

Charles Hartshorne and the Defenders of Heschel

By Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

In his evaluation of “Heschel and His Critics”¹ Professor Tanenzapf proposes the adoption of Charles Hartshorne’s process metaphysics in order to secure philosophic support for Heschel’s Biblical world-view and to counter his critics. The latter fault Heschel for his failure to sustain his insights with theological argumentation and for his unphilosophic predictions for dealing with God in unabashedly anthropomorphic terms.

A number of contemporary theologians both Christian and Jewish, have similarly argued that even where philosophic articulation of the theology implicit in the Bible is used, it is hampered by a false dependence upon the classical categories of Aristotelian metaphysics. Rather than a wholesale repudiation of philosophy, they, like Prof. Tanenzapf, suggest that biblical theologians ought to adopt the metaphysical approach of Hartshorne whose categories are held to be more compatible with the living God of the Bible. While the ideas of divine perfection of classical metaphysics ascribe immutability and impassibility to God, they maintain that Hartshorne’s di-polar process categories make room for God’s growth, openness to the future and responsiveness to the suffering of His creatures. Acceptance and application of this newer approach would, it is contended, lend metaphysical substantiation to Heschel’s leading notion of “divine pathos,” and overcome the charge of anthropomorphism.

However, I would argue that the proposed relationship of Biblical and process categories can be only surface accommodation. The moral connotation of goodness in Heschel’s Biblical view and in Hartshorne’s process view is radically different. Hartshorne transmutes the Biblical understanding of moral values into metaphysical values. His metaphysical understanding of God’s goodness, love, suffering and concern is incompatible with Heschel’s Biblical appreciation of those divine predicates. The use of Hartshorne’s categories may be serviceable in presenting the logic of a God who grows in knowledge and in relationship, and yet retains His unsurpassable wisdom and absoluteness, but

1. JUDAISM, Summer, 1964

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It fails the crucial moral test of the Bible. The divine pathos whose attentiveness “reveals the extreme pertinence of man to God” and entrails an involvement in history and a special concern with humanity: this is not reflected in the metaphysical orientation.²

What is it that Hartshorne means by God’s love and concern?

It is certainly true that Charles Hartshorne is particularly sensitive to both the Biblical and philosophical strands in historical theology. He recognizes that the classical categories of philosophy express a bias against change, plurality and potentiality; and that they favor an immutable, self-sufficient deity inconsistent with the Biblical, personalistic insights into God’s character. According to Hartshorne, the theological failure to express a metaphysics reflecting the Biblical view is due to traditional theism’s reliance upon a one-sided, static metaphysics. He offers his own di-polar process philosophy as metaphysically supportive of the Biblical God who is “an all-loving, efficacious friend.”³ In his panentheism, the attributes of being and becoming are harmonized so as to present one perfect Being in whom two complementary qualities reside.

But to go to the heart of the matter, in what sense is Hartshorne’s God a loving God? How does Hartshorne’s God exhibit His efficacy and friendship? Whose friend is He and will He take sides to protect the innocent tormented by evil? And what moral significance, if any, is implied by Hartshorne’s conception of divine perfection?

For Hartshorne, the controlling image of Perfection is that of an Inclusive Process in which ideals are progressively realized and remembered. Hartshorne’s panentheism conceives of God as an Eternal-Temporal Consciousness, knowing and including the World. The mark of ultimate goodness is in the adequate taking into account of all possible and actual interests, each being given its due “Maximal social inclusive” is the criterion of the goodness of the Supreme Being-Becoming. Evil is exclusion, the ignorance and ignoring of the interests of all things. God is aware of all, including all forms of evil because He cares for all. The plenitude principle of the *Timaeus* is echoed in Hartshorne’s process theodicy. Inasmuch as God’s goodness is expressed in His total concern for all, only a provincial anthropocentrism would have God declare His partnership. God literally loves all and “appreciates the qualities of all things-period.”⁴ Therefore, He cannot wish the sick child well without caring about the woes of the bacteria. It is not that God views the whole of things impassively. Unlike the solid impassibility of the scholastic Deity, Hartshorne’s

2. A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), p. 483.

3. Charles Hartshorne, *Men’s Vision of God* (Chicago: Willet, Clark 7 Co, 1941), p. 93.

4. Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1962), p. 142.

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sensitive God grieves in all griefs. There is no callousness in not destroying the bacteria to save the child. "He merely has other values to consider also."⁵

The omni:benevolence of the divine Perfection governs His providential wisdom. God balances, limits and distributes powers with an eye towards maximal fecundity.⁶ On the one hand, too much freedom would increase discord: on the other, concord gained by excessive external control would lead to a "loss of vitality, of depth of individuality, and of zest arising from creative capacities."⁷ Ever open to growth and improvement, the Process-Perfection governs the best of possible worlds. God's general providence does not interfere with creation but holds a gentle rein, setting "wholesome limits to our eccentricities (and) guiding the world as a whole in a desirable direction..."⁸

Hartshorne's assumption of the providential benevolence of God who respects the independence of His friends begs the Jobian question. How are "Love" and "righteous" exhibited through. Hartshorne's "hands off" theodicy? If the function of divine providence is "to set limits to the free interplay of lesser individuals, which otherwise would be chaos," why were limitations not set upon the ruthless men of the Holocaust?⁹ How can one affirm God's setting limits on human eccentricity in the face of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Biafra and Bangladesh? Is divine non-intervention in such holocaustal outrages morally justifiable on the grounds that God cares more about providing zest, vitality and creativity in the universe? Surely "love" and "righteousness" are being used in a highly un-Biblical manner by Hartshorne. It is clearly not the love which moves God to intervene in history in response to the groanings of the persecuted. Hartshorne's divine love is an all-encompassing appreciation of being, an awareness of and participation in, the suffering of the victims. However, awareness and compassion are necessary but not sufficient conditions of goodness. To metaphysical ideal of cognition has led him to substitute divine knowledge, memory and aesthetic appreciation for the moral activity which describes the Biblical God.

Hartshorne places much stock in the redemptiveness of God's "cosmic memory which preserves all values."¹⁰ Again we must point out that such divine retentiveness is a metaphysical virtue but is far from

5. Man's Vision of God, p.105.

6. Charles Hartshorne and William Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1955), p.110.

7. *The Logic of Perfection*, p. 314.

8. *Ibid*, p.314.

9. *Ibid*, p.314.

10. *Man's Vision of God*, p.157.

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a salvational force vindicating moral behaviour. Salvation by retentive inclusion of value is removed from the Biblical faith in the transformation of the evil in the world God's impartial participation in the positive elements of creaturely decision is properly a metaphysical, not a moral virtue. Masterful as is Hartshorne's attempt to translate Biblical insights into compatible philosophic categories, something essential in the Biblical ideal of God is lost in the process. God's metaphysical participation in being does not reflect His moral involvement. The moral partisanship of the Biblical God is not to be found in God's "universal interest in interest." To question the priority of human over simian or amoebic values, as Hartshorne does, is a far cry from the affirmations of man's centrality which inform the ethic of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.¹¹ God's metaphysical love which reveals interest in all is remote from religious moral love which upholds the fallen. It is metaphysical criteria which Hartshorne calls upon to make an independent check of our ethical insights concerning the goodness of God.¹² The moral sense of God's goodness is thus made to bend to the philosopher's metaphysical criteria.

Whatever is virtue, such submission is alien to the biblical tradition of the moral Lord of History. Hartshorne's metaphysical love allows him to dismiss the Jobian condition with the argumentum ad ignorantiam: "Are we to suppose that our feeble love can tell us how infinite love must or might express itself, save in the vaguest and most general way?"¹³ Only a metaphysical love can justify the death of animals as providing them relief from boredom can rationalize swift death on the grounds that it is preferable to slow degeneration, and can celebrate the excitement and adventure of freedom as compensation for the fightful collision of conflicting evils.

Hartshorne's conception of divine perfection and his theodicy are largely dependent upon Whitehead's aesthetic metaphysics. For Whitehead "the real world is good when it is beautiful."¹⁴ Perfection is an ideal maximum beauty, the harmonious inclusiveness of maximum massiveness and maximum intensity. Whitehead's ideal of perfection is a footnote to Plato's principle of plenitude and the lever upon which his theodicy is raised. Storms and barbaric invasions, in themselves admittedly destructive, must be appreciated as contributory values to the adventure of ever new and increased perfections. The vision of the whole-in-process wipes out the terror of past and part. Without conflict. Whitehead reiterates, history would stagnate with the tedium of infinite repetition and degenerate through the stultifying tameness

11. *The Logic of Perfection*, p. 309

12. *Ibid*, p.144.

13. *Philosophers Speak of God*, p. 110.

14. A.N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: MacMillan, 1933), p. 345.

of life. Whitehead's metaphysical aesthetic identifies goodness with beauty. Mortality is an instrumental value, an overstressed aspect of goodness; but Beauty is the only self-justifying value. The teleology any system of things which in any wide sense is beautiful is to that extent justified in its existence." 15 To question the mortality of Beauty may be regarded as irreverence, but when the harmony of Beauty is used to justify the sufferings of men, it is the most pertinent of all inquiries for those attached to the Biblical view.

For Hartshorne, like Tillich, "love" is treated as an ontological concept characterized by inclusive unity and participation. It is a love for each and every other, apart from considerations of higher or lower, pleasant or unpleasant qualities. Divine justice and love function impersonally as an order of being. The metaphysical God, however its categories are formulated, takes no side. It stands apart from the humanistic bias of the Biblical God who responds to "the needy one who groans, the afflicted one who has no helper. He pities the poor and needy, the soul of the needy, He delivers, redeems their souls from oppression and injustice; precious is their blood in His sight."¹⁶ The philosopher's idea of providence extends itself equally to non-rational and rational beings, to the bacteria as well as to man.

Heschel's perception of the Bible and of prophecy makes moral demands upon God and His providential care which neither supernatural nor naturalistic metaphysics is able to satisfy. However uniquely transcendent the Biblical God, His significant other is man, and the exhibition of His goodness is discovered in its benevolent effects upon man.

13. Ibid, p. 341.

14. Psalm 72:12f.

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