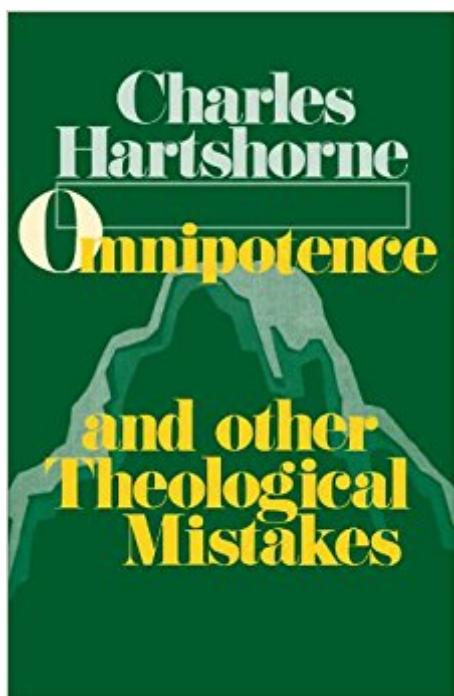


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# Omnipotence And Other Theological Mistakes



## **Synopsis**

This book presents Hartshorne's philosophical theology briefly, simply, and vividly. Throughout the centuries some of the world's most brilliant philosophers and theologians have held and perpetuated six beliefs that give the word God a meaning untrue to its import in sacred writings or in active religious devotion: 1. God is absolutely perfect and therefore unchangeable, 2. omnipotence, 3. omniscience, 4. God's unsympathetic goodness, 5. immortality as a career after death, 6. revelation as indefallible. Charles Hartshorne deals with these six theological mistakes from the standpoint of his process theology. Hartshorne says, "The book is unacademic in so far as I am capable of being that." Only a master like Hartshorne could present such sophisticated ideas so simply. This book offers an opinion for religious belief not heretofore available to lay people.

## **Book Information**

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Hartshorne speaks with not just conviction, but passion. He cares, and that caring comes through loud and clear. By and large Hartshorne is a very abstract thinker, but this book has a very concrete concern with practical issues of importance to all thinking persons abortion, environment, love, creationism and fundamentalism as negative forces in our society, nuclear arms, how to read the Bible, birds and animals in their relation to humans, etc. Donald W. Sherburne ""Hartshorne speaks with not just conviction, but passion. He cares, and that caring comes through loud and clear. By and large Hartshorne is a very abstract thinker, but this book has a very concrete concern with practical issues of importance to all thinking persons--abortion, environment, love, creationism and fundamentalism as negative forces in our society, nuclear arms, how to read the Bible, birds and

animals in their relation to humans, etc. -- Donald W. Sherburne

Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000) was an American philosopher who taught philosophy at the University of Chicago, Emory University, and lastly the University of Texas. He is perhaps best remembered for his development of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy into a form of theology. He wrote many books over his long career, such as *The Divine Relativity*, *Darkness and the Light: A Philosopher Reflects upon His Fortunate Career and Those Who Made It Possible*, *The Zero Fallacy: and Other Essays in Neoclassical Philosophy*, etc. He wrote in the Preface to this 1984 book, “The occasion which led to the writing of this book was somewhat sudden and quite concrete. It was the near-coincidence of two conversations, each with an intelligent, educated lady who was troubled by what she felt were absurdities in the idea of God. I was made more aware than ever before of a large number of people who, not trained but seriously interested philosophically and theologically, know little or nothing about some important but relatively recent changes in the philosophy of religion. The objections that the two make to a traditional and still widely accepted form of theology (which I call ‘classical theism’) have been felt also by a number of penetrating, technically trained philosophers and theologians and these writers have been working out a revised form of theism which some call ‘process theology’ and I call ‘neoclassical theism.’” This book is an attempt to present and defend the revised idea of God as simply and forcefully as I can. He adds, “I am not a fundamentalist in religion. But I definitely believe in God, in divine love as the key to existence, in love for God as (ideally) the all-in-all of our motivation, and in love for fellow creatures as valuable and important. In other words I accept what Jesus said was ‘the Law and the Prophets,’ that is, the gist of religion. If that makes me religious I think I am as religious as anybody. But it does not cause me to look down upon pious Jews or upon Unitarians or members of many other religious groups.” In the first chapter, he states, “I develop at length my arguments against the six mistakes [about God], which together form what I call classic theism and in favor of what I sometimes call the new theism, sometimes process theology, sometimes neoclassical theism---which is my version of a general point of view that has had a great many proponents in recent times. FIRST MISTAKE: God Is Absolutely Perfect and Therefore Unchangeable. SECOND MISTAKE: Omnipotence. THIRD MISTAKE: Omniscience. FOURTH MISTAKE: God’s Unsympathetic Goodness. FIFTH MISTAKE: Immortality as a Career after Death. SIXTH MISTAKE: Revelation as infallible.” He observes,

Those who stand deep in the classical tradition are likely to object to the new theology that it fails to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. To them we may reply, Are we to worship the Heavenly Father of Jesus OR to worship a heavenly king, that is, a cosmic despot? These are incompatible ideals; candid thinkers should choose and not pretend to be faithful to both. Our diminished awe of kings and emperors makes it easier for us than for our ancestors to look elsewhere for our model of the divine nature. Divine sovereignty sounds to some of us like a confession, an admission that it is sheer power, not unstinted love that one most admires. He clarifies, Our rejection of omnipotence will be attacked by the charge, So you dare to limit the power of God? Not so, I impose no such limit if this means, as it seems to imply, that God's power fails to measure up to some genuine ideal. All I have said is that omnipotence as usually conceived is a false or indeed absurd ideal, which in truth LIMITS God, denies to him any world worth talking about: a world of living, that is to say, significantly decision-making, agents. It is the TRADITION which did indeed terribly limit divine power, the power to foster creativity even in the least of the creatures. He states, The only livable doctrine of divine power is that it influences all that happens but determines nothing in its concrete particularity.

Knowing afterwards exactly what God has willed to happen is useless. We can, I believe, know the GENERAL PRINCIPLE of God's purpose. It is the beauty of the world a beauty of which every creature enjoys its own glimpses and to which it makes its unique contributions, but each created stage of which only God enjoys adequately, everlasting, and as a whole, once it has been created. He asserts, That we can learn about God from a book is one proposition, that we can learn to be infallible about God from a book, or from anything else, is a very different proposition. From an infallible God to an infallible book (to an infallible reader of the book?) is a gigantic step. For many of us it is a step from rational faith to idolatry. No book in a human language written by human hands, translated by human brains into another language, can literally be divine, the word of God. What we know is that it is the word of human beings about God. The beings may be divinely inspired but they are still human. In general, claims of infallibility made for the Bible seem stronger than any made in the Bible. He suggests, God's cosmic body is a society of individuals, not a single individual. The world as an integrated individual is not a world as this term is normally and properly used, but God. God, the World Soul, is the INDIVIDUAL INTEGRITY of the world, which otherwise is just the myriad creatures. As each of us is the supercellular individual of the cellular society called a human

body, so God is the super-creaturely individual of the inclusive creaturely society. Simply outside of this super-society and super-individual, there is nothing. (Pg. 59) He says, "one reason for my hesitation to accept any of the recent (or old) theories of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth (some of the best of these theories being formulated by careful readers of my writings) is that any such theory at least strongly suggests the idea of deity as highly spiritualized masculinity. It is a constant temptation to male chauvinism, and a temptation in historical fact not altogether resolutely resisted, to put it mildly." (Pg. 60) He argues, "The world consists of individuals, but the totality of individuals as a physical or spatial whole is God's body, the Soul of which is God. So there is no eternal, worldly individual, rival to God. Simply, eternally God has some creaturely individuals or other---indeed, taking the divine past into account, an infinity of them, but a growing infinity." So, in a sense, even God evolves, but in a decidedly transcendent or divine sense. (Pg. 94) He notes, "The central question of religion cannot be, 'What about heaven and hell?' but must be, 'What about God, cosmic mind and love, exalted in principle above all else, the only indestructible, all-inclusive, yet individual, being?'" (Pg. 118) He adds, "Our consciousness will still be there in God. It will be such consciousness as we had before dying, but all of it will be imperishable in God. If we are now aware of ourselves as contributing to the divine consciousness, that very awareness of us will not perish but 'live forevermore'." What will not be there are new, additional states of awareness belonging to us, other than those we had before dying. (Pg. 121) In the last chapter, he admits, "I am in no position to say what would have happened to my religious development had my parents and several teachers at school not been Christians well trained in relatively orthodox ways. And the parables of Jesus seem to me full of wisdom; incidents like the washing of the disciples' feet, or the forgiveness from the cross, seem full of symbolic power to convey religious insight." (Pg. 125) This book is full of insights into Hartshorne's positions on religion, and will be of great interest to those studying Process Philosophy/Theology, Open Theism, or contemporary religious thought.

This is informal vintage Hartshorne, articulating and defending (somewhat) his characteristic positions on God, mind/body, creation/evolution, and his ethic of universal love. It's a good introduction to Hartshorne's views, though he could have used an editor to tidy up the prose.

Charles Hartshorne is one of the greatest and most important philosophers of religion of the 20th century, and I mean the \*entire\* 20th century: he lived from 1897 to 2000, covering the entire span

of that century and dying at the age of 103. Along with Alfred North Whitehead, he was a principal developer of the modern process philosophy of religion. Both Whitehead and Hartshorne believed their insights were critical for overcoming centuries of discord, misunderstanding, and philosophical errors that both religion and science were making that were actually standing in the way of their mutual progress. But most of Hartshorne's writings were intended for an audience of professional philosophers and were very carefully crafted to stand up to erudite criticism. This presented an imposing barrier for more widespread dissemination of his important ideas. Therefore in his old age he decided it was time for a more "popular" and informal presentation of his ideas, and this book is the result. Unlike his more formal works, this work was composed at a furious pace, almost as a stream of consciousness, and perhaps for that reason, there are long passages that are as difficult to comprehend as you will find in his more formal works. Part of what makes some of these passages difficult is the extremely long and complicated sentences out of which they are composed: you sit there wading through a series of parenthetical clauses looking for the subject and predicate, and reading the sentence over and over, trying to put it together. It's difficult for a scholar to switch gears and write for an audience that is not trained in comprehending long, involved arguments, and perhaps just as much care has to be taken to present complex arguments for laymen as it takes to present them to professional scholars, only in an entirely different style that Hartshorne had never really trained himself for. That said, this book is full of peerless gems of wisdom that jump out at you with astonishing force and persuasion. Hartshorne was a professed Christian, but his view of God will be met with shock by a lot of Christians, even heresy. He believes that for the sake of the religious future of the world, religious belief should be entirely informed by the modern scientific view of the world. Among other things, this means that the way God is in the world is not as a worker of miracles that require an interruption in the natural flow of events, but as a persuasive force in competition with all of the other natural sources of persuasion, including the freedom of the individual itself. He sees this process going "all the way down" the hierarchy of individuals in the natural world: from human beings, to nervous systems, to biological cells, to macro molecules, to simpler molecules, and down to the most fundamental atomic particles. Every such individual, before it makes a free decision to achieve an aim made possible by its very nature, has at least some minimal ability to respond to competing aims from the rest of the world, including the initial aim of God Himself/Herself (Hartshorne's non-sexist terminology when referring to God with a pronoun), which always gets in there first but is never guaranteed to prevail. Thus, God is in the world in an entirely \*natural\* way, never in a supernatural way. And this way of God being in the world is not simply a result of a decision on the part of God not to interfere, but is \*intrinsic\* to the very nature of

God himself and the world. According to Hartshorne's metaphysics, it's impossible for it to be any other way. To do justice to the various aspects of Hartshorne's philosophy would require a review as long as this little book itself. There are just a couple more points I want to make. When reading this book, I sense a principle that Hartshorne uses in deciding what the nature of God must be. In discussing God's nature, Hartshorne always arranges his philosophy of religion to allow God to be seen in the most positive light possible. You will see none of the embarrassments in traditional theology as it tries to reconcile an all-powerful God with an all-good God, or limitations in God's ability to sympathize and feel all of the joys and sorrows of \*every\* individual, regardless of where it lies in the hierarchy of complexity. Hartshorne's God is the most lovable, most worshipful God ever portrayed in the history of the philosophy of religion. You don't worship Hartshorne's God because of some ultimate reward in the afterlife -- which is essentially a selfish reason for worship, but because Hartshorne's God is intrinsically lovable: we "fall in love" with his awesomely lovable God that is as metaphysically perfect as possible, and hence we cannot help but worship this God: we are drawn to worship this God simply because it is so worshipful, not because of threats if we don't or because of rewards if we do. The last point I want to make about this book is that probably because of the haste in which it was written, some things are glossed over or slip by without enough explanation, and you're left with the feeling that perhaps errors have been made. Of course Hartshorne (as well as Whitehead himself) is often at pains to point out that process philosophy is a work in progress and that it should never present ideas as Absolute Truth, but the philosophy should grow through a dialog among many philosophers with different backgrounds and orientations. But there is one passage in the book that seems to me is particularly careless that also leaves the impression that the conclusion is central to the argument of the book. There is a line in his chapter on neo-Darwinian evolution (which he professes to accept and understand as well as any intelligent layman can be expected to) that is suspect: "[T]he only positive explanation of order is the existence of an orderer. Hence evolution is not, I hold, fully intelligible without God." To keep this review within reasonable bounds, you'll have to take my word for it that the rest of the paragraph this quote was taken from makes perfect sense. But just to read the quoted sentence, it looks as if it's a sound bite "proof" for the existence of God. But it seems to me that the "orderer" of order in the biological world is simply natural selection, and at least what is missing is a "proof" that the existence natural selection is "proof" for the existence of God. This just seems like carelessness, and unfortunately it happens here and there throughout the book. This last reservation shouldn't deter you from reading this book, however. If you have an open mind at all -- for example if you are agnostic and just don't know whether there is anything more fundamental behind the scientific

picture of the world "behind it all" -- you will definitely find a feast for thought in this book. It's just that it would be good to have some idea of the book's limitations before you start digging in, and digging in is exactly what you'll have to do: it isn't your typical layman's guide to a difficult topic that has been carefully crafted to make it both accurate and reasonably digestible for the non-professional.

Perhaps one of the most important theological books for anyone who has doubts about classic Christian doctrine, but wants to remain a follower of Jesus.

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