

# SURPASSING CLASSICAL THEISM IN A SOCIETY BASED ON KNOWLEDGE♦

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**Abstract:** The classical theism describes God as being omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and having infinite love. There are many mistakes implied in classical theism which weakened the concept of God and the possibility of proving His existence through rational arguments. Neoclassical theism propose to give a better image of God accommodating certain aspects of theistic beliefs such as divine perfection, freedom and creativity and to surpass the difficulties classical theism. Instead of the classical concept of God, neoclassical theism considers the possibility of developing and changing in God. Process philosophy, in general, and neoclassical theism, in particular propose a God that is a subject of change (that means changing for the better, but never for the worse) because He is related to the world and influenced by the world. God's knowledge about the world has to change along with the world which is changing in every moment.

**Keywords:** God, classical theism, neoclassical theism, omnipotence, omniscience, potentiality.

In the classical theism, God is described in absolute terms in what concerns his qualities: omniscience, omnipotence or infinite love. One of the most important idea that stand firmly in classical theism is the denial of potentiality in God. God is supposed to have no possibility of developing, God cannot change, because otherwise he would not be perfect. As a result, in classical theism God cannot change because change requires potency, He created the world out of nothing, He is omnipotent and omniscient.

The mistakes implied in classical theism are traced back to Greek philosophy. It is believed to be the wrong way in which Plato's ideas

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were hidden or distorted by his successors, especially Aristotle. In *Zero Fallacy* Hartshorne explains this point of view:

...classical theists were misled by Aristotle's radically one-sided, and even mildly plausible, view of the divine life as the mere thinking of thinking (totally devoid of any intrinsic relation to, or awareness of, the contingent specificities of the world) and how these negations were, with radical inconsistency, combined in patristic and medieval classical theism with so-called knowledge of and love for created individuals and creation of the world *ex nihilo*<sup>1</sup>.

In *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, Hartshorne affirms that "classical theology was a compromise between a not-very-well-understood Greek philosophy and a not-very-scholarly interpretation of sacred writings"<sup>2</sup>.

Hartshorne insists that His neoclassical theism is more appropriate to theists than the classical theism exemplified by Aquinas and many others. Hartshorne's doctrine of God aim to give a better image of God accommodating certain aspects of theistic beliefs such as divine perfection, freedom and creativity and to surpass classical theism's difficulties<sup>3</sup>.

In the work entitled *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes*, Charles Hartshorne tries to identify mistakes of philosophers in the history of the philosophy of religion, mistakes that weakened the concept of God and His existence. A first mistake, successfully identified also by others refers to the perfection of God: God being perfect can not change. As Plato shows in *The Republic*, God could not change for better because "perfect" means something which can not be surpassed, nor for worse because this thing would imply a weakness. From this point the argument would be convincing only if we assign to "perfect" a meaning which excludes the change in any aspect. In neoclassical theism, perfection does not exclude in an absolute way the change. Even in situations in which God is presented as unchangeable there exists the possibility of an ambiguity. God can be unchangeable in what concerns justice but can be changeable in compatible

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Zero Fallacy*, La Salle, Open Court, 1997, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1984, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Jay W. Richards, "Charles Hartshorne's Critique of Christian Classical Theism: Separating the Chaff from the Wheat", in Randy Ramal (ed.), *Methaphysics, Analysis and The Grammar of God*, Tubingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2010, pp. 111-112.

ways with the necessary constant of his justice. The neoclassical perspective includes change, but God could never change into worst<sup>4</sup>.

The neoclassical theism has its tradition back from Socinus to Whitehead and in contrast with classical theism rejects the conclusion of the well known argument from *The Republic* which upholds that God, being perfect cannot change. To contradict this view is enough to show the contingency of the world combined with divine knowledge of that world<sup>5</sup>.

Instead of the classical concept of God, neoclassical theism suggests a God in which there is potentiality. God's knowledge is growing alongside with every action in the world. More than that, if we assume God's potentiality than there are perfections which He lacks: "In every choice some good possibilities are rejected, in every artistic creation possible forms of beauty are renounced"<sup>6</sup>.

If God was dependent on something outside himself he would not be considered perfect. In Hartshorne's view, dependence is not always a defect – he believes in a God which is influenced by the world. This perspective gives more sense to the idea of serving God<sup>7</sup>.

In the classical tradition it was supposed that God could not interact with other creatures:

It was held that while ordinary individuals interact, God's superiority is that he acts only, and does not interact. Unfortunately, this destroys all analogy between God and creatures, and it contradicts the very meaning of worship and related religious ideas. Nor is there any justification for the notion that interaction, as compared to simple action, indicates a weakness<sup>8</sup>.

The exclusion of change in God does not fit in Hartshorne's neoclassical theism: first of all these come in direct conflict with the idea of God being omniscient. If God has no potentiality, then God's knowledge is eternal and if the world changes God's knowledge of the world does not change. Don Viney reformulates the idea this way: "the argument can be expressed in the form of a dilemma. Perfect knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, pp. 2-10.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Aquinas to Whitehead*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Publications, 1976, pp. 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*, La Salle, Open Court, 1970, p. 229.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Wayne Viney, *Charles Hartshorne and the Existence of God*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1985, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology of Our Time*, La Salle, Open Court, 1967, p.134.

conforms perfectly to its object. Now, temporal events are either eternal or they are not. If they are eternal they are not really temporal events. On the other hand, if the events are not eternal then perfect knowledge could not know them eternally”<sup>9</sup>.

Neoclassical theism considers on the possibility of developing and changing in God: the capacity of being different doesn’t exist in God’s existence, but God’s actuality could always be different of how it is. But this does not mean that the divine actuality may fail in existence. God’s existence is necessary – it has to be somehow actualized<sup>10</sup>.

There are many difficulties in what concerns the classical conception of perfection. When we about the perfections of an entity we have to say that it is more perfect not because we are referring to qualities like love or grace but because it has more experience than another<sup>11</sup>.

Hartshorne believes that an argument which tries to establish God’s perfection with the exclusion of any change may seem convincing only if it is possible to conceive a meaning for “perfection” which “excludes change in any and every respect and that we must conceive God as perfect in *this* sense. Obviously the ordinary meanings do not entirely exclude change”<sup>12</sup>.

One major attack against classical theism concerns the way in which the relationship between God and the world is conceived. It is not true that God remains unaffected by the events that take place in the world. If God knows His creatures, He has to relate with what these creatures do and He can not remain unaffected by what he knows about this world. His omniscience includes the world and the events that take place in it<sup>13</sup>.

In what concerns Charles Hartshorne’s contributions to this problem, many philosophers consider that one of the most important aspects in the philosophy of religion contemporary discussions is the substitution of the classical and monopolar conception of God with the dipolar abstract-concrete understanding of God<sup>14</sup>.

He also defended theism by providing a new type of theism – neoclassical theism which had the task of enriching and strengthening the

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Wayne Viney, *Charles Hartshorne*, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, London, SCM Press, 2001, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> George L. Goodwin, “The Ontological Argument in Neoclassical Context: Reply to Friedman”, in *Erkenntnis*, volume 20, 1983, p. 219.

concept of God and also rescuing the ontological argument and the whole theism of its main critiques.

The relationship between God and the world can be better understood if we associate it with the relationship of a person with his body. God's body is changing, but God remains himself and the world is a part of God. In this view, it is clear that no being could surpass God in perfection because no matter what value a human has, God has it too and He has even more. In classical theism, the distinction between God and the world corresponds to the distinction between the creator and the created but in neoclassical theism God is in some respect created<sup>15</sup>.

God's dipolar conception implies a God which in part is affected by the actions of other entity and in other part His existence can not be threatened by what He suffers. He participates to the actions of the world. Classical theism had given a monopolar doctrine and with that they missed important aspects of God<sup>16</sup>.

Hartshorne criticizes classical theism because it was upholding a wrong perspective by introducing a contrast between God and the world. Hartshorne refers to God as being dipolar – starting from the main differences between classical and neoclassical theism: in classical theism God is absolute, creator, infinite and necessary, while the world is relative, created, finite and contingent. In neoclassical theism God has to be seen in the same time absolute and relative, creator and created, infinite and finite, necessary and contingent. So God has an absolute pole and a relative one. Yet God avoids possible contradictions by making the distinction between the different aspects of God. For example, God is not necessary and contingent in the same sense: although God's existence is necessary, the particular manner in which His existence is actualized is contingent (in this way it is made a successful distinction between existence and actuality)<sup>17</sup>. Very often the dipolar concept of God suggested by Hartshorne is being attacked by logic rules but the reality is not that a subject can not have opposites predicates such as p and not-p but that they can not have opposite predicates in the same respect. A person can change in some respects without changing in every respect, or even better “the world may be finite spatially and infinite temporally”<sup>18</sup>.

There have been built arguments in favor of God's non-existence starting from certain incompatibilities between the characteristics which

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<sup>15</sup> Donald Wayne Viney, *Charles Hartshorne*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming*, p.21.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Wayne Viney, *Charles Hartshorne*, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Hartshorne, pp. 22-23.

were attributed to Him in the classical tradition. Norman Kretzman builds an argument of this type starting from the incompatibility between God's omniscience and the fact that he is not a subject of changes, upholding that a being which knows everything, knows all the time what time it is and if He knows what time it is He is the subject of changes – in consequence, a perfect being like God could not exist<sup>19</sup>.

Against these views, process philosophy, in general, and neoclassical theism, in particular, propose a God that is a subject of change (that means changing for the better but never for the worse) because He is related to the world and influenced by the world. God's knowledge about the world has to change along with the world which is changing in every moment.

If the reality is in a continuous process and if God's perfection implies the fact that he has to know everything that may be known than God must grow in what concerns His knowledge. Starting from here, God has to be considered perfectly unchanged in what concerns the perfection of His abstract existence which implies knowing all the time what is to be known, but also in a process of development in what concerns the perfection of His concrete actuality – which implies knowing which is actual to be known<sup>20</sup>.

But God does not possess all the actuality: "God does not possess the actuality of having created a world without Augustine. In fact, now that he has created a world with Augustine, He can never had that actuality"<sup>21</sup>.

If God acquires new knowledge as new things are there to be known, the eternity of God cannot mean His immutability. The sense in which God is eternal is the fact that He cannot fail to exist – because the divine essence is necessarily actualized somehow, in some states of knowledge that are omniscient in the sense defined but with contingent aspects and with increments since reality acquires new items<sup>22</sup>.

Hartshorne's position is that God knows futurity in terms of possibility. But there are not future actualities but future possibilities.

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<sup>19</sup> Norman Kretzman, "Omniscience and Immutability" in Timothy A. Robinson, *God-second edition*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2002, pp. 168-170.

<sup>20</sup> David A. Pailin, "Hartshorne's presentation of the ontological argument" in *Religious Studies*, volume 4.1, 1968, p. 108.

<sup>21</sup> Jay W. Richards, "Charles Hartshorne's Critique of Christian Classical Theism: Separating the Chaff from the Wheat", in Randy Ramal (ed.), *Methaphysics, Analysis and the Grammar of God*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2010, p.115.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Aquinas*, p. 14.

Thus, there it is no limit in God's knowledge because he knows the future events only as possibilities<sup>23</sup>.

In *Man Vision of God*, Hartshorne explain the relation between future events and God's knowledge:

I conclude that omniscience does not imply a knowledge "above time." There could be a future event to an all-knowing being. When a future event comes to happen, such a mind will know more than it did before, but at both times it will know all that there is, though at the later time there will be a new event to know<sup>24</sup>.

The first philosophers who took the problem of human freedom on the right path and put it in a way that explain correctly God's omniscience were the Socinians: human decisions, that were supposed to be freely taken cannot be known in advance because in advance they don't exist to be known. An omniscient God knows the past events as being definite and the future ones partly indefinite. To know the indefinite as definite would be an error<sup>25</sup>.

In the classical tradition, God's omniscience implies that whatever happens must be known by God and as a result our freedom is inexistent, no matter what we, nothing changes.

God does not eternally know what we'll do tomorrow because in this moment there are no such as our tomorrow decisions or actions. As the Socinians put the problem, future events are not there to be known<sup>26</sup>.

Hartshorne gives an accurate response to the classical justification that God surveys on the past, present and future because He is the supreme cause and the world is the effect, or God's knowledge of himself as cause entails God's knowledge of the world as an effect:

...causes never imply any precise actual results, but only a range of possible ones. Thus, God, merely is knowing his eternal essence, would know "possible worlds" so far as these are eternally implied by the essence; but he would not thereby know the actual world. Causes always leave results somewhat open for further decision<sup>27</sup>.

God is believed to have the knowledge which He might not have had: "Thus he knows that a certain world exists which might not have

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<sup>23</sup> Donald Wayne Viney, *Charles Hartshorne*, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Man Vision of God and the Logic of Theism*, Connecticut, 1964, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Aquinas*, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Aquinas*, p. 11.

existed; but surely had it not existed, he would not have known it to exist”<sup>28</sup>.

Another useful point against the idea that God could not change is the fact that if God remains unchanged humans would not try to do good actions since no act would be better than the other because the same reality remains in both cases:

Now traditional theism posits among the circumstances of all acts the existence of an absolutely perfect being. It appears to follow inexorably that no act can, in its consequences, be better than any other, for in either case the outcome can be neither better nor worse than the hypothesized continued or eternal reality of a value from which real subtraction and to which real addition are meaningless<sup>29</sup> (CH – mvg 156).

If God is unaffected by His relation with the world He has to be considered a superobject rather than a supersubject. Aquinas had held that God is omniscient and that His relation to the things He knows remains external – the criticism made to this classical view is that the logic of knowing is turned on its head in the divine case<sup>30</sup>.

Even it is impossible for any other being to surpass God in perfection, God could surpass himself because He is capable of increasing in value. This is possible due to the human decisions – God knowing all the new actions also acquire a new value<sup>31</sup>.

The arguments for God’s unchangeability are considered to be fallacious and the arguments for growth and change in God (as He knows the world which is changing all the time), are considered to be sound in the recent circles in philosophy of religion.

The fact that God posses certain great making properties and omnipotence or perfect power was debated for a long time. Obstacles against classical theism put the problem of reconciliation in God omnipotence and perfect goodness. The problem which was raised is the following: if an omnipotent God is powerless to do evil, then how can God be omnipotent?

Some answers try to surpass the incompatibility between God’s omnipotence and the existence of evil in the world by presenting a perspective in which it is considered that the universe is better with

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*, La Salle, Open Court, 1970, p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Man Vision of God and the Logic of Theism*, Connecticut, 1964, p. 156.

<sup>30</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, London, SCM Press, 2001, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Donald Wayne Viney, *Charles*, p. 36.



something evil in it than without it. From this perspective, the organization of the universe should be progressive and not static – a progressive insert of evil would be more benefic than an undisputed supremacy of the good. The existence of pain and diseases can make possible the existence of sympathy or heroism. Another solution through which the evil in the world is not connected with God's will is best offered by the Christian perspective of the free will through which humans have the freedom to act and to be responsible for their choices<sup>32</sup>.

There have been raised many dilemmas derived from God's omnipotence – one of the most well-known of them one being the situation in which God is capable or incapable of creating a stone too heavy for him to lift it.

The doctrine about God's omnipotence tries to show us that God can do anything. There have been built questions referring to God's omnipotence and no matter which answer we picked, we would face a problem. A question like the following one puts us in a strange situation: *Can God build a stone too heavy for him to lift it?* – If we say **no**, he lacks omnipotence and if we say that he can build that stone, but he can't lift it, he lacks omnipotence again. However, on the basis of the assumption that God is omnipotent, the statement *a too heavy stone for God to lift* becomes self-contradictory: it would be brought up to a stone which can not be lifted by the one which is capable to do anything. More than that, a being which is described by a self-contradictory statement is impossible<sup>33</sup>.

Hartshorne's perspective is that we have to abandon the idea of theological determinism in favor of a perspective in which each individual has some capacity for self-creation. It is true that God contributes to the character of each individual but He is not responsible for what an individual becomes. Even God can not determine another's individual decision in such a way that no details of the decision were left to that individual. Humans are to be considered *co-creators* of the world with God. The classical concept of omnipotence has to be considered erroneous<sup>34</sup>. Hartshorne denies the doctrine of the immortality of the soul (he denies that the soul continues to exist apart from the body), but he

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<sup>32</sup>J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence" in Timothy A. Robinson, *God - second edition*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2002, pp. 236-239.

<sup>33</sup>George Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence" in Timothy A. Robinson, *God - second edition*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2002, p. 164.

<sup>34</sup>Donald Wayne Viney, *Charles Hartshorne*, pp. 32-34.

does not deny what Whitehead has called *objective immortality* – this is a part of God’s omniscience and He remembers all that occurred. So all humans live forever in God’s memory<sup>35</sup>.

As an analogy to human death Hartshorne gives a very good example for the way in which all human actions are to be remembered in the divine life: “a book ends with its last sentence or last world; however, the book does not become the mere silence or blank page following that world. The book of life is all its *words* (actions, experiences), and these form an imperishable totality, as adequately retained in the divine life”<sup>36</sup>.

Related to the problem of human freedom and how determinism has been surpassed an interesting perspective about cosmic order related to human’s freedom is that in which the freedom is being limited but not reduced to zero. With too much freedom it would be a chaos. A world is understood as an ordered one but not an absolute ordered world – a system of decision makers in which change is implied. This agent decides things in every moment and “becoming” applies even to God<sup>37</sup>.

In *Logic of Perfection* Hartshorne suggests that:

The ideal rule sets those limits outside of which freedom would involve greater risks than opportunities. Risks cannot be banished, for opportunity would go with them, both having the same root in freedom or self-determination. But too much freedom would extend risks more than opportunities, and too little would restrict opportunities more than risks<sup>38</sup>.

Other critiques aim at the relationship between God and believers in the context in which they conceive God as a being worthy to be venerated. In these circumstances God is presented as a being in front of whom all people should kneel down. More than that, to venerate anybody or anything else would be a blasphemy. James Rachels tries to build up an a priori argument against God’s existence, considering that no being can ever be seen as a fitting object of veneration – veneration implies a superior status of the one which is to be venerated and the believer necessarily assumes his inferiority. From this it can be concluded that no

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Hartshorne, “The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays” in *Neoclassical Metaphysics*, La Salle, Open Court, 1962, p. 231.

being can be a suitable object of veneration as long as veneration implies the abandoning of the believer from the position of an moral agent<sup>39</sup>.

A similar position is adopted by John Hick in the article *The Vail of Soul Making*. Someone who tried to be good when encountering in his way lots of temptations is considered better than someone who tried to be good in a *peaceful* environment. The world was not created as a paradise, but as a scene of history in which human personality must be formed. Humans have to live in an environment in which the purpose is reaching a certain potential in the personality<sup>40</sup>.

For Hartshorne the classical concept of God is incoherent and must be reject because of his internal contradictions. Any society based on knowledge will come to have a concept of that which necessarily exists, as opposed to that which is contingent. Humans live best when they live as though what is best in them resonates to what is highest in the universe. In the final analysis, theism provides the best metaphysics for this kind of thinking. The main directions in classical theism are not of much use anymore because of their internal contradictions between God's qualities like omniscience, omnipotence, perfect goodness etc. Neoclassical theism suggests a God in which the main difficulties found in classical theism are surpassed, provides a dipolar doctrine of God – a God which is related to the world, whose knowledge is growing alongside with every action in the world.

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<sup>39</sup>James Rachels, "God and Human Attitudes" in Timothy A. Robinson, *God - second edition*, pp. 197-207.

<sup>40</sup>John Hick, "The Value of Soul-Making" in Timothy A. Robinson, *God- second edition*, pp. 248-250