

Globethics Repository



God the Mad Scientist

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Stephen T. Davis
Publisher	Religious & Theological Students Fellowship
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-09-24 01:41:25
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/157502

God the mad scientist: process theology on God and evil

Stephen T. Davis

Dr Stephen T. Davis is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Claremont Mens College, California. He has been working on the development of Process thought and this is the fruit of some of his thinking.

An interesting facet of the American religious scene in the past few decades is the development and growth of the movement known as Process Theology. An outgrowth of the philosophical and theological work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, Process Theology seems to be growing in influence. Unless signs mislead, it threatens to swallow up liberal Protestant thinking about God, at least in America. One perhaps unfortunate aspect of the movement is that it appears to the outsider at least to be something of a cultic orthodoxy. It has its own technical jargon, its own doctrines, its own periodical, its own academic centres, its own semi-official spokesmen, its own cadre of overly-zealous students.¹

Evangelical Christians have not paid much attention to Process Theology, and reasons for this are not difficult to find. For one thing, there is a fairly formidable technical vocabulary that must be mastered before crucial works by Whitehead, Hartshorne, and their followers can be understood. Second, much of what passes for Process Theology seems to Evangelicals only vaguely Christian. Nevertheless, Process thinking is a major presence in the contemporary theological world, and Evangelicals ought to assess it.

Scholars who are exposed to Process thought often react that it seems in deep trouble on the traditional problem of evil. Indeed, this charge has been seriously developed by Peter Hare and Edward Madden in their book, *Evil and the Concept of God* (Charles C. Thomas, Publishers, 1968).² So

¹ I can attest to the fact that some of these students apparently believe that the whole history of philosophy and theology was sheer chaos till Whitehead came along and straightened it out. And I was amused the other day to see a bumper sticker that read, 'Another Family For Whitehead.'

² Although Hare, at least, seems to have softened his critical stance somewhat. See his review of *God, Power, and Evil in Process Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring, 1977), pp. 44-51.

it is not surprising that Process thinkers—in keeping with the growing application of Process thought to more and more fields of inquiry—should begin to address themselves to the problem of evil. Two recent studies should be mentioned. First, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* by John Cobb and David Griffin³ contains a chapter entitled 'Why So Much Evil in the World?' Second, Griffin himself has now produced a full-blown work on the problem of evil entitled *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*.⁴ In what follows I will concentrate primarily on the latter work. Page references in the text are to this book.

Griffin's book has two main aims—first, to expose the failure of traditional theists to solve the problem of evil, and, second, to solve the problem from a Process perspective. Accordingly, Parts I and II of the book are primarily devoted to a historical survey of various theodicies. All the chapters are written from a Process perspective (as Griffin admits); hence the reader can grasp the outlines of the author's own theodicy from the comments he makes about others. Of particular importance are his discussions of Augustine, Aquinas, and John Hick. The general moral is that traditional theodicians all fail to solve the problem of evil because they have a defective view of God's power. In Part III of the book, which is entitled 'A Nontraditional Theodicy,' Griffin argues for his own view of God and for the theodicy it entails.

Before proceeding to the heart of Griffin's theodicy, which is what I want to analyze in this paper, let me make three preliminary points. The first concerns the term 'traditional theist', a term which appears often in the book. This term for Griffin seems basically to mean 'non-Process theist', and as such is a perfectly acceptable way of referring to those Catholic and Protestant theists in the Augustine-Aquinas-Luther-Calvin-Barth tradition against whom he wishes to argue. However, Griffin appears to me to use the term too loosely. For

³ John B. Cobb and David R. Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 69-75.

⁴ David R. Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976).

example, the following opinions are all attributed by Griffin to all or most traditional theists:

that divine immutability, impassibility, and simplicity are essential to theism (pp. 94-95);

that God is to be defined as infinite substance (p. 96);

that the distinction between primary and secondary causation makes human freedom compatible with divine causation (p. 206); and

that all causality is explicitly or implicitly to be attributed to God (p. 218).

Now I consider myself a traditional theist and I do not hold *any* of these views. Nor, in my opinion, is this due to mere eccentricity on my part. I believe I am in company with many traditional, i.e. non-Process, theists here. Thus, Griffin might have used the term 'traditional theist' more carefully. Traditional theists are not so theologically homogeneous as he implies.

One aspect of this general point merits specific comment, for it is relevant to one of Griffin's key criticisms of traditional theism. He often makes the point that according to traditional theism God either actually or potentially controls all things. I believe he is quite correct here; traditional theists *do* hold this view. Some traditional theists hold that certain contingent events occur because of free human decisions, but even they will admit that God *potentially* controls all events; it is just that he has limited his causal power precisely to allow for human freedom in the case of some events. However, Griffin strongly criticizes the way certain traditional theists develop this point, either in terms of the distinction between primary and secondary causation or between God's antecedent and consequent will or hidden and revealed will. And in the light of his rejection of these notions Griffin attributes to traditional theists the much stronger view that God *actually* controls all events. He argues that traditional omnipotence logically entails God's actual control of every event (i.e. that whatever occurs is God's will), whether traditional theists admit it or not. He says:

As long as deity is defined as omnipotent in the traditional sense, God is equally responsible for all murders, rapes, and earthquakes, whether one says that God works by means of secondary causes or that all such phenomena are directly implanted upon our experience by God (p. 237). But, again, there are traditional theists whose view of omnipotence in no way entails that God causes every event or that everything that happens is God's will. I would say, for example, that many events (e.g. sins) occur that are not caused by God *at all* and are not his will *at all*. Of course sins are

permitted to happen by God; but permitting is not the same as causing. God can permit, sustain, and (in my opinion) even foreknow⁵ human actions without providing sufficient conditions for them.

The second point concerns Griffin's concept of necessity. Griffin often claims that eternal things are necessary: 'The eternal and the necessary are equatable,' he says (p. 113; cf. also pp. 77, 297). Now it is notorious that both the terms 'eternal' and 'necessary' can be defined in a variety of ways. 'Eternal' might mean 'timeless' or it might mean 'unending in duration'. 'Necessary' might mean 'logically true', 'ontologically independent', 'unavoidable', or many other things. The claim that 'the eternal and the necessary are equatable' at the very least needs explication; to me it seems simply false. The piece of paper I am now writing on *might* have unending duration (it is logically possible, although undoubtedly false, that due to an eternal choice on the part of God it is eternal). But even if it *is* eternal why must it be necessary? It can still depend for its existence on God, for example. (To borrow an example from Richard Taylor, if the sun and the moon were eternal then moonlight would be eternal but still contingent—for it would still depend for its existence on sunlight.)

Griffin's notion of necessity also seems garbled at another point. Having summarized Spinoza's argument for the conclusion that all things flow necessarily from God's nature, he says: 'And from this it is difficult to see how one can resist the further conclusion that all things are parts or "modes" of God. If God's necessary existence does not distinguish God from all worldly beings, what basis is there for insisting upon a distinction?' (p. 98; cf. also p. 113). This argument can be summarized as follows:

- (1) God is a necessary being
- (2) The world flows necessarily from God's nature
- (3) The world is a necessary being
- (4) Therefore, the world=God.

I will simply point out that the argument is invalid: even if we grant premises (2) and (3) (as I am unwilling to do), what is to prevent God and the world being distinguished from each other in other ways than by necessity?

Third, I believe there is a problem related to Griffin's repeated charge against traditional theists that they solve the problem of evil by denying the

⁵ Griffin also assumes that human freedom and divine foreknowledge are logically incompatible, but I disagree. See my 'Divine Omniscience and Human Freedom,' forthcoming in *Religious Studies*.

reality of genuine evil. Now at first glance this seems an absurd charge, but in the light of Griffin's definition of the term 'genuine evil', he is quite correct. What he says is that a 'genuine evil' is 'anything, all things considered, without which the universe would have been better. Put otherwise, some event is genuinely evil if its occurrence prevents the occurrence of some other event which would have made the world better, all things considered' (p. 22; cf. also pp. 48, 179-180, 324n). It follows from this that any *prima facie* evil is not genuinely evil if it is necessary to a greater good or if it in fact leads to a greater good. And since it is quite true that traditional theists typically argue that all evil will eventually be overcome by a greater good that it leads to, it follows that traditional theists do indeed deny the reality of genuine evil (as Griffin defines this term). This much is fairly straightforward. Many theists would prefer to define 'genuine evil' in some other way, i.e. so that genuine evil remains genuine evil even if it is instrumentally good. I, for one, am quite prepared to admit that there are certain events which, all things considered, should not have happened, e.g. the Nazi holocaust. Still, Griffin is free to define the term in any consistent way he chooses.

The problem, however, is that in places Griffin seems to turn this valid terminological point into an unfair substantive criticism of traditional theists. That is, he in effect argues: we all know that genuine evil exists, so traditional theists are wrong. He refers to 'the virtually universal intuition that not everything is as good as it could have been' (p. 71; cf. also pp. 250, 254). He says: 'The whole of Biblical religion is undercut if the reality of . . . real evil is finally denied' (p. 222). Again: 'One cannot talk about "God" in our context, decisively molded as it is by the Biblical tradition, without affirming . . . the reality of human freedom and of genuine evil' (p. 230). Traditional theists, Griffin says, 'fail to see that any "solution" with any possible relevance to contemporary experience will have to be one that . . . holds that genuine evil exists' (p. 256).

But all this has not been shown at all. As Griffin defines the term 'genuine evil', we do *not* in fact know that genuine evil exists. It may well be—as Christians often claim—that in the end God ensures that all *prima facie* evil leads to a greater good. So Griffin's argument appears unfair. He first defines 'genuine evil' in such a way that many traditional theists are made to deny the reality of genuine evil (something they would not do on their own definition of the term, incidentally), and he then turns around and criticizes them precisely because they

deny the reality of genuine evil, contrary, Griffin says, both to biblical religion and to the intuitions of nearly everyone (as if their beliefs were of a piece with those, say, of Mary Baker Eddy).

But let us now turn to the theodicy Griffin presents in Part III of his book. As the title of the book reveals, this theodicy revolves around the notion of God's power. Griffin first argues that the traditional view of divine omnipotence must be given up because it is incoherent. It is incoherent for two reasons—first, because there logically can be no sin (the reality of which is affirmed by traditional theists) in a world controlled by a good God who is omnipotent, as this term is defined by traditional theists (p. 211). The will of such a God simply could not be transgressed. Second, it is incoherent because it reduces to the claim that God has all the power that there is, but this is impossible. All actual worlds logically must have power of their own over against God (see pp. 49-50, 148, 250-251, 265-268, 270-271, 273, 276-279, 281). Furthermore, there logically must be an actual world (pp. 277, 279, 297), so the traditional theistic picture of God controlling every event cannot be true.

This makes it possible for Griffin to deny that premise of the problem of evil which says, 'An omnipotent being could unilaterally [i.e. intentionally, not by luck or accident] bring about an actual world without any genuine evil.' Given any actual world—and, again, there must be an actual world in Process thought, since for it there was no creation *ex nihilo*—it is logically impossible for God unilaterally to prevent evil. Griffin says: 'Any actual world will, by metaphysical necessity, be composed of beings with some power of self-determination, even vis-a-vis God, so that it is logically impossible for God unilaterally to prevent all evil' (pp. 201-202). Of course, an actual world without genuine evil is logically possible—it is up to the self-determining members of any actual world whether or not there is evil in it (not up to God), and they *might* choose not to do evil. What is logically impossible is for God to *cause* there to be or *guarantee* such a world (p. 270).

God is perfectly good, Griffin believes, so given the metaphysical necessities described above, what God does is try to *persuade* people to follow his ideal aims for them. There are two kinds of evil, according to Cobb and Griffin: discord and triviality. Discord is mental or physical suffering and is evil *per se*; triviality, or lack of intensity, is not evil *per se*—only *unnecessary* triviality is evil *per se*. Both are evil because they prevent the occurrence of *enjoyment*, which is the one intrinsic

good.⁶ God is responsible for evil only in the sense that his persuasive activity originally brought the world from chaos into a cosmos in which free creatures can do evil deeds (pp. 300, 308). But the main point is that God is not indictable—both because he could not have prevented evil no matter what he did (had he not stimulated the existence of the cosmos, evil in the sense of unnecessary triviality would still have existed) and because even now he is doing his very best. He is continually seeking to overcome our resistance to his purpose and our tendency toward moral evil (pp. 280, 305). He can even be said to be overcoming evil with good by transforming it into ideal aims for the next state of the world (pp. 303-304). Thus the problem of evil is solved—no longer is there any logical difficulty in believing that genuine evil exists, that God is perfectly good, and that God is perfectly powerful (i.e. has all the power a being logically can have (pp. 142, 268)).

Is this a good theodicy? Does Griffin solve the problem of evil? I do not believe so, and for two main reasons. The first has to do with Griffin's analysis of omnipotence. God cannot have a monopoly on power, he says; any actual world must have power of its own over against God. Now I believe that *prima facie* this is a strange claim. Some Christians have in fact espoused doctrines which amount to the claim that God is the efficient cause of everything that occurs. I had always considered this claim false but logically possible. But to Griffin the claim is logically impossible. Let us call the statement we are talking about

(5) Any possible world, if it were actualized, would contain self-determining entities with power over against God.

Now Griffin considers (5) a 'metaphysical principle', which for him means that it is not just true but necessarily true (pp. 271, 279).⁷ He first introduces it in the Preface to his book (p. 12), and it figures prominently throughout. Surprised by it, I confess I read the book impatiently looking for an argument for it. Unfortunately it is not to be found. The reader is told again and again that (5) is necessarily true—and this claim is undoubtedly

crucial to Griffin's theodicy—but he is never told why.

Griffin does make it clear that (5) is a principle of Whiteheadian metaphysics (pp. 274, 276-282), but that surely by itself is not enough to establish it—Whitehead might be wrong. What is needed is an argument. The only thing in the book that even approaches the level of an argument is this: if (5) were false it would be logically possible for there to exist entities whose states are completely determinable by other entities. But, says Griffin:

It has been increasingly accepted, since Berkeley, that the meaningful use of terms requires an experiential grounding for those terms. What reality could one point to that would supply an experiential basis for the meaning of 'a powerless actuality'? This thing would have to be directly experienced, and directly *experienced as being devoid of power*. I do not experience anything meeting these criteria which I would term an actuality. . . . The idea that there are some actualities devoid of power is a pure inference The person who assumes the existence of powerless actualities does not even have any direct knowledge that such entities are possible. On this point Berkeley is absolutely right. Talk of powerless actual entities is finally meaningless, since it cannot be given an experiential basis (pp. 266-267).

But this simply will not do. In the first place, Griffin is arguing from a surprisingly unsophisticated version of the empiricist criterion of meaning, one which not even he himself can consistently hold. It is one thing to make the general point that utterances have meaning only if they have some sort of empirical grounding. I accept this principle. But why say that terms have meaning only if the things they refer to have been *directly* experienced? Not even Berkeley believed that—nor, evidently, does Griffin. For he obviously believes that talk about God is meaningful, and yet no one directly perceives God.

In the second place, 'x is totally causally determined by y' does indeed entail 'x is causally impotent', but 'x is totally causally determinable by y' does not. It may be that y can fully control x if y wants to do so but y has chosen not to do so, thus leaving x with some self-determining power. So all talk about whether or not we experience causally impotent actual entities is irrelevant. God might have a power (i.e. power totally to determine all actual entities) which he does not use. It may even be that *every* being we experience (including ourselves) is causally impotent, i.e. totally determined by God, though we don't know it. It may be

⁶ *Process Theology*, p. 70.

⁷ It is not clear exactly how Griffin wants us to understand his use of the word 'necessary'. Perhaps he only wants (5) to be taken as a sort of metaphysical hypothesis or assumption. Or perhaps he means not that it is logically true per se but rather than it is necessarily true if certain other Whiteheadian metaphysical assumptions are true. This much is unclear. He does in places, however, seem to say that (5) is of itself necessarily or logically true, and I will interpret him in this way.

that every effect that we observe in the world that is apparently caused by some *x* is really caused by some unobserved *y* (God, for example).

In the third place, while it may or may not be true, as Griffin claims (p. 270), that the only experience we have of completely determinable entities is of ideal entities (i.e. things that exist in our minds), it does not follow from this that if the world is completely determinable by God the world is a mere divine idea. For the argument:

(6) All the *x*'s I experience are *y*

(7) Therefore, all *x*'s are *y*
is obviously invalid.

I take it, then, that Griffin has not established the truth of (5), and therefore that his theodicy (assuming the rest of it is sound) will be acceptable only to those who already believe (5). Committed Whiteheadians presumably believe (5), but I do not. Accordingly, Griffin's theodicy will not be convincing to me and others like me who see no good reason to affirm (5).

The other reason I do not believe Griffin solves the problem of evil has to do with the future. Unlike John Hick's theodicy, Griffin's theodicy is not strongly eschatological. While I do not always agree with Hick, I believe his eschatological emphasis is correct. For a Christian, the problem of evil cannot be solved without crucial reference to the future. Thus in response to Griffin's repeated statements that God *aims*, *intends*, *seeks*, *works*, and *tries* to overcome evil (pp. 305, 310), we must ask: Does God have the power, influence, or persuasive ability to make his intention succeed? If he does, we are entitled to wonder why he didn't overcome evil long ago. If he does not (and I believe this is what Process thinkers must say; they cannot be sure but can only *hope* that God will emerge victorious), then, in my opinion, God is not worth worshipping. He is a good being who tries his best: we can certainly sympathize with him and perhaps even pity him. Some of us will choose to fight on his side in the battle against evil, and we can all *hope* he will win in the end. But I see no reason to worship him.

Let me add an additional comment here, lest I be interpreted as recommending the worship of power per se. I do not recommend this, though I believe the criteria that must be met before a given being is 'worthy of worship' include power. In fact, I would hold that *goodness* and *power* are two of the principle criteria that must be met. This can be seen as follows. Suppose there existed a malevolent demon who was omnipotent in the traditional theistic sense. Would we be inclined to worship this being? Of course not: we might fear

him, but we would not worship him. Now suppose there existed a morally perfect paragon (many times more saintly than, say, St. Francis of Assisi) who was no more powerful than a typical human being. Would we be inclined to worship him? Of course not: we might respect and even love him, but we would not worship him. Thus, I conclude, both goodness and power are criteria of 'worthiness of worship'. Given the failure of Griffin's argument for the incoherence of the traditional notion of omnipotence, the God of Process Theology, in my opinion, fails to meet the second criterion.

God obviously ran a great risk in creating this sort of world—on that, Griffin and I can agree (although we mean different things by 'create'). But was the risk worth taking? Evangelical Christians believe it was. They believe God foresees the future of the world, i.e. the coming Kingdom of God, and they believe he has revealed that the risk was worth taking. In the end, they believe, we will be able to see how evil is overcome by God. As Paul says, 'The sufferings of this present life are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come' (Rom. 8: 18). But on Process Thought we do *not* know whether the risk was worth taking, for we do not know how the world turns out, and neither does God.

As noted earlier, there are two intrinsic evils, according to Griffin, discord and unnecessary triviality. In stimulating the world away from the latter, God created the possibility of the former. God's aim was to overcome unnecessary triviality while avoiding as much discord as he could. As Cobb and Griffin say:

God's loving purpose must not be thought of as merely the avoidance of discord. To have left the finite realm in chaos, when it could have been stimulated to become a world, would have been to acquiesce in unnecessary triviality. To be loving or moral, God's aim must be to overcome unnecessary triviality while avoiding as much discord as possible.⁸

But did God succeed in achieving his aim? The sad answer in Process Theology must be that we do not know. There are two reasons for this. First, no one—not even God—can see far enough into the future to tell. Second, even if foreknowledge were possible, Griffin provides us with no calculus for weighing intrinsic goods and evils against each other. Which is more important—avoiding unnecessary triviality or avoiding discord? It is surprising that we are never presented with an argument on this point, since the success of the Process theodicy depends on our agreeing that avoiding unnecessary

⁸ *Process Theology*, p. 71.

triviality is at least as important as avoiding discord.

In an interesting Appendix to his book, Griffin argues that personal immortality (or resurrection, as Evangelical Christians would prefer) is possible but not required on Process thought. Accordingly, Griffin considers belief in survival of death an optional aspect of Christian theology. In his closing paragraph he says:

I do not consider faith that there actually will be a happy future for humanity in this world to be essential for theodicy. No matter how bad the future actually turns out to be, it will not cancel out the worthwhileness of the human goodness enjoyed during the previous thousands of years (p. 313).

These statements both show the non-eschatological basis of Griffin's theodicy and reveal its weakness. It seems almost an exercise in Pollyanna optimism to claim, as Griffin does, that the intrinsic values that now exist are so great that they outweigh *any* evil events that might occur in the future. Suppose ten years from now all human beings die, cursing God, after years of horrible physical and mental suffering. Will God's great adventure have turned out worthwhile? I hardly think so. At this point

orthodox Christianity seems far more sober and realistic. Good events do indeed occur, Evangelicals want to say, but the power of evil is pervasive in the world; the world is *not* worthwhile *as it stands*: it needs to be redeemed.

This is where the mad scientist metaphor comes in. Even if we grant Griffin his view of omnipotence (as I am not willing to do), it still follows that God is indictable for creating the sort of world he created if in the end evil outweighs good. God will be something like a mad scientist who creates a monster he hopes will behave but whom he cannot control: if the monster does more evil than good the scientist's decision to create the monster will turn out to have been terribly wrong. The scientist will be indictable.

It does not seem, then, that the theodicy offered by Process Theologians is successful. The problem of evil is a thorny problem for all theists. There are no easy answers available. But it is clear that no solution to the problem is to be found here, let alone a solution acceptable to orthodox Christians. Those who agree with me that the suggested theodicy fails utterly will draw the moral that Process Theology is not therefore a tenable theological option.