

“The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself” (A.N. Whitehead)

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[draft version]

Introduction

“The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself” - the title of my presentation - is taken from Whitehead’s *Religion in the making* (1926, p.149).

In *Adventures of Ideas* (1933) too, Whitehead speaks of ‘incarnation.’ There he evaluates the idea of ‘incarnation’ as it was brought forward by the alexandrine fathers as an improvement upon Plato’s notion of imitation: “These Christian theologians have the distinction of being the only thinkers who in a fundamental metaphysical doctrine have improved upon Plato” (AI 167).

In this paper I want to discuss the following points:

1. How does Whitehead see the difference between Plato and himself, that is to say, between ‘imitation’ and ‘incarnation’?
2. What is the importance Whitehead attaches to ‘(mutual) immanence’ or, in theological terms, to ‘perichoresis’?
3. This will bring us to Whitehead’s view of the relationship between incarnation, creation and self-creation.
4. Finally I will briefly address the question of evil in relation to incarnation. For if this world embodies God, i.e., is in some sense factually the incarnation of God, how then is it possible for the world not to be the best possible world? Moreover, the question of the place of matter will be addressed.

1. Difference between Plato and Whitehead / between imitation and incarnation

Whitehead makes an explicit comparison of his view and Plato’s in his theological chapter of *Adventures of Ideas* (‘The New Reformation’), where he points out three phases with regard to conceptions of how the Ideas in God’s nature can be persuasive elements in the world:

In the first phase there is Plato’s suggestion, although Plato wavered in the way he works it out

(persuasion versus compulsion; imitation versus participation) (AI 166-167).

For Plato the divine Ideas belong to the eternal nature of God, and there is a gap between that eternal nature of God and the transient world. How then can those ideas in God be persuasive in the world? For Plato, according to Whitehead, by imitation only. Quote: “Thus the World, for Plato, includes only the image of God, and imitations of his ideas, and never God and his ideas” (AI 168).

Whitehead indicates as third phase the phase of the early Christian theologians from Alexandria and Antioch. And he praises them, because, as he sees it, their conception of a multiplicity in God, and more precisely, their conception of the mutual immanence of each component in the divine nature, constitutes a ‘*metaphysical discovery*’: “They decided for the direct immanence of God in the one person of Christ. They also decided for some sort of direct immanence of God in the World generally. This was their doctrine of the third person of the Trinity. My point is that in the place of Plato’s solution of secondary images and imitations, they demanded a direct doctrine of immanence. It is in this respect that they made a metaphysical discovery. They pointed out the way in which Platonic metaphysics should develop, if it was to give a rational account of the rôle of the persuasive agency of God” (AI 168-169).

Whitehead points out that those theologians developed their notion of direct immanence in a theological context but that, unfortunately, they failed to make use of this discovery for a further development of a general metaphysics.

This is the task Whitehead sets for himself. He is not interested in a Trinitarian doctrine as such, but he is highly interested in a rationally developed doctrine of immanence of God in the World generally.

For the sake of historical honesty, it is good to say that Plato’s idea of imitation too sometimes has connotations of immanence. Plato uses in his texts two different words: μιμησις (duplication or imitation) and μεθεξις (participation). Aristotle and the great majority of scholars consider the two words as near synonyms for imitation. Thereby, the problem of the gap between the world of the Forms and the transient world of *sensa* remains unavoidable. As we have seen, this is also the way Whitehead understands Plato. This widely held interpretation is supported by Plato’s *Parmenides* 132d: “participation of the things in the Ideas is nothing else than that they are representations/reproductions of those Ideas.”

Nevertheless, Plato does make use of two different words, and occasionally (e.g., *Phaedo* 100 c-d) the term μεθεξις (participation) suggests some of the characteristics Whitehead so fondly likes when he speaks of ‘direct immanence’ or ‘incarnation.’

2. ‘Immanence’ and ‘mutual immanence’ / ‘perichoresis.’

Why does Whitehead attach so much importance to these notions?

However, this paper concerns Whitehead, not Plato. Apart from the question whether his interpretation of Plato is entirely accurate in this respect, it may be clear that for Whitehead, forcefully looking for a concept that might bridge the gap between the transient world and God, the concept of immanence really functions as a metaphysical discovery. Why? Because it enables him to conceptualize a *persuasive presence of the ideal in the actual world*.

Moreover, in his metaphysical view nothing stands alone, separate from the other entities. Each actual entity is interwoven within the web of relations. Therefore, in order to avoid an exceptional status for God, God too must be thought of as present in the world and the worldly events as present in God. The idea of *mutual immanence* (AI 201) offers Whitehead this possibility.

Before we go on, we must reflect a moment on this ‘mutual immanence.’ Whitehead also uses the expression ‘prehension of each other’ (PR 24). Is the notion of ‘reciprocal prehensions’ intelligible? Most of us get their first understanding of the notion of prehension from a description in which a becoming occasion is said to prehend or appropriate a past occasion (or a different type of being) as an object. This, however, would make ‘mutual prehensions’ impossible. Yet, Whitehead is able to refer to such prehensions, because not only past occasions but also future anticipated occasions can be prehended, even though in the latter case the term ‘prehension’ receives a slightly different meaning, and in general the reciprocity is not symmetrical. Whitehead: “The earlier [occasion] will be immanent in the later according to the mode of efficient causality, and the later in the earlier according to the mode of anticipation” (AI 197). As for contemporary occasions, Whitehead remarks: “It is the definition of contemporary events that they happen in causal independence of each other. Thus two contemporary occasions are such that neither belongs to the past of the other. (...) The occasions originate from a common past and their objective immortality [=their continuing efficacy as objects] operates within a common future. Thus indirectly, *via* the immanence of the past and the immanence of the future, the occasions are connected. But the immediate activity of self-creation is separate and private, so far as contemporaries are concerned. There is thus a certain immanence of contemporary occasions in each other” (AI 195-196).

In *Modes of Thought* (1938) Whitehead again speaks of ‘mutual immanence’ (MT 164), albeit in a slightly different sense or context. He then offers examples of mutual immanence, such as “I am in the room, and the room is an item in my present experience” (MT 163), and: “We are in the world and the world is in us” (MT 165).

Similarly, but now with regard to God and World, Whitehead says in *Process and Reality* (1929): “It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World,” and: “[N]o two actual entities can be torn apart: each is all in all. Thus each temporal occasion embodies God, and is embodied in God” (PR 348).

With the phrase “each occasion embodies God” we enter the linguistic field of incarnation.

3. Incarnation

How does immanence relate to incarnation? In its strictest sense, the term ‘incarnation’ refers to God’s direct immanence in Jesus Christ: “The Word (God) became flesh (*logos sarx egeneto*),” according to the beginning of St. John’s Gospel (John 1, 14).

As you well know, there is a very long theological debate on the meaning of the provocative sentence that God became flesh. But for now let it suffice to remark that apart from the connotation of immanence - the connotation which Whitehead focuses on - the expression that God became flesh is also interesting because of its implicit positive view on flesh or body. Historically it formed a positive counterpart to much negative religious thinking about body and matter (in platonic and gnostic areas of the religious spectrum). At the end of this paper, we will return to this aspect of the valuation of matter with regard to incarnation.

But first we must follow Whitehead’s thinking on the embodiment of God in each temporal occasion (PR 348). ‘Embodiment’ is the English equivalent of the Latin term ‘incarnation’ which Whitehead also applies sometimes, e.g. in: “The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself” (RM 149) – which is the title of this lecture. Whitehead uses the idea of incarnation/embodiment to signify the immanence of God in the world in a broad sense, or, in Whitehead’s own words, to signify that “[i]n some sense he [the primordial Being] is a component in the natures of all fugitive things” (AI 130).

So far, we have seen Whitehead’s enthusiasm for the idea of immanence or incarnation in relation to his attempt to bridge the gap between the eternal God and the transient World, and in relation to the reciprocity of this immanence.

Now, we must consider in some more detail what this immanence or embodiment of God in the world entails, how it relates to persuasiveness, to existence, to factuality.

1. The first way in which Whitehead pictures God’s immanence is expressed in his notion of God as the *object of desire* for each becoming occasion. God is immanent in the world because a worldly occasion prehends God as its initial aim (PR 244-247). The becoming occasion has this purposive awareness by “sharing in the nature of the immanent God” (cf. AI 130). So the occasion’s initial aim is the immanence or incarnation of God in that occasion.

This divine *persuasive* agency is by the same token a *constitutive* agency (PR 244). For the occasion is lured/persuaded by its prehension of God as its initial aim, and it is by this being lured, by this being attracted, by this longing-for that the occasion happens to be.

Thus, by providing such aim God acts as ‘principle of concretion,’ so as thereby constituting (creating) the new actual occasion.

However, this creation implies the *self-creation of the new actual occasion*. For the initial aim constitutes the *autonomous subject* in its primary phase of feelings (PR 244); the aim is the

starting point of the subject's self-causation (PR 244).

2. Up to now we have seen the immanence of God in the world exclusively in the shape of a purposive and therewith constitutive *lure*. But according to Whitehead God is also immanent in the world in the *results* of the worldly occasions, in their outcome, the facts.

“Every event on its finer side introduces God into the world” (RM 149). Through an event God's ideal vision is given a base in actual fact, according to Whitehead. That is why he can say:

“Every act leaves the world with a deeper or a fainter impress of God” (RM 152).

So, God is not only embodied in value (as distinguished from fact), but God is also embodied in the facts themselves. Or to put it the other way around: To some extent, a fact (*factum*) is not simply something different from value, but it is also a congealed earlier *realization of value* so that the world is in some sense the incarnation of God.

4. Matter and Evil

All this has important implications for the role of ‘matter’ in the sense of the given factual world. In early Christian theology there was a heavy dispute regarding the role of matter. Was it to be regarded as a second force next to or opposed to God? Is it responsible for the evil in the world?

For Marcion (ca 85 – ca 160) the source of evil lies partly in matter – the un-become matter – from which the (bad) creator formed the world. Opposed as he is to this Marcionite doctrine of un-become matter understood as anti-divine power, Tertullian (ca 155 – ca 225) defends the doctrine of ‘creation from nothing’ which by that time had already become the ‘orthodox’ doctrine, and therewith the goodness of the creator. He states that the evil of the world is due to man and to an abuse of free will, but not to the created matter.

Let us now consider Whitehead's position against this background. The data of the actual world from which the becoming event creates itself are to be understood as ‘matter.’ However, contrary to ‘matter’ for the Marcionites and for later Manicheism, Whitehead's ‘actual world’ does not have the connotation of an anti-divine power. His is a process view: the advance of time is essentially part of that picture. This implies, as we have indicated, that whatever we call ‘matter’ (in the sense of the facts of the actual world which the novel event itself must form) was itself a becoming event at an earlier moment, when it too came to be under the influence of an aim derived from God.

Therefore, as stated above, far from being a second factor existing by itself, un-become and independent from God, ‘matter’ too is co-created by God and shows to some extent the incarnation of God in itself.

However, this claim needs a further amendment. God's creating activity towards the becoming

entity that has become fact or matter, was at first (only) an initiation in need of subsequent self-creation for the sake of actualization. But, depending on how such self-creation occurs, the result is more or less in conformity to God's ideal: "Every act leaves the world with a deeper or a fainter impress of God. He then passes into his next relation to the world with enlarged, or diminished, presentation of ideal values" (RM 152). And moreover: "So far as the conformity is incomplete, there is evil in the world" (RM 60).

Thus, the actual world as 'matter' features two aspects for Whitehead: "On one side it ... show[s] that its creative passage is subject to the immanence of an unchanging actuality [=God]. On the other side its incompleteness, and its evil, show that the temporal world is to be construed in terms of additional formative elements" (RM 96).

5. In conclusion

Whitehead's view of incarnation, according to which God is present in the world as both lure and fact, keeps him from holding a negative view on the actual world as matter (as is the case in old and modern gnostic views).

But Whitehead's incarnation view is not naïve. God is present in the world, as lure and as fact, *but not every lure or fact is equally and totally an incarnation of God*. This is the crux of the reason why this world, even though it embodies God in itself, is not the best of all possible worlds. Incarnation does not imply a restless identity of God with the world. Whitehead's view is therefore anything but pantheistic.

In the end we can say that this not-naïve incarnation vision precisely expresses Whitehead's dynamic process view. It shows the tension between what the world *factually happens to be* (an impasse) and *what it could be*. What it happens to be is induced by the 'actual world,' what it could be derives from God's 'initial aim' as related to that actual world. And precisely the difference between the two constitutes the tensed bow of the event.

References:

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