

# 6

## Reply: Cobb on Ultimate Reality

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### I

One of Professor Cobb's aims in 'A Process Concept of God' is to find a way of seeing different religious traditions as complementary rather than competitive. This is an appealing project. How is it to be accomplished? A central point of Cobb's strategy is to assign the religious contemplation of the being of all things, including ourselves, to such traditions as Vedanta and Buddhism, as a characteristic approach quite distinct from the focus on a personal God. I have misgivings about this strategy. Perhaps Vedanta could be happy enough with it, but I suspect it does violence to other traditions.

I cannot speak with much authority on behalf of Buddhism or the mysticism of Emptiness, but I wonder whether they will be content with the assignment of 'Ultimate Reality', and the contemplation of the *being* of which all things are constituted, 'the ultimate in the line of material causes', as their special concern. Is the Emptiness of which they speak an *ontological* element of this sort? Is it to be identified with being-itself? I had thought that that was one of the things that Emptiness was not.

I would also say, and with more confidence, that in relation to personalistic theism, the religious contemplation of our own and other being as such is not unoccupied territory that can cheerfully be assigned to other religious traditions. Theists reflect on their own and other being and are convinced that what they see is the radical contingency of everything in the world, including themselves. This goes naturally with belief in a personal deity who is the ground of our being in the sense that that deity has created us out of nothing.

It is not the case, therefore, that contemplation of the deepest nature of our own being yields results that are agreed on by all but

exploited by some religious traditions rather than others. On the contrary, such contemplation is experienced in some religious traditions as leading to a vision of our identity with a necessary and eternal reality, but in other traditions as leading to a vision of the vast difference between creator and creature, between independent and dependent being. Perhaps these visions are not as opposed as they seem, but at any rate the apparent conflict cannot be resolved by assigning this field of contemplation to one religious tradition, or one conception of the Ultimate, rather than another. For the field will be claimed by many traditions and many conceptions of the Ultimate.

## II

I also have questions about Professor Cobb's suggestion that Ultimate Reality should be understood as the ultimate in the line of *material causes*. Some of the candidates that he discusses for the role of constituents of being fit the notion of material cause pretty well. This is true of energy and matter-energy; and, of course, the conception of material cause is built into the idea of prime matter. These are not Cobb's favourite concepts for the description of Ultimate Reality, however. He seems to prefer to speak of it as creativity, or 'creativity-itself'. He also characterizes it as 'actuality-itself', 'reality-itself', 'existence-itself', 'being-itself', and 'dynamism-itself'. None of these terms sound as if they should refer to material causes, on any historic conception of the Aristotelian 'four causes' with which I am familiar. 'Creativity' and 'dynamism' actually sound like formal or exemplar rather than material causes.

This issue has the following importance for our theological topic. Personalistic theism's account of the foundations of our being has typically included a belief in creation *ex nihilo*. This belief is one way of articulating a vision of our radical contingency and of the great qualitative difference between creator and creature. And the identification of Ultimate Reality with a material cause of our being is incompatible with creation *ex nihilo*.

The view that I exemplify (contingently and within limits) a property, *being*, or *creativity*, that is eternally and necessarily exemplified (by God) is quite consistent with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. That doctrine was never intended to exclude the eternal and necessary existence of universals that we instantiate. On the other

hand, the attribution of necessary or eternal existence to a *material* component of any creature is precisely what the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is meant to exclude. Aquinas, to take the obvious example, explicitly identifies God as the efficient, exemplar, and final cause of all things, but not as their material cause.<sup>1</sup>

Why has theistic tradition thus supposed that it is consistent with the difference between God and creatures to locate Ultimate Reality in other sorts of cause but not in a material cause of our being? Perhaps because it has seemed easier to see causes of other types as transcendent and distinct from us in an important way. If God's creativity is an eternal and necessary exemplar cause, our creativity can be viewed as only a copy or imitation of it, and an imperfect copy at that. But if there were an eternal and necessary material cause of creatures, they would actually be composed of it, and its existence would be completely contained in that of the sum of the things composed of it – or so I think it has been thought.

The question whether theistic tradition has made an unwarranted discrimination at this point against the material cause is worth re-examining; and Professor Cobb may wish to urge us to re-examine it. But identification of Ultimate Reality with being-itself or creativity-itself will not lead to such a re-examination unless Cobb can provide an argument, which I have not seen, for regarding those as material causes.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 44.
2. I am indebted to Marilyn McCord Adams for helpful discussion of previous drafts of this comment.