DOES GOD INFLUENCE THE WORLD'S CREATIVITY?:
HARTSHORNE'S DOCTRINE OF POSSIBILITY

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July, 1981
ABSTRACT

Since Hartshorne rejects Whitehead's doctrine of eternal objects, this seems to deny Hartshorne's God any causal influence via providing initial subjective aims to the world's creatures. If there are no specific eternal objects as possibilities to be actualized by creatures, there can be no specific initial aims. Hartshorne's metaphysics, however, can be rendered coherent at this point by interpreting the initial aims as hierarchies of indeterminate possibilities which are not specific until rendered so by creatures. Such an interpretation is coherent with his doctrine of possibility understood as a hierarchy of indeterminate potentiality. A further issue remains, nevertheless, in regard to Hartshorne's claim that the possibilities offered by God to creatures are both infinite and yet limited. It is difficult to see how they can be both.
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A central feature of Hartshorne's "neoclassical" metaphysical scheme is his understanding of God as the dominant causal influence upon the creative acts and decisions of the world's creatures. Following Whitehead, Hartshorne and other process philosophers have long contended that God's causal agency in the world functions as an effective "persuasive" lure. God's role (among other important functions) is to provide creatures with their "initial subjective aims" as the source of ideal and novel possibilities, possibilities which the creature may or may not wish to actualize. If God's ideals are actualized, the creature will experience the maximum of value and intensity that was possible at that particular moment; if not, there is a loss of value and intensity, and the world is the lesser for it. So indeed is God the lesser, since he encourages and seeks ever greater value and intensity in his creatures as important (and necessary) contributions to his own ongoing experience.

The purpose of this article is to assess the coherence of Hartshorne's understanding of this matter. Specifically, I wish to focus upon his rejection of Whitehead's doctrine of "eternal objects" as the specific ideals which are the source of the initial aims given by God to his creatures. In Whitehead's account, God envisages specific possibilities from which he chooses the initial aims, as final causes, for each creature. The creature then synthesizes these aims with the causal influences of its immediate world, thereby making determinate new concrete experiences, all of which contribute continually to the creative, pro­ cessive advance through time of its reality. In Hartshorne's scheme, however, there are no specific ideals from which God may choose the initial aims for his creatures; there is rather a vast continuum of possibilities containing potentiality which is not specific until rendered determinate by creatures.

The issue I wish to consider is this: it is generally assumed by process philosophers, following Whitehead, that the initial aim is a specific ideal, and while this would seem to be coherent with Whitehead's doctrine of eternal objects, Hartshorne's non-Whiteheadian understanding

1See, however, Barry L. Whitney, "Process Theism: Does a Persuasive God Coerce?" The Southern Journal of Philosophy XVII (1979), 133-143, wherein it is argued that Hartshorne's God acts coercively at times despite Hartshorne's insistence on the contrary.

2I shall not pause to rehearse the countless references to this theme, but shall merely assume this is generally accepted as an undisputed point.
of the nature of possibility is, in my opinion, incoherent with such. It must be noted that Hartshorne has not been terribly clear on this matter, for quite simply, he has not addressed the issue explicitly. Indeed, he has written very little about the whole matter of the creatures' "concrescence," with the little he has written of it seeming to indicate that he accepts Whitehead's account of the initial aim as a specific ideal. He has, to my knowledge, offered nothing in explicit contradiction of this impression. My contention, however, is that since Hartshorne rejects Whitehead's doctrine of specific ideal possibilities, he may not hold—coherently—that God's causal agency functions by offering specific initial aims to creatures as their final causes.

I would suggest that this is not merely an academic point of interest only to Whiteheadian scholasticism, for at stake here is the fundamental viability of a rather central feature of Hartshorne's metaphysical scheme. The issue is a serious one, as attested to by the criticisms of Hartshorne by Lewis Ford, a leading process philosopher. Ford's contention is that Hartshorne's God is not able to provide creatures with their initial aims, thereby rendering the Hartshornian account of the origins of subjectivity defective. As long as Hartshorne defines possibility as "simply the indeterminate potentiality of the past bearing on an indicated spatio-temporal region in the future, there can be no definite formal possibilities for God to evaluate." And without these definite and distinct eternal objects, God cannot provide specific initial aims for his creatures. This, in turn, denies creatures the necessary unifying and ordering principle which alone can explain how the indeterminacy of potentiality is made relevant and comprehensive to the creature. Hartshorne's account, in short, "slights" God's necessary causal role: "The possible is not merely compatible with the past out of which it grows [as Hartshorne holds], but provides the formal pattern for the emergence of the actual."  

Reference to the "becoming" or "concrescence" of a creature refers to the process whereby the creature synthesizes its causal data into a new experience. Hartshorne has written significantly less than has Whitehead on this theme, making it difficult to determine Hartshorne's understanding of the creature's freedom vis-à-vis the causal data of its past world and vis-à-vis the divine final causality.

In describing Whitehead's philosophy on this point, Hartshorne has not so much as hinted at any disagreement. See, for example, his Whitehead's Philosophy: Selected Essays, 1935-1970 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. 92; etc.


Hartshorne's God, according to Ford, acts mainly as the imposer of natural law, a thesis which Ford, however, finds rather "deficient in religious inspiration. . . . [for] While we may be comforted and reassured that God thereby protects us from chaos, this is primarily a matter for physics rather than for ethics and religion." In contrast, Ford contends that Whitehead's God is more adequate religiously, i.e., as an object worthy of worship, since he "inspires us primarily by what he contributes to us in the form of values for us to actualize," specifically, by providing us with distinct eternal objects as the formal (or final) causative ingredient in our concrescences.

Now, I would agree with Ford that Hartshorne's understanding of the nature of possibility is incoherent with God's providing specific eternal objects as our initial aims; yet I would like to submit an interpretation of Hartshorne which, I believe, reconciles his doctrine of possibility with his rather fundamental thesis that God's causal agency operates by providing novel possibilities for creatures as their final causes. It is necessary, however, to interpret those initial aims as constituted not by specific eternal objects, but rather by a loosely structured range of potentiality. I hope to substantiate this understanding of the initial aim (i.e., divine final causality) by interpreting Hartshorne's doctrine of possibility as implying that the realm of potentiality is constituted neither by specific eternal objects nor, on the other hand, by a chaotic, unstructured randomness. Rather, the infinite continuum of possibility envisaged by God is a loosely structured range of indeterminate ideals, ideals which are not specific until rendered so by creatures.

Ford, "Whitehead's Differences," p. 79.

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While I have referred to God's causal agency as the creature's "final causes," it must be noted that, for Hartshorne, God's final causality is transmitted through the "efficient" causality of the creature's immediate past world. Hartshorne, accordingly, can argue that God "is an efficient cause because he is a final cause, and vice versa." (Whitehead's Philosophy, p. 92). Efficient causality is transmitted through prehensions, both "physical" and "hybrid"--physical prehensions of the past world and hybrid prehensions of God's "conceptual" prehensions. The latter contain aims and ideals and are, accordingly, also final causes which are always qualified by the particular state of the world at any moment. God's final causality is constituted by those possibilities he deems best within the limits determined by the efficient causality of the world.

We might note also that while Ford prefers to speak in terms of the "formal" causality of God and the "material" causality of the world, Hartshorne seems to prefer the other Aristotelian terms, "final" and "efficient" causality. For our present purposes, the sets of terms may be considered synonymous.
Possibility and Divine Causality

Hartshorne has persistently voiced his disapproval of Whitehead's doctrine of eternal objects as specific ideals, i.e., as eternally distinct and definite possibilities. He contends that Whitehead's understanding here is "obscure, if not definitely erroneous." There is, in Hartshorne's view, only one metaphysical universal (eternal object): "God's fixed essence," which constitutes a "continuum of possible states of divine experience." From this continuum, specific qualities emerge as novel creations, as "subdivisions," of the more general, nonspecific universality of the continuum. There are no specific possibilities, no distinct eternal objects as such, but rather only the general continuum of possibility. Novel ideas are not definite before they emerge, but rather become definite only as they are instantiated by creatures. "I do not believe," Hartshorne writes, "that a determinate colour [for example] is something haunting reality from all eternity, as it were, begging for instantiation, nor that God primordially envisages a complete set of such qualities. At this point I am no Whiteheadian."

It is Hartshorne's rather insistent belief that Whitehead's doctrine of eternal objects jeopardizes the reality of creation and time, for if there are eternal possibilities that are definite, some of which are selected and actualized by creatures, then "actualization is thereby reduced to a more shuffling (Whitehead's "selection" is all too suggestive of this view) of primordial qualitative factors. In short, creation in the proper sense is denied, and with it the nature of time." Whitehead's position undermines the rather fundamental Hartshornian thesis that creation is the "production of new images," and "not the mere actualization of eternal patterns:" "If all the 'forms of definiteness,' each perfectly definite in itself, are eternally given to God, it is not altogether clear to me what actualization accomplishes." Specific

13 Hartshorne, Whitehead's Philosophy, p. 95.
14 Hartshorne, Creative Synthesis, p. 59. Colors are often cited by Whitehead as examples of eternal objects.
15 Hartshorne, Whitehead's Philosophy, p. 32.
16 Hartshorne, Whitehead's Philosophy, p. 187.
17 Hartshorne, Whitehead's Philosophy, p. 95.
qualities, rather, emerge in time as definite, as determinate, where there was once only a general universal continuum of possibility. Actualization, then, adds to this continuum a unique and particular quality, a definiteness. The causal conditions of the past world (the immediate context) of each creature limit what is possible for the creature, and yet, "what is done is always more determinate than merely what can be done. The latter is a range of possibilities for action, not a particular act." Man's autonomy, his creativity, "is the resolution of an uncertainty inherent in the totality of the influences to which the act is subject;" that is, to "all the influences and stimuli, all 'heredity and environment,' all past experiences, an indetermination removed by the actuality (event, experience, act) itself, and always in such fashion that other acts of determination would have been possible in view of the given total conditions up to the moment of the act."18

I would suggest that Hartshorne's God plays an essential role in all of this. His function is to choose the best range of ideals from among the possibilities arising from the past world as the initial aims for his creatures. That is, God offers to his creatures, as persuasive lures and as final causes, those possibilities not yet actualized by the past world which are most able to provide intensity and value at that (and every other) particular moment in time. The issue, however, is whether this divine aim is to be understood as constituted by specific eternal objects, and if not, by what? As noted above, Hartshorne himself has not been clear on this rather basic point. It is my contention, however, that his metaphysical scheme is coherent at this point only if the divine aim is not considered to be constituted by specific eternal objects. Quite simply, it cannot be specific since Hartshorne's doctrine of possibility (as will be discussed shortly in more detail) denies the existence of specific ideals: the divinely conceived possibilities are not specific eternal objects (i.e., one or more) but rather a vast continuum of largely unstructured potentiality.

This point can be substantiated, I believe, with reference to one of Hartshorne's earliest and most lucid essays (though one which is probably not well known).19 He writes there, for example:

Always a particular character is covered by some range of possible diversity (rather than a mere diversity of possibilities, strictly speaking) within which range something must happen. This much is conditional, that is, granting the world up to now. At an earlier moment, taking the world up to then, a different range was open for compulsory decision.20

Note that Hartshorne refers to a "range" of possibilities. This range ensures that there is some basis of distinction among possibilities, for if all were equally possible, equally relevant to each particular creaturely moment—as an unstructured randomness might imply, then all creaturely instantiations would be merely spontaneous and irrational, and "anything is anything," i.e., there could be no distinctions among things. 21 It is Hartshorne's position, rather, that the more general a possibility, the farther away from determination it is: "The order of decreasing definiteness is the order of increasing generality."22 At each particular creaturely moment, there are certain possibilities (albeit, as indeterminables) which are more relevant than others, and these (the former) are more specific in that they are offered to (and prehended by) creatures as the most desirable possibilities. God is not concerned at each moment with all that is possible, but only with that which is most relevant at any particular moment. He offers a more or less limited range of ideals to creatures as their final causes at each moment. Creaturely experiences, accordingly, are not constituted by the merely mechanical selection (or rejection) of definite eternal ideals, but rather are "the determination of the somewhat indefinite;"23 the possibilities are somewhat limited, i.e., "more or less indeterminate in character, though not simply without character:"24

Since there are degrees of indeterminateness or intrinsic generality, the realm of characters will be a hierarchy, with the most general characters or character enjoying a unique status such that it can, in entire consistency, be viewed as the only really eternal character, at all times necessarily given some embodiment, some determination, or expression of its character as a determinable; while the other, less general, or more determinate characters would be relevant, not to all time, but to stretches of time proportional to their generality.25

There is no need, then, for specific eternal ideas to be offered to creatures by God, but only a randomness which is, however, more or less structured (as to its particular relevance) such that a certain range of ideals is more attractive than others. The continuum of possibility envisaged by God is neither an unstructured randomness nor a multiplicity of specific ideals; it is rather a "hierarchy,"26 a somewhat structured

26 Hartshorne, "Santayana's," p. 150.
continuum of possibility which is yet indeterminate. As such, I would suggest that the initial aims chosen by God for creatures as their final causes are likewise constituted neither by an unstructured randomness nor by specific eternal objects. They are, rather, a limited range of somewhat structured potentiality, possibilities which are not specific until they are actualized and made determinate by creatures. The only definiteness potentiality has before it is instantiated by creatures is its particular relevance for the creature at any (and every) specific moment in time.

Possibility and Infinity

Thus far, I have argued that for Hartshorne's understanding of God (as providing novel ideals to creatures as their initial subjective aims) to be coherent with his doctrine of possibility, he must hold that this final causality is not specific. But this granted, I wish to draw attention to a closely related issue which demands clarification. According to Hartshorne, God's role is to provide creatures with the best ideals possible, taking into full account the present state (or more accurately, the immediate past state) of the individual creatures' world at every particular moment in time. Hartshorne contends that, despite the fact that these new possibilities are limited by the creatures' past world, depending upon the particular situation the creature is in at any moment, they always constitute a very real potential novelty for the creature. The past does not simply (i.e., fully) predetermine the new possibilities which the creature may actualize, for there is virtually an infinity of novel possibilities open to the creature at every moment. Against the dogma of causal determinism which contends that antecedent causal conditions are the "necessary and sufficient" reason for new events, Hartshorne argues for a doctrine of probabilities; i.e., he insists that no creaturely act can ever be fully predetermined:

If the calculus of probabilities has any purchase upon the question of absolute law it can only, as Peirce so pertinently said, declare an infinite improbability against it; for between any given finite value which observation might fix as the probable maximum of the hypothetical irregularity, and the zero value which causality taken as absolute requires, there are an infinity of possible values, none of which is known to be more probable than another [though, as I have argued, God ensures some are more desirable], so that the assumption that the value is exactly zero represents a probability of one over infinity.27

C. Hartshorne, "Contingency and the New Era in Metaphysics," The Journal of Philosophy 16 (1932), p. 426. Hartshorne reaffirms this thesis elsewhere: "there is an eternal creative source of qualities such that, given any two actualized qualities, there is an inexhaustible possibility of intermediaries between them" ("Continuity, the Form of Forms, in Charles Peirce," Monist 39 [1929], p. 527). See also his "Husserl and the Social Structure of Immediacy," in M. Farber, ed., Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), p. 220: "in addition to the aspects of the objects actually given there is an infinity of others virtually or potentially given, though as virtual these too are somehow given."
Now, the point I wish to raise is this: is it coherent to argue, concurrently, as Hartshorne does, that (1) the past state of the world limits what is possible next for a creature and that God's final causality lures us to the best possibilities therein, yet that (2) we have an infinity of possibility available for instantiation? Surely, if we have an infinity of choice, there can be no limits to that choice: Infinity (by definition) would seem to me to deny limits, for it implies that everything is possible. I find Hartshorne's reference to infinity, accordingly, somewhat obscure. Yet perhaps what he is getting at may be made clearer by the following analogy: between the number "1" and the number "2," we are limited to those fractions we may wish to instantiate; and yet there is, at the same time, an infinity of fractions between "1" and "2." There are, furthermore, other possibilities outside the range determined by "1" and "2," for example, the fractions between "2" and "3." I, for one, find this an obscure notion of infinity: it is limited in one sense but infinite variation is, nevertheless, apparently accounted for!

Furthermore, if this analogy is applied to Hartshorne's metaphysical scheme, with respect to God's causal activity, the following rather odd situation would appear to result: the past state of the world limits the range of possibilities which may be instantiated (made determinate) by creatures at any particular moment, and yet, creatures have an infinity of choice within those very limits. Hartshorne could argue, to be sure, that while there is an infinity of choice between "1" and "2," the actualization of the possibilities within that (or any other range) would eventually become trivial, i.e., they would at some point no longer instantiate meaningful intensity and freshness of value. The term "infinity," accordingly, may be misleading: I invite further clarification of this issue.

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