

The Attractiveness of Panentheism—a Reply to Benedikt Paul Göcke

Raphael Lataster

Published online: 17 October 2014
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Abstract In his recent article in *Sophia*, Benedikt Paul Göcke concluded that ‘as long as we do not have a sound argument entailing the necessity of the world, panentheism is not an attractive alternative to classical theism’ (Benedikt Paul Göcke, ‘Panentheism and Classical Theism’, *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 75). As the article progresses, Göcke clarifies his view of what panentheism is, essentially identical to Göcke’s view of classical theism in every way, except in the world’s modal relation to God. This concept is vastly different to many of the panentheistic notions that are more commonly held. While it is not initially made transparent—especially with the label Göcke chooses to use—it becomes increasingly clear that Göcke critiques a God concept of his own making. More common variations of panentheism are contrasted with Göcke’s version, in order to provide a broader and more accurate view of the ancient concept, and to demonstrate that Göcke’s view of panentheism is idiosyncratic. It is finally explained that even if Göcke’s view of panentheism were definitive, he has not successfully argued for the relative unattractiveness of the concept, relative to his view of classical theism.

Keywords Panentheism · Göcke · Pantheism · Theism

Perhaps God Is Simply the Search for God

Göcke begins by claiming that he will be ‘clarifying the thesis of panentheism’.¹ After reading the article, it becomes clear that Göcke has adopted a notion of panentheism that is exceedingly different to those most prominent. This section serves as a brief review of how certain elements of Göcke’s invented God concept are not necessitated by more traditional versions of panentheism. The very first problem is in clarifying

¹Benedikt Paul Göcke, ‘Panentheism and Classical Theism’, *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 61.

what panentheism is. There are many Eastern variations and Western opinions of panentheism, so formulating a particular view and calling it ‘panentheism’ was always going to be a challenging task.² Göcke does acknowledge this and it is understandable then that he focusses on one view, in order to contrast it with his version of classical theism, so that he may fulfil his seeming aim of demonstrating its relative implausibility or ‘unattractiveness’.³ One of the key problems of this article is that Göcke gives the impression that what he presents is the definitive view of panentheism and that his comments are not merely specific to his own version.

Göcke initially provides a definition of the term ‘panentheism’: everything is in God.⁴ In trying to clarify what this means, Göcke notably avoids mentioning Eastern and ancient notions of just such a concept; indeed, throughout Göcke’s article, there is not a single mention of India, the Vedanta, the Bhagavad Gita, Hinduism, Tantra, the Brahman, Ramanuja or the Purusha Sukta. It is also rather unfortunate that Göcke fails to acknowledge *Sophia*’s recent special issue dedicated to panentheism (whose origins lie in a panel on panentheism at the 2009 Parliament of World Religions)⁵ and seems generally unfamiliar with the contributors to that issue.⁶ After providing some coherent thoughts as to what being ‘in’ God *could* mean, and acknowledging that these ideas can also apply to theism, Göcke gets to his most fundamental point:

Since classical theism and panentheism cannot differ as regards the scientific description of the world, that is, since they cannot differ on what the world factually is like, it follows that if there is a difference between panentheism and classical theism at all, it has to be a difference as regards the interpretation of the modal status of the relation between God and everything else.⁷

Göcke’s support for the important claim that classical theism and panentheism do not (even cannot) differ ‘on what the world factually is like’ is that he feels it ‘inadequate’ that the ‘in’ in panentheism could be used as a spatial preposition.⁸ Göcke fails to argue for this crucial claim, either logically or empirically. Göcke also later admits his important assumption that God is not a mereological sum (as may be the case for classical theism) ‘on the panentheism I develop’.⁹ In fact, there are panentheistic scenarios in which the universe *is* of the substance of God (this is possibly

² A number of panentheistic versions are discussed by Philip Clayton, who makes use of both traditional Eastern sources and more contemporary Western sources. See Philip Clayton, ‘Pantheisms East and West,’ *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 183–191. Dirk Baltzly discusses the possibility of a polytheistic panentheism being discussed in Plato’s *Timaeus*. See Dirk Baltzly, ‘Is Plato’s *Timaeus* Panentheistic?,’ *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 193–215.; One particularly imaginative variant is Schelling’s notion that ‘God shit out nature’. See Tyler Tritten, ‘Nature and Freedom: Repetition as Supplement in the Late Schelling,’ *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 268.

³ Göcke has somewhat of an ally in his fellow Christian theist, Patrick Hutchings, who notes the great diversity of pantheisms and yearns for a definitive panentheistic concept. Their shared wish might remain forever unfulfilled. See Patrick Hutchings, ‘Postlude: Panentheism,’ *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 297–300.

⁴ The definition comes from nineteenth-century German philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause. See Benedikt Paul Göcke, ‘Panentheism and Classical Theism,’ *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 62.

⁵ Yih-jiun Peter Wong, ‘Prelude,’ *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 181.

⁶ In the sense that he fails to reference any of their research, with the sole exception being Philip Clayton, who is hardly mentioned.

⁷ Benedikt Paul Göcke, ‘Panentheism and Classical Theism,’ *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 65.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 63.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 68.

a common attribute of all pantheisms and panentheisms in general),¹⁰ which is entirely compatible with the ‘in’ in panentheism being used as a spatial preposition. It would seem that this is indeed a very big difference between the two views (panentheism and classical theism) and clearly a factual one. Göcke confidentially moves on from this baseless claim, strangely asserting that the two views must differ regarding the modal relation between God and ‘everything else’, otherwise ‘the distinction between panentheism and classical theism might collapse right from the start’.¹¹

Göcke’s first key assertion led him to the conclusion that the two views can only differ regarding the modal relation between God and the world. That panentheism and classical theism actually do differ regarding the modal relation between God, and the world is Göcke’s second key assertion. On Göcke’s view, God is always necessary, the world is contingent on theism, and the world is necessary according to panentheism.¹² These ideas are not fully developed, nor does Göcke distinguish between logical necessity and physical necessity (or indeed, clarify the meaning of ‘necessity’ and how he knows which things are necessary and which are not),¹³ or acknowledge the great challenges in demonstrating that God and the universe are not both necessary or both contingent.¹⁴ If the free choice of the necessary God of Göcke’s theism to create the world somehow results in a contingent world, it is unclear why the similar choice of a panentheistic God cannot also result in a contingent world. It would seem that in this case, the universe qua universe is as unnecessary as the universe in the theistic scenario. Göcke has simply not demonstrated that the modal status of the universe in relation to God *must* differ between the two views; he has merely asserted it. As noted earlier, the differentiating factor could indeed be the ‘substance’ of the world. In fact, that seems to be the major theme of scholarly comparisons of classical theism or monotheism on the one hand, and the various forms of pantheisms and panentheisms on the other, as we shall see.

The third major issue with Göcke’s panentheistic concept is that the panentheistic God (like the theistic God) is claimed to be immutable.¹⁵ Once again, Göcke’s view is at variance with traditional panentheistic accounts. For example, Stephen H. Phillips, an expert in the philosophy of South Asia, has earlier discussed, in considerable detail, the mutability of God

¹⁰ Barua notes Christian reactions to notions of the world where God and the Universe are of the same substance, and Ramanuja’s belief that the ‘world literally *is* the body of Brahman’. See Ankur Barua, ‘God’s Body at Work: Ramanuja and Panentheism,’ *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 14, no. 1 (Barua 2010): 1–3.

¹¹ Benedikt Paul Göcke, ‘Panentheism and Classical Theism,’ *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 63.

¹² Göcke’s support for the necessity of the world on panentheism is nicely summarised on page 66: ‘According to panentheism, “God requires a world”’. The quotation comes from philosopher Charles Hartshorne, who, as noted by Philip Clayton, ascribed a number of attributes to the panentheistic God which not all panentheists would agree on, and who is also ignored by Göcke when it comes to the issue of *creatio ex nihilo*. See Philip Clayton, ‘Pantheisms East and West,’ *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 184.

¹³ Carolyn Morillo recognised that one of the major problems with contingency arguments is the disagreement over the interpretations of key terms such as ‘necessary’. See Carolyn R. Morillo, ‘The Logic of Arguments from Contingency,’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 37, no. 3 (1977): 408.

¹⁴ In other words, Göcke has not convincingly demonstrated that a necessary God could or has produced a contingent universe or that this is a crucial element classical of theism. For an interesting treatment on the supposed contingency of the universe, see Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?: A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 123–125.

¹⁵ Benedikt Paul Göcke, ‘Panentheism and Classical Theism,’ *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 73.

among both Eastern and Western pantheisms.¹⁶ The fourth key element of Göcke's unorthodox notion of pantheism that is at odds with traditional forms revolves around the substance and origin of the universe. Göcke makes use of Paul Copan and William Lane Craig's claim that 'creation is ex nihilo in the sense that God's causing a creature to exist is without any intermediary' (they are, in turn, interpreting Thomas Aquinas)¹⁷ and, assisted by a particularly narrow understanding of creation, interprets it in such a way so as to argue that even the pantheistic God must have created the universe ex nihilo, as there was nothing else besides God.¹⁸ Apart from the possibilities of pantheistic scenarios in which a creation did not occur, Göcke overlooks one of the core principles of virtually all pantheisms and pantheisms; that the world is of the very substance of God.¹⁹

Nor must all pantheists be committed to a creation and especially the typically monotheistic or classical theistic concept of *creatio ex nihilo*.²⁰ For example, Joseph Prabhu, who specialises in Indian philosophy, considered a type of pantheism that 'insists on the transcendence, but not the separation, of God', alluding to an irreconcilable factual difference between pantheism and classical theism.²¹ One unambiguous historical example of just such a concept is found in the Purusha Sukta (twelfth to tenth centuries B.C.E.), which describes various aspects of the world as altered versions of the Primordial Man's or God's actual body parts, with some part of God yet remaining, as discussed by Bilimoria and Stansell.²² This is clearly not a creation 'from nothing', or 'without any intermediary' (in the Göckean sense), but a transformation, partially or wholly, of the very body of God.

In the very same source invoked by Göcke, Copan and Craig reveal that they would disagree with Göcke's interpretation, suggesting that 'ex nihilo creation is incompatible with true pantheism'.²³ Furthermore, Copan and Craig associate pantheism with *creatio ex materia* (leaving open the possibility for *creatio ex deo* which ancient sources do indicate).²⁴ The following pages of Copan and Craig's book, *Creation out of Nothing*, reveal that there are major differences between *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio ex deo*, which cannot be reconciled as Göcke seems wont to do. Additionally, Ankur Barua noted that ancient forms of pantheism did involve the concept that the world was

¹⁶ Stephen H. Phillips, "'Mutable God": Hartshorne and Indian Theism,' in *Hartshorne: Process Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Robert Kane and Stephen H. Phillips (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 113–134. This research has been reworked and modernised. See Ellen Stansell and Stephen H. Phillips, 'Hartshorne and Indian Pantheism,' *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 285–295.

¹⁷ Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 148.

¹⁸ Benedikt Paul Göcke, 'Pantheism and Classical Theism,' *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 68.

¹⁹ This stands in direct contrast to classical theisms that depend on *creatio ex nihilo*, which further indicate a total separation between God and humanity. See Edward Craig, ed. *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 590.

²⁰ When pantheism is taken to mean 'the world is in God', as it is in the article, it does not follow that the world must have been created. The world could 'merely' be an eternal part of the eternal God.

²¹ Joseph Prabhu, 'Hegel's Secular Theology,' *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (Prabhu 2010): 224.

²² Also referred to are the diversities, ambiguities and unanswered questions regarding such concepts. See Purushottama Bilimoria and Ellen Stansell, 'Suturing the Body Corporate (Divine and Human) in the Brahmanic Traditions,' *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 239–240.

²³ It would seem, at least according to the authorities Göcke does choose to reference, that what he is describing is indeed not 'true pantheism'. See Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 13–14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

literally ‘the Lord’s body’ and that many modern proponents of panentheism, such as Hartshorne and Jantzen, explicitly rejected *creatio ex nihilo*.²⁵

Just as the analytic philosopher of religion may be frustrated with the work of Continental philosophers and like-minded literary artists who entertain notions such as ‘perhaps God is simply the search for God’,²⁶ so too the panentheist may object to Göcke’s idiosyncratic concept. It is exceedingly clear that Göcke’s panentheism is at odds with both ancient descriptions of panentheism and other modern conceptions.

Göcke’s Counter-Intuitive Conclusion

In the latter part of the article, Göcke assesses the ‘attractiveness’ of his panentheistic notion (in comparison with his view of classical theism), rather than assessing the attractiveness of a more common panentheistic concept.²⁷ Göcke concludes: ‘Anyway, the aim of this paper is not to decide between classical theism and panentheism, but only to show that as long as we do not have a sound argument entailing the necessity of the world, panentheism is not an attractive alternative to classical theism’.²⁸ If it is considered unproblematic that Göcke is critiquing a God conception of his own making (which just happens to be given the label ‘panentheism’),²⁹ it is still the case that his conclusion, ‘panentheism is not an attractive alternative to classical theism’, is left unsubstantiated. In fact, Göcke’s conclusion seems to contradict the latter parts of his article; Göcke provides many reasons to suppose that the world is not contingent and is indeed necessary.³⁰ For example, on the supposed contingency of the world:

Arguments for the contingency of the world are based on the premise that it is conceivable that there might not have been a world and that therefore it is possible that there might not have been one. There are two problems with these kinds of argument. Firstly, they presuppose the assumption that conceivability entails metaphysical possibility, an assumption which is often criticised in recent discussion. Secondly, they face the problem of whether we can actually conceive of there being no world. Arguably, this is a capacity we lack. As Rundle argues, ‘our attempts at conceiving of total non-existence are irredeemably partial. We are always left with something, if only a setting from which we envisage everything having departed, a void which we confront and find empty, but something which it makes sense to speak of as having once been home to bodies, radiation or whatever’.³¹

²⁵ Barua concluded that Ramanuja would reject ‘creation out of nothing’, as he believed that the world always existed in the sense that it is literally of ‘the Lord’s Body’. See Ankur Barua, ‘God’s Body at Work: Ramanuja and Panentheism,’ *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 14, no. 1 (2010): 10, 21.

²⁶ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Saint Francis* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2005), p. 43.

²⁷ Such as those among the Indian panentheistic teachings or in the work of modern scholars such as Michael Levine and Purushottama Bilimoria.

²⁸ Benedikt Paul Göcke, ‘Panentheism and Classical Theism,’ *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 75.

²⁹ An obvious question would be why a critique of a God model conceived by Göcke—with no reference to believers or scholars who consider his idiosyncratic view significant—was necessary.

³⁰ Benedikt Paul Göcke, ‘Panentheism and Classical Theism,’ *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 73–75.

³¹ For more on these criticisms, see David J. Chalmers, ‘Does Conceivability Entail Metaphysical Possibility?’, in *Conceivability and Possibility*, ed. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Bede Rundle, *Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 110.

These comments are immediately preceded by a number of arguments (elaborated in the footnotes) for the universe's necessity, including an acknowledgement that everything could in fact be necessary and that the panentheist could simply argue for a necessary world by endorsing the principle of sufficient reason.³² Göcke then counter-intuitively concludes that 'we do not have a sound argument entailing the necessity of the world', intimating that theism, and its associated (and supposed) contingent world, should somehow 'remain' the more attractive, or at least the default, option.³³ Interestingly, without Göcke explaining how a logically necessary God could yield a contingent universe (on his theistic view), it seems that his own brand of panentheism (which entails a necessary universe) is an attractive alternative after all.

Conclusion

Göcke's article is unsuccessful for a number of reasons. Insofar as attempting to clarify what it is that ancient Indian mystics and more modern Western academics are describing when they use the term 'panentheism', Göcke fails completely. He effectively describes his own God model,³⁴ giving it the label of a concept (or group of concepts) that is radically different to his own. Göcke's panentheism differs with the pantheisms of previous religious teachers and scholars on crucially important matters such as the mutability of God, and the composition of the universe. Even when these criticisms are overlooked by granting that Göcke is merely trying to discuss a concept of his own making, the need for his critique becomes questionable, and his overall conclusion remains counter-intuitive and unsubstantiated. Given that Göcke did not convincingly demonstrate that a logically necessary God must yield a contingent universe, it could be that his pseudo-panentheism is indeed an 'attractive' alternative to classical theism.

If his aim is to demonstrate the relative implausibility of a somewhat popular alternative to classical theism (as is indicated in his article's introduction),³⁵ it is suggested that Göcke critique an already-developed view of panentheism, rather than producing one himself, comparing that already-developed concept with classical

³² Benedikt Paul Göcke, 'Panentheism and Classical Theism,' *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 74–75.

³³ It seems that with 'attractive', Göcke means 'plausible'. If it is granted that classical theism and panentheism differs on the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* (in his view, they do not), it would be interesting to see Göcke's arguments on why *creatio ex nihilo* could be considered plausible (compared with the eternal world or world created *ex deo*, that is common to most pantheisms). It is worth noting that the Leibnizian question, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' is loaded. It seems to suggest that nothingness, itself an unknown concept, is the natural state and that the existence or appearance of something is the aberration. Tyler Tritten alludes to an improved question, recalling that the 'traditional metaphysics of presence asked not why is there something rather than nothing but first and foremost: "What is?"' See Tyler Tritten, 'Nature and Freedom: Repetition as Supplement in the Late Schelling,' *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (2010): 268.; For an interesting treatment of the something-nothing debate, including the flippancy of the intent of the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?', the need for classical theists to discuss the issue, and the assumptions commonly made about nothingness, see Purushottama Bilimoria, 'Why Is There Nothing Rather Than Something? An Essay in the Comparative Metaphysics of Nonbeing,' *Sophia* 51, no. 4 (2012): 509–530.

³⁴ Which is indistinguishable from classical theism in all respects, except for the modal relation between God and the universe. That is of course, if the world is indeed contingent on classical theism. If it is not, Göcke's concept is merely classical theism, renamed.

³⁵ Benedikt Paul Göcke, 'Panentheism and Classical Theism,' *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 61–62.

theism. Comparing the plausibilities of a more traditional and common notion of panentheism and Göcke's favoured classical theism would make for a far more interesting and impactful article. It is further hoped that Göcke explain how models dependant on the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* can be plausible or 'attractive', especially relative to models (such as more common pantheistic and panentheistic notions) that do not rely on such a tenuous concept.

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