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# Review of "Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes"

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Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

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Charles Hartshorne (born June 5, 1897) is arguably America's foremost speculative philosophers and the leading exponent of process theology. *Omnipotence* is his attempt to present and defend the process (or as he calls his version, neoclassical) idea of God to a nonacademic audience. In the preface Hartshorne says that the book was written in five weeks. However, he has spent the better part of sixty years refining and developing his form of theism. In this respect, the book is the culmination of a decades-long intellectual struggle with the concept of God. Nevertheless, one should not come to *Omnipotence* expecting a mere summary of Hartshorne's previous work. While he rehearses many of his familiar arguments, there is also a wealth of new material, applying the logic of neoclassical theism to some of the pressing concerns of our day. *Omnipotence* is therefore a welcome addition to the Hartshornean corpus.

The "theological mistakes" referred to in the book's title are, for the most part, ideas whose truth has been obscured by misinterpretation. For instance, omnipotence has traditionally been construed as the ability to bring about or cause every detail of world history. For Hartshorne, this is a mistake since, among other things, it allows no room for creaturely freedom. If God makes our decisions, then we do not. Hartshorne advocates a concept of God's power (he thinks the word "omnipotence" should be dropped) according to which God has the supreme form of power over creatures who themselves have power. What occurs is never simply the result of divine agency. In Hartshorne's theology, the creatures are co-creators of the world with God. This is not to say that God's power is [145] limited. "God has power uniquely excellent in quality and scope, in no respect inferior to any coherently conceivable power" (26).

Besides omnipotence, Hartshorne explicitly identifies seven other theological mistakes: God is unchanging because perfect; omniscience is the ability to eternally know past, present, and future; God loves but is unaffected by the world; immortality involves a career after death; revelation, such as claimed for the Pope or the Bible, is infallible; there is mere insentient, lifeless, wholly unfree matter; and, belief in God is incompatible with the idea of an evolution of species. His strongest rhetoric is reserved for the advocates of "creation science." "I say it is bad philosophy, bad science, bad theology, bad hermeneutics [textual interpretation], and no good thing at all" (67). Despite such pronouncements, Hartshorne is not an uncritical follower of any scientific theory of evolution—Darwin's determinism is subjected to searching criticism.

Hartshorne makes a case that it was, in part, Darwin's adherence to determinism that kept him from seeing that "evolution is not fully intelligible without God" (71). One finds in these arguments a position largely neglected by those who oppose evolution to the Bible.

What sets *Omnipotence* apart from much of Hartshorne's previous work is that it addresses more practical questions from the framework of neoclassical theism. Discussion of issues as diverse as the moral and legal status of abortion, illiteracy, near-death experiences, and the nuclear arms race, are sprinkled throughout the book. Hartshorne's openness to contemporary problems is nowhere more evident than in his treatment of feminist issues. He recognizes the male bias of traditional theology and with it, the irrationality, and by implication, the chauvinism, of conceiving and speaking of the deity in exclusively [146] male terms. Hartshorne's use of inclusive language and imagery for God is a refreshing and uplifting change from what one usually finds in tomes of theology or hears from most pulpits on Sunday morning.

Martin Gardner, the popular science writer and former student of Hartshorne, says that it bothered him that Hartshorne always seemed to know so much more about God than he did. Readers of *Omnipotence* may come away with a similar uneasiness. The feeling stems partly from Hartshorne's theological acumen. However, the feeling's deeper source is in the awareness that God cannot be completely captured in theological formulae. Hartshorne is fond of Anselm's claim that God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." Anselm also says that God is "greater than can be conceived." For all its brilliance and advance over previous formulations, the neoclassical concept of God is itself provisional. Such a view is consistent with Hartshorne's emphasis on process, change, and novelty. May not God be conceived as one who beckons us from beyond the understanding to understand the God who lies beyond? The religious importance of this insight is that it preserves the mystery of God while serving as a check on theological hubris and a safeguard against idolatry.

The physical strain of writing *Omnipotence* put Hartshorne in the hospital where he underwent a blood transfusion—"the closes thing modern medicine has to a miracle," he told me. Readers may rightly judge that the product was worth the effort. For the layperson is offered "a natural theology for our time" (the title of another of Hartshorne's books). When Hartshorne is done dismantling the various "mistakes" and presenting the neoclassical alternative, one is left with a sense of the vitality of theology in the hands of one whose genius is unmistakable.