Open Theology 2018; 4: 60–70 DE GRUYTER OPEN

Intersubjectivity and Reciprocal Causality within Contemporary Understanding of the God-World Relationship

Joseph A. Bracken*

Divine-Human Intersubjectivity and the Problem of Evil

https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2018-0005
Received December 4, 2017; accepted December 20, 2017

Abstract: The use of the interrelated terms divine primary causality and creaturely secondary causality to describe the God-world relationship presents problems to Christian philosophers and theologians in dealing with two key issues: first, the freedom of human beings (and to some extent other finite entities) to exercise their own causal powers in independence of Divine Providence for the world of creation; secondly, the responsibility of God and all creatures for the existence of natural evil and the corresponding responsibility of God and human beings for the existence of moral evil in this world. After reviewing some of the ways these issues have been dealt with in the past, the author offers his own solution in terms of a Neo-Whiteheadian systems-oriented approach to the God-world relationship with emphasis on a reciprocal causal relationship between God and creatures so as conjointly to bring about everything that happens in this world.

Keywords: primary and secondary causality; reciprocal causality; intersubjectivity; Aristotle; Thomas Aquinas; Alfred North Whitehead; substance; open-ended system; emergence of higher-order systems out of lower-order systems

Many contemporary Christian systematic theologians regularly use intersubjective language to describe their understanding of God's relationship to creatures, above all, to human beings as rational creatures able to exchange thoughts and feelings with other human beings and with God. But what is not always clear in this otherwise very attractive line of thought is whether the theologian in question is thinking metaphorically or systematically about God's relation to human beings and their relationship to God. For, as I explain in what follows, intersubjectivity seems to imply a freely chosen reciprocal relation between two subjects of experience. Yet, given the presupposition that God as Creator unilaterally brings finite entities into existence *ex nihilo* (i.e., with no pre-existing substrate),[1] at least one of the conditions for an intersubjective relation between God and creatures seems to be lacking. Furthermore, within classical Thomistic metaphysics, God as Primary Cause of human beings (and other finite entities) sustains them in their creaturely existence and activity from moment to moment. Human beings (and within limits other finite entities) exercise secondary causality only in response to the antecedent divine gift of existence and activity. That is, their ability to respond to God's grace is itself an effect of God's primary causality in their regard. The initiative to act then does not come in the first place from themselves as finite subjects of experience, but from God.

Within an intersubjective relation between two subjects of experience, then, there is no distinction between primary and secondary causality in their relation to one another. Both are primary causes in

1 Denziger and Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolarum,* n. 800. Reference is to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 AD.

***Corresponding author: Joseph A. Bracken,** Xavier University, United States of America; E-mail: bracken@xavier.edu

Open Access. © 2018 Joseph A. Bracken, published by De Gruyter Open. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 License.

setting up and sustaining what Martin Buber called an I-Thou as opposed to an I-It relationship.[2] An I-It relationship, of course, does involve primary causality in that a human being unilaterally determines how to deal with something or someone other than him-/herself with an eye to his/her personal gain or satisfaction. Is then the primary causality of God vis-à-vis the world of creation equivalently an I-It relationship, given that all things in creation are ordered to God as to their final cause?[3] A student of the thought of Thomas Aquinas, however, might rightly object that God's relation to creatures should still be understood as an I-Thou relationship, given that God created the world out of love for creatures and thereby makes all things within creation good in themselves.[4] Thus creation exists both for the sake of the creature and for the glory of God. Hence, the use of intersubjective language to describe God's relation to human beings is not simply metaphorical but justified. God creates the world out of love, and love demands a return of love if it is to endure.

Yet, from a purely rational philosophical perspective (as opposed to a theological position grounded in the data of Sacred Scripture), the language of primary and secondary causality still presents problems to Christian philosophers and theologians in dealing with two key issues: first, the freedom of human beings (and to some extent other finite entities) to exercise their own causal powers, given the ontological and temporal primacy of divine causality vis-à-vis the secondary causality of creatures; secondly, the responsibility of God for the existence of natural evil and the co-responsibility of God and human beings for the existence of moral evil in this world. In this article, I will initially review some of the ways in which these issues have been resolved within the framework of the classical God-world relationship, and then propose my own solution to these problems in the light of a systems-oriented approach to the God-world relationship.

1 A critique of the classical God-World relationship

1.1 The Thomistic explanation

I begin with Thomas Aquinas's description of Divine Providence in his *Summa theologiae*. He first argues that the order of things in this world with respect to their final end pre-exists in the mind of God.[5] He then adds that the things of this world are ordered to the Providence of God in the same way that an artifact is ordered to the intent of the artist.[6] Thus the intent of God for creation is never impeded even though in the interaction of finite entities with one another the causal agency of one entity can be clearly impeded by the causal activity of another entity. Evidently, Divine Providence allows some finite causal agencies to fail or be defective, provided that they still serve a higher good intended by God. For example, a destructive fire can be extinguished by a human being with a pail of water who providentially comes on the scene and knows what to do to prevent the fire from spreading. Hence, even the free decisions of human beings and other seemingly contingent events are incorporated into the divine plan for the world of creation. In this way God thereby actively assists good people in making good decisions and finds a way to compensate for the effects of bad decisions made by malicious people.

Here is where secondary causality comes into play. Admittedly, non-rational agents simply act in line with their God-given natures. But within Divine Providence human beings are intended to be executors of the divine plan, whether they realize it or not.[7] Contingency is therefore a factor in the divine plan for the fulfilment of the cosmic process, but the plan of God for creation is nevertheless more perfectly fulfilled if finite rational agents are also involved in its execution and fulfilment.[8] But does this likewise imply divine

2 Buber, *I-Thou*, 54; 62.
3 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*: I, Q. 2, art. 3; Q. 19, art 6.
4 Ibid., I, Q. 20, art.2.
5 Ibid., I, Q. 22, art. 1.
6 Ibid., art. 2.
7 Ibid., art. 3.
8 Ibid., art. 4.

predestination? To this question Aquinas replies "yes" with respect to human beings and angels since only rational creatures have the potentiality for the gift of eternal life with God.[9] Yet God wills that only some rational creatures be granted the gift of eternal life since God also wills that others not be given the gift of eternal life but instead incur the penalty of eternal damnation because of their sinful behavior.[10] Presumably the justice of God is the reason for these human beings to be condemned and the mercy of God is the reason why others are saved. Yet even those who are saved for eternal life do not earn it by the meritorious character of their lives. For the grace to live a meritorious life is itself a gift from God.[11]

In a subsequent chapter of his *Summa theologiae* on the Book of Life, Aquinas adds a further detail in his understanding of predestination, namely, a distinction between predestination to grace and predestination to eternal glory.[12] Apparently, all human beings are predestined to grace, but not all are predestined to glory, given the character of their earthly lives.[13] This distinction softens what could be considered the harshness of Aquinas' teaching on divine predestination. But in my judgment there are still residual philosophical problems with Aquinas' understanding of divine predestination and human free will, given the presupposition of primary and secondary causality in understanding the ongoing interaction between God and human beings.

For, as noted above, Aquinas claims that the things of this world are ordered to the Providence of God in the same way that an artifact is ordered to the intent of the artist.[14] This image of the craftsman working on an artifact was also present to Aristotle in setting forth his fourfold causal scheme in the *Metaphysics*. A craftsman chooses some relatively unformed material substance (e.g., wood or stone) and gives it a distinct shape in terms of a pre-given pattern corresponding to whatever purpose he has in mind in creating it.[15] As W. T. Jones comments, Aristotle's causal scheme works well with regard to man-made objects or artifacts but not with organisms, entities that have a life-principle or innate impulse to change.[16] But what then is the cause of that life-principle in organisms? For Aristotle, it is nature.[17] Nature is both the ontological source and the "first constituent" of what is meant by *substance*, that which exists in its own right as itself.[18]

Given this line of thought from Aristotle, it was easy for Aquinas to claim that the first constituent of the activity of existing is God whose nature is simply to exist without any qualifications. Likewise, God as the first constituent of the activity of existence communicates existence to all the creatures of this world, thereby enabling them to exist in their own right as finite participants in the divine activity of existence. The only problem with this understanding of the God-world relationship is that the causal activity of God vis-à-vis creatures is thus unilateral, not reciprocal as in intersubjective relationships among entities in this world.[19] The creature is given the gift of existence *ex nihilo*, i.e., without any antecedent substrate.[20] Furthermore, as noted above, secondary causality as exercised by the creature is instrumental to the causal activity of God in bringing about the fulfilment of the cosmic process. Hence, as noted above, God predetermines the final end of rational creatures even if the creature exercises some freedom of choice along the way. Yet, if God were to set no limits on the way that the creature exercises the gift of free choice, then God would be powerless in terms of guidance or directionality for those creatures.

9 Ibid., Q. 23, arts. 1-2.
10 Ibid., art. 3; see also Q. 24, arts. 2-3.
11 Ibid., Q. 23, art. 5.
12 Ibid., Q. 24, art. 2, ad. 3.
13 This is a common theme in the Hebrew and Christian Bible (See, e.g. Matt. 13: 47-48).
14 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae:* I, Q. 22, art. 2.
15 *Aristotle's Metaphysics*: 983a, 24-33.
16 Jones, *History of Western Philosophy,* I, 225-28.
17 *Works of Aristotle*. Vol. II (*Physics*), 192b.
18 *Aristotle's Metaphysics,* 1014b16-1015a19.
19 See above, n. 2.
20 See above, n. 1.

1.2 Other approaches to the God-World relationship

This tension in understanding the proper relation between the primary causality of God and the secondary causality of creatures in determining what de facto happens in the cosmic process has had a long history. In the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish prophets generally thought that, when defeated in battle by their enemies, the Jewish people were justly being punished by God for their sins but they also expressed great confidence that God would find a way to save the "faithful remnant" (Malachi 3:16-18). When Job initially objected that he was not responsible for the catastrophic events that had recently happened to him, he was reminded personally by God of his inability to understand the way in which God brought the world into existence and now continues to sustain it (Job 38-41). In the New Testament one reads that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Tim. 2: 4). But at the Last Judgment Christ will definitively separate the sheep from the goats, the saved from the damned (Matt. 25: 31-46). In his book *The City of God* and elsewhere, Augustine refers to the condition of humanity after the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3) as a *massa damnata* from which the elect are saved by the mercy of God.[21] Aquinas' views on divine predestination have already been reviewed.

In the sixteenth century, the Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina conceived the notion of "middle knowledge." i.e., knowledge of "what would be the case if various states of affairs were to obtain."[22] That is, God knows some propositions to be metaphysically true (their denial would involve a contradiction even for God). God knows other propositions to be true because they have already happened, are happening or will happen by a unilateral divine decision. Finally, via middle knowledge God knows what would be the case if a human being were making a choice in a specific situation. This seems to guarantee human freedom since the human being, not God, makes the decision. But, if God knows by reason of divine middle knowledge that a given human being will inevitably choose to make one decision rather than another, then the alleged freedom of the human being to make a decision is still compromised. In addition, even God's freedom to make a choice in this case is compromised since even God cannot alter what a human being will inevitably choose to do under certain conditions.

Some contemporary Thomistic philosophers and theologians have tried to resolve this tension between human freedom of choice and God's providence over the world of creation by emphasizing that God *empowers* human beings to make their own decisions; God does not overpower or in any way predetermine a human being's freedom of choice. Denis Edwards, for example, in his book *How God Acts,* claims with Thomas Aquinas that the primary causality of God lies in giving existence (*esse*) to creatures: "it is by God's power that every other power acts."[23] Is God then responsible for everything that de facto happens in this world, both what is good and what is evil? Furthermore, how does God make sure that Divine Providence for the world of creation is fulfilled, namely, that all of creation will be ultimately incorporated into the Cosmic Christ as envisioned in the Pauline Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians? Edwards claims that creatures "find in God not only the cause of their being (efficient cause), but also their final end (final cause). God's providence governs all creatures toward their end, which is participation in the goodness of God."[24] But, if God is both the efficient cause and the final cause of the existence and activity of a creature, how free is the creature to make its own decisions from moment to moment? By way of explanation, Edwards cites Karl Rahner to the effect that we human beings have only a limited understanding of how God works through secondary causes that are only imperfectly understood by modern science.[25] But, in any event, it is only through divine empowerment that the material universe transcends itself in the emergence of life, and life transcends itself in the self-consciousness of human beings.[26]

21 Augustine, *City of God* , Book 21, chap. 12.
22 Laing, "Middle Knowledge."
23 Edwards, *How God Acts,* 81.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 87.
26 Ibid., 88.

The contemporary philosopher of science Terrence Deacon, however, would dispute that claim to divine empowerment as the reason for the progressive growth of order and complexity within the cosmic process, In a recent book *Incomplete Nature,* he offer a strictly naturalistic explanation of the emergence of life from non-life and the emergence of mind from matter based on the "constraints" that higher-order systems impose on lower-order systems in an evolutionary approach to physical reality.[27] Naturally, in response to Deacon, one can claim that divine empowerment is still required for growth in order and complexity within the cosmic process via constraints between higher-order and lower-order systems. Nevertheless, such appeals to divine empowerment of the cosmic process by Christian systematic theologians are in the view of many scientists a faith-claim without empirical verification and thus of no scientific value or significance.

1.3 The problem of evil

I turn now to the other key issue in the classical God-world relationship, namely, the problem of natural and moral evil within the cosmic process. Given Aquinas's understanding of the secondary causality of creatures as executors of the primary causality of God within the cosmic process,[28] it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that God is somehow responsible for the existence of both natural and moral evil within the world of creation. For, if God is both the efficient and final cause of everything that exists, then in principle God can inhibit the workings of the secondary causality of creatures in bringing about the existence of some natural or moral evil simply by refusing to empower the creature to act in this negative way or even by withdrawing the power to exist any longer. Admittedly, why God allows moral evil to occur can, as Joseph Kelly points out in his book *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition,* be justified or at least explained through what is known as "the free will defense" set forth by Alvin Plantinga some years ago: "God loves his creations, and he wants them always to choose the good, although they must make that choice freely."[29] Hence, in an evolutionary cosmic process which proceeds by way of trial-and-error, spontaneity at any level of existence and activity can have unexpected effects on a much greater scale elsewhere in the universe over an extended period of time. This is the so-called "butterfly effect" that was originally detected by Edward Lorenz in running a computer model for weather prediction. God presumably chose then to create a world full of spontaneity rather than a world that operated like a well-oiled machine because it represented a higher good both for God and for creatures. In the short run, such a choice on God's part will result in innocent and seemingly pointless suffering; but in the long run even the evil of gratuitous suffering will be productive of a higher good within the overall divine plan of creation.

But would an alternate paradigm for the God-world relationship that dispensed with the notion of primary and secondary causality in God's relationship with creatures in favor of reciprocal causation between God and creatures in the evolution of the cosmic process be any better in terms of dealing with the problem of natural and moral evil in this world? It will be the task of the second half of this article to set forth such an alternate paradigm for the God-world relationship. If it is logically coherent and consistent both with human experience and with the data of divine revelation in the Bible, then it deserves a fair hearing from members of the scientific and religious communities.

2 A systems-oriented paradigm for the God-World relationship

2.1 System rather than substance

Any new paradigm for the God-world relationship should be grounded in a carefully chosen organizing principle and a corresponding key concept. In the systems-oriented paradigm to be explained below, the

27 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature,* 182-205.
28 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*: I, Q. 22, art. 3
29 Kelly, *Problem of Evil,* 219. Reference is to Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil.*

organizing principle is the notion of heterogeneous unity, i.e., the corporate unity of dynamically interrelated different parts or members, as opposed to the notion of homogeneous unity, i.e. the unity of an individual entity that is either altogether lacking in parts or members or with parts or members that are all of the same kind. The classic instance of homogeneous unity is Aristotle's notion of substance, an individual entity that exists in and for itself, albeit with accidental modifications that distinguish it from other entities of the same kind.[30] An Aristotelian substance does not evolve or otherwise essentially change with the passage of time. The classic instance of heterogeneous unity is an organism, i.e., an open-ended system of dynamically interrelated different parts or members that continues to evolve with the passage of time.

If the God-world relationship is grounded in the Aristotelian notion of substance, i.e., an individual entity existing in its own right, then one would expect the world also to be constituted by individual entities with various forms of contingent relations to one another. Furthermore, within this understanding of the God-world relationship God too is a transcendent individual entity who exists in and for "Himself" separate from the world of creation.[31] Hence, even though God has chosen to create a finite world apart from "Himself," God as Creator is still transcendent of the world of creation. For example, God exists as Pure Spirit; but every finite entity in this world is a combination of spirit and matter, an immaterial principle of self-organization and a material substrate in need of actualization by its substantial form.[32] Accordingly, there is still a residual ontological dualism between God and the world of creation. God is present to the world of creation not as a constituent part or member but as its ontological source of existence and activity and as its final goal, that to which everything in this world is ordered in terms of its ultimate meaning and value.

If, however, the God-world relationship is grounded in the philosophical concept of an open-ended system, namely, an ongoing heterogeneous unity of dynamically interrelated parts or members, then the world is constituted not by individual entities but by corporate entities with every constituent part or member actively contributing to its continued existence and activity. Within this metaphysical scheme, God too is conceived as a corporate unity with multiple parts or members. For Christians, this ontological requirement is easily satisfied, given antecedent belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, three divine persons who are together one God. Especially if that unity is conceived as the unity of an indissoluble transcendent community, the governing concept of God is that of a corporate entity or open-ended system with three dynamically interrelated parts or members.[33]

Likewise, the world of creation is constituted not by individual entities as in the classical paradigm for the God-world relationship, but by corporate entities or organic realities (e.g., human communities, herds of animals, flocks of birds, schools of fish; physical environments for the multiple forms of individual plant-life). Within this understanding of the God-world relationship, the primary purpose for the existence and activity of individual entities is to contribute to the survival and well-being of the corporate entities to which they belong in much the same way that the three divine persons of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity exist exclusively for one another so as thereby to safeguard their ongoing unity as an indissoluble divine community. Finally, even individual entities are organic realities, composed of dynamically interrelated parts or members. A human being or other higher-order animal, for example, is constituted by the ongoing interplay of multiple parts or members (brain, nervous system, heart, lungs, stomach, digestive system, etc.). Plants too exist as networks of dynamically interrelated parts or members (cells) that are themselves mini-organisms, unities of dynamically interrelated parts or members (atoms, molecules).

30 *Aristotle's Metaphysics,* 1028a10-33.

31 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*: I, Q. 3, art. 1.

32 Ibid., art. 2.

33 Within Judaism and Islam, admittedly, that understanding of God as a heterogeneous unity or corporate reality is much harder to justify but it is still present in the efforts of at least some Jews and Muslims to bridge the gap between the Infinite and the finite (e.g., the role of the *Logos* or *Sophia* in the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible and the tradition of the 99 names of *Allah* in the *Quran*).

2.2 Appeal to the metaphysics of A. N. Whitehead

Admittedly, rocks and other stationary physical realities, likewise, human artifacts like tables and chairs, are inert things, not mini-organisms. But contemporary natural science has made clear that the atomic and molecular constituents of these lifeless entities are constantly in motion and thus in some minimal sense alive or full of spontaneity. Naturally, one can dispute whether this activity at the atomic and molecular levels of seemingly inanimate entities is a sign of life or exists simply as a consequence of purely external factors like gravity. Here I follow the lead of Alfred North Whitehead in the belief that the ultimate units of physical reality are what he calls actual entities, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience that are minimally aware of and responsive to one another and the surrounding physical environment.[34] A spatially and temporally organized series of these visibly imperceptible self-constituting subjects of experience produces a persistent pattern of existence and activity that we human beings empirically recognize as atoms and molecules. One must distinguish, therefore, between actual entities that as momentary self-constituting subjects of experience are clearly alive and the objective byproduct of their dynamic interaction from moment to moment. Whitehead calls the latter "societies" of actual entities.[35] I call them open-ended systems. Either way, these inanimate objective realities exist in virtue of reciprocal causal relations between actual entities (dynamically interrelated subjects of experience) from moment to moment.

In his book *Process and Reality* Whitehead describes how the objective things of this world are progressively emergent out of the ongoing reciprocal causal relations between subjective components:

> Thus a society is, for each of its members, an environment with some element of order in it, persisting by reason of the genetic relation between its own members. Such an element of order is the order prevalent in the society. But there is no society in isolation. Every society must be considered with its background of a wider environment of actual entities, which also contribute their objectifications to which the members of the society must conform.[36]

What Whitehead means by "environment" here may be further specified as a field of activity structured by all the events taking place within it according to a persistent pattern or mode of operation. Furthermore, these environments or structured fields of activity are hierarchically ordered vis-à-vis one another. Some environments/fields of activity are more elementary and thus less well organized than others. But they form the ontological foundation or infrastructure for the existence and activity of other environments/fields of activity that are more complexly organized. These higher-order environments/fields of activity are in turn the superstructure of the less well-organized fields of activity/ environments. That is, the governing structure of their mode of operation as a higher-level society or field of activity heavily conditions the ongoing mode of operation of the lower-level society or field of activity since the two groups of actual entities must work together to achieve a determinate goal or value.[37]

Furthermore, as the following text from *Process and Reality* makes clear, even the internal organization of any single environment/field of activity is not permanently fixed but is itself in evolution as a result of the reciprocal relation between the constituent actual entities at any given moment and the "defining characteristic" or governing structure of the environment/field of activity set in place by the interrelated activity of previous generations of constituent actual entities:

> The causal laws which dominate a social environment are the product of the defining characteristic of that society. But the society is only efficient through its individual members. Thus in a society, the members can only exist by reason of the

34 Whitehead, *Process and Reality,* 18.
35 Ibid., 34-35; 89.
36 Ibid., 90.
37 Ibid., 103. There is a clear parallel here between Deacon's understanding of physical reality in terms of hierarchically ordered systems and Whitehead's approach to reality in terms of hierarchically ordered societies of actual entities. The different between the two approaches to reality is that for Deacon the constituents of the systems are inanimate entities; for Whitehead, these constituents are self-constituting subjects of experience. See here Deacon, *Incomplete Nature,* 72-79.

> laws which dominate the society, and the laws only come into being by reason of the analogous characters of the members of the society.[38]

This may seem overly complicated to the casual observer. But one should realize that Whitehead is providing a metaphysical analysis of how the cosmic process can slowly evolve from very simple beginnings to a highly complex state of organization by working "from the bottom up," that is, in and through the reciprocal causal relation between constituent actual entities and the structure of the society to which they belong at every level of existence and activity within physical reality. By way of contrast, within classical Aristotelian-Thomastic metaphysics, the hierarchical ordering of different kinds of entities within physical reality is set by God "from the top down," so to speak by antecedent divine decision. For, as noted above, at the top of the hierarchy of Being is God as Pure Spirit. God in turn creates a world of finite entities that are in each case a different combination of matter and form and thus are either nearer or farther away from God in terms of their relative perfection or actuality.[39]

There is, to be sure, some degree of top-down causation in the mode of operation of Whiteheadian societies/fields of activity since, as noted above, the prevailing structure at any given moment within the society/field of activity conditions the way in which the constituent actual entities of the present moment relate to one another and thereby either confirm or modestly modify that same structural principle. But the ongoing development of the society/field of activity is still dependent on the constituent actual entities in their reciprocal interrelation, not on the structure itself as a relatively fixed reality. Similarly, there is bottom-up causation in the hierarchy of finite entities established by God within Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics in that at every level of existence matter conditions the way in which a substantial form is individuated, namely, constituted as different from other entities of the same class or kind.[40] But the causal activity is still primarily top-down with the substantial form acting on the material substrate instead of primarily bottom-up with the constituent actual entities in their dynamic interrelation giving greater specificity to the governing structure of the society to which they belong within Whitehead's metaphysical scheme.

3 A new Trinitarian approach to the God-World relationship

If one applies this systems-oriented approach to the Christian understanding of the God-world relationship, then, one should logically begin as noted above with an understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as an open-ended life-system or all-comprehensive structured field of activity for the three divine persons in their ongoing dynamic interrelation. That structured field of activity corresponds to what in Thomistic metaphysics would be the essence of God, the energy-source for the interaction of the divine persons with one another and, by the free decision of the divine persons, likewise the energy-source for the world of creation from the moment of the Big Bang onwards. That is, roughly 14 billion years ago within the field of activity/energy-source proper to the divine persons in their ongoing interaction, there occurred a tremendous explosion of energy that radiated in all directions. But at a certain point this expansion slowed and a modest contraction took place at which time "virtual particles" or instantaneous energy-events emergent from the Big Bang lasted long enough to begin to draw together so as over time to constitute the enduring subatomic particles that would themselves eventually aggregate into the atoms and molecules first of non-living things and eventually of living entities.

Admittedly, according to most natural scientists this attraction of subatomic particles to one another was guided by purely external forces like gravity and electromagnetism. But from the systems-oriented perspective presented in these pages, the operative principle at work in subatomic particles was instead derivative from the operative principle at work in the ongoing dynamic interrelation between the divine persons. That is, the operative principle at work among the divine persons so as to preserve the indissoluble

38 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 90-91.
39 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*: I, Q. 66, art. 2.
40 Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 1034a5-8.

unity of their community with one another worked in an analogous way within the emergent world of creation so as to link actual entities, momentary subjects of experience, into "societies," higher-order ontological unities, beginning with the way that subatomic particles were originally drawn together to constitute hydrogen and helium atoms followed by molecules within cosmic evolution. From its very beginnings, then, the world of creation was empowered by the energy-source proper to the divine life-system, what Whitehead termed creativity or the principle of process.[41] Likewise, the directionality or orientation of the cosmic process was conditioned, but not controlled, by the mode of operation of the divine life-system, namely, the ongoing conversion of potentiality into actuality among the three divine persons so as to form an ever more perfect communitarian life. Thus understood, the divine life-system serves as the super-structure for the prevailing mode of operation of the cosmic process. Thereby the divine life-system influences but does not control what happens within the cosmic process that still functions as a quasi-independent reality.

Yet the cosmic process in turn serves as a contingent infrastructure of the divine life-system. That is, although the cosmic process came into being by reason of a free choice on the part of the divine persons, its independent existence and mode of operation makes a difference in terms of the inner life of the divine persons. The Father is not only the origin of life within the Trinity but also the transcendent source of the cosmic process. The Son is the Divine Word or self-manifestation of the Father not only within the divine life but likewise in the world of creation. The Spirit is not only the Mediator between the Father and the Son within the divine life but also the Mediator between all three divine persons acting as a single corporate agency and the world of creation. The pattern of existence and activity proper to the world of creation from the Big Bang onwards thus has had a significant effect on the ongoing pattern of existence and activity among the three divine persons ever since.

What in the New Testament is called the Kingdom of God is then the byproduct of the ongoing reciprocal relationship between the higher-order system proper to the divine life and the lower-order system proper to the world of creation. The history of the world of creation is thereby forever preserved within the history of the divine life-process. Accordingly, the life-system proper to the world of creation is not destined to expire without a trace but instead to enjoy objective immortality as a significant factor within the history of the everlasting divine life-system. Moreover, as I have explained elsewhere, the divine persons have provided for all the different creatures of this world, but especially human beings and members of other higher-order animal species, upon leaving this world to enjoy subjectively their objective immortality within the divine life-system in varying degrees.[42]

4 Application to the problem of evil

Yet does this systems-oriented understanding of the God-world relationship offer a satisfactory solution to the problem of natural and moral evil within the cosmic process? Is it at least as good or perhaps even better an explanation of why moral and natural evil continually take place within a world created by an all-loving God as the traditional explanation proposed by proponents of classical Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics? I support this systems-oriented approach to the God-world relationship because of its consistent emphasis on reciprocal relations between God and the world of creation instead of the traditional focus on the non-reciprocal relation between the primary causality of God and the secondary causality of creatures in the workings of the cosmic process.

For, within the traditional paradigm for the God-world relationship there is always some ambiguity as to the responsibility of God for the occurrence of natural evil (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes, and other catastrophic events that produce significant pain and suffering to human beings and members of other sentient animal species). If an all-knowing and all-powerful God can see in advance and avert such a natural evil, why does God not prevent it from happening? Likewise, even in the case of moral evil in which

41 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 21.
42 Bracken, *World in the Trinity*, 217-45.

a human being deliberately chooses to do what is wrong, one can legitimately ask why God did not provide that individual with sufficient motivation in the form of supervenient divine grace to resist the temptation to perform that evil act? Saying that God permits such an evil decision on the part of a human being for the sake of a higher good (as in the "free will defense" for the occurrence of moral evil mentioned above) seems weak and ineffective in the face of gross human suffering as a result of apparent divine inaction.

But, if God and the creatures of this world mutually bring about whatever happens in this world, God is co-responsible with the creature for the occurrence of both natural and moral evil. That is, if in the divine plan for creation not just human beings but every finite subject of experience exercises some measure of spontaneity in its process of momentary self-constitution, then both God and the finite subject of experience are responsible for what happens as a result. The event does not take place simply by chance or, on the contrary, by antecedent divine decision. Cancer, for example, is a clear instance of the occurrence of natural evil. Yet it happens because of mutations among body cells that are ultimately destructive to the well-being of the organism as a whole. Moreover, these destructive mutations took place because the actual events constituting the body cells "decided" to deviate from their conventional mode of operation within the cell and thereby to risk self-destruction for themselves and all other cells associated with them. Hence, in creating a world of entities exercising varying degrees of spontaneity, the divine persons are in their own way likewise responsible for the existence of natural evil. That evil may ultimately serve a higher good intended by the divine persons but in the short range it is productive of considerable pain and suffering for creatures.

Similarly, both God and a human being bear responsibility for the moral evil that occurs as a result of a human being's decision to deviate from what reason, past experience and what Whitehead calls "divine "initial aims"[43] urge that person to do. For, the three divine persons still provide the physical energy or creative power for a human being to make that morally evil decision. Thus working in tandem with their erring human creatures, the divine persons have to find ways to make amends for what has unfortunately happened. Whitehead's comments in *Process and Reality* about what he calls the "consequent nature" of God, i.e., the way that God does "damage control" in dealing with the wayward decisions of their creatures, is quite apt here:

> The revolts of destructive evil, purely self-regarding, are dismissed into their triviality of merely individual facts; and yet the good they did achieve in individual joy, in individual sorrow, in the introduction of needed contrast, is yet saved by its relation to the completed whole. The image . . .under which this operative growth of God's nature is best conceived, is that of a tender care that nothing be lost . . .It is also the judgment of a wisdom that uses what in the temporal world is mere wreckage."[44]

Admittedly, such a sweeping concession to the vulnerability or co-suffering of God in dealing with the world of creation may well be too hard for some to accept. They may need instead greater assurance that God is truly in charge of this world. If that be the case for these proponents of the classical God-world relationship, I certainly respect it. After all, all human attempts to comprehend the God-world relationship and, even more, to solve the problem of good and evil in this world, are inevitably partial and provisional, thus always subject to ongoing revision. But in my judgment the systems-oriented Trinitarian understanding of the God-world relationship is the most satisfactory position put forward thus far.

References

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa theologiae.* Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1951.
Aristotle's Metaphysics. trans. Hippocratus G. Apostle. Grinnell, Iowa: Peripatetic Press, 1979.
Aristotle, Works of . Eds. J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross: II. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930.
Augustine. *City of God* [Books 17-22], trans. Gerald G. Walsh, S.J. and Daniel Honan. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008.

43 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 244.
44 Ibid., 346.

Bracken, Joseph A., S.J. *The World in the Trinity: Open-Ended Systems in Science and Religion*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014.

Buber, Martin. *I-Thou*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Scribner's, 1970.

Deacon, Terrence. *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012.

Edwards, Denis. *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

Enchiridion Symbolarum, Definitionum et Declarationum de rebus fidei et morum. 33rd edition, eds. Henry Denziger and Adolph Schönmetzer, S.J. Freiburg in Breisgau, Germany: Herder, 1965.

Jones, W. T. *History of Western Philosophy*. 2nd Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.

Kelly, Joseph F. *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition: From the Book of Job to Modern Genetics*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002.

Laing, John D. "Middle Knowledge." In *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://www.iep.utm.edu/middlekn/

Plantinga, Alvin. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *The Human Phenomenon*. Trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber. Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 1999.

Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. Corrected Edition, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 1978.