

PROCESS PHILOSOPHY AND THE CONVERGENCES OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION*

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My understanding is that I was asked to address myself to this topic because of interests and questions arising from the Isthmus Institute Lectures this past year, especially the first of these lectures by Ilya Prigogine, in the discussion of which I had occasion to participate. As I gather, some of the things I said or implied either in my response to Professor Prigogine or during the ensuing question and answer period led someone to suppose that that discussion might well be followed up by the sort of roundtable planned for today.

Those of you who were present on that earlier occasion may recall Professor Prigogine's remark that, were it up to him, he would prefer to speak of "convergences of science and philosophy" rather than of "convergences of science and religion." I myself had a good deal of sympathy with what I took to be the point of this remark, even though on my own, very broad, strictly functional definition of "religion" the contrast of religion with philosophy could hardly be anything like as sharp and clear as on the conventional understanding of "religion" that Professor Prigogine evidently presupposed. In any event, on my view of philosophy, it would certainly be involved--and necessarily involved--in any discussion I could imagine of convergences between science and religion.

Let me explain briefly why I take this to be so, with apologies to any of you who participated in that earlier discussion for whom this may be unnecessary repetition.

On my understanding, science and religion are alike, in that, at bottom, each is a mode of inquiry, a way of asking and answering a question that is significant, given our vital interests as human beings in not only living, but living well, and, so far as possible, living better. At the same time, I understand religious inquiry to be different--in fact, logically different--from scientific, insofar as the question that it pursues and attempts to answer is the existential question about the ultimate meaning of our existence as such, given the ultimate reality with which we must somehow come to terms in our understanding of ourselves.

Notwithstanding the essential difference of this religious question from the typical question of the special sciences, however, I understand it to be possible for religion and science to converge at two main points. Because the existential question to which religion seeks an answer has two aspects, metaphysical and moral, religion necessarily has both properly metaphysical and properly moral implications. It has properly metaphysical implications because, in its metaphysical aspect, the existential question is the question about the meaning of ultimate reality for us; and any answer to this question necessarily implies some answer to the properly metaphysical question about the structure of ultimate reality in itself. Unless ultimate reality in itself had one structure rather than another, it could not have the meaning for us that it is asserted to have by any answer to the existential question such as is given by religion. But, then, religion also has

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properly moral implications because, in its moral aspect, the existential question to which religion gives an answer is the question about our own self-understanding in relation to ultimate reality; and any answer to this question necessarily implies some answer to the properly moral question about how we are to act and what we are to do in relation to others. Unless it were morally right for us to act in one way rather than another and to do some things instead of others, the self-understanding implying such moral action could not be the authentic understanding of ourselves that religion asserts it to be.

But now, at both points, with respect both to its metaphysical and to its moral implications, religion is also related to science which, in its own somewhat different way, also has both metaphysical and moral implications. Clearly, whatever is true of this actual world, whose order science has the task of understanding, cannot be false in every possible world and must, therefore, be allowed for by any true metaphysics, whose task it is to conceptualize the strictly necessary conditions of the possibility of any world whatever. Just as clearly, it is impossible to specify morally exactly how we are to act and what ought to be done in a particular situation without having an understanding of the circumstances and consequences of our action such as the natural and human sciences alone are finally in a position to provide.

In sum, then, as I understand them, science and religion converge at these two points--in the one case through the mediation of metaphysics, in the other, through the mediation of morality. But this is tantamount to saying that science and religion converge through the mediation of philosophy; for, on the classical understanding of all of these concepts, metaphysics proper and morals proper are both comprised in what is properly called "philosophy." Literally, or etymologically, of course, "philosophy" means "love of wisdom," or, alternatively, perhaps, "the wisdom that is worth loving." In a more contemporary idiom, one could make the same point by saying that philosophy is the critically reflective form of integral, secular self-understanding. By critically reflecting on all the primary cultural forms, secular as well as religious, philosophy seeks to make fully explicit the ultimate meaning of human existence. It seeks an answer to the same existential question to which religion claims to give an answer, only for it neither any one particular religion nor even all religions together has any kind of privileged status among the data on which this answer has to be based. Despite this essential difference from religion, however, which explains why I speak of philosophy as "secular," the existential question to which it seeks an answer has the same two aspects as when this question is asked and answered by religion. Thus philosophy's question, like religion's, has both a metaphysical and a moral aspect, in that it asks about both the meaning of ultimate reality for us and the authentic understanding of ourselves. And here, too, any answer to the metaphysical aspect of its question has properly metaphysical implications, while any answer to the moral aspect of its question has properly moral implications.

Now you will understand that there are any number of things that could and should be said to nuance this brief summary sketch of how I understand philosophy in its relation to science and religion, and hence to any

points of convergence between them. But this bare sketch will have to do for our purposes here, if I am to say anything at all about process philosophy in particular and about its bearing on the convergences between science and religion.

Talk about such convergences obviously presupposes that science and religion are both in the grip of change, since it is only insofar as science and religion have both recently undergone certain changes and developments that it is at all possible to talk about any convergences between them. But if science and religion, for their part, are indeed caught up in change, the same is true of philosophy, which likewise continues to develop and to present a rather different appearance from its earlier forms in our cultural tradition. Among such relatively newer developments in philosophy are those that now tend to be lumped under the heading "process philosophy."

Like most such terms, "process philosophy" can be said to have three related, but different, senses: (1) a very strict, or proper, sense; (2) a broad sense; and (3) a very broad, or improper, sense. In its very strict or proper sense, "process philosophy" should be understood to apply primarily, if not exclusively, to the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and certain of his followers, most notably, Charles Hartshorne. In its broad sense it may be taken to apply as well to the work of any number of predecessors and contemporaries of Whitehead and Hartshorne, particularly those whom Douglas Browning has described in the title of his excellent anthology of primary sources as "philosophers of process," i.e., the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, and the English philosophers, Samuel Alexander and C. Lloyd Morgan, as well as the American philosophers, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead. Some students of these matters would no doubt wish to add the French scientist-theologian-philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, although I suspect myself that he more properly belongs in the group referred to by the third, very broad or improper sense of the word, which could be said to also include German philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Max Scheler as well as any number of still more remote antecedents going all the way back, presumably, to Heraclitus.

This clarification of the three senses of the term should make clear that, strictly speaking, there is not one process philosophy, but only many process philosophies, which express several metaphysical and moral positions, not simply one such position. But, as different as the positions of philosophers in even the first two groups may be at many special points, they are remarkably similar in their main outlines, and they quite agree in projecting a comprehensive metaphysical outlook as well as in clarifying the fundamental moral principles and rules of human action. In any case, it is on process philosophy in the very strict or proper sense, and hence on the philosophies of Whitehead and Hartshorne, that I intend to focus my subsequent comments.

Let us consider, first, the metaphysical position expressed or implied by process philosophy in this strict sense of the words. At the risk of oversimplification, I think one way to describe the basic metaphysical axiom of process philosophy is to say that it is process rather than substance,

becoming rather than being, that is the inclusive category or transcendental concept for understanding anything real. Please note that I have spoken of process or becoming as the inclusive category, not as the exclusive category. any supposition that process metaphysics simply replaces substance with process, being with becoming, thereby assuming a position that would be at least equally one-sided with doing the opposite, is woefully wide of the mark. As a matter of fact, the gravamen of process philosophy's charge against classical metaphysics is not that it simply denied process or becoming, but that it failed to give a consistent account of this essential aspect of experience and reality, what with its assumption that it is substance or being which is the inclusive category. Granted that being and becoming both are somehow real--and on this assumption classical and neoclassical metaphysics are agreed--the serious question is as to the reality of their conjunction. Is the whole comprising being and becoming together being, or is it, rather, becoming? In this sense, which is the inclusive category?

To this question, the process metaphysician answers "Becoming," and he or she defends this answer with an argument that is as simple as it is effective. Becoming must be the inclusive category, it is held, because, while it can be consistently said to include being, being cannot be consistently made to include becoming. If anything at all becomes, the whole comprising being and becoming together must also become, any becoming in the parts necessarily entailing a becoming of the whole, and any failure of the whole to become necessarily precluding any becoming in the parts. Supporting this merely dialectical argument, however, is the appeal the process philosopher makes to our own most basic experience of ourselves and of the world. If we take account not only of our external sense experience of things around us but also of our internal experience of ourselves as experiencers, we are at once made aware that it is becoming rather than being which is the really concrete, and thus inclusive, reality. We realize that such permanence and constancy as our existence may be said to have are but an abstract aspect of a whole of lived experience that is ever changing as we enter into new internal relations with all the others who, in turn, are related to us.

At this point, the process metaphysician agrees with the existentialist philosopher in taking our own human existence as temporal, changing, and really related to be what is ultimately real. But, unlike the existentialist, or, at any rate, many existentialists, the process philosopher by no means conceives of metaphysics to be exhausted merely by a new philosophical anthropology. On the contrary, the process metaphysics of Whitehead and Hartshorne takes our experience of ourselves to be paradigmatic of reality as such, and so generalizes the insight into our own existence as temporal and relative selves who are continually changing as also to develop both a new cosmology, or theory of the world, and a new philosophical theology, or theory of the strictly ultimate reality that in theistic religious traditions is called "God," as well as a new ontology, or theory of reality itself. Thus process metaphysics is able to understand all that is actual, from the most insignificant particle of so-called matter all the way up to the God than whom none greater can be conceived, in terms of the same set of fundamental categories or transcendental concepts--namely, as an instance of process or becoming of which time, change, and relativity

are more concrete and inclusive features than eternity, changelessness, and absoluteness.

In other words, process metaphysics is, in one important sense, monistic. Although it is definitely pluralistic in asserting that there is more than one ultimate subject of predication, it is at the same time monistic in asserting that there neither is nor could be more than one ultimate or irreducible kind of such ultimate subjects of predication. It is, in Whitehead's words, "a one-substance [metaphysics]," which explicitly denies all forms of dualism or pluralism with respect to actual kinds.

As for the moral position that is taken by process philosophy, it can be readily characterized, given what has now been said about its metaphysics. As the express denial of any form of metaphysical dualism or pluralism that would assert an irreducible difference or differences between kinds, process metaphysics undercuts the metaphysical justification for any homocentric self-understanding and morality. All actual things, from the least to the greatest, are ultimately of one and the same kind, and so there can at most be a relative, not an absolute, difference between one level of actual things and another with respect to how one is to act and what one is to do. Because anything actual is really related to other real things, which can make a difference to it, for better or for worse, it has an intrinsic as well as extrinsic, or merely instrumental, value. At the same time, because process metaphysics allows for the recognition of different emergent levels of actual things, which differ from one another in their degrees of variety and unity, and thus in their degrees of internal harmony or complexity, it enables one to make all of the relative differences that a sound morality requires between one level of things and another--say, between human beings and the other nonhuman animals who coinhabit our planet.

It is also worth noting that, for this philosophy, it makes perfectly good sense, as it hardly does on a classical metaphysical position, to talk about loving and serving God as well as all other beings who can be affected by one's actions. Because even God is not only eternal, unchanging, and absolute, but also temporal, changing, and really related to others--in fact, to all others--God, too, is such that other things--namely, all other things--can make a difference to God, for better or for worse. Thus God is the eminent intrinsic value, as well as the eminent extrinsic or instrumental value. God is instrumentally valuable, namely, insofar as God's decisions ever and again re-establish the fundamental limits of cosmic order, thereby setting the optimum conditions for the decisions of all other actual things. Recognizing this, however, the process philosopher can rightly call attention to the moral importance of human actions directed toward maintaining and/or transforming the fundamental limits of social-cultural order. In other words, from the standpoint of process philosophy, the broadly "political" aspect of our moral responsibility comes clearly into focus, insofar as it becomes clear how we in our way, like God in God's way, must so act as to set the optimum conditions for the actions of all.

Inadequate as it surely is, this brief outline of the metaphysical and moral positions of process philosophy should be sufficient to clarify

its bearings on the convergences between science and religion about which I spoke in the first part of my address. Summarily stated, this bearing is to make explicit both the metaphysical and the moral implications of much recent science and religion. As I explained in my response to Professor Prigogine, the "scientific revolution" of which he likes to speak and of which he himself is very much a part, is radically antidualistic in its metaphysical implications and radically antihomocentric and "political" in its implications for morality. On the other hand, what I should be willing to call the "religious" or "theological revolution," which has also gone on in our time, has the same antidualistic implications in the metaphysics it implies and the same challenge to human-centeredness and neglect of the broadly political in what it implies with respect to morality.

But, as I have tried to show, it is just these implications, metaphysical and moral, that process philosophy makes explicit. In doing so, it plays an irreplaceable role in the convergences of science and religion in our time. Neither science nor religion simply is either a metaphysics or a morality, even if each of them, in its way, necessarily implies both. Consequently, it is precisely to philosophy that we must look if we are to find either an explication of the metaphysical and moral implications of science that science itself does not and cannot explicate or sufficient reason to affirm the truth of the convergent metaphysical and moral implications of religion for which religion alone fails to provide a sufficient ground.

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