

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, by **Charles Hartshorne**, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983. Pp. xi + 144.

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It is often thought that a critical review must of necessity be negative, but this is a mistake. If criticism means, as it should, the passing of judgment then there is no good reason why such judgment could not be positive, especially if one is prepared to give reasons for the opinion. Hartshorne has written an excellent little book, remarkable not only because of its combination of theological, philosophical and scientific learning with good sense, wit and wisdom, but in the ground it covers in so short a space as well. What is more, the author succeeds in presenting clearly some quite complex ideas—God, creation, freedom, evolution, love—and in developing them to a point where they serve to illuminate a number of immediate problems confronting all of us on the contemporary scene—the nuclear arms race, abortion and pro-life arguments and the debate about creation “science.” The discussion is rooted in Hartshorne’s “neoclassical theism,” here presented in the course of proposals for correcting “six common mistakes about God,” stemming in one way or another from what Hartshorne rightly calls misguided conceptions of what it means to be “Perfect” and “Omnipotent.” I detect in this particular version of a position articulated at greater length in other writings, a stronger tendency than heretofore to bring theological conceptions in line with biblical insights and to stress some of the limitations imposed on religious thought by certain notions adopted from Greek philosophy.

Briefly, the theological errors to be avoided are: thinking of God as Absolutely Perfect and Unchangeable, as Omnipotent and Omniscient in an all or nothing sense and as the bearer of unsympathetic goodness. Two other mistakes, one concerning immortality and the other the concept of revelation, are also cited, but these are said to depend on the status of man and not upon the unique function of God. No detailed account of Hartshorne’s arguments is possible here, but since the first four mistakes are to be avoided by invoking what Hartshorne calls the principle of Dual Transcendence we must concentrate on that. Succinctly stated, this principle is based on the claim, to be found in different ways in both Hegel and Tillich, that no clear and consistent conception of the relation between God and the creatures is possible if the two are initially conceived as being totally “outside” or “other than” each other. In Hartshorne’s version, God contrasts with creatures not as an abstract infinite against a finite, but as a concrete “infinite-and-finite” each aspect of which, in uniquely excellent ways, i.e.,

beyond rivalry and criticism, contrasts with fragmentary creatures who are neither relative nor absolute in themselves. Applying this principle to the traditional view of divine omnipotence results in the disclosure of incoherence, for on that view God is seen as wholly independent or “absolute” in relation to creatures who are wholly passive and consequently can *do* nothing of themselves in any sense. In claiming that God is *both* active and passive in relation to creatures, Hartshorne aims at one stroke to ensure that creatures actually decide and act—have a measure of self-creativity—and to show how this finite creativity makes a difference or influences God. This conception is Hartshorne’s signal contribution and in presenting it he helps to make explicit in a coherent way a most curious deficiency in Western religious thinking and at the same time to show how the defect can be overcome. Consider, first, that the biblical view of a living God is combined with a belief in the reality of history, time, individual development and novelty. Then consider further that the traditional theological idea of God as “Perfect,” “Absolute,” “Pure Actuality” leaves no room either for a living God or for the real difference that the historical increment, including the development of individual personalities, makes to the divine life. To Hartshorne must go the credit for meeting this problem head-on and saying, in effect, that if the biblical view includes taking seriously the value resident in the historical increment and the freedom of the creatures, with God’s help, to have a hand in making themselves, then the traditional idea of God as the One who is through and through “without a shadow of turning” can no longer be maintained. This is a major step not only in the direction of logical consistency, but in the way of conceiving of God as actually involved with the creatures and not as an abstract “Perfection” to be “honored” by equally abstract and one-sided predicates—Omnipotent, Omniscient, etc.—which, construed strictly, would make such involvement impossible.

While I am in complete agreement with Hartshorne’s rejection of determinism along lines marked out by Peirce, James, Whitehead and others, I would like to enter a word of caution and raise a question about the idea of being “creator of myself.” In introducing this idea (p. 17), Hartshorne cites Lequier’s “Thou has created me creator of myself,” Whitehead’s reference to “the self-created creature,” and Sartre’s idea of human consciousness as self-caused, *causa sui*. To begin with, self-creation stands in need of qualification or limitation and I am reassured that, in a number of places, Hartshorne takes note of the point. The scope of freedom is said to be limited (p.18); there is the expression “to some extent self-controlled” (p.36); “to some extent” is repeated in this connection (p. 79) and “partly self-creative” is also used (p. 81). Well and good, but if such limitation is recognized, it will not do to place Sartre in the above company because he, in principle, denies the limits and espouses what I call “free” freedom in the idea that we can *be* only insofar as we have our own being solely from

ourselves—*causa sui*—and do not have it from another, i.e., God. Sartre's dismissal of God is not a matter of preference, but is a consequence of his idea of freedom and total self-creation; man can be only if God is not. I take it, however, that Hartshorne would not accept this idea of freedom nor that of a totally self-caused being. My reason for raising this issue is that, while I accept the idea of limited self-creation, I do not believe that we should overlook the problem of our having to live with (be responsible for?) those aspects of ourselves which we did not create but have inherited from beyond our freedom. In short, there is the question whether an element of *fate* can ever be eliminated from finite freedom and whether that element can be reconciled with the idea of divine providence intended to signal the triumph over the belief in bondage to fate which was widespread in the world of antiquity.

Hartshorne makes some telling criticisms of the claims made by the adherents of the pro-life position on abortion, of the view that the theory of evolution is incompatible with divine creation, and of those fundamentalists in religion who would force essentially ignorant beliefs upon us through legislative means. In describing pro-life literature as full of "question begging," Hartshorne points to the confusion of the actual and the possible. The fetus, he rightly insists, has to be understood in terms of what it actually is, i.e., something very different from what it may become. It is, he argues, to beg the question when it is assumed that the difference is irrelevant. "It is not a mere opinion," he writes, "that *there are enormous...differences between a fetus and an adult human being...*" (p. 100), and to ignore them is simply to ignore basic facts. Under the rubric of "Creation through Evolution," Hartshorne presents a convincing case for the thesis that not only is the process of evolution consistent with the reality of a God whose creatures are endowed with freedom, but that the process requires God for its intelligibility as well. "The evolutionary scheme," he writes, "presupposes an aspect of order in the world which it does not explain" (p. 71) and which cannot be accounted for by mutual adaptation among the creatures. The order necessary for there to be a world at all requires in turn an orderer. Here Hartshorne agrees with Whitehead and with Peirce in some writings.

Finally, Hartshorne alerts us to the dangers that exist in the political power possessed by proponents of fundamentalistic religion with their alternative "Creation biology or else a Godless biology" (p. 116). As he says, this alternative is ignorant and might be harmless were it not for the fact that those who believe it have a fanatic belief in the possibility of forcing it upon us through the power of the law.

While it is not possible to do justice to all that is in this book in a short review, I commend it to thoughtful readers who still value intelligence in religion.