

NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 'SPECIAL' AND 'GENERAL' IN WHITEHEAD'S VIEW ON DIVINE ACTION

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1. Introduction

I will present here the view of Alfred North Whitehead on divine agency as it is conceived of in his philosophy.

Whitehead (1861-1947) was a British mathematician-logician and theoretical physicist, and became late in his career professor of philosophy at Harvard. His philosophy is mostly referred to as "process philosophy", although he himself calls it "philosophy of organism".

I present Whitehead here for a couple of reasons. To mention only the most important one:

* Whitehead's view overcomes the problematic distinction and tension between general and special divine agency. Problematic, because if God is believed to be the creator of the laws of nature, then the question arises what God – given these laws – can do else.

State of the art

God creating and imposing the laws of nature is the typical idea referred to by the expression "General Divine Action". God seen as the creator of the world and its laws may count as the default position in theology.

More diversity pops up with regard to the so called Special Divine Actions. Do these (by God created) laws leave room for God to do some specifically in the course of history (e.g., healing someone, punishing someone, becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, etc.)?

In scientifically informed theology two reactions are dominant, schematically:

either this special divine action is denied (which results in a (quasi-) deistic position),
or it is suggested that the so called 'indeterministic' laws of nature (of quantum mechanics and to some of chaos theory as well) leave room for objective special divine actions (because the laws are not completely deterministic, there are openings which God can use to change the course of worldly events).

Each with its more or less serious problems.

Whitehead

Against this background, Whitehead's view on divine agency is *intriguing*, because he presents a remarkably *different* indeterministic and non-interventionist account of divine action.

According to his 'process' view, God *neither imposes nature's laws, nor works in the space left by the indeterministic laws*. (And moreover: with Gods actions included, these laws remain indeterministic.)

In Whitehead, there is *no real distinction between general and special divine agency*: In some sense all divine actions are *special*, viz. the creative influence in a special context from God's *general* relative valuation of all possibilities. Let us see this in some more detail.

2. Whitehead's philosophy of organism and its concept of God

In essence, Whitehead's project is to look for a new system of general ideas in terms of which we can interpret our experiences. He is looking for such new ideas because he deems the dominant mechanistic worldview inadequate.

In the mechanistic paradigm the ultimate units of reality are "things" that are primarily static and that relate only externally to one another. In stead of the mechanistic one Whitehead proposes an organismic paradigm according to which reality consists of interrelated entities as *self-organizing events*.

According to this paradigm, each elementary event (or "occurrence") *forms itself - from the world given to it*. Whitehead views every elementary event as a process of unification of the many influences that are given by and appropriated from its past.

Because those many influences are not simply compatible, such unification can occur in many ways: it can occur trivially—by weeding out a number of the influences—or in a more difficult and complex way that results in a 'richer' synthesis. The richer the synthesis is, the better.

In Whitehead's view, a new event derives *the urge to its best possible synthesis* from an atemporal principle which he denotes as *a relative valuation of all possibilities* - a kind of optimization function - that distinguishes for every possible situation better from worse solutions. And he often calls this principle or function "God" or more precisely the "primordial nature of God".

So, "God" as this universal and atemporal principle makes the new event feel what is the most preferable possibility relative to the particular situation of that new event.

In this way, God functions as 'object of desire' and thereby gives to the novel event a subjectively felt initial aim. Or better: There is no event before such aim is felt! The new event *originates* by feeling this 'best' possibility as aim. Without God, there would be no oriented desire, and therefore no event, no world.

So far, this very introductory summary.

3. Highlighting some remarkable points concerning our issue

a. This aim makes the new event start and exist, but does not secure or fix its end result.

The initial aim (provided by God's primordial nature) is *not* the actual outcome of the new event, but only its initial point "from which its self-causation starts" (PR 244). It is only by the new occurrence *itself* (by its "occurring") that the initial aim is transformed from a mere possibility into some actuality. The initial aim - derived from God - therefore constitutes the new event as subject of its own becoming, as subject of self-causation:

Each temporal entity [...] derives from God its basic [...] aim, relevant to its actual world, yet with indeterminations awaiting its own decisions. (PR 24)

b. Not just one single ideal order

The phrase "relevant to its actual world", i.e. "relative to its background, its past" marks a very important fact, namely that Whitehead does *not* use a model in which there would be only one single aim, and in which God would pull everything towards that one ideal aim, or in which God would embody this one encompassing aim. Not at all. Whitehead writes:

There is not just one ideal 'order' which all actual entities should attain and fail to attain. In each case there is an ideal peculiar to each particular actual entity, and arising from the dominant components in its phase of 'givenness.' (PR 84)

Thus, for Whitehead God functions as 'object of desire,' but, immutable though God in this function may be, God shows himself differently for each and every event, and always embodies 'a dominant ideal peculiar to each actual entity,' that is, God embodies the best possibility of synthesis that fits that particular givenness.

Therefore Whitehead passionately rejects every conception that speaks of *the* aim for *the* world. To him, 'the most attractive' is always relative to a particular context.

This brings us by the heart of the matter:

God('s primordial nature) is an atemporal, general valuation of all possibilities (a general action), but seen as influence on the receiver, this action is particular. How is that to be seen?

c. How can an action be both general and particular ?

I want give you here one very simple example, in order to give some 'feeling' how one and the same act can be both general and particular.

Consider a city. South of that city there is a signpost pointing in the direction of that city. A traveler arriving at the sign coming from the east, in perceiving the sign will receive the message: 'take a right turn'; while an traveler coming from the west receives the message:

'turn left.' This particularity of the indication of the direction stems from the particular situation of the person under consideration.

Likewise, but of course *mutatis mutandis*, a particular aim may be derived from God's general ('primordial') nature relative to the receiver's particular position.

Let me give here again one quote of Whitehead:

“He [God] is the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire. *His particular relevance to each creative act, as it arises from its own conditioned standpoint in the world*, constitutes him the initial 'object of desire' establishing the initial phase of each subjective aim” (PR 344, my italics).

d. “General divine action” refers primarily to God's creation of the laws of nature. What about them?

According to Whitehead, whatever in a given situation is the best possibility of synthesis depends to a large extent upon the characters of the components of the given situation itself. This makes intelligible that similar situations are often linked to similar best possibilities of synthesis, and hence that occurrences in similar situations often manifest an *identity of pattern* (AI 112).

In other words, thanks to its stable valuation of possibilities, God's nature enables the patternedness or law-like behaviour of natural processes.

In this way, God is that actuality in virtue of which there is physical "law" (PR 283).

Note, that here the “laws” are not 'before' but 'after' the events. They are the results: the patterns emerging from the many events.

e. Difference with the other Non-Interventionist Objective Divine Action (NIODA) approaches struggling with room for Gods special actions left over by the laws

It may now be clear that what nearly all theologians perceive as twofold divine agency, viz. creation plus sustenance, and in addition particular providential acts whereby God gives a direction to the course of history, Whitehead perceives as *one single type of act of God*.

This one type of agency of God accounts for (1) the creation/origination of events and (2) the particular providence with regard to the events initial directionality, as well as for (3) some regularity of behavior of those events: the 'laws' of nature.

For most of the scientifically informed theologians (e.g., Murphy, Polkinghorne a.o.), whenever God performs his special actions, there is an already pre-existing nature with its laws. Presuming that God wants to respect nature's integrity, nature's laws constrain God (even though the quantum-openness gives God some room) since God has to act in a way so as to leave the laws on a macro level intact.

For Whitehead, the story is totally different:

Whitehead never is confronted with the problem of having to explain how God's agency can find some leeway in the framework of existing laws, nor does Whitehead have to restrict God's agency to the openings left by the laws.

In Whitehead's view, God is in no way limited by the laws of nature, for the simple reason that *there are no laws of nature that exist of their own, because the 'laws' arise together with the by God constituted and guided events and their directionality. So, the problems related to the distinction between general and special divine action do not pose themselves here.*

f. The idiosyncrasy of God's agency

As we saw, God's one type of agency accounts for the existence of every particular event and its particular initial directionality, as well as for some regularity of the behavior of those events: the 'laws' of nature.

In doing all of this, however, *God's agency is of a completely different order than the agency of the worldly events.*

Said schematically:

Worldly entities act by converting possibilities into actuality ('actualization'). In contrast, God's *modus operandi* has an opposite direction: relative to an actual situation God provides valuable possibilities.

[World: possibility > actuality; God: actuality > possibility. See: PR part iv, chapter ii, and its introduction on PR 341]

And precisely because of this opposite directionality, these activities of God and World form together an ongoing movement.

Either of them, God and the World, is the instrument of novelty for the other (PR 349).

This opposition of roles has some [only 'some'!] resemblance with the different roles of the musicians in an orchestra and their director.

The director is the one who makes feel the best possibilities, but the factual actualization thereof is done by the musicians (with better or worse result).

So, in Whitehead, God's role is to open up possibilities, and to make feel their relative attractiveness, the role of the worldly events is to actualize them by making their own decisions.

This opposite directionality (from possibility to actuality, and from actuality to possibility) is crucial in Whitehead, and has a lot of implications. I only mention one:

God's agency is not a super-version of our way of acting, rather fundamentally opposite to it (PR 341, 342-351).

This means that - of necessity - also God's special actions are not actualizations!

Let me, here at the end, give some more thought to this very important aspect:

Why is it "of necessity" that God's special actions are no actualizations?

Is it not the hallmark of God's special agency that God sometimes fulfills the role of the worldly causes?

In the case of a director and his orchestra members such a take-over is indeed imaginable. But not so in the case of God and the worldly entities. Why not?

This depends on God's infinity and on what is meant by 'actualization'.

Actualization means de-cision, cutting off of possibilities, so that in the end the result is no longer indeterminate but a determinate actuality.

God in his primordial nature is infinite, viz., in Whitehead's vocabulary, the conceptual realization of *all* possibilities.

This implies that God cannot possibly limit the factual possibilities for an other entity (just as white light, because it contains all colors, cannot limit the color spectrum of the light reflected by an object). So, God because of being infinite cannot provide a physical limitation, and thus no actualization.

But God limits in a different way, not on the level of the number of possibilities (which God can only increase) but on the level of the *valuation* of those possibilities. So, God provides a constraint on the preferability of the possibilities in relation to the specific situation. So, God makes feel a special urge which constitutes the new event.

4. In summary:

- No real distinction between SDA and GDA. That is to say, all divine agency is also special.
- This special divine action is present in every particular event, everywhere, at all times. In the way described, this work of God is at the same time the source of nature's orderliness.
- This view here presented is NOT a zero-sum understanding of divine agency (something is done either by God or by nature). For there is no nature without God, and there is no actualization without nature.
- Also God's special actions are not actualizations.
- In connection to the remarks of Alister McGrath in his opening lecture: here we possibly have "an open interpretation of the immanent frame", Charles Taylor is opting for.

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