

## ARE THERE PROBLEMS WITH PANENTHEISM? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PHILIP CLAYTON'S RESPONSE TO CURRENT CHALLENGES

Brian Macallan

**ABSTRACT:** Panentheism suggests that the God-World relationship is one of mutual indwelling. Pantheism, Theism, and Atheism are seen as alternate options to Panentheism in their description of the God-World relationship. Philosophers of science and religion, who engage in these debates, have different perspectives regarding Panentheism and its metaphysical value. There are also different ways of conceiving Panentheism itself. Philip Clayton had staked out a specific version of Panentheism which is called Emergent Panentheism. Several critiques of Clayton's position will be noted to help situate Clayton's position more specifically. It will be argued that Clayton's position is robust in its affirmation of science and its value when conceiving a Panentheistic perspective.

**KEYWORDS:** Panentheism; Philip Clayton; God-World; Science

### INTRODUCTION

The philosophical and theological concept of Panentheism continues to garner interest amongst philosophers of science, religion, and theology. It is claimed that it is superior to two traditional ways of conceiving the God-World relationship, these being Pantheism and Theism.<sup>1</sup> Philip Clayton has argued consistently that Panentheism is conceptually valid and superior to these other perspectives. In what follows, I will broadly situate Panentheism in relation to its competitors,

---

<sup>1</sup> There are other less popular ways of conceiving this relationship. Notably God as an emergent reality of the universe. Atheism would obviously would not affirm the possibility of any kind of God-world relationship.

outline Philip Clayton's Panentheistic position, followed by critiques of his view. I will argue that Clayton's position and support for Panentheism remains convincing as one of the many panentheistic positions on offer today.

#### PANENTHEISM IN CONTEXT

Benedikt Göcke has argued, that if one considers the concept of God to be meaningful, it must distinguish, in some form, the difference between reality and its ultimate ground.<sup>2</sup> Atheism, therefore, is not a concept of God so defined, as it is best articulated as "an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods".<sup>3</sup>

This leads Göcke to outline four positions: theism, pantheism, theistic emergentism and panentheism. He suggests that panentheism is the most promising when considering "philosophical, theological and scientific reasoning".<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper we will put to one side the question of emergent theism and deal only with theism, pantheism, and panentheism. Culp has defined Panentheism broadly as being a constructed word composed of the English equivalents of the Greek terms "pan", meaning all, "en", meaning in, and "theism", derived from the Greek '*theos*' meaning God. Panentheism considers God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world. It offers an increasingly popular alternative to both classical theism and pantheism.<sup>5</sup>

The above description by Culp offers Panentheism as an alternative to classical theism, which Culp believes, tends to prioritise the difference between God and the world. Classical theism is defined differently by its proponents and opponents. Some believe that it is set up as a straw man, hence the importance of clear definitions in our discussion. Classical theism is often defined as being composed of the three "Omni's", whereby God is defined as omnipotent,

---

<sup>2</sup> Benedikt Göcke, "Concepts of God and Models of the God–world relation." *Philosophy Compass* 12 (2017): 1-15.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Bullivant, *Defining 'Atheism'* In Stephen Bullivant & Michael Ruse (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Oxford University Press (2013), pg. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> John Culp, "Panentheism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/panentheism/>>.

omnipresent, and omniscient.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, for our concerns, theism can be defined more in terms of how God and the world are related. Following Buckareff and Nagasawa, I suggest that theism can be defined as emphasizing that God is to be seen as ontologically distinct from the world.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Pantheism may be defined as reality and God being ontologically identical, or as Göcke might define it “one substance”, where the universe is identified with God.<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, all the definitions I have offered of atheism, theism, and pantheism are contested, which is true of the varieties of panentheism to which we now turn. We do this in order to locate Clayton’s version of panentheism that his critics challenge.

#### VARIETIES OF PANENTHEISM

The term Panentheism, as a specific label, was first used by Karl Krause in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, although Schelling had used the phrase previously in his *Essay on Freedom* in 1809.<sup>9</sup> However, the concept itself and what it connotes, has been suggested to go back the ancient Egyptians, being manifest at different times and cultures in the ancient world. Broadly, there are scientific, philosophical, and theological conceptions of Panentheism.<sup>10</sup> From a theological perspective, Panentheism is understood differently depending on the context that one has emerged from. As Clayton suggests,

The contemporary social, spiritual, ethical, ecclesial, or political issues one wishes to address will also influence one’s preferences for describing the relationship between God and world. One’s theological location likewise matters. Niels Gregersen understands panentheism differently because of his commitment to “Deep Incarnation”; Marjorie Suchocki comes to panentheism from her location as a process theologian; and Moltmann’s espousal of panentheism in *God*

<sup>6</sup> Andrei Buckareff, and Yujin Nagasawa. "Introduction: Alternative Conceptions of Divinity and Contemporary Analytic Philosophy of Religion." In *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, edited by Andrei Buckareff, and Yujin Nagasawa. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2016. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722250.003.0001.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>8</sup> Göcke, *Concepts of God*, 5

<sup>9</sup> Culp, *Panentheism*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> See, Brüntrup, Godehard, Benedikt Paul Göcke, and Ludwig Jaskolla (eds). *Panentheism and Panpsychism*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | mentis, 18 May. 2020) doi: <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303>

*in Creation* is influenced by kenotic theologies (and, interesting, also by Jewish Kaballah).<sup>11</sup>

As will become apparent, Clayton broadly supports kenotic conceptions of Panentheism, conceptions that support the contingent nature of reality outside of God. Kenotic conceptions of Panentheism affirm a God who creates the world within God's self. This is the position taken by the well-known Protestant theologian Jurgen Moltmann in *God and Creation*. In contrast, more process orientated theologians have tended to emphasize that the universe has always existed alongside God. This process perspective is one in which the world is still within God and God within the world, but there is no *creatio ex nihilo* as understood by kenotic versions of panentheism. A third alternative is modal panentheism, which might be referred to as an "all possible worlds panentheism". This version of panentheism argues for the existence of multiple worlds, yet these multiple worlds all exist within God and God within them.<sup>12</sup> Clayton's version of panentheism is the one that we shall be evaluating in this paper.<sup>13</sup>

#### CLAYTON'S PANENTHEISM

Clayton believes a minimal Panentheism must affirm at least two things, God in all things and all things in God.<sup>14</sup> He is driven by a desire to affirm God's immanence<sup>15</sup>, while also affirming that God's relationship to the world is

---

<sup>11</sup> Philip Clayton, Prospects for Panentheism as Research Program, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11,1 (2019) :1-18.

<sup>12</sup> Andrei Buckareff, and Yujin Nagasawa, *Alternative concepts of God: essays on the metaphysics of the divine* (Oxford University Press. Oxford, 2016)

<sup>13</sup> Clayton's kenotic version of panentheism is useful in its application of Hegelian thinking with regard to the infinite and finite. Although it is not the focus of this paper, his affirmation of a contingent universe created by God, I believe, runs into difficulty when dealing with the problem of evil. God still maintains significant power (as in the creation of a universe) yet chooses not to intervene against the laws of nature, in defence of free will and moral equality. See, Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp. *The Predicament of Belief: Science, Philosophy, and Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Philip Clayton, "Varieties of Panpsychism". In *Panentheism and Panpsychism*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | mentis, 2020) doi: [https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303\\_011](https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303_011), 200.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Jay Oord and Wm. Andrew Schwartz, "Panentheism and Panexperientialism for Open and Relational Theology". In *Panentheism and Panpsychism*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | mentis, 2020) doi: [https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303\\_013](https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303_013), 235.

contingent.<sup>16</sup> Clayton's position can be defined as "emergent panentheism"<sup>17</sup> and one which seeks to pay significant attention to scientific and philosophical perspectives.<sup>18</sup>

Philosophically he affirms, influenced by Hegel, that the finite cannot exist outside the infinite by definition and hence, by implication, the world is not separate from God.<sup>19</sup> In outlining the importance of panentheism within the different world religions and traditions, Clayton has noted its key features,

Panentheism describes important family resemblances among a variety of traditions. Panentheistic theologies tend to be dialectical, however, affirming complementarities rather than forcing final decisions between them: the divine is both immanent and transcendent, including all things within it while also existing as more than the world. It's true to say both that many individual things exist and that all things are One. In theistic terms, it's true to say both that God is in the world and that the world exists within God.<sup>20</sup>

As will become apparent shortly, one of the critiques that is offered against panentheism is its apparent diversity. Clayton, in proposing Panentheism as a research program, or paradigm, believes this is not uncommon or necessarily a bad thing.<sup>21</sup> Broadly, the difference between Clayton's Panentheism and others boils down to differences between the contingent and necessary features of the God world relationship, while at the same time arguing that panpsychism is emergent and not fundamental. Classical process theologians and philosophers have argued that the universe has always existed alongside God, making both God and the world necessary.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, Clayton can hardly be defined as a classical process philosopher or theologian. He suggested his mediating position on panentheism to be one of "open panentheism". He articulates his view

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>17</sup> Joanna Leidenhag, "Index." In *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation*, 197–204. London: T&T Clark, 2021. Accessed November 15, 2021. <http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/minding-creation-theological-panpsychism-and-the-doctrine-of-creation/index>, 24

<sup>18</sup> Culp, *Panentheism*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2000), 477.

<sup>20</sup> Clayton, *Varieties of Panentheism*, 202.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Clayton (2019). Prospects for Panentheism as Research Program. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11 (1):1-18. PhilArchive copy v1: <https://philarchive.org/archive/CLAPFP-2v1>

<sup>22</sup> David Griffin, *Panentheism and scientific naturalism*, Process Century Press, Claremont (2014), 13.

accordingly,

In contrast to many process theologians, I find myself compelled also to defend the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* – the belief that there has not always been a world, and hence that the world is not co-eternal with God. Instead, in this view both the creation of the universe and the details concerning *how* it was created involved free divine decisions. To make these assertions is to endorse the radical contingency of ourselves, of our world – and indeed of the existence of any world whatsoever.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, Clayton’s “open panentheism”, although locating philosophically the world within God (the finite within the infinite), still argues for a contingent universe. His emergent Panentheism then flows from this. Many panentheists argue that panpsychism flows naturally from panentheism. Clayton suggests that this is not the case. He argues that “experiencing reality” only began when the first cells were formed and were able to respond to their environment.<sup>24</sup> Clayton rejects that it is “mind all the way down”, charging that full blown panpsychism is a “robustly metaphysical move” that cuts itself off “from evidential considerations that science could otherwise provide”.<sup>25</sup>

Clayton critiques and responses

There are several critiques that could be given, and have been given, to Clayton’s “open panentheism”. Some of these critiques focus on panentheism more generally, while others suggest that Clayton’s specific version of panentheism is problematic. Leidenhag is one who takes the latter option, suggesting that Clayton’s view on emergence is the most tenuous. She suggests that all forms of emergent theology runs the risk of naturalising God and making God an emergent phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> She argues that “emergence, as a scientific hypothesis, does not currently provide a stable base for analogies of emergence in other areas, such as philosophy of mind and theology”.<sup>27</sup> Clayton’s claim, according to Leidenhag, for a process that drives this emergent unfolding, is one

<sup>23</sup> Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis (2008), 175.

<sup>24</sup> Clayton, *Varieties of panpsychism*.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Clayton, *Mind and emergence: from Quantum to Consciousness*, Oxford University Press: Oxford (2004), 130

<sup>26</sup> Joanna Leidenhag, *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation*, Bloomsbury T&T Clark: London (2020), 35.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

that can't be easily separated from vitalism, despite claims to the contrary.<sup>28</sup>

Leidenhag suggests that panpsychism is a useful way to try and demarcate panentheism. Hence, it is unsurprising that Leidenhag criticizes Clayton's emergent panentheism because Clayton does not accept the universal scope of panpsychist views.

Mullins has also sought to take aim at Clayton's panentheism in which Clayton argues that the world is included in God.<sup>29</sup> According to Mullins, Clayton's view that the world is included in God is not well defined, and that Clayton's model of a panentheistic God could be the same as Pantheism. Clayton suggests that Spinoza is a good example of panentheism, while Mullins suggest Spinoza shares similarities with Clayton's view of a Pantheist God. A similar critique is offered to claims that theists don't locate God in the universe. Mullins suggests that they do in some form, particularly those that emphasize God's omniscience. Mullins solution, which he believes is not found in Clayton, is to make space and time part of God and the universe. The universe then is found within this absolute space and time. Absolute space and time being metaphysical attributes of God that are necessary to God's being. Mullins suggests that,

Given this distinction, the pantheist would be saying that absolute space and time are to be construed as metaphysical space and time. These are divine attributes, whereas physical space and time are not. When God creates a universe, God creates physical space and time. Physical space and time exist within metaphysical space and time/God.<sup>30</sup>

In what ways might Clayton respond to the challenges to emergentism by Leidenhaag, as well as the more generalist challenge by Mullins?

Concerning Mullin's critique, Clayton has recently responded to it directly. Despite his concerns regarding the negative tone of the article, as well as its critique of panentheism being linked to its worst proponents and examples, Clayton appears quite laudatory of Mullin's solution.<sup>31</sup> After noting that there are problems when thinking of God spatially that could prove problematic for the "double in" of panentheism, Clayton does suggest that there are ways to conceive

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 23-24

<sup>29</sup> Ryan Mullins, "The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism." *Sophia* 55, no. 3 (2016), 337.

<sup>30</sup> Mullins, *Demarcating Panentheism*, 343

<sup>31</sup> Clayton, *Prospects*, 15

it. In responding to Mullin's critique, he suggests that it is actually a "compelling" way to conceive of the "double in".<sup>32</sup> Hence, Clayton affirms a view that would locate created space and time within a metaphysical space and time that Mullins suggests. After referring to his work in *God and Contemporary Science*, where he has made a version of Mullins argument, he argues that "stressing the radical immanence of God only works, in other words, as long as God remains the absolute framework for all talk of space and time".<sup>33</sup>

Unlike his response to Mullins, Clayton has not yet responded to Leidenhag's critique regarding his emergent panentheism. I suspect that the broad outlines of such a response will take the following contours though. Firstly, Clayton would reject assertions that he is arguing for an emergent theism that sees God as a natural expression of emergence within the natural world. Clayton clearly, and in contrast to process philosophers, argues for a contingent creation. God is *prior* to the evolution of the natural world and its emergent development. Whether Leidenhag's critique of emergence being a legitimate scientific theory is true or not is a key aspect of the debate regarding emergence. Clayton's *Mind and Emergence*, and the *Re-emergence of Emergence*, is an attempt to argue that it is legitimate. Ultimately, it's unlikely that Leidenhag and Clayton will agree on a version of panentheism, largely because Clayton suggests panpsychism takes place only after the emergence of cellular life. Leidenhag, in contrast, will want to argue that panpsychism, universally understood, is the only way to demarcate panentheism accurately.

## CONCLUSION

The title of this paper, perhaps in provocative form, raises the question as to whether there are problems with Panentheism. There certainly are, as would be the case with any philosophical, theological, and scientific position on offer. There are certainly a variety of views regarding panentheism, some of which have been sketched here. But this should hardly be seen negatively as part of a research program.<sup>34</sup> Diversity should be welcomed, for as Oord and Schwartz suggest,

Some versions of panentheism are spatial, for instance, others comparative,

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>34</sup> *Prospects*, Clayton

some metaphorical, and still others causal. This diversity indicates a lack of clarity, but a measure of imprecision and disagreement are understandable given the subjects in question: God and everything else.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, lazy approaches in defining important terms should also not be welcome. And there is a present danger, that with the rise in popularity of panentheism, we succumb to panentheistic slogans.<sup>36</sup> Hence, continued and detailed engagement with panentheism remains important. By examining Philip Clayton's conception of panentheism, and two recent critiques of his position, have been an attempt to contribute to this debate. Clayton's emergent panentheism is one that seeks to guard the contingent nature of the world, while attempting to maintain the "double in" of Panentheism whereby God is both in the world and the world within God. Unlike process panentheists, Clayton rejects a universe that has always co-existed with God. This opens him up to the problem of evil in a way that process thinkers have claimed to be able to sidestep. Clayton is also distinct from panentheists that would seek to make panpsychism the clear demarcating mechanism for panentheism, rather suggesting panpsychism is an emergent phenomenon, taking place only after the advent of cellular life. Clayton's response and potential response to his critics, briefly articulated here, highlight the uniqueness of his position, as well as the continuing problems panentheism will have to confront into the future.

bmacallan@stirling.edu.au

---

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Jay Oord, , and Wm. Andrew Schwartz. " Panentheism and Panexperientialism for Open and Relational Theology". In *Panentheism and Panpsychism*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | mentis, 2020) doi: [https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303\\_013](https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303_013)

<sup>36</sup> Joanna, Leidenhag. " Deploying Panpsychism for the Demarcation of Panentheism". In *Panentheism and Panpsychism*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | mentis, 2020) doi: [https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303\\_005](https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303_005)

## REFERENCES

- Bullivant, Stephen. Defining 'Atheism' In Stephen Bullivant & Michael Ruse (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Buckareff, Andrei A., and Yujin Nagasawa. "Introduction: Alternative Conceptions of Divinity and Contemporary Analytic Philosophy of Religion." In *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, edited by Andrei Buckareff, and Yujin Nagasawa. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Brüntrup, Godehard, Benedikt Paul Göcke, and Ludwig Jaskolla (eds). *Panentheism and Panpsychism*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | mentis, 2020.
- Clayton, Philip. *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2000.
- Clayton, Philip, and Steven Knapp. *The Predicament of Belief: Science, Philosophy, and Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Clayton, Philip, *Mind and emergence: from Quantum to Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004.
- Clayton, Philip. *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.
- Clayton, Philip. Prospects for Panentheism as Research Program, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11,1 (2019) :1-18.
- Clayton, Philip. "Varieties of Panpsychism". In *Panentheism and Panpsychism*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | mentis, 2020)  
doi: [https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303\\_011](https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303_011), 200.
- Culp, John, "Panentheism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL  
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/panentheism/>>.
- Göcke, Benedikt Paul. "Concepts of God and Models of the God–world relation." *Philosophy Compass* 12 (2017): 1-15.
- Griffin, David. *Panentheism and scientific naturalism*. Claremont: Process Century Press, 2014.
- Leidenhag, Joanna. "Deploying Panpsychism for the Demarcation of Panentheism". In *Panentheism and Panpsychism*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | mentis, 2020)  
doi: [https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303\\_005](https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303_005)
- Leidenhag, Joanna. "Index." In *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation*, 197–204. London: T&T Clark, 2021. Accessed November 15, 2021.  
<http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/minding-creation-theological-panpsychism-and-the-doctrine-of-creation/index>, 24

- 
- Mullins, Ryan. "The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism." *Sophia* 55, no. 3 (2016): 325-346.
- Oord, Thomas Jay, and Wm. Andrew Schwartz. "Panentheism and Panexperientialism for Open and Relational Theology". In *Panentheism and Panpsychism*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | mentis, 2020)  
doi: [https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303\\_013](https://doi.org/10.30965/9783957437303_013), 235.