onto-theology is ensues: onto (a derivation from *ontas, seiende*) which is added to theology (Masong 2013). Clearly, from this analysis, Heidegger claims that Being, *Sein*, has not been provided the attention that it commands, as God took this position. This is also the case in Hegel as he conflates Being (i.e. Absolute Spirit) with God in his pantheistic framework. In essence, "The equation of God with Being (*Sein*) and the failure to acknowledge their ontological difference, culminating into the branding of metaphysics as onto-theology by Heidegger" (Ofuasia 2023, 15).

Heidegger is convinced that Being is not the same as God. Speaking on Being, Heidegger perceives it as "the light that gives sight to metaphysics or the light from which metaphysics derives its sight" (Heidegger 1967, 433). He explains further that: "The truth of Being may thus be called the ground in which metaphysics, as the root of the tree of philosophy, is kept and from which it is nourished" (Heidegger

1967, 433). At this juncture, it is pertinent to expatiate in the words of Chidozie Okoro (2011, 117) that:

The Being that Heidegger speaks of is not any particular being, it is not this or that being. Unlike Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, by Being, Heidegger does not refer to God who incidentally is regarded as the being of beings. Heidegger is rather talking of a most primordial ground that sustains all other grounds, including God.

The task, then, is to consider the system of Whitehead to see how it treats God and whether Heidegger's onto-theological critique extends to it. This is one of the means of seeing how to amend Hegel's ideas to circumvent it from Heidegger's charge and the move from pantheism to panentheism.

Whitehead's God and the Futility of Heidegger's Query of Onto-Theology

Alfred North Whitehead, during his time was known as a mathematician and philosopher of science than as a metaphysician. He turned to metaphysics later in life and provided a metaphysical system which he calls "philosophy of organism." Whitehead (1978) begins his analysis by rejecting the substance-based metaphysics which has been used to explain the nature of God leading to bifurcation of reality with the struggle to establish how they interact. He proposes his version of process metaphysics as a suitable alternative that overcomes this challenge. Process metaphysics claims that "the world is composed of events and processes and reality is understood through becoming"

(Mesle 2008, 8). Elsewhere, process metaphysics has been understood as a metaphysical framework which points at

Dynamism by which things are perpetually moving forward, interacting, and creating new conditions in the world...Process-relational thought rejects the Cartesian idea that there are *minds*, or things that think, and *bodies*, or matter that acts according to strict causal laws. Rather the two are considered one and the same, or two aspects of an interactive and dynamically evolving reality (Ivakhiv 2018, 234).

For Whitehead, all things that exist in the world are actual entities/occasions, not substances. These are “the final real things of which the world is made. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real” (Whitehead 1978, 18). It is clear that Whitehead is rejecting and replacing substance with actual entities. Substance metaphysics could not account for the origin of consciousness especially in the light of developments in the fields of electromagnetic and quantum physics. For Whitehead, it is more sensible to assume that there are degrees “of experience in every entity than to assume there is none on the lower end of being and that somehow, miraculously, experience sprang from nowhere” (Olav 2010, 7). Experience and consciousness springing from nowhere is one of the many fall outs of substance metaphysics. From this leaning, Whitehead (1978, 88) accentuates:

The philosophy of organism is an inversion of Kant’s philosophy. *The Critique of Pure Reason* described the process by which subjective data pass into appearance of an objective world. The philosophy of organism seeks to describe how objective data pass into subjective satisfaction, and how order in the objective data provides intensity in the subjective satisfaction. For Kant, the

world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world – a ‘superject’ rather than a ‘subject.’

The cell is an actual entity with experience, just as the barking of the dog across the street. Whereas the one is conscious, the other is not, yet both are temporally enduring objects. In spite of the idea that the world is a composition of actual entities, Whitehead is quick to insist that there are gradations among them (Ofuasia 2021). “God is an actual entity, and so is the trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space. Though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level” (Whitehead 1978, 18). What Whitehead evinces here is the fact that God is not beyond but bound to the metaphysical laws that holds for all other actual entities and the actual world. In his words: “God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save them from collapse. He is their chief exemplification” (Whitehead 1978, 343). Whitehead’s position is valid because even when God is supposed to exemplify metaphysical principles, God does this in a unique. Any attempt to place God outside the scheme, to be used when things transcend human explanation, for Whitehead, is not suggestive of coherence and logicity and these are the misgivings that his system seeks to avoid and dispel (Ofuasia2021).

There is no distinction as the perennial problem of mind-body in mainstream substance metaphysics is impregnable to process thought, since each actual entity has physical and mental poles. Via the mental pole, they are able to admit potentials initiated by God for their agency, whereas with the physical they are able to influence the world. God too

has physical and mental poles which correspond to Its primordial and consequent natures. In the former state, God provides eternal objects for all entities to choose from since they possess their individual motivation for agency. Eternal objects or potentials are options open to all actual entities to admit into their essences or not. The feedback of the conformity with or not with God's recommendation for each actual entity is admitted by the consequent nature of God. It is therefore based on this understanding that Whitehead (1978, 348) affirms that:

It is as true to say that God creates the world, as that the world creates God. God and the World are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjoined multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into concrecent unity, with its diversities in contrast.

This nature, for Whitehead (1978, 46) "...is the physical prehension by God of the actualities of the evolving universe." Prehension, I need to state, at this juncture, is an important term which Whitehead initiated to capture his concept of how we acquire knowledge of the actual world. He finds perception, a term too limiting and misleading, since there are other ways of knowing besides the five senses. God and all actual entities exhibit this unique capacity.

Hence for Whitehead (1978), God is able to serve all actual entities in the actual world eternal objects because It is the only actual entity that can prehend the eternal objections positively and an Orderer, whereas other actual entities, owing to their freewill may prehend positively or negatively. Hence, Whitehead (1978, 345) relays that "every entity on its finer side introduces God into the world." And on the non-fine side, what is introduced into the world is disharmony or disorder, or in clear terms, evil. It is precisely this factor that is responsible for the disorder or evil that is encountered in the actual world (Ofuasia 2021).

Whitehead's analysis is convincing because it provides a consistent analysis for why the world operates the way it does. In his entire system however, the only role accorded to God by Whitehead is that of an orderer. In other words, Whitehead gives to God is the role of the actual entity who guarantees order in the actual world and this to him is an adequate reason for maintaining God without requiring further proofs. In his words:

...it is not the case that there is an actual world which accidentally begins to exhibit an order of nature. There is an actual world because there is order in nature. If there were no order, there would be no world. Also, since there is a world, we know that there is an order. The ordering entity is a necessary element in the metaphysical situation presented by the actual world (Whitehead 1957, 104).

God, in Whitehead's version of process thought is not bound or limited as God, the perfect being in classical theology girded by substance metaphysics. Whereas God does not transcend the world, It transcends all other actual entities, as I had highlighted above. This is because of Its capacity to exemplify the metaphysical principles in finer and unique ways. William Lawhead (2002, 495) shares my inferences when he writes that "although Whitehead's God does not transcend the world, he does transcend every other actual entity within the world." If God is not transcendent, then it is the case that God must be immanent. Whitehead (1978, 111) seems to take this stance too when he amplifies that "The immanence of God gives reason for the belief that pure chaos is intrinsically impossible." As a result, "God and the World stand over against each other, expressing the final metaphysical truth that appetitive vision and physical enjoyment have equal claim to priority in

creation. But no two actualities can be torn apart: each is all in all. Thus each temporal occasion embodies God, and is embodied in God”(Whitehead 1978, 111). As a way of making this point more clear, Whitehead (1978, 348) expatiates:

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 is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many. It is as true to say that, in comparison with the World, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently. It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World. It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God. It is as true to say that God creates the world, as that the world creates God. God and the World are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjoined multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into conrescent unity, with its diversities in contrast.

From the discussion provided thus far, Whitehead’s God is panentheistic. It must indicate, at this juncture, that panentheism differs from pantheism in several respects. This is because in panentheism, the world and God are not viewed as one and same, as pantheism holds. Panentheism however, “is the view that God includes the world in his being (since he is affected by every event within it) and at the same that he is more than the events in the world (God has his own unique aims and actions)” (Lawhead 2002, 495). This can be contrasted with pantheism which sees the world and God as identical (Lawhead 2002, 495). From another parlance, pantheism is seen to mean that “God is everything and everything is God” (Owen 1971, 74). In a nutshell, pantheism means that “the world is God, and God is the world. All

beings are physical manifestations of God” (Ofuasia 2022, 88). Whitehead’s God is therefore not adorned with the superlative accidents of might, power and knowledge. This is a persuasive but not a coercive God that breaks the laws of nature at will to save Its people miraculously. When coercive power involves parting the Red Sea, transgressing or upsetting the established law of water bodies, for some chosen people to thread on dry ground into Palestine, Whitehead’s God works persuasively and finds the idea of an all-powerful God untrue (Dasaolu&Ofuasia 2019, 68).

It is helpful to conclude this section by adding that Whitehead makes every effort to disassociate God from the ultimate reality. Creativity is that which is primordial to God. In Whitehead’s words, Creativity is the “universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact” (Whitehead 1978, 21). It is with this terminology that Whitehead offers the ultimate explanation. Creativity does not provide the reason for the concrescence and nexus of actual occasions. Creativity is process philosophy’s nominal description given to that which everything exemplifies and yet is no thing. Whitehead is convinced that it is Creativity that makes everything including God to play their different roles which translates into the various series of becoming witnessed in the actual world. This is obvious when Whitehead (1978, 47) adds that “God is at once a creature of Creativity and a condition for Creativity.”

Given the outlook that Whitehead’s system has been adduced to be panentheistic, there is no reason for pantheism to enter the discursive fray as holds in Hegel’s. More so, the fact that Whitehead does not coalesce the ultimate principle, Creativity with God as the same is an indication that he focuses solely over the ultimate question. Put

otherwise, that Whitehead did not replace *Being, Sein*, the chief focus of ontology, for entities, *ontas, beings (seiende)*, reveals why his system has no place for Heidegger's onto-theological warrant to penetrate.

Hegel's God as Panentheistic: Reconstructing Hegel to avoid the Onto-theological warrant

Perhaps the best way to begin the reconstruction of Hegel, in this section, is to restate that efforts at salvaging his ideas have not done commendable job. They continue to see no distinction between the world and God, on the one hand (leading to pantheism) as well as the failure to see that the conjunction of God with the Absolute Spirit on the other as a justification of Heidegger's warrant. These are the two crucial aspects that needs to be revised using Whitehead as a guide.

It should be restated once again that Hegelians such as Quentin Lauer have confided that God in Hegel's system is no different from the Absolute Spirit. In his words: "Only in the light of 'absolute spirit' is anything Hegel says intelligible...in Hegel's view, 'absolute spirit' is in fact to be identified with God..." (Quentin 1983, 3). One way to overcome this puzzle is to posit that for Hegel's system to be admitted as a form of event metaphysics, then it is important that the Absolute Spirit is made to be distinct from God. This is possible and easy to deduce from Hegel's work because Hegel himself is not so concerned about God's existence as Whitehead. Hegel, like Whitehead is concerned what God *does*. Furthermore, when Hegel (1988, 454) says: "God is God only to the extent that He knows Himself, and His self-knowing is, moreover, His consciousness of self in man, and it is man's knowledge of God which becomes man's knowledge of himself in God," he comes close to Whitehead (1978, 348) concerning God's consequent nature as an actual entity who is creating the world as the world creates God. To therefore argue that the Absolute Spirit is Being,

that primordial ground which accounts for God and all physical expressions in the world is consistent with Hegel's system.

With this singular, reconstruction, two objectives would have been achieved: First, Hegel's system would be free of Heidegger's critic of it as onto-theology since a distinction has been made between the ultimate category, the Absolute Spirit and God who is a being, subordinate to the Absolute Spirit.

Second, Hegel's system will be disconnected from the notion of pantheism but drafted into panentheism, just like Whitehead's. This is plausible as God is no longer seen to be the same or identical with the world. God, on this new reading of Hegel, has its subjective role to play since God will now be immanent and not transcendent. This reconstruction of Hegel is also faithful to the works of Hegel as he stresses the fact that the existence of God is demonstrated in the thoughts of humans. Such a God is always close by and immanent just as Whitehead's. This is also plausible because when Hegel says the Absolute Spirit permeates everything and it is the physical manifestation of all there is, he comes close to Whitehead (1978, 31) who sees Creativity as that which "...lies in the nature of things that the many enter into one complex unity."

Conclusion

The task of this study was to consider how to rescue the concept of God in the philosophy of Hegel away from the onto-theological charge or

warrant of Heidegger. The study has been able to use Whitehead's version of process-relational philosophy to rescue Hegel from this charge as it indicates that there is a huge distinction between what counts as Being and what is perceived as God. One of the core implications of this inquiry is that Hegel is not the only philosopher that is guilty of Heidegger's onto-theological warrant – the confusion of Being with God. Several other scholars such as Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Gottfried von Leibnitz have succeeded in confusing Being with God. Whereas the present study lacks the wherewithal to confront these other scholars, it has limited itself to the onto-theological implication latent in the work of Hegel. The bottom line is that to avoid any element of substance-based metaphysics with its onto-theological implication, a process-relational alternative is more appropriate.

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