



## Consequences of Prehending God's Consequent Nature in a Different Key (Palmyre M.F. Oomen)

The previous issue of *Process Studies* (PS27/1–2 [1998]: 108–133) published my essay on the prehensibility of God's consequent nature. A response by Lewis S. Ford also was published (PS27/1–2 [1998]: 134–146). I feel honored by such a prompt reaction, but I wish to make a few remarks regarding it. The reader will have noticed that whereas my article is about the consequent nature, Ford writes almost completely about the primordial nature. We can see why: Ford claims that my position on the consequent nature entails or presupposes a specific interpretation of the primordial nature, one which he thinks conflicts with the very gist of a Whiteheadian temporalized concept of the divine. However, my interpretation of the primordial nature is quite different from what Ford claims I (should) think. There can only be a discussion about my interpretation if it is my own, not Ford's rendition of my position. I will speak, therefore, for myself and indicate—however briefly—my position on God's primordial and consequent nature. I do not have the space here to give a full account of my interpretation of Whitehead's concept of God (I hope to get the opportunity to do that in a future issue of PS), but my remarks here are intended to point out to the reader the difference between my own thoughts and Ford's inferences.

Ford's entire objection rests on the assumption that my exposition of God's consequent nature demands a "very strong primordial nature" (PS27 134), in fact so strong that all real possibilities are valued in it. Such a primordial nature, Ford states, means that "non-temporal valuation preempts any role for divine temporal valuation" (PS27 136), and thus the influence of God's consequent nature would be simply an influence of God's primordial nature: "Then the first phase does the work of the third phase" (PS27 136). He then queries whether on my interpretation "God's temporal evaluation [can] be effective for initial aims" (PS27 136). This question receives a negative answer in the last sentence of the same page: "only by retreating from the project of showing how God's on-going experience of the world and temporal valuation can be made effective in the world" (PS27 136).

The reason Ford says I should be thinking this lies in the fact that, according to him, it is a prerequisite for the foundation of the notion of immediate integration of past occasions (and hence for the absence of indeterminate phases): "Then whatever actual situation God experiences, God already (or more precisely, eternally) has the conceptual means whereby that situation can be unified" (PS27 135). But this argument does not take into account the reversal of divine poles, whereas it seems to me that this reversal of poles could be of substantive significance in relation to this issue. An ordinary actual entity receives an aim as a means for the unification of the multiplicity of its situation. The aim is adapted (consequent) to the situation. But God's aim is not dependent on the given situation; in other words, God does not need some kind of blueprint which indicates how to unify this specific situation. Rather, God's aim precedes that situation (primordial). That is why for God the reverse relation holds: the reception of the situation in God is dependent upon God's aim: "The consequent nature of God is ... the realization of the actual world in the unity of his nature, and through transformation of his wisdom" (PR 345). I would say that the reversal of poles allows us to say: the worldly situation is received into God's unity, but God does not have to be *brought* to a unity. A worldly entity has to acquire in the process a consequent unity, but God acquires in the process a consequent

multiplicity “which the primordial character absorbs into its own unity” (PR 349). In the case of a worldly entity its process implies a *de-cision*, a cutting off. But not for God. God should cut away nothing; God includes incessantly, like a reservoir, which grows incessantly by gathering in it all inflowing water.

The second remark I want to make is this: in his response Ford makes no distinction between valuation and evaluation, whereas it seems to me that this distinction is helpful in understanding what Whitehead says about God’s primordial nature. This distinction between valuation and evaluation perhaps may be clarified by the example of a mathematical function *F* which attaches a *y* to every possible *x*. In this *xFy*-example, *F* signifies, *mutatis mutandis!*, God’s primordial nature, which is the unchanging valuative ordering of all possible potentialities to each other: if *x*<sub>1</sub> then *y*<sub>1</sub>, if *x*<sub>2</sub> then *y*<sub>2</sub> etc. The *x* signifies the variable possible worldly initial situation (the possible “actual world”) being composed of many data, and the *y* the “best possibility for synthesis of these data” (the initial aim). Well, this *F* is to be seen as an unchanging atemporal valuation, but the *y* is a temporal evaluation, viz. dependent on *x*. So, the initial aim is a temporal evaluation. Whitehead writes: “But Evaluation [the *y*] always presupposes abstraction from the sheer immediacy of fact [the *x*]: It involves reference to Valuation [the *F*]” (Immortality).

This example also makes it possible to see that for the determination and providing of an initial aim God’s consequent nature is not needed: only the actual world (*x*) and the primordial valuation (*F*) are needed. So, in contradiction to what Ford states (PS27 135), I do *not* propose that the aim is that valued possibility by which that occasion’s world is unified in the divine [consequent] experience, and of which the provision is possible by prehending God’s consequent nature. On the contrary, in my article, I defend the possibility and the desirability of Whitehead’s implicit conception that a (not completely) specific initial aim can be envisaged and can be provided by God’s primordial nature without the help of God’s consequent nature (PS27 126–127, note 36; 130–131, note 44).

How should we think about this primordial valuation, this ordering of all possibilities in terms of aesthetic intensity? Ford speaks of omniscience with regard to this model of God’s primordial nature. But omniscience or something like that is out of the question here; it simply does not come up. The ‘*F*’ knows nothing. God as primordial knows nothing! It is only an abstract aesthetic ordering, linking possible situations (containing many data) to the best possibilities of synthesis of those data, without consciousness and deficient in actuality. Is this “a very strong primordial nature”? (PS27 134). In my opinion, the primordial nature is nearly “nothing”; it is only an abstract atemporal valuation of hypothetical linkages between possibilities. Although being nearly “nothing,” this is nevertheless a necessary permanent element “apart from which there could be no changing world” (RM preface).

And what about the divine temporality and the effectiveness of this temporality? Well, that was the very subject matter of my article! The temporal aspect of God certainly is not only the above-mentioned “temporality” of the evaluation, i.e., of the initial aim derived from God which results from the temporality of the “plugged in” situation: much more essential is the temporality of God, which encompasses an everlasting growth, and which implies novelty for God (PR 345). God’s concrescence, therefore, is *not* non-temporal—as Ford has me say (PS27 143)—but temporal in the sense of an everlasting growth. Is that possible? Certainly! Even though God has valued all possibilities, that does not mean that there is no novelty in God. As I wrote in my discussion of Suchocki:

It is indeed the case that all eternal objects are envisaged in God’s primordial nature according to Whitehead and, by this, that all pure potentials are accounted for.

However, this does not imply that there already are propositions, i.e., impure potentials, contained within it, according to Whitehead. These impure potentials are emergent (PR 188, 259). This makes supplementation to the primordial nature logically possible. (PS27 127)

What is this supplementation? Well, it is nothing less than God’s experience of the actual contingent world. “Experience” includes knowledge in a cognitive and an affective sense. God feels and knows what actually happens in the world. This divine knowledge of the world does not fade out, but is everlastingly present in God. It is an ever-present living fact.

This divine knowledge of our world can be felt reciprocally by the worldly entities. This is the prehension of God’s consequent nature, its efficacy. Quite opposed to what Ford says (PS27 136), I am not retreating from the project of showing how God’s on-going experience of the world can be made effective in the world. The whole point of my analysis is precisely to show how such efficacy is possible, and what this efficacy means. In my opinion, this efficacy is not for initial aims as such (see above), but this “fourth phase” is an influence on a much more complex and existential level. It is our feeling (now and then, as a gift) of God’s love for us, a feeling of being accepted. It is an intuition of judgment and an appeal to transcend ourselves. It is an awareness of lasting importance and of personal identity. It is a sensitiveness to tragedy as disclosure of an ideal. It is the experience of forgiveness which sets us free. It is a trust in the efficacy of Beauty. *These are the possible consequences of the prehensibility of God’s consequent nature!*

So, I agree completely with Ford that God has to be proclaimed to be a “Thou.” In other words, I agree wholeheartedly with his intention to save God’s everlasting subjectivity, and also with his opinion that subjectivity has to do with temporality. However, there is no need to deny God’s objectifiability in order to save God’s subjectivity. This is so because in God’s case (within Whitehead’s conceptuality) there is, by reason of the reversal of poles, the possibility for God of being both subjective and objectifiable. That is the very matter of my essay!

Ford is right in saying that “incompleteness” as such does not insure concrescent status (PS27 145, note 17). Concrescence is not simply a process of ongoingness (as the growth of the past), but a teleological process which ends with achieving its aim. But in God’s case, the aim is never achieved in the sense that the process stops. So I concur with William Christian that the finality of God should be seen as *telos* and not as end. The fact that God’s aim is never-ending implies that God’s *subjectivity* is without end. So, although God is at all times determinate, God is at all times involved in a teleological process, i.e., in concrescence. Despite God’s objectifiability, God is always Thou, always subject in the full sense of the word.

I have felt it necessary to make these brief remarks in order to participate in the discussion on my own terms. This discussion has importance for theology because it concerns the conceptual groundwork of our thought about God not only as “unmoved mover,” but also as “moved mover.” The technicalities are necessary, but they are no more than the nail on which to hang the painting!