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Recommended Citation

Walker, Theodore, "In celebration of NOTEBOOKS (December 2018) by Schubert M. Ogden: Avoiding the Partialist Fallacy in Theology, Especially in Liberation Theology" (2019). *Perkins Faculty Research and Special Events*. 20.

https://scholar.smu.edu/theology_research/20

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22 March 2019, presented at Charlie Curran's SMU Ethics Colloquy on Tuesday 26 March 2019, and revised in light of critical and constructive responses

**In celebration of *Notebooks* (December 2018) by Schubert M. Ogden:
Avoiding the Partialist Fallacy in Theology, especially in Liberation Theology**

Theodore Walker Jr.

As an ethicist, and especially a theological ethicist, and more especially as a liberation theologian, what I most appreciate about Schubert M. Ogden's "revisionary theology"* is his appreciation of Charles Hartshorne's panentheism (all-in-theos-ism), and his insistence that such appreciation is essential to adequately formulated theology and ethics, including liberation theology.

*Yes, Schubert M. Ogden's theology is often called "process theology" (Stone and Oord 2001), but Ogden calls his theology "revisionary" and his metaphysics is classified as "neoclassical" or "neoclassical theology."

Similarly, Charles Hartshorne's metaphysics is often called "process" (for example, see the journal *Process Studies*), but Hartshorne calls his metaphysics "neoclassical" or "neoclassical theology."

And, Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy is often called "process" (again, see the journal *Process Studies*), and often in reference to Whitehead's *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1927-28), but Whitehead calls his philosophy "philosophy of organism" (1978 [1927-28]: xi).

Also, process theologian John B. Cobb Jr. inaugurated the practice of referring to Whiteheadian-Hartshornean-Ogdenian thought as “postmodern” or, as amended by David Ray Griffin, as “constructive postmodern” or “reconstructive postmodern.”

Ogden’s poetically redundant formulation of Hartshornean panentheism is that **God** (understood to be that than which none greater can be conceived [Anselm]) **must be “the one all-inclusive whole of reality”** (Ogden 1984: 21; also Hartshorne 1975 [c1937]: 25, 72, 163, 208; 1973 [1967]: 7, 12, 16). Whitehead, Hartshorne, Ogden, and other process-neoclassical-revisionary theologians appreciate the logical necessity of affirming an “all-inclusive whole of reality” (God) for adequate moral theory.

The logical necessity of reference to God in moral theory is developed in chapter four “God and Righteousness” in *Man’s Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (1941) by Charles Hartshorne. And according to Hartshorne’s *Beyond Humanism: Essays in the Philosophy of Nature* (c1937), theology serves theory of value by providing “explicit recognition” of “the whole of which all lesser values are parts” (1975 [c1937]: 25).

Similarly, in *The Divine Good: Modern Moral Theory and the Necessity of God* (1996 [c1990]) Ogden’s student Franklin I. Gamwell, following Hartshorne, argues that the necessary “ground of any moral claim” (18) is the “divine good,” the “comprehensive variable that identifies the good as such” (178). An adequately grounded moral theory must refer to the whole of reality (God) and to more than one part of reality because “... greater or lesser good can be

identified only by the concrete comparisons within the divine relativity ...” (1996 [c1990]: 182). And because reference to God (whose necessary existence can be demonstrated by valid metaphysical arguments) is a necessity for adequate moral theory, *modern* moral theory—given its nontheistic framework—is a necessary failure. In Gamwell’s postmodern-neoclassical moral theory, failure to relate comprehensive whole to parts, by asserting a non-comprehensive ground, is labeled the “partialist fallacy” (1996 [c1990]: 149n.15; also 1984).¹

Partialist Fallacy

The idea of one all-inclusive-living-loving-creative whole of reality is a panentheistic conception of “the Creator” (in whom we creatures live and move). Here theology (all-inclusive Creator) is rightly entangled with biology (included creatures and creations). Obviously, from this panentheistic-Creator-affirming perspective, failure to conceive of one all-inclusive living whole of reality (conceiving only of parts) is a fallacy in theology and biology.

In *Science and the Modern World* (1925), Alfred North Whitehead conceived that science was becoming “the study of organisms” (103), with physicists studying the smaller organisms and biologists studying the larger organisms. And in emphasizing universal creativity, Whitehead connected his biology-oriented “philosophy of organism” to cosmology and theology in *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1927-28). Similarly, biology was connected to ontology, evolutionary cosmology, and natural theology in *Beyond Humanism: Essays in the Philosophy of Nature* (1975 [c1937]) by Charles Hartshorne. Here Hartshorne held that “the structure of reality” is “one of organisms within organisms” (91); that “the philosophical

argument for *cosmic evolutionism* stands on its own feet” (140; italics added); and we are “cells in the body of God” (197).

According to Hartshorne’s biology-instructed “person-to-cell analogy” for God, all creatures are like cells in the “cosmic body” of the all-inclusive Creator, “outside” of whom “there is nothing” (1984: 59; also 1975 [c1937]: 197). This biology-based analogy illuminates the panentheist idea that God is the one all-inclusive living individual “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Clayton and Peacocke 2004).

Partialist Fallacy in Cosmology

In addition to recognizing the partialist fallacy in moral theory, and in biology-entangled theology, we should also recognize the partialist fallacy in cosmology. Though the very word “cosmos” implies a cosmic whole, many cosmological theories refer only to parts of reality. Referencing only parts of reality (even all parts of reality [absent the all-inclusive whole of reality]) can only yield an inadequate account of cosmic reality.

The term “big bang” (a term coined by “steady state” advocate Fred Hoyle) sometimes encourages committing the partialist fallacy by suggesting analogy to an exploding bomb or grenade. With a bang, a grenade explodes into many fragments, obliterating the whole grenade. For the sake of correcting our tendency to conceive only of parts, we should notice that unexploded whole grenades are parts of the whole of reality, and that exploded grenade fragments are also parts of the whole of reality. Cosmology should include recognizing that

whether exploding/expanding or collapsing, or oscillating, or in some relatively steady state, all parts of reality are parts of the cosmic whole of reality.

To conceive only of parts (as though there could be parts of no whole of reality) is to commit the partialist fallacy. Where the partialist fallacy is avoided, cosmology converges with theology and moral theory.²

Panentheism and Ethical Realism

Panentheism helps with discerning that the biblical imperatives—to love our neighbors and our enemies as we love ourselves (Matthew 5:43-48; 22:34-40)—are imperatives founded upon realism, not mere idealism.³ Every experience confirms (by exemplifying) what no experience could possibly deny: we really are partly inclusive parts among variously inclusive parts of reality. And logical/mereological analysis shows that all parts of reality are parts of the whole of reality, parts of “the one all-inclusive [divine] whole of reality” (Ogden 1984: 21; also Hartshorne 1973 [1967]). Hence, conformity to reality (living righteously, not missing the mark [not sinning]) requires valuing neighbors, enemies, and selves as they/we really are: as parts among parts of the divine whole. This ethical realism is justified by panentheism.

Liberation Theology

In *Faith and Freedom: Toward a Theology of Liberation* (1979) Ogden offers his contribution to liberation theology. Among other typical failures, those liberation theologies

committed to classical theism [according to which God is some part(s) of reality (often a purely spiritual part)] fail to recognize the metaphysical necessity of avoiding the partialist fallacy.

As I see it, then, the challenge presented by the various liberation theologies is that of working out a still more adequate theology of liberation than any of them has yet achieved.

(Ogden 1979: 32)

I am confident that it is precisely the metaphysics that has been worked out by certain of the process philosophers—notably, Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne—that goes beyond all the usual metaphysical alternatives and provides the very resources that are required if the project of a theology of liberation is to be carried out to completion.

(Ogden 1979: 73)

A more adequate theology of liberation can be achieved by avoiding the partialist fallacy characteristic of classical theism.

Ogden argues that liberation theologies need to be liberated from uncritical commitment to classical theism. Some liberation theologians do the same. For instance, black humanist philosopher William R. Jones argued against commitment to classical theism in *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (1973). According to Jones, the classical understanding

of omnipotence (according to which God is wholly determinative of all events) makes it impossible to avoid concluding that God is a white racist. Hence, black theology must reject classical theism. Also, black womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher rejects classical theism in *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (1998). And “Boston Personalism” (arguably very similar to process theology) is favored over classical theism by Rufus Burrow Jr. in *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (1999). Moreover Burrow embraces pantheism (39). And agreement with Ogden is expressed in *Mothership Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Neoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology* (2004) by Theodore Walker Jr.

According to Ogden, process-neoclassical metaphysics is essential to “working out a still more adequate theology of liberation” (Ogden 1979: 32). And insofar as Ogden is seeking to contribute something essential to liberation theology, he might be called a neoclassical liberation theologian, or at least a wanna-be-helpful neoclassical theologian.

The Ogden Notebooks

Ogden’s effort to be helpful has been enhanced by the March 2018 online posting of one thousand sixty entries from his Notebooks, now among the Schubert M. Ogden Papers in the Special Collections at the Drew University Library. The contents of the Ogden Notebooks were photographed, transcribed, edited, and posted in an online searchable database at <https://uknow.drew.edu/confluence/display/ogden/Ogden+Notebooks+Home> after nine years

of work by an Ogden-directed team of five scholars: Philip E. Devenish, retired SMU GPRS PhD 1975, Franklin I. Gamwell, retired distinguished professor, the Divinity School, the University of Chicago, George L. Goodwin, retired President Emeritus, College of St. Scholastica, Andrew D. Scrimgeo, retired Dean of the Libraries Emeritus, Drew University, and Alexander F. Vishio, who will be a SMU GPRS PhD student starting this coming Fall.

Also, 115 of Ogden's notebook entries were published in a 334 page-book titled *Notebooks* (December 2018) by Schubert M. Ogden. The entries are thematically placed in three parts:

Part 1 – Philosophical Analyses,

Part 2 –Transcendental Metaphysics, and

Part 3 – God.

These newly published resources will provide new opportunities for scholarly work in “Ogden Studies,” including new opportunities to better appreciate panentheism, and his insistence that such appreciation is essential to adequately formulated theology and ethics, including liberation theology.

* Schubert M. Ogden served here at the SMU Perkins School of Theology, from 1955 to 1969 and from 1972 to 1993, and he served as Director of the Graduate Program in Religious Studies from 1974 to 1990.

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Notes

¹ Concerning partialist fallacy; Gamwell writes: “In another work, I have called the assertion of a noncomprehensive moral principle ‘the partialist fallacy’ and have sought to show that it is a fallacy, both in [Alan] Gewirth and as such. See Gamwell 1984a, chapters 3 and 4.” (Gamwell 1996 [c1990]: 149 footnote 15)

² Concerning power and knowledge on a cosmic scale, Hartshorne writes: “But when we try to conceive power on a cosmic scale we find that only love in the highest degree can fulfill the requirements. Similarly with cosmic knowledge; it can only be cosmic love.” (1975 [c1937]: 25)

³ Concerning loving neighbors and enemies as we love ourselves, Hartshorne explains: “We can love the other *as ourselves* because even the self as future is also another” (1970: 198).