

## Research Article

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# Process-Panentheism and the “Only Way” Argument

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**Abstract:** Given panentheism, when trying to offer a plausible solution to the problem of evil, what is the most promising way forward? In this article, I argue that a panentheist who wants to answer the problem of evil by using the “only way” argument should embrace the metaphysics of process theism. In other words, she ought to be a process-panentheist. Process theism is a version of panentheism, while panentheism generally need not to imply process theism. I shall use the terms “process-panentheist” and “non-process-panentheist” to differentiate adherents of these two forms of panentheism. I examine the “only way” argument as a possible theodicy for panentheists and conclude that it is only a convincing theodicy for the panentheist if (i) she is a process-panentheist, or (ii) she thinks this is the best possible world. If she is a non-process-panentheist or does not think this is the best possible world, the “only way” approach fails to be a coherent theodicy.

**Keywords:** panentheism, process theism, process-panentheism, evil, theodicy, only way, evolution, theistic evolution, omnipotence

## 1 Introduction

I shall argue that if a panentheist wants to use the “only way” argument to answer the problem of evil, she should embrace the metaphysics of process theism. Roughly, the “only way” argument<sup>1</sup> states that God needed to create the world through an evolutionary process. I claim that the “only way” argument is only a plausible theodicy within a process-panentheistic metaphysics or if this is the best-possible world. Therefore, a panentheist who argues that evil is a necessary part of evolution, and that God had to create by using evolutionary history, can coherently do so only if she is a process-panentheist or believes this is the best world possible.

Process theism is a version of panentheism, while panentheism generally need not necessarily imply process theism. I shall use the terms “process-panentheist” and “non-process-panentheist” to differentiate between adherents of these two forms of panentheism. In this article, I defend the core claim that panentheists *should* endorse the process metaphysics if they want to use the evolutionary “only way” approach when addressing the theological dilemma of coherence of a belief in an omnibenevolent God in a world full of evil and suffering. The astute reader will now have a question ready: Why should panentheists want to adhere to the “only way” approach in the first place? This question I answer in the following section.

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<sup>1</sup> This expression is coined by Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*.

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## 2 The “only way” argument

The problem of evil comes in different forms depending on the conception of God. The traditional problem of evil is framed with the classical theistic God in mind, where God is necessarily perfectly good, omnipotent, and the world’s creator.<sup>2</sup> How could there be so much suffering and evil in the world if God is the world’s perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent creator? Evil and suffering are also a problem for panentheists because God can be conceptualized as the perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent sustainer of the world also within panentheism.<sup>3</sup>

Why does a perfectly good and powerful God allow evil and suffering? The significant difference between responses to the problem of evil in panentheism and classical theism is the panentheistic claim that the world is a part of God and *vice versa*. God includes the world, and the world includes God. This is the meaning of the panentheistic God-world inclusion. I will come back to the problem of evil for panentheists. Now, I turn to the “only way” argument.

Philosopher Robin Attfield suggests that the so-called “only way” argument “remains the most reliable theodicy available to the generality of panentheists.”<sup>4</sup> “Only way” arguments are versions of evolutionary theodicies that aim to explain how the suffering and death involved in the evolutionary process can be consistent with belief in a good and powerful God. Philosopher Mats Wahlberg examines and criticizes two versions of the “only way” argument: the anthropocentric and the non-anthropocentric. In general, “only way” arguments attempt to show that certain values, certain valuable attributes, could only have come about through an evolutionary process and that the same values or attributes could not have come about through direct divine intervention.

Philosopher Michael Murray suggests that a morally adequate theodicy must meet three conditions: (1) The Necessity Condition, (2) The Outweighing Condition, and (3) The Rights Condition.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I concentrate on the first condition since that is what is expressed by the “only way” arguments under examination.

*The Necessity Condition:* “The good secured by the permission of the evil, E, would not have been secured without permitting either E or some other evils morally equivalent to or worse than E.”<sup>6</sup>

The anthropocentric version of the “only way” argument, with defenders such as theologian Arthur Peacocke and philosopher Nancey Murphy, argues that the good value inherent in human free will can only come about through an evolutionary process; that is, if God controls the creation instead of letting it create itself to a sufficient degree by means of evolution, then human free will would be undermined. The non-anthropocentric version of the “only way” argument, with defenders such as theologian and biochemist Christopher Southgate and physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne, maintains that for creatures to be truly *other* than God, for them to be creaturely selves with sufficient autonomy, God’s activity at the founding of the world involved a “partly random and uncontrolled process of evolution.”<sup>7</sup>

Before continuing, it must be stressed that “only way” arguments are not open only to panentheists. On the contrary, classical theists and open theists (and those within other schools of theism) can adhere to versions of it. However, this article seeks to examine whether a panentheist successfully can adhere to an “only way” approach. If successful, panentheists could use an “only way” argument to explain the existence of evil and suffering.

In debates on various conceptions of God, it is often argued that panentheism’s core lies in the idea that God’s power is purely persuasive and never coercive.<sup>8</sup> I will show that this is only true if the panentheist in

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent defense of classical theism, see Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Peacocke, Philip Clayton, and Jürgen Moltmann are three panentheists who maintain God’s omnipotence.

<sup>4</sup> Attfield, “Panentheisms, Creation and Evil,” 179.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, “Theodicy,” 356.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Wahlberg, “Was Evolution the Only Possible Way For God to Make Autonomous Creatures?,” 38.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Stenmark, “Competing Conceptions of God,” 32; Oomen, “God’s Power and Almightiness in Whitehead’s Thought;” and Whitney, “Divine Persuasion and the Anthropic Argument.”

question accepts the doctrines of process theism. I focus on panentheism to make it clear that only process-panentheists are coherent in their claim that God’s power only is purely persuasive and never coercive, thereby making the “only way” approach available to process-panentheist, but not to panentheists in general.

I agree with Attfield that an “only way” argument is the most promising theodicy available for panentheists, and the arguments I offer are built on this assumption. However, I argue that *process*-panentheism, with the doctrine of pure persuasive power, is the only version of panentheism that can apply the “only way” argument as a successful theodicy, unless the panentheist believes this is the best-possible world.

It appears as if the most common response to the problem of evil is to argue that God needed to create a world where evil is at least *possible* because otherwise no free will, free choices, or creaturely freedom would have been possible. The philosopher John Hick is known for his theodicy of *soul-making*, which builds on our possibility to acquire virtues by use of free will.<sup>9</sup> It is often argued that free will comes with the cost of making evil and suffering possible. If we combine this claim with the claim that free will could only come about through a “free” evolutionary process, we have an anthropocentric version of the “only way” argument. I shall argue that the “only way” argument is a possible theodicy for process-panentheists, but not for non-process-panentheists, unless they claim that this is the best-possible world.

Christopher Southgate is a prominent defender of a non-anthropocentric version of the “only way” argument. According to him, the “only way” argument explains why the evolution of the natural world was the only way for God to bring about the values of creaturely conscious beings.<sup>10</sup> The argument claims that the evolutionary process is the only explanation for complex, sentient creatures (The Necessity Condition). According to Southgate, an evolutionary process was the only way God could create a world with free creaturely selves. The values of interest to Southgate involve all sentient life.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of creation, says Southgate, is the realization of creaturely values such as beauty, diversity, sophistication, and freedom – the realization of flourishing “creaturely selves.”<sup>12</sup> However, values such as sight, scent, love, taste, and intelligence result from creatures evolving in an often hostile environment full of suffering. Some values only exist because of the need to escape predators or because of the need to adapt to a hostile environment. However, evil and suffering are outweighed by the values of creaturely selves (The Outweighing Condition).

Attfield instead suggests that it is logically possible for the values mentioned above to exist without a hostile evolutionary process but that such a world would be very short-lived. According to him, a sustainable world with meaningful, valuable lives and interactions is impossible without the predation inherent in an evolutionary process. Only if God were to intervene constantly could a world with similar values be possible.<sup>13</sup> He continues that:

In the absence of such interventions, characteristics such as feeding habits and competition for food were bound to be the determinants of the evolution of species. So, though evolution by natural selection is not logically necessary, it is probably the only kind of non-interventionist world-system which could give us those capacities found in nature that we value.<sup>14</sup>

This non-anthropocentric “only way” argument thus attempts to show that God needed to create the world via an evolutionary process because otherwise the values of flourishing creaturely autonomous beings with capacities for intelligence, consciousness, eyesight, hearing, and sentience would be impossible.

The anthropocentric version of the argument, to which we now turn, focuses on human free will. According to Peacocke, humans capable of freely choosing a loving relationship with God outweigh the sufferings in the world (The Outweighing Condition), and this good could not be if God would have created

<sup>9</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*.

<sup>10</sup> Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 16, 29, 90–1.

<sup>11</sup> “[...] God’s purposes with creation are not wholly bound up with humanity.” Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 30, 48, 59.

<sup>13</sup> Attfield, “Evolution, Theodicy and Value,” 287–8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

by any means other than a partly uncontrolled evolutionary process (The Necessity Condition).<sup>15</sup> According to Peacocke, only through an evolutionary process can free persons come to be, and evil and suffering are therefore necessary parts of the natural world in order for it to realize the greater good of human freedom.<sup>16</sup> He argues that this is so because the acts of God in creation are purely natural (as opposed to supernatural). God self-limits divine omniscience and omnipotence in order for the world to produce “open-endedness and flexibility of generating complexity, consciousness and freedom.”<sup>17</sup> Peacocke maintains that God intervenes in the world by affecting nature from within, e.g., on a quantum level, and that God never intervenes supernaturally. God acts only “in, with, and under” the natural processes. God acts “through what science calls “chance” operating within the created order [...]”<sup>18</sup> These non-intervening acts of God are necessary to realize God’s purpose with creation: to bring about “intelligent, self-conscious, sensitive, free beings” that can engage in a free relationship with God.<sup>19</sup> If God intervenes to form the creatures instead of letting them evolve freely, the purpose of beings experiencing a loving, free relationship with God is undermined.

### 3 Critiquing the “only way” arguments

Wahlberg is critical of both these sorts of “only way” arguments.<sup>20</sup> He argues that God very well could have created doppelgängers – animals, and humans that were created as exact copies but who are not the result of evolutionary processes.<sup>21</sup>

He uses the thought experiment of the Swamp-man, originated by philosopher Donald Davidson, to explain that a copy – a replica with the same memories and molecular constitution as himself – could still be a creaturely self with free will and moral character. The Swamp-man may not have these traits immediately after being created, but these character traits will develop after some time in the world.<sup>22</sup> After all, human beings develop these traits by engaging in and with the world. Wahlberg concludes that “If my doppelgänger lives for some years in the world, he would have the opportunity to acquire moral properties such as virtues, and thereby to acquire freedom.”<sup>23</sup> An instantly created Swamp-man can therefore acquire moral character, experience the good values of sentient beings, and have free will – all without being created without an evolutionary process. Wahlberg concludes that the anthropocentric “only way” argument fails to explain why the evolutionary process would be the only way for God to achieve these good values.

The question here is whether or not an instantly created doppelgänger that has all the attributes, characteristics, and emotions that I have is *free* in the same way (or any way) as I am. Wahlberg thinks that one does not need to be part of an historical evolutionary process that involves much suffering, pain, and death, to become a free moral character. Moreover, none of us has evolved through an evolutionary process as individuals. Nine months in a womb is enough to become a free moral individual, so why, he asks, could a person directly created by God not be one?

There is a heavy burden of proof resting on those who think otherwise, and who claim that one’s basic physical constitution must have evolved if one is ever to be able to acquire freedom.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Peacocke, *Paths from Science Towards God*, 86–8.

<sup>16</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>18</sup> Peacocke, “Articulating God’s Presence in and to the World Unveiled by the Sciences,” 143.

<sup>19</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Wahlberg, “Was Evolution the Only Possible Way,” 37.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 43–4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Wahlberg concludes that Peacocke’s anthropocentric “only way” argument is unsatisfying since it does not address why God could not create creatures instantly (such as the doppelgänger and the Swamp-man), and it does not account for God allowing so much suffering.

Wahlberg further argues that the non-anthropocentric argument fails to convince that God needed to create by use of evolution because it fails to explain why the good values of intelligence, eyesight, and creaturely flourishing could not have been created instantly by divine supernatural intervention.<sup>25</sup> Wahlberg grants the accuracy in Attfield’s claim that values such as intelligence, eyesight, and hearing plausibly have evolved precisely because of the need for adaption and evolution in a hostile world. However, he continues to say that this in itself says nothing about whether the world necessarily contains predation and hostile environments for intelligence, eyesight, and hearing to exist. An omnipotent God could create creatures with these values without evolution. Southgate seems to agree with this claim since he argues for what he calls “pelican heaven” – an eschatological heavenly state where the good values of creaturely selves exist without predation, suffering, and evil.<sup>26</sup> If the values – that were the purpose of creation – can exist in heaven, where no suffering and predation exist, Southgate’s version of the “only way”-argument fails to explain why God *needed* to create by use of an evolutionary process full of suffering. If we can live and flourish in heaven, despite the lack of predation and the need for adaption and evolution, why was it necessary in the first place? The doppelgänger argument presented by Wahlberg shows us that God indeed could have created creatures with the ability for free will and creaturely flourishing without an evolutionary process.

With that said, we remember that Attfield instead suggested that unless God constantly intervenes in the world to uphold the good values, our world would be a world of natural selection, evolution, and predation. This brings us to the arguments by theologian and philosopher Bethany Sollereeder.

Sollereeder suggests an analogy of sports to understand how a heavenly state without predation can contain the predatory characteristics inherent in animals such as lions, bears, and alligators. If the need to hunt, chase, roar, and eat meat were stripped from the lion in heaven, there would not be much of a lion left.<sup>27</sup> She posits a heavenly state where all the creaturely attributes are maintained, but no death or suffering exists. To preserve these creaturely values, but without the existence of predators who kill and prey who suffer, the needs could be satisfied in terms of sport.

In sport, the same skills [as used for hunting] – the same resources of human identity – are made use of, but without bloodshed. What is more, the skills and abilities in this context often far transcend what would ever have been necessary in the context of hunting. ... In a similar way, nonhuman animals could take up different behaviors but still use their skills and instincts and bodies in ways that no longer come at the cost of other animals.<sup>28</sup>

With this possibility in mind, we can see that a world without constant divine intervention could still be a world without natural selection, evolution, and predation.

Sollereeder, much inspired by Southgate, also defends a version of the non-anthropocentric “only way” argument by arguing that evolution quite possibly was the only way for God to come up with creatures such as humans, pelicans, and tigers.<sup>29</sup> Apart from evolution, how would God decide what to create? Without evolution, why would God create a *human* or a *tiger* as humans and tigers presently are? Sollereeder maintains that it is highly anthropomorphic to assume that God would have created us as we *actually* are had God been free to create us without evolution involved. Was the appendix really part of God’s eternal plan of creation? Or is it the result of an evolutionary process without direct divine control? Since tigers, humans, and pelicans have evolved into the types of organisms that currently exist, and how we actually are, seems highly arbitrary – with much room for improvement – Sollereeder points out that it is reasonable

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>26</sup> Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 87, 90.

<sup>27</sup> Sollereeder, “Exploring Old and New Paths in Theodicy,” 731.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 732.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 727–38.

to assume that God did not have another choice but to create via the evolutionary process. A God with another choice would hardly have created the world with tigers, pelicans – and humans – as *we actually are*.

“How does God choose the possibility that led to the pelican amongst the alternative choices?” she asks.<sup>30</sup> Like Southgate, she suggests that the evolutionary process quite possibly was the only way for God to come up with creation as it actually is, with the values it actually contains. I find this non-anthropocentric critique compelling. I agree that it is highly anthropomorphic to assume that God had the frail human body, the walrus, and the pelican as eternal blueprints in the divine mind. However, it is not *impossible* that God could create free creaturely selves instantaneously. Perhaps God knew beforehand that these actual life forms, plants, mountains, etc., constitute the best-possible world. It is possible that the world we live in is the best-possible one and that any other possible world would entail a higher degree of evil and suffering.

Wahlberg’s objection to the non-anthropocentric argument is very much like his previous objection; if a creature who is the result of a long evolutionary process is a “creaturely self,” then so would a doppelgänger – an exact copy created instantly by God – be. For Wahlberg, given that God is omnipotent, it is perfectly possible that God created values such as beauty, senses such as sight, and creaturely free selves instantly without an evolutionary process.<sup>31</sup> Even if the anthropocentric critique is powerful, the “only way” arguments still have not shown that the Necessity Condition is satisfied.

Asle Eikrem and Atle Ottosen Søvik, both theologians and philosophers, maintain that the “only way” argument is successful because some token values had to be produced by evolution and not instantly by an intervening omnipotent God. A token value is “a type-value [such as having fun] *at a certain time and place*, e.g. the joy of attending the party yesterday at my neighbor’s house.”<sup>32</sup> They claim that God’s purpose with creation involves both place/time-specific and non-place/time-specific values and that this indicates the necessity of the evolutionary process.<sup>33</sup> They also argue that Wahlberg’s discussion concerns only type-values such as the value of free will, while they maintain that certain token values – specific to a certain time and place – may require an evolutionary process.

Eikrem’s and Ottosen Søvik’s argument presupposes a specific type of value involved in the place/time-specific circumstance of, e.g., attending a party yesterday. This seems to entail that the relevant value in creation is accumulated, making my memory and experience of attending the party yesterday part of the accumulated value. However, I might be an instantly created doppelgänger with an implanted memory of the party. What is the difference between actually attending a party and believing that I did, enjoying implanted memories from attending a party? Only if we have reason to believe that we need an actual historical process of accumulated values do we have reason to believe that actual place/time-specific values are necessary for God’s purpose with creation. As long as we assume that the relevant values are the actual and future ones, not past and place-bound ones, we have no reason to believe that an evolutionary process was the only way for God to realize the purpose of creation.

Eikrem and Ottosen Søvik presupposes “that the evolving universe under scrutiny is characterized as indeterministic.”<sup>34</sup> They are, of course, right that *if* God’s purpose with creation is the realization of an indeterministic and freely evolving world at all times, God would have no choice but to create using evolution. In that case, if God were to intervene and create doppelgängers, the purpose would be undermined. Only if the purpose with creation was an evolutionary process itself is an “only way” approach convincing. However, the claim that the *process itself* is the purpose, thereby making the evolutionary process necessary, is a circular argument. And as Wahlberg has shown, after spending only a little time in the world, even the instantly created being can be a free creaturely self. Such a being could then act

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 729.

<sup>31</sup> Wahlberg, “Was Evolution the Only Possible Way,” 47–8.

<sup>32</sup> Eikrem and Søvik, “Evolutionary Theodicies,” 430.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 432.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 431.



creatively and surprisingly, thus satisfying the values mentioned by Eikrem and Ottosen Søvik.<sup>35</sup> We have still not shown that an omnipotent God could not realize creaturely flourishing or bring about free beings who can partake in a free relationship with God without an evolutionary process.

If the world were created *ex nihilo* it would have been less independent, less self-created, not creative (until now) and not a surprise to God. Wahlberg could of course object that the universe *from now on* could have been independent, self-creating (etc.), but our point is that evolution has actualized these values in the course of the very process itself, and that to a greater degree than if created from nothing in its current state: more independence, more self-creation (etc.).<sup>36</sup>

A freely evolved world may entail more independence and self-creation than a world created instantly with the same values. This is, of course, *possible*. However, it is also possible that an omnipotent God can realize an equally free, valuable, and evolving world. In other words, we still have not found an argument in favor of the “only way” approach that satisfies the Necessity Condition.

The critique of “only way” arguments offered here and by Wahlberg aims to show that an omnipotent God could indeed create the world’s necessary values instantly and without an evolutionary process. I agree that an omnipotent God would not be forced to create by evolution. Therefore, for the “only way” argument to be plausible as a theodicy, God cannot be understood to be omnipotent in the classical meaning of the term. This is where process-panentheism comes in. Only within the metaphysics of process theism is it plausible that God does not have omnipotent power to coerce – and thereby interact directly in creation – but instead create only by using persuasive power to produce the evolutionary processes.

What is the implication of this for panentheism? It depends, of course, on whether the panentheist rejects or, in order to *be* a panentheist, must reject the idea that God is omnipotent. Therefore, I shall explore whether non-process-panentheism is satisfactory in its response to the problem of evil, and – since the answer I give to this question is negative – then explore the resources that process-panentheism has in using the “only way” argument as a successful response to the problem of evil.

## 4 Panentheism and the problem of evil

A panentheist claims that God includes the world in God’s being and that the world includes God in its being, that God simultaneously transcends the world, and that there is necessary feedback between God and the world.<sup>37</sup> We can call this “minimal panentheism” – both non-process-panentheists and process-panentheists hold this to be true. The God-world inclusion entails that God is part of the world and that the world is part of God. Classical theism accepts only that God is part of the world due to divine omnipresence but rejects that the world is an ontological part of God. Panentheists reject the classical theistic claim that there is an ontological distinction between God and the world. Instead, panentheists accept the doctrine of ontological inclusion – that God is part of the world, and the world is part of God.<sup>38</sup> The process-panentheists add to this whole metaphysics, originating from the philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and the philosopher Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000). We will come back to what this entails.

The question to examine now is whether non-process-panentheism can answer the problem of evil satisfactorily. We have already seen that Attfield suggests that the “only way” argument is the only

<sup>35</sup> “Examples of unique type-values within such a universe are genuine independence (that beings to some extent, influence what happens), self-creating creation (that beings cause their own characteristics over time), the creativity of creation (that new things occur), and surprise (that unexpected things occur).” Eikrem and Søvik, “Evolutionary Theodicies,” 431.

<sup>36</sup> Eikrem and Søvik, “Evolutionary Theodicies,” 433.

<sup>37</sup> Compare with the panentheism of, for example Gregersen, “Three Varieties of Panentheism,” 19–35; Stenmark, “Panentheism and Its Neighbors,” 23–41; Nagasawa, “Modal Panentheism,” 91–105; Moltmann, *God in Creation*; Peacocke, “Articulating God’s Presence in and to the World Unveiled by the Sciences,” 137–54.

<sup>38</sup> Stenmark, “Panentheism and Its Neighbors,” 27.

promising theodicy for panentheists. In the following sections, I explain why a process-panentheist responds to the problem of evil by saying that *God is not omnipotent*, at least not in the traditional sense.<sup>39</sup> However, a non-process panentheist need not reject a traditional understanding of omnipotence. Incidentally, neither philosophers Philip Clayton, Arthur Peacocke, nor theologian Jürgen Moltmann reject divine omnipotence, and they are all panentheists. The only things a non-process-panentheist must hold true are the claims of minimal panentheism: that God includes the world in God's being and that the world includes God in its being, that God simultaneously transcends the world, and that there is necessary feedback between God and the world. Such a panentheistic God can be both omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent.

The standard objection to panentheism when it comes to the problem of evil is that if God includes the world so that the world is an ontological part of God and God is an ontological part of the world, then God cannot be omnibenevolent since there is evil in the world.<sup>40</sup> As the theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen defines it, *strict* panentheism claims that God *necessarily* needs an actual world.<sup>41</sup> We shall see that process-panentheists hold this to be true. Process-panentheism thus falls under the category of strict panentheism. Attfield argues that because of this, evil becomes even more of a problem in strict panentheism than in classical theism (although it is, of course, still a problem for classical theism).<sup>42</sup> This is so because, according to strict panentheism, the evil in the world is a metaphysical part of God. This means that God cannot be all-good. It may also appear as if God, according to strict panentheism, is not free to create since God necessarily needs a world. However, this need not be true. Moltmann, for example, holds a compatibilist position where God *necessarily* needs a world while God at the same time creates freely.<sup>43</sup> According to him, the world is not a divine aspect or mode as Spinoza thought. The world is not itself divine but metaphysically "located" within God's being. He adheres to panentheism, not pantheism. With the kabbalistic notion of *zimzum*, Moltmann embraces a theology of creation which may be regarded simultaneously as both *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio ex materia*. The creation is not created out of absolute Nothingness because, before the creation, God was all there was. However, with the withdrawing of Godself, a sort of Nothing emerged, which made the Creation as we know it possible.<sup>44</sup> Clayton describes this God-world inclusion in an illuminating way:

The motivation of the doctrine of divine omnipresence, then, is not to pretend that all things are God, but to locate all things within the divine presence, which is the only source of all existing things. ... If space is God's space, then the world is not "outside" him but by definition within him.<sup>45</sup>

According to Moltmann, God is necessarily loving, and love always needs a free response from some *Other*.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, God needs a world that in itself is *not* God. The Trinity is not enough to satisfy the loving relationship within Godself. According to Moltmann, due to God's essence as love, God necessarily needs that which is not Godself to love and be in a relationship with.

I argue that Moltmann's version of panentheism can be understood to be strict panentheism – the claim that God necessarily must relate to a world – because Moltmann's compatibilism still holds the doctrine of symmetrical ontological dependence to be true: "God depends on the world (or the creation of another world) for God's own existence."<sup>47</sup> I thus conclude that Moltmann's panentheism could be understood as strict panentheism.

<sup>39</sup> Not even the perfect-being response, which says that God can do anything a perfect being can do, is acceptable for the process theist.

<sup>40</sup> This problem is maximized by Nagasawa in his version of modal panentheism, because according to modal panentheism God is not only identical with the actual world with its actual evil, but also with all possible worlds and their possible evils. See Nagasawa, "Modal Panentheism."

<sup>41</sup> Gregersen, "Three Varieties of Panentheism," 23.

<sup>42</sup> Attfield, "Pantheisms, Creation and Evil," 168.

<sup>43</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*; Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*; and Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*.

<sup>44</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 113; and Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 75.

<sup>45</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 89.

<sup>46</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 32, 55–6.

<sup>47</sup> Stenmark, "Panentheism and Its Neighbors," 26.



Attfield writes that strict panentheism cannot understand God as the creator of the world and so strict panentheism “undermines the central epistemological grounds for theistic belief.”<sup>48</sup> He thinks that strict panentheism is philosophically flawed as a conception of God because it fails to make sense of God as a creator. Suppose the conception of God cannot help explain why the world exists and why it has the character it has. In that case, it fails to be a philosophically satisfactory conception of God, according to Attfield.

Attfield’s critique can be contested because God can coherently be considered the creator and the world the creation, even in strict panentheism. Furthermore, the evil in the world need not be considered part of God’s eternal essence. It can be considered a part of God merely because it affects God and takes place within God – but it is not part of the divine eternal essence. In process terms, we would say that evil is part of the *consequent nature* of God but not of God’s *primordial nature*.

The panentheism of, for example, Peacocke and Moltmann claims that evil is not necessarily a part of God. Nevertheless, the evil in the world takes actual place within the space of God. I reject the conclusion that strict panentheism must imply that evil necessarily is part of God’s essence. It suffices to say that it is a contingent part of God – as it is also stated in process-panentheism, Peacocke’s emergentist monism, and Moltmann’s trinitarian panentheism.<sup>49</sup>

According to panentheism, evil is part of the world and, therefore, also of God. However, since the world is created or evolved from God, evil is an evolutionary phenomenon in order for human beings to become free and autonomous beings – beings *in* God but not identical with God.<sup>50</sup>

Now that we have settled that strict panentheism is not necessarily a philosophically flawed conception of God, it is time to move on to the metaphysics of process-panentheism.<sup>51</sup> If it entails a coherent refutation of the omnipotence of God (in traditional understanding), it may be possible for process-panentheists to adhere to the “only way” theodicy successfully.

## 5 Process theism – a brief excursus

To understand why process-panentheism rejects the idea of God as omnipotent, we must understand and consider specific core concepts in process metaphysics.

Whitehead’s magnum opus *Process and Reality* explains and develops his process philosophy.<sup>52</sup> In short, process philosophy states that reality is relations in processes. Contrary to substance dualism, which states that there are material substances and non-material mental states such as consciousness and minds/souls, process metaphysics states that the primary metaphysical category is process.<sup>53</sup> According to Whitehead, every “actual being” or “actual occasion,” everything from electrons to cats to human beings, essentially has a mental and a physical pole – all creation is essentially dipolar.<sup>54</sup> That everything has a mental, and a physical pole does not mean that all things are conscious in the full human sense but that every actual being possesses some level of experience to reach its subjective aim.<sup>55</sup> “The mental pole is the

<sup>48</sup> Attfield, “Panentheisms, Creation and Evil,” 169–70.

<sup>49</sup> Peacocke, *Paths from Science Towards God*; Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*; Moltmann, *God in Creation*; Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*.

<sup>50</sup> Compare with Burns, “How to Prove the Existence of God,” 5–21.

<sup>51</sup> I leave the discussion of whether the process-God is worthy of worship for another time.

<sup>52</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Hartshorne questions the traditional assumption that metaphysical perfection must entail that God is impassible and unchangeable. Instead, he argues that change is a good thing (p. 6). There is freedom in becoming (p. 75). See Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. See also Cobb and Ray Griffin, *Process Theology*, 14.

<sup>54</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 32–3, 184, 239, 248. See also Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, 44–50. Hartshorne uses the word “dual transcendence.”

<sup>55</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 85, 224–5.

subject determining its own ideal of itself [...].”<sup>56</sup> The feedback between the mental and the physical pole is called *prehension*. Whitehead describes prehension as feelings – actual occasions/actual beings *feel* God’s pull or lure toward its best potential given its actuality.<sup>57</sup>

Process theism of the Whiteheadian tradition is based on at least two<sup>58</sup> core assumptions: *panpsychism*/*panexperientialism* and a *prehensive* doctrine of perception.<sup>59</sup> Panpsychism/panexperientialism<sup>60</sup> is the doctrine that everything has at least some degree of experience. Prehension is the non-sensory fundamental mode of perception that we share with all other experiencing creatures, including atoms and quarks.<sup>61</sup> Prehension is the “feeling of feeling.” By prehension, all subjects feel the feelings of, and have sympathy, for other subjects. God knows the world by physical prehension, by feeling the world’s feelings.<sup>62</sup>

According to the doctrines of process theism, God cannot intervene with, or violate, metaphysical laws.<sup>63</sup> Two of these metaphysical laws are, as we have seen, the fundamental relationality of reality and the panpsychist/panexperiential aspect of reality (experience is everywhere and in everything). If – as panpsychism/panexperientialism states – every actual being, such as an electron, has some level of self-determination, then this is a freedom that even God cannot interfere with.<sup>64</sup> God’s purpose is for there to be happy creatures, and happy creatures are, in Charles Hartshorne’s words, “partly self-determined actualities.”<sup>65</sup>

Process theists reject the claim that God can violate natural and metaphysical laws. In the literature on process theism and the rejection of divine omnipotence, a frequently occurring reason for this rejection relates to the distinction between coercive and persuasive power.<sup>66</sup> Process theists such as David Ray Griffin and Palmyre Oomen argue that the process-God possesses only pure persuasive power.<sup>67</sup> According to process theism, as soon as something exists, be it a quark or an electron, God cannot act coercively on it. The very first divine creative act arose from a type of modified persuasion or, as Griffin puts it, it was “quasi-coercive.”<sup>68</sup> However, from the moment a first actual entity existed, God’s power had to be purely persuasive. Since all actual entities, according to the core assumptions of process theism, have self-determination that even God cannot coerce, God’s power is now – ever since that first creative act – purely persuasive. Instead of coercively intervening in the world, God creates by influencing the world without determining it.<sup>69</sup>

For this reason, and due to the core claims that God necessarily needs a world and that everything necessarily possesses creative power – self-determination – process theists usually state that God created the world out of chaos (*creatio ex material*) rather than *ex nihilo*.<sup>70</sup> God “is not *before* all creation, but *with* all

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 52, 224–5, 220–1. For a good overview of Whitehead’s thoughts, see Viney, “Process Theism.”

<sup>58</sup> Griffin lists ten core doctrines of process theism. See Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 5–7.

<sup>59</sup> Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 5–7. Compare with the fuller account in Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 30–5.

<sup>60</sup> There are those, including Griffin, who do not think that panpsychism is a suitable word. Griffin uses panexperientialism instead. With the term panexperientialism we avoid the impression that everything has a psyche/mind. Personally, I have no quarrel with the term panpsychism, but since the term panexperientialism is regarded as less problematic, I will use both terms: panpsychism/panexperientialism.

<sup>61</sup> Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, 27; and Griffin, “Panentheism,” 44.

<sup>62</sup> Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, 27–8.

<sup>63</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 342. God is not an exception to the metaphysical rules, Whitehead writes. God “is their chief exemplification.”

<sup>64</sup> Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 135.

<sup>65</sup> Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, 81.

<sup>66</sup> Stenmark, “Panentheism and Its Neighbors,” 32.

<sup>67</sup> Oomen, “God’s Power and Almightyness in Whitehead’s Thought,” 89–92; Griffin, *Evil Revisited*, 96–102; Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 110.

<sup>68</sup> Griffin, “Process Theology and the Christian Good News,” 30.

<sup>69</sup> Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, 78.

<sup>70</sup> See Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 46–54; Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, 58, 65–75; Griffin, “Panentheism,” 38.

creation.”<sup>71</sup> The main reason for this is metaphysical: God necessarily needs a world, and that world necessarily contains creative power of its own. According to strict panentheism – of which process theism is one version – there is a symmetrical ontological dependence between God and the world. Metaphysically, God must have a world, and any world metaphysically depends on God.<sup>72</sup>

However, the doctrine of pure persuasive power need not be embraced by panentheists in general. If a panentheist rejects the doctrine of pure persuasive power, she must also accept the possibility of direct divine interaction. However, if God has coercive power, God can intervene in creation to create Wahlberg’s doppelgänger, which means that the evolutionary process is not the “only way” for God to realize the divine purpose with creation. If so, then panentheism offers no better solution to the problem of evil than does classical theism.

Whitehead applied all the metaphysical principles of process philosophy to God, and since every actual entity has both a physical and a mental pole, this also applies to God. Whitehead calls this the consequent and the primordial nature of God.<sup>73</sup> The two natures indicate a *dipolar* nature of God, and Whitehead ends *Process and Reality* with his famous litany about God:

It is as true to say that God is permanent and World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God fluent. It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many. ... It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God.<sup>74</sup>

Hartshorne explicitly describes his process theology as panentheism – something Whitehead never did. However, the process metaphysics does imply panentheism because, according to process theism, God is the essentially dipolar creator of the world. This means that God essentially needs the world, but God is *more* than the world. There is a feedback relation between God and the world – they affect each other. The core doctrines of process theism involve minimal panentheism and make a cumulative argument for panentheism. I believe that the combination of the doctrine of *prehension*, *panpsychism*/*panexperientialism* with organizational duality, *dipolar theism* with the two poles of God, and the doctrine that all *actual entities are fundamentally relational* together make a case for panentheism.<sup>75</sup> This is, however, not the place to spell out the details of this argument.

## 6 Process-panentheism and the problem of evil

Why, specifically, can God not exercise coercive power according to process theism? Griffin explains that the process theistic denial that God possesses coercive power is linked to the understanding of *efficient* and *final* causation.<sup>76</sup> The denial that God possesses coercive power comes from the denial that God is a physical aggregate and that God possesses unilateral power to coerce the self-determination of free actual beings.<sup>77</sup> Only the individual event/being itself can exercise *final* causation. Final causation equals self-determination.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, only aggregates can coerce other aggregates, e.g., a hand on a ball or a knife through a cake. God is not a physical aggregate, so God cannot coerce physical aggregates in the world.

God prehends all occasions of experience in the world, which becomes part of God, but God cannot coerce since God is not a physical aggregate. “The universe, in other words, is a compound individual [such

<sup>71</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 342.

<sup>72</sup> See again Stenmark, “Panentheism and Its Neighbors,” 27.

<sup>73</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 32, 244, 345.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>75</sup> See Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 5–7 for a fuller explanation of the meaning of the doctrines.

<sup>76</sup> Griffin, *Evil Revisited*, 96–102; Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 110.

<sup>77</sup> Griffin, *Evil Revisited*, 98; Cobb and Griffin, “Process Theology,” 23. Compare with Oomen, “God’s Power and Almighty in Whitehead’s Thought,” 83–110.

<sup>78</sup> Griffin, *Evil Revisited*, 98; and Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 102–3.

as a human being is a compound individual, while the stone is a mere aggregate] with God as its dominant member.”<sup>79</sup> God cannot physically hinder a person from pulling the trigger of a gun because God is not one localized agent who can use other bodies as aggregates.<sup>80</sup> God is omnipresent and can therefore not be regarded as an anthropomorphic agent with the same abilities as we have. God only persuades.<sup>81</sup>

I can coerce my arm to move – God cannot. Does this indicate that we have greater power than God? Not necessarily. We cannot observe God’s success rate when it comes to persuasion. It could very well be the case that God is very successful in persuading the actual occasions of the world. Without God’s constant lure, the world might have been considerably worse off than it is. Moreover, according to process theism, God metaphysically *cannot* act by coercing actual occasions even if it is sometimes morally desirable.<sup>82</sup> Whether or not the process-God is more loving and moral than a God with *both* persuasive and coercive power is not for me to evaluate here. I merely conclude that the process argument for pure persuasive power is metaphysical. It is not a moral argument.

The rejection of divine coercive power, which consequently is a rejection of direct divine intervention, is a consequence of the belief that the world is foundationally relational (the prehension). It is also a consequence of the belief that all actual events, even electrons, have self-determination that even God cannot violate.

Griffin thinks that although so-called “open theists” (sometimes also called “free-will theists”) offer somewhat better answers to the problem of evil than classical theists do, their free-will defense is inadequate.<sup>83</sup> Even if we grant the goodness of libertarian freedom, the question remains as to why God should not intervene and therefore temporarily violate the humanity of persons who are about to violate the humanity of others. Griffin asks: “Would not this violation have been a small price to pay to have prevented Hitler from violating the freedom and humanity of billions of other people?”<sup>84</sup> The process-panentheistic answer is that God *cannot* intervene. It is not the case that God willingly refrains from using God’s coercive power on us. God metaphysically cannot coerce us. *The process-God cannot coerce the inherent freedom of actual events and beings.* To argue along this line, one must reject the traditional conception of God as omnipotent, which is precisely what process theists do.<sup>85</sup>

Process theism handles the problem of evil differently than classical theism, where God is believed to be omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. The process-God cannot be blamed. The evils in the world are not God’s fault. God does not allow evil for us to have free will or the possibility for soul-making. God *wants* us to listen to, and follow, our inner voices – voices that speak of initial aims and the best possibilities. It is up to us to act upon the good initial aims set by God, but God cannot coercively intervene in the world. Not even to stop horrendous evil.

However, a non-process-panentheist need not sign up for this metaphysical framework. A non-process-panentheist need not be a panpsychist/panexperientialist at all; she must not accept that all things have a physical and mental pole, and she must not accept the doctrine of prehension. All that the non-process-panentheist must accept are the claims that God includes the world in God’s being and that the world includes God in its being, that God simultaneously transcends the world, and that there is necessary feedback between God and the world (minimal panentheism).

<sup>79</sup> Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 142.

<sup>80</sup> Griffin, *Evil Revisited*, 103–4.

<sup>81</sup> Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 143.

<sup>82</sup> Arguments stating that God only persuades because a necessarily loving being never coerces those he/she loves are unconvincing. There are cases where it is morally permissible to physically coerce someone instead of only persuading them. For example, I would be morally blameworthy if I did not physically hinder a child from being run over by a bus but instead only tried to persuade the child. Moral arguments in favor of divine pure persuasive power are thus unconvincing.

<sup>83</sup> Free-will theists are sometimes also called open theists. Open theism shares many core assumptions with process theism but differs on some important points. The major difference, according to myself, is how open theism and process theism conceptualize God’s love and essence as loving and relational, where the open theist claims God’s love of the creation to be free and voluntary while the process theist claims God’s love of the creation to be metaphysically necessary.

<sup>84</sup> Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, 223.

<sup>85</sup> The very title of Hartshorne’s book indicates this: *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*.

In conclusion, a non-process-panentheist need not accept the doctrine of pure persuasive power. In fact, a non-process-panentheist has no reason to believe that God only has persuasive power. That conclusion only follows from the process theistic doctrine of panpsychism/panexperientialism and the doctrine of prehension.

## 7 Process-panentheism and the “only way” argument

We have seen that Attfield suggests that the “only way” approach “remains the most reliable theodicy available to the generality of panentheists.”<sup>86</sup> However, he thinks that strict panentheism fails to offer a satisfying theodicy because strict panentheism entails the idea that the evil in the world is a necessary part of God. I have argued that this need not be the case. As previously mentioned, Sollereeder’s critique of anthropomorphism ought to be considered: How did God come up with the idea of pelicans, tigers, or humans?<sup>87</sup> Everything existing is the result of billions of years of evolution. Why should we think that if God would create a human being without the use of evolution, would create us as we are *now*? I can think of several ways to improve the human bodily constitution, so why would God create such a physically and mentally fragile being if God were free to create us without having to involve evolution? It is *possible* that the evolutionary process really was the “only way” to produce solar systems, cells, pelicans, and humans. However, even if this possibility remains, we have no apparent reason to assume that an omnipotent God could not create these entities and values without the use of evolution.

It is, of course, possible that God considered all the possible options before creating. It is possible that we and the entire world are the best of all possible worlds, although it certainly does not appear to be so. *If* this is the best-possible world, then the “only way” argument might be an appealing approach for a panentheist to take because it is plausible that God would not have created the world exactly as it is now had God been able to choose freely. However, if a non-process-panentheist believes that God is omnipotent but doubts that this is the best-of-all-possible worlds, it seems that the “only way” approach fails her.

The two versions of the “only way” argument presented here (the anthropocentric and the non-anthropocentric) have been criticized by Wahlberg. His critique emphasizes that we have no reason to assume that an omnipotent God is forced to create in a particular way. An omnipotent God can create by evolution or not at all. It is up to God to decide. Only if we have a good reason to assume that God is *not* omnipotent in this sense is the “only way” argument plausible as a theodicy. I conclude that a panentheist who does not think this is the best-possible world can only coherently adhere to the “only way” theodicy if she is a process-panentheist. If a panentheist wants to use the “only way” theodicy to explain why God created the world through an evolutionary process, she ought to be a process-panentheist. In other words, only if the panentheist thinks that this is the best-possible world – so that any other possible world would entail a higher degree of evil and suffering – does the “only way” argument satisfy the Necessity Condition.

Suppose a panentheist argues that God indeed is omnipotent in the traditional sense (that God can do anything logically possible that does not violate God’s essential attributes, such as being all-good and loving). In that case, she appears to face the same problem of evil as classical theists do. Suppose also that the panentheist wishes to find an alternative approach and a solution to the problem of evil. In that case, she should look to process theism because it rejects the possibility of divine coercive intervention and adheres to the doctrine of pure divine persuasive power. Yujin Nagasawa’s words fit well with this conclusion: “I conclude, therefore, that Mackie’s original claim stands: The problem of evil is not a problem for theists who believe (or leave open) that God is not omnipotent or omnibenevolent.”<sup>88</sup> Non-process-

<sup>86</sup> Attfield, “Panentheisms, Creation and Evil,” 179.

<sup>87</sup> Sollereeder, “Exploring Old and New Paths in Theodicy,” 728–30.

<sup>88</sup> Nagasawa, “The Maximal God and the Problem of Evil,” 242.

panentheists have no apparent reason to reject the claim that God is omnipotent, which means that non-process-panentheists still have the problem of evil unresolved.

## 8 Conclusion

What I have argued in this article is this: The “only-way” arguments state that God could only achieve the good values necessary to realize the purpose of creation through an evolutionary process. The “only-way” arguments examined here fail to convince us that God could not realize these values directly – using divine interaction. A non-process-panentheist has no reason to reject that God could realize these values directly – using divine interaction. Only if this world (the world of evolutionary process) is the best-possible world do we have a reason to believe that God needed to create by means of evolution. My conclusions are the following: (1) only if this world (the world of evolutionary process) is the best-possible world, does non-process-panentheists have a reason to reject the possibility of God realizing the values necessary for God’s purpose with creation directly, without an evolutionary process; (2) if this is not the best-possible world, or if the non-process-panentheist does not believe this is the best-possible world, the non-process-panentheist has no reason to reject the possibility of God realizing the values necessary for God’s purpose with creation directly, without an evolutionary process.

Process-panentheism is a version of panentheism; it is *strict* panentheism that states that God necessarily needs and creates a world. Non-process-panentheists have no apparent reason to reject the claim that God is omnipotent. They have no apparent reason to reject divine coercive power (they can preferably agree with the open theists that God possesses both coercive and persuasive power). The conception of God as described in non-process-panentheism need only accept that God includes the world in God’s being and, *vice versa*, that God at the same time transcends it, and that there is necessary feedback between God and the world. On the other hand, process-panentheism is incompatible with the belief in an omnipotent God as traditionally understood.

“Only-way” arguments state that God could only achieve the good values necessary to realize creation’s purpose by using an evolutionary process. Only a process-panentheist can coherently adhere to an “only way” argument because only the process-panentheist can claim that God *metaphysically could not* create in a coercive and determinate way. Non-process-panentheists have no reason *qua* panentheism to reject the claim that God could have achieved the good values necessary to realize the purpose of creation by some means other than the evolutionary process. This means that non-process-panentheists are still confronted by the problem of evil.

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