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Panentheisms East and West

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Abstract In the West panentheism is known as the view that the world is contained within the divine, though God is also more than the world. I trace the history of this school of philosophy in both Eastern and Western traditions. Although the term is not widely known, the position in fact draws together a broad range of important positions in 20th and 21st century metaphysics, theology, and philosophy of religion. I conclude with some reflections on the practical importance of this position.

Keywords Panentheism · Hartshorne, Charles · Hegel · Ramanuja · Shankara · Environmental philosophy · Comparative theology · Ecology

The recent years have brought a deepening awareness of the significant overlaps between Eastern and Western philosophies. As we will see, panentheism represents one of the most profound, even startling parallels across the world's great traditions. Unfortunately, however, the *word* 'panentheism' has not helped the cause. Generally, people are either misled by it (thinking it means 'pantheism') or put off by it because it sounds strange, foreign, and unhelpful. However, since there is no better term available—the alternatives are even more cumbersome—I'm afraid there's nothing else to do but to treat it as a new vocabulary word. You just have to sit down and learn it.

Let me first try to evoke and define panentheism in two different ways before turning to a few specific examples in Eastern and Western philosophy.

Etymology

Historians generally claim that the word 'panentheism' was first coined by Karl Christian Friedrich Krause in 1829. This is actually incorrect; the term '*Pan*+*en*+*theismus*' occurs already in 1809 in the famous *Essay on Freedom* by Friedrich Schelling. The word

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literally means 'all in God.' The etymology is a bit misleading, however, since in most cases the 'in' actually has at least *two* meanings: all things are in God, and God is in all things.

Fundamentally, it's a position concerning the relationship between the world and its ultimate Source or Ground, between God and world, between the infinite and all finite things. Panentheists will not affirm a God who is completely transcendent, but they also resist treating the 'immanent' reality, the reality that we see around us, as all that is.[1] The transcendent is *in* the immanent, and the immanent is *in* the transcendent. Or, in the beautiful words of the Bhagavadgita, 'He who sees Me everywhere and sees all in Me; I am not lost to him nor is he lost to Me' (VI, 30).

The richness of panentheism lies in unpacking all that is contained in this mysterious word 'in.' For most panentheists, the 'in' is not understood primarily in a spatial sense, but metaphysically, religiously, mystically. Elsewhere I have identified at least 13 different senses of 'in' in comparative philosophy.[2] The major connotations among panentheists are the 'in' of inherence (inhering in), the 'in' of strong ontological dependence, and the 'in' of participation.

One of the clearest and most powerful arguments for a metaphysic of panentheism is found in the great German Idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. I will try to put the argument in simple terms (though in fact nothing in Hegel is really simple). Hegel begins with the question of how finite reality might be related to its infinite ground. He claims that it is absurd to conceive the finite as *outside* the infinite, as 'standing over against' the infinite. If infinite and finite are separated in *any* way—other than through the essential difference between infinite and finite, of course—then the infinite ceases to be infinite, for now it has been made dependent on something other than it, something outside of it. Thus it is the nature of infinite reality (if such exists) to contain all things within itself. Panentheists in the East and West are those who believe there is in fact an infinite or ultimate reality and who agree with Hegel that it cannot be limited by anything outside itself. *Brahman* for many in the Vedic traditions, and God for many theologians in the West, is such a reality. Hence they are panentheists.

Charles Hartshorne's Classic Definition

The great process philosopher Charles Hartshorne, who was largely responsible for the 20th-century renaissance of panentheistic thought in the West, formulated a classic definition of this concept. He used the five letters E, T, C, K, and W to stand for five features attributed to the Ultimate by many panentheists: eternal, temporal, conscious, knowing the world, and world-inclusive. Of course, there are panentheists who do not affirm one or another of these five attributes. Still, Hartshorne correctly

[1] For a beautiful recent presentation of a panentheistic view of ultimate reality, see Arthur Peacocke's posthumous book, *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the 21st Century*, ed. Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

[2] See Clayton, P. & Peacocke, A. (2004). *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (p. 253). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

realized that these are some of the most important attributes of the Ultimate that concern panentheists.

In order to see this, try to think your way into the worldview of panentheism. Even though you are a devout panentheist, you still admit that things *appear* to be separate and discrete; they appear to exist as individual substances. But ultimately, you believe, they are grounded in the One Ultimate Reality. For you what we call 'objects' are, ultimately speaking, modes or manifestations or expressions of that One. Hence their appearance as separate, independent existents is not ultimately real.

Now you begin to see why Hartshorne's five qualities are attractive to you, why they at least pose the right questions. The Infinite One must be *eternal*, you conclude, for it was never created and depends on nothing outside itself in order to exist. And the fifth property, being '*world-inclusive*,' seems obvious to you as well, given Hegel's argument about the infinite.

Next, the One is *temporal* in the sense that it contains within itself all finite things. Why would this make it temporal? Well, we certainly believe that *our own existence* is temporal, for we know our past, live in a continuously changing present, and anticipate a future that has not yet arrived. If the temporal features of our existence are not altogether illusory, then they must exist within the One Unity and hence must be attributes of it as well.

Fourth, you reason, the One is conscious because it contains us and we are conscious. On the one hand, this isn't actually a sound argument as it stands; after all, why should the One have all the properties that we have? Thus a number of panentheists actually deny that the One is conscious. On the other hand, the argument works if you are committed to the additional premise that the One cannot be (metaphysically) *less than* what its parts are. The One need not share the imperfections of its parts: it need not be able to cheat, lie, and steal; or to be dependent on another; or to die. By contrast, consciousness has seemed to many Eastern and Western thinkers to be a *positive* attribute that we must attribute to whatever is the Ultimate Reality. I prefer the more cautious formulation: the One cannot be *less than* what we mean by conscious, but its quality of consciousness must be infinitely more than, infinitely greater than, any consciousness we can conceive.

The situation is similar in the case of the final attribute, 'knowing the world.' One reason is that being conscious entails knowing; the two attributes cannot be separated. A second argument is that, if the parts of the One possess the characteristic of knowing, and the One cannot be less than its parts, then it must possess that quality as well. We know our world or environment; thus the One must also know its 'world,' that is, all that exists.

Panentheism in the West

Western thought is dominated by a sharp split between rather anti-religious philosophies and rather unphilosophical religious theologies. Panentheism, by contrast, presupposes a religiously or spiritually open form of philosophical reflection. To many of us, this makes it a powerful corrective to an unhealthy

dichotomy. In this section, I limit myself to the monotheistic traditions, although one also finds panentheistic strands elsewhere in the West, for example in the Native American traditions.

The concept of God in Hebrew Bible, at least in most of its phases, is not significantly panentheistic. Only in the later prophets and the intertestamental period does a more mystical notion of the divine Spirit as world-inclusive begin to arise. These Jewish tendencies are intensified in the New Testament (e.g., Eph. 2, Col. 1). Paul uses the phrase 'in Christ' (*en Christo*) some 93 times in the New Testament, and the gospel of John suggests that believers exist in and participate in the Spirit. The author of Luke/Acts claims that Paul, when speaking on the Areopagus in Athens, quoted a Greek poet in order to affirm that God is the One 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

Sadly, though, the panentheistic openings in the New Testament were quickly squelched by the substance-based metaphysic that dominated at the time that the classical Christian creeds were being formulated. When you think of individual things as substances, you conceive them as existing 'in and through' themselves. In most cases, this amounts to a denial of panentheism, that is, a denial of the view that what appear to be separate individuals are really parts or modes or manifestations of the one divine reality. It is a pity that Christian orthodoxy was defined in these terms, because it marginalized the panentheistic tendencies that are, I believe, inherent in Western monotheism.

As a result, the thinkers and mystics who suggested the inclusion of all reality within the divine were often branded as heretics: the entire Neoplatonic tradition from Pseudo-Dionysius on (which was deeply panentheistic), John Eriugena, Meister Eckhardt, Nicholas of Cusa, Giordanno Bruno, and many others. And yet, even in highly orthodox thinkers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the panentheistic dimension could not be entirely suppressed or domesticated. Although substance-oriented thinking dominated the Scholastic period and continues within Christian theology up to the present day, Descartes represented the final hurrah—or the *reductio ad absurdum*, depending on your point of view!—for substance-based philosophy in the West.

It is no coincidence that, within decades of Descartes' publications, Europe began to see a rebirth of panentheistic thinking. The analogy is not perfect, but there are intriguing parallels between (on the one hand) the full-on panentheism of the great German Idealist thinkers, which arose out of the beautifully strict *pan*theism of Spinoza, and (on the other hand) the full-on panentheism of Rāmānuja, which arose out of the more pantheistically inclined Shankara. (Scholars of Vedanta will understand this progression in terms of the distinction between *nirguna Brahman* and *saguna Brahman*, Brahman without and with attributes.)

Recall Hartshorne's five categories. Spinoza's One, which he called 'God or Nature,' was eternal and world-inclusive but lacked the other three properties (temporal, conscious, knowing the world). These latter three properties, Spinoza taught, pertained to the modes but not to the One itself. Critics of Spinoza in the 18th century quickly realized that Spinoza's position would be both more consistent and more powerful if one could predicate *all five* properties of the Ultimate, and not just two. There is no space to tell the whole story of how Western philosophers worked their way, step by step, to a full, five-attribute panentheism. Suffice it to say that, by

the time of high German Idealism, philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel were able to develop powerful panentheisms that included all five attributes: eternity, temporality, consciousness, knowledge of the world, and the inclusion of all reality within the Divine.

As of the end of the 20th century, one could find multiple schools within Western philosophy that defended sophisticated versions of panentheism. In fact, panentheism became so dominant in 20th-century *philosophical* theology that virtually every major new system was panentheistic rather than (classically) theistic.[3] The two metaphysical systems most often utilized by Western panentheists today are German Idealism and Whiteheadian or 'process' philosophy. The Idealists used 'dialectical' thinking to affirm all five properties within a single system; that is, they sought to integrate each affirmation and its opposing 'antithesis' within some higher-order synthesis. Only if reality itself is fundamentally dialectical can it encompass *both* the eternal, world-inclusive One *and* the more temporal features of knowledge, awareness, and change.

The other major path to panentheism grew out of the highly original philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead; it has come to be known as 'dipolar' metaphysics. On this view, God consists of two different 'natures,' an antecedent nature and a consequent nature. The enduring, eternal, unchanging properties of God are contained in the eternal nature: the divine eternality, God's goodness, and the forms or timeless ideas, which Whitehead called 'initial aims.' The 'consequent nature' is the conscious side of God, the aspect of God which knows the world and responds to it anew at every new moment. In place of the classical God, who stands above the world in transcendent purity, the process God is 'the supremely related one' (Marjorie Suchocki) who experiences and responds to every finite experience. As Samuel Alexander put it, 'All we are the hunger and thirst, the heart-beats and sweat of God.'[4]

Rāmānuja

There is no location-free, and hence no value-free, form of comparative philosophy. I consider Rāmānuja's work to be one of the greatest expressions of panentheistic thought across the world's tradition, and I hold it up unapologetically as a model for contemporary Western panentheisms.[5] In effect, I am implicitly suggesting that Western philosophers could develop a 'purer' form of panentheism if they paid closer attention to his thought. (The same holds for Sri Aurobindo, whose magisterial *The Life Divine* is one of the great metaphysical and spiritual treatises of the 20th century.) Of course, it goes without saying that Rāmānuja's views are not

[3] See Brierly, M. Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Panentheistic Turn in Modern Theology. In Clayton & Peacocke, *Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being* (pp. 1–5).

[4] Alexander, S. (1920). *Space, Time, and Deity, the Gifford Lectures for 1916–18* (volume 2, p. 357). London: Macmillan.

[5] The interpretation of Rāmānuja as a panentheist is widely shared among Hindu scholars. For example, Jeaneane Fowler notes, 'The ultimate transcendency of God never permits him to be merely the pantheistic whole that unites the parts: while causative, he panentheistically transcends all' (Fowler (2002). *Perspectives of Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Hinduism* (p. 318). Portland: Sussex).

representative of all the Vedantic traditions, much less of the history of Indian philosophy as a whole.[6]

Rāmānuja beautifully affirms the dual status of finite individuals. It is possible to ascribe real agency and even a form of freedom to them (more on the freedom question in a moment). And yet finite agents do not have independent subsistence. '*Brahman* is reality, consciousness, infinite' (Tait. Up. 2.1.1); hence it alone enjoys independent subsistence.[7] Thus all conscious and nonconscious entities (*cit* and *acit*)

[6] This is not to say that panentheism doesn't play an important role in other Schools as well. David Lawrence rightly notes, 'I observe in favor of the Pratyabhijña that a number of thinkers in the contemporary period have argued that the traditional Western understanding of God places too much emphasis on God's transcendence of the world. It has been argued that this emphasis denies various modern valuations of this world—including the scientific and historical, the ethical or socially progressive, and the sexual' (Lawrence, D. (1998). Siva's Self-Recognition and the Problem of Interpretation, *Philosophy East & West* (vol. 48, pp.197–231, middle)). Lawrence adds, for example, that 'One of the ideas most emphasized by Abhinavagupta and much of Hindu tantrism is that God/Siva-Sakti is both transcendent (*visvottirna*) and immanent (*visvamaya*). Therefore I think that these systems may be placed within the class of panentheism. I also believe that a panentheistic approach to the problems of tradition and modernity has inspired many contemporary retrievals of Hindu tantrism, by both Indian scholars such as Gopinath Kaviraj and Western scholars such as Sir John Woodroffe. I also recommend the Pratyabhijña as a valuable intellectual and spiritual resource for the development of contemporary panentheism' (Lawrence, 'Siva's Self-Recognition,' last sentence).

In fact, Lawrence argues elsewhere that 'The most strongly panentheistic doctrines may be found in varieties of Hindu tantrism. According to Kashmiri Saiva tantrism, Siva divides himself from his power and consort Sakti, and in sexual union emanates the universe through Her. The Saivas repeatedly state that God is therefore both transcendent (*visvottirna*) and immanent (*visvamaya*). Tantric spiritual practice endeavors to transfigure worldly experience to find the infinite God within it. Such practice includes sexual rituals in which the practitioners reintegrate the cosmogonic union and bliss of Siva and Sakti, philosophical contemplation, and heightened forms of aesthetic appreciations' (Lawrence, D. P. (2001). The Dialectic of Transcendence and Immanence in Contemporary Western and Indian Theories of God. In Liu Shu-hsien et al. (Eds.) *Transcendence and Immanence: Comparative and Muti Dimensional Perspectives* (pp. 347–63, quote 351f). Hongkong: New Asia College.). Lawrence also rightly includes Sri Aurobindo as a panentheist: 'For Aurobindo the world is the emanation of the divine, and evolution a process of return, the goal of which is the mystical realization of the 'Supermind.' This experience, which reveals the world as contained within the divine, at first empowers individuals to work for the progress of humanity. Finally, the Supermind will become the guiding consciousness of a world Utopian society' (ibid., p. 358).

I find it more difficult to apply panentheistic categories to most Buddhist thought, and increasingly so as the history of Buddhism moved further from the classical Indian philosophical traditions. But others make this application without reservation. Thus Francis Cook, for example, writes, 'like Brahman of Hindu Vedanta, the Buddhist ultimate is transcendent in one sense while being immanent at the same time. It is immanent because it is nothing other than what we see before us; nor does it transcend the world either spatially or temporally. However, it is transcendent *qualitatively* as that numinous nature of things which is the object of religious practice and the content of enlightenment. That numinous quality is not just things *as things* but the way in which these things be and become. Therefore, to see the Buddha is to see the *true nature* of all *dharma*' (Cook, F. H. (1989). Just This: Buddhist Ultimate Reality. In *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (vol. 9, pp.127–42, quote 139)).

Ping-Cheung Lo ('Neo-Confucian Religiousness vis-à-vis Neo-orthodox Protestantism,' *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 32/3 [September 2005]) interprets Neo-Confucian thought in panentheistic terms; see 374, and notes 9 and 16 on p. 384.

[7] John Carman summarizes the five defining attributes of the essential nature of *Brahman* for Rāmānuja: (1) *satya* (true being) describes *Brahman* as 'possessing unconditioned being, thus distinguishing Him from nonintelligent matter, which is subject to change' (102): (2) *jnana* (knowledge or consciousness) describes 'the state of permanently uncontracted knowledge, thus distinguishing [Him] from released souls, whose knowledge was at one time contracted' (ibid.); (3) *anantatva* (infinite, free from all limits of time and space); (4) *ananda* (full of bliss); and (5) *amalatva* (purity or, literally, stainless); see Carman, J.B. (1974). *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (chapter 7). New Haven and London: Yale.

exist only as modes of *Brahman*.[8] C. J. Bartley, in his excellent treatment of the theology of Rāmānuja, summarizes the position:

> For Rāmānuja a mode is a reality ... which has neither essence, actuality nor purpose independently of some other entity upon which it is existentially dependent and to which it is 'adjectival'. This amounts to the thesis that contingent conscious individuals are ultimately subsidiary states and constituents of *Brahman*—a way of being of *Brahman*.[9]

The world is held together by 'the immanent divine presence,' which gives to it both its existence and the regularities that it manifests (85). God is not only the efficient cause of things, the way that the potter molds the clay, but is also the 'substrative' cause, that of which everything is made.

Other agents can thus arise only through a sort of self-limitation on the part of *Brahman*. Thus we can say that finite agents *are Brahman* as it conditioned by *karma*, *avidyā*, and *kamā* (desire). The brilliance of Rāmānuja's work lies in the almost perfect balance that he establishes between *Brahman* and *atman*. *Atman* is non-different in that it remains a mode rather than an independently existing thing, yet it is different because it is a mode and because, thanks to the grace of *Brahman*, it is able to exercise its own (albeit limited) form of agency. The intricacy of this conceptual balancing act is all the more remarkable when one realizes that Rāmānuja is seeking to do justice to three different requirements: the plain sense of the sacred scriptures, the demands of metaphysical reflection, and the requirements of *bhakti*, that is, the life of obedience and devotion to God.

Western panentheists, and even many classical theists, have affirmed that all finite things exist only through participation in the divine. But Rāmānuja radicalized the sense of participation, extending it beyond things to include all thought, action, and language as well. In so doing he was able to draw on the widespread Indian view that language, insofar as it is true, does not merely *stand for* its referent but also participates in the reality to which it refers. This allowed him to develop a perfect isomorphism for all aspects of reality: individual things have their existence only in the one true Reality; individual minds or spirits (*atman*) participate in the one *Brahman*; all true affirmations likewise participate in the One and thus express reality both ontologically and conceptually.

Rāmānuja boldly used the metaphor of mind and body to explain the relationship between *Brahman* and the world. The mind is the controller of the body; the body, although a real actor in the world, is ultimately the agent of the mind. The sole essence of the body, he argues, is to be an attribute of a self (83 n.29). The same relationship holds between *Brahman* and its modes[10]: the world, like bodies, is *apṛthaksiddha*, that is, 'incapable of independent existence' or, literally, 'not separately established' (84). From a Vedic perspective there is a further advantage

[8] Rāmānuja writes, 'In short, He is the core, whether manifest or not, of all beings in whatever condition they exist. The totality of beings, mobile or immobile, cannot exist apart from God, who is the atman within themselves' (quoted in Fowler, 318).

[9] Bartley, C. J. (2002). *The Theology of Rāmānuja: Realism and Religion* (p. 70). London: RoutledgeCurzon. Subsequent page references in the text are to this work.

[10] '*Brahman*, because it is embodied by the conscious and non-conscious entities that are its modes, is always referred to by every denotative expression (naming term)' (Bartley, 83 n. 31).

to this philosophy: just as *atman* is not decreased by the death of the body, but continues on through reincarnation to be paired with another body, so *Brahman* is not affected by the impermanence, change, and decay of the world but remains always in its eternal perfection.

One final point: Rāmānuja recognized that understanding finite agents as modes of *Brahman* threatens to lead to fatalism and determinism, the abolition of all human agency. This consequence would be disastrous, since it would render the moral exhortations of the scriptures vacuous and would make genuine devotion (*bhakti*) on the part of believers impossible. Here too Rāmānuja's answer is a model for the perennial Western struggles with the problem of God and freedom. The same divine self-limitation that allows finite reality to exist also creates a place for finite agency. A purely naturalistic, object-based account of reality, one without the concepts of *atman* and *Brahman*, is not sufficient to support genuinely free agency.[11] By contrast, the only way that free agency *can* exist is if finite agents are sustained by an ultimate consciousness in which they participate. The Divine gives (and sustains) the capacity for action.[12] In Rāmānuja, as in some Western theologians, one finds hints that finite agents are only truly free when they choose to act in accordance with the divine purposes; all other action produces karma and thus binds the agent more fully to the world of materiality and illusion. But *atman* itself is not ultimately illusory, since its very agency has been given by God.

Conclusion

I have only begun to touch on the richness of Rāmānuja's thought, much less on the complexities of panentheism East and West, and there are numerous difficulties that require further reflection and responses. Panentheism is not a 'magic pill' either in philosophy or theology. But it is, in my view, an immensely rich model for attempting to conceive Ultimacy. I hope this brief summary will offer a helpful point of orientation for other comparative philosophers as they explore the rich connections between the great metaphysical traditions of the East and West. It is no small thing that distinct philosophical traditions, often treated as discrete and even antagonistic, should converge on an underlying unity of perspective. Indeed, one can hardly fail to note that this unity-in-difference manifests, once again, a panentheistic structure.

In the final analysis, panentheism is far more than a philosophy, however. Just as distinctive forms of spiritual practice are associated with pantheism on the one side and with classical Western theism (God as transcendent of the world, His creation) on the other, so panentheism fosters its own distinctive spirituality as well. From yogic practices to Quaker worship, these spiritualities make their own contribution to

[11] I have made this argument in *In Quest of Freedom: The Emergence of Spirit in the Natural World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

[12] Rāmānuja writes, 'The Supreme Self has provided all conscious beings in common with all the assistance needed ... either to perform or to abstain from actions. In order to accomplish this, he who is their ontic ground enters them, exercises control in that he guides and permits them to act and exists in them as the principle to whom they are ancillary. The conscious entity, whose powers are dependent upon the Supreme Self, performs or abstains from actions of his own accord' (quoted in Bartley, 92).

the storehouse of the world's spiritual practices. Finally, in an age when humanity is on the verge of decimating the world's ecosystems and bringing about the extinction of many of its species, we must assess metaphysical systems in terms of their ecological potential. Arguably, there is no stronger motivation for valuing and preserving the environment than the affirmation that each organism has its own distinct reality and agency, while at the same time inherent in each is the infinite value of the one overarching and all-encompassing One.[13]

[13] I gratefully acknowledge the research support of Andrea Stephenson, until recently a doctoral candidate at Claremont Graduate University, which played an important role in preparing this paper. Conversations with Professors Purushottama Bilimoria and Joseph Prabhu have played a significant role in my understanding of panentheism and the Indian philosophical traditions, and I happily express my debt of gratitude to them.