

Pantheism—Part 2: An Evaluation

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As a world and life view pantheism has had a broad and persistent influence in the world. Much of the Far Eastern world for most of its recorded history has been influenced by pantheism. Even much of the Western world has been a series of footnotes on plotinian pantheism. The appeal of pantheism has not been without both truth and value. Examples may be briefly noted.

Positive Insights in Pantheistic Positions

Pantheism has provided much of value to its adherents and has given both insight and challenge to those who do not embrace it as a world view. Among these values we may take special note of six.

1. First, pantheism attempts to be *comprehensive* in its perspective. Pantheism is not a piecemeal philosophy. It is an all-embracing view of the sum total of reality from that perspective. In this sense it is both metaphysical and comprehensive, two commendable dimensions essential to any world view.
2. Second, pantheism has laid special emphasis on an ultimate dimension of reality that cannot be overlooked or denied, namely, *unity*. Unity and harmony are constitutive elements in any adequate world view. If this is a uni-verse, there must be some reality basis for its unity.
3. Third, no adequate view of a God who is worthy of serious human interest can neglect his *immanent* presence and activity in the world. A God who is totally and completely Other lacks relatability and no doubt, at least to many, he will lack worshipability. Pantheism appropriately stresses that God is really *in* the world, at least within the depths of the human soul.
4. Fourth, pantheism acknowledges that only God is *absolute* and *necessary*. Everything else is less than ultimate and absolute in the supreme sense in which God is. No part of creation is independent or ontologically detached; all is completely dependent on God who is All in all. This insight is a valuable corrective for many materialisms as well as for deisms.
5. Fifth, pantheism invariably involves an *intuitive* epistemological emphasis which is often unappreciated by more empirically oriented minds. This stress on the direct and unmediated intimacy with the object of knowledge (especially God) is not only valuable but it is unavoidable. Indirect or inferential knowing must rest finally on direct and immediate seeing. All justification must come to an end; first principles must be known intuitively. Hence, some form of intuitive knowledge is essential to knowing God who is the ultimate principle (person) in religion.
6. Sixth, pantheists place strong and appropriate emphasis on the *via negativa*. God cannot be expressed in positive terms with limited meaning. God is infinite and transcendent and all limitation must be negated from terms applied to him. Without the way of negation verbal idola-

try results, namely, the finitizing of God. Pantheists have preserved this important dimension of religious language.

One could take note of numerous other contributions pantheistic thinkers have made to the philosophy of history (e.g., Hegel), to comparative religions and human toleration (e.g., Radhakrishnan), to the preservation of mystical and spiritual emphases, as well as to many other areas. But time has come to critically evaluate the system as a world view.

Some Criticisms of Pantheism as a World View

Understood as a metaphysical interpretation of the universe, pantheism is decidedly lopsided and lacking. There are many reasons for this conclusion and a number of areas in which it may be illustrated.

1. The most fundamental criticism of a strictly pantheistic world view is that it is actually unaffirmable by man, for no finite individual reality exists as an entity really different from God or the absolute. In essence a strict pantheist must affirm, "God is but I am not." But this is self-defeating, since one must exist in order to affirm that he does not exist.

Of course most pantheists are not absolute monists in that they allow for some reality to finite man whether it be modal, manifestational, emanational, or whatever. In this way they hope to escape the self-destructive dilemma just mentioned. Their attempt, however, is not convincing for the following reasons. Claiming that man, as a self-conscious person, is merely a mode or aspect of God is a denial of the way man experiences himself. If we are only self-conscious modes, "why are we not conscious of being so? How did this metaphysical amnesia arise and (yet more seriously) come to pervade and dominate our whole experience?"¹ In point of fact, is it not self-defeating to claim that individual finite selves are less than real? How can any of our individual statements be true including the statement that pantheism is true? If we are being deceived about the consciousness of our own individual existence, then how does a pantheist know that he is not being deceived when he is conscious of reality as ultimately one?

2. Second, granting that there are no real finite selves or "I's," then there is no such thing as an I-Thou relationship between finite selves nor between men and God. Both fellowship and worship become impossible. All alleged I-thou or I-I relations reduce to I. Indeed there is no true changing relation at all, since there are no separate changing relata to relate. Religious experience is impossible in any meaningful sense of the term since all meaningful experience involves something or someone other than oneself with whom one enters the changing experience. For if when one is conscious of experiencing God it is really only an experience internal to the modes or manifestations of God, then *he* is not really having an experience; only God is having the experience.

Some pantheists hope to avoid this problem by giving man a manifestational or emanational status, at least temporarily, as a self. This is true of both Plotinus and Radhakrishnan. Their attempt, however, is unsuccessful because when all is said and done there is no reality in the finite individual that is his own. His selfhood is real only at the point at which it is one with the absolute. Logically this means that *as finite* and *as individual* it is not real, despite all attempts to say that it has some kind of lesser reality. They wrongly assume that whatever is not really ultimate is not ultimately or actually real.

Other pantheists, like Alan Watts, appeal to the Christian Trinity as a model where there is more than one person in communion, I-Thou relations, and yet only one being or essence. This move, however, will not suffice, since the persons of the Trinity are not anchored to finite and

changing natures. They interrelate in accordance with the perfect and unchanging unity of one absolute and eternal nature. By contrast, finite egos bound to a space-time continuum (our “world”) are an entirely different matter. In this case, plurality of persons involves also a plurality of changing essences.

3. Third, the basic metaphysical assumption of monism begs the whole question. From Parmenides to the present, monists of numerous varieties invariably assume a univocal notion of being without justification. This is apparent in Parmenides’ premise that things cannot differ in what they have in common (viz., being) for *that is the very respect in which they are identical*. If one assumes that being is identically the same wherever it is found, then of course it follows that being is ultimately one. That is, if being always means *exactly the same thing* (i.e., univocity of being), then the attempt to show there is more than one being in the universe is futile. Whatever being one points to and however distant and separate it may *seem* from other beings, in the final analysis they are all identical in their being. Not only is no proof offered for this monistic assumption, but a pluralistic alternative to it is overlooked, namely, that being is analogous. If being is not entirely the same wherever it is found but is only similar, then there can be more than one being in the universe. That is, there may be different kinds of being, for example, finite and infinite. And as long as the principle of differentiation is within the very being of the finite beings, then there can be many beings. Each of these can have its own identity different from the others, but each will have an element of similarity in that each has being. This analogous concept of being is at least a metaphysical possibility, and if it is possible then pantheism is not necessarily true. In brief, the central metaphysical premise of pantheism is the unproven assumption that being is to be understood univocally.

4. Fourth, the ship of pantheism is wrecked on the reef of evil. Pronouncing evil illusory or less than real is not only hollow to those experiencing evil, but it is philosophically inadequate as well. If evil is not real, what is the origin of the illusion? Why has it been so persistent and why does it seem so real? As it has been aptly put, why is it that when one experiences suffering, he dislikes what he fancies he feels? Or, more seriously, how can evil arise from God who is absolutely and necessarily good? Making evil a necessary part of God or of the world process that flows necessarily from God does not explain evil; in fact, to the contrary, it explains away absolute Good. It makes God both good and evil. Or, as a pantheist would prefer, it puts God beyond both good or evil. But this leads to another serious inadequacy with pantheism.

5. Fifth, there is neither ground for absolute Good nor an ultimate distinction between good and evil in a pantheistic universe. The ground of all is beyond being and knowing. It is beyond the laws of logic and distinction. Hence, ultimately and really there is no basis for distinguishing between good and evil. So, for God as God nothing is either good or evil, for he is beyond both and contains both in a transcendent way that is manifest in that which flows from him by way of mode, manifestation, or emanation.

6. Sixth, the pantheistic God is not really personal. Strictly speaking, personality is at best a lesser or lower level of God. The Judeo-Christian personal God is a second-class citizen in the heavens. The absolute as absolute and ultimate is beyond personality and consciousness. These are pure anthropomorphisms or at best lesser manifestations of the Supreme. Rather than being the most personal Being and the paradigm for all personality, the pantheistic God is an impersonal force driven by metaphysical necessity and not by volitional and loving choice. God as a loving Father freely bestowing kindness on the world of his creatures is alien to the highest level of religious reality in a pantheistic world. A personal God—if there is one—is at best a lower manifestation or appearance of the highest impersonal reality.

7. Seventh, the pantheistic God is incomplete without creation; he is dependent on the creation that flows from him for the attainment of the perfections that lie latent in his own infinite potentialities. To borrow Plotinus' illustration, God is like a seed that must unfold in its own creation in order to blossom forth in all its potential. God must create a mirror so that by reflection on his creation he may come to know himself. For Hegel, God comes to self-realization by unfolding in the historical process; history, as it were, is necessary to develop deity.

By way of contrast, the theistic God is eternally conscious and complete and without need for anything to realize latent potentials. Indeed, the traditional theistic God is pure actuality without any potential in his being whatsoever.² While a pantheistic God creates out of necessity and need, the theistic God creates out of love and desire.

8. Eighth, if God is "All" or coextensive in his being with the universe, then pantheism is metaphysically indistinguishable from atheism. Both hold in common that the Whole is a collection of all the finite parts or aspects. The only difference is that the pantheist decides to attribute religious significance to the All and the atheist does not. But philosophically the Whole is identical, namely, one eternal self-contained system of reality.

What is more, statements that include everything, such as "God is All," are vulnerable to the charge that they say nothing. For to say everything of God, including opposites, is to say nothing meaningful of him. Unless some real distinction can be made between the finite and the infinite, good and evil, and so on, then nothing significant is being said. Every affirmation must imply by contrast a possible negation in order to be meaningful. Even the general statement "God is being" implies that "God is not non-being." But to affirm, as pantheism does, that "God is All and All is God" in the ultimate and absolute sense is equivocal and nonsensical because it contains within it opposites such as good and evil, being and non-being.

9. Ninth, pantheism involves a contradiction within the nature of God as infinite. For if God is infinite and yet he somehow shares his being (*ex Deo*) with creation, then either the finite is infinite, the contingent is necessary—which is clearly contradictory—or else the finite and contingent and many are not really finite and contingent and many. Rather, they are one, necessary, and infinite. In short, either absolute monism is clearly self-defeating (first criticism above) or else if God shares part of his infinite being with creatures, then part of it is lost and becomes less than infinite. It will not suffice for the pantheist to opt for a third alternative, namely, that when God gives being to a creature it is not God's own being that is given but a being separate from it which is created in the creature; for this position is not pantheism but theism. The choices within this overall framework, then, appear to be absolute monism, which is self-defeating; contradictory pantheism, which holds that God remains infinite in his being even when part of his being is given to another; or theism. Some would attempt to avoid this dilemma by opting for a panentheism. But one thing seems certain; one must move in some other direction than pantheism for a rational and coherent world view.

10. Pantheism's stress on the unknowability or ineffability of God is self-defeating. The very assertion that God is unknowable in an intellectual way is either meaningless or self-defeating. If that assertion is one that cannot itself be understood in an intellectual way, then it is a meaningless assertion. On the other hand, if the assertion "God is unknowable in an intellectual way" is really understandable in an intellectual way, then it is self-defeating. For in this case the pantheist is offering a statement about God to the effect that such statements cannot be made about God. He is making a positive predication about God that claims that predications cannot be made about God in a positive way. Totally negative predications tell one nothing. As even Plotinus admitted, every negative predication implies some positive knowledge.³

Some pantheists, like Alan Watts, frankly avoid this dilemma by admitting that their writings are not informative about God. Besides signifying that their writings are meaningless, this implies in addition that the whole communication process is fruitless. Why write? Pantheists do write and often write long books. Furthermore, it is self-defeating for the pantheist to communicate to us his view of God only to inform us that he has not done so. Despite what some pantheists say, what they actually do is use language to communicate to us a view of God which in turn they say is incommunicable.

Summary and Conclusion

Pantheistic emphases provide numerous insights into the nature of reality including the absoluteness of God, his immanence in the world, the unity of being. Pantheism attempts to provide a comprehensive, all-embracing philosophy. In addition, many pantheists have provided valuable insights into intuitive epistemology and the need of negation in religious language in order to preserve the transcendent and infinite nature of God. On the interpersonal and social level many pantheists have stressed the need for tolerance and the desire for a spiritual unity among men. All of these, and more, are commendable contributions by proponents of the pantheistic viewpoint.

However, when we consider pantheism as a metaphysical system, there are numerous problems—some of which seem insurmountable. Most significant is the fact that pantheism is self-destructive of religious experience, of its own concept of God and of the ability even to affirm the position of pantheism without involving the existence of that which is contrary to the system, namely, the existence of a finite self making the affirmation. In addition, the inability to adequately explain the apparent reality of evil and the relegation of God to an incomplete potential for perfection dependent on manifestation or emanation for completion of his being is a shabby concept of absolute and necessary perfection compared to the God of Christian theism. Finally, pantheism is often built on an intuitive or mystical epistemology that makes self-defeating or meaningless statements about the unknowability of God. If it were true that God is actually unknowable and inexpressible by language or thought, then the pantheist could not have so expressed his view to us. The fact that pantheists in writing and speaking do express their view proves that their claim about God's unknowability is self-destructive.

Notes:

¹ H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity*, p. 72.

² See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 13, 11.

³ *Enneads*, VI, 7, 29.

Select Readings:

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