

GOD, FREEDOM, AND EVIL: PERSPECTIVES FROM RELIGION AND SCIENCE

by *Joseph M. Życiński*

Abstract. This paper develops analogies concerning the evolution of dissipative structures in nonequilibrium thermodynamics to interpret irrational human behavior in which one finds a lack of correspondence between the invested means and the consequences observed. In an attempt to positively explain the process of cooperation between the free human person and interacting God, I use philosophical categories of Whitehead's process philosophy in an aesthetic model that opposes composition and performance in a musical symphony. Certainly, the essence of human freedom can be expressed in neither thermodynamical nor aesthetic terms. The models proposed can, however, facilitate our understanding of the mutual relations between God's action in the world and the drama of human free choice of moral evil.

Keywords: freedom; God's action; grace; irrationality; moral evil; nonequilibrium thermodynamics; process theology; Whitehead's philosophy.

Many profound questions are raised when we try to interpret human history not as a result of interplay between chance and necessity but as a consequence of cooperation between natural phenomena and Christian God, understood as principle of rationality and order. Regardless of our definition of nature, many difficult problems emerge when we ask why the divine Logos is so ineffective on the level of human existence. The drama of moral evil, the reality of individual suffering, the tragedy of ethnic conflicts, the Holocaust, and the abuse of freedom define the domain of human

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behavior that could be regarded as both irrational and dramatically meaningless. Many authors have already tried to explain why God, discovered in the beauty of nature as well as in the harmony of mathematical parameters, cannot effectively introduce the beauty and harmony on the level of human existence, where free choice appears as a new quality in the evolving universe. In my attempt to understand the same difficulty, I sketch two explanatory models: the first refers to dissipative structures in non-equilibrium thermodynamics, and the second, using the framework of Whiteheadian process philosophy, develops an analogy built on composition and performance in a musical symphony.

MORAL EVIL AND DISSIPATIVE STRUCTURES

The expression of human freedom very often results in moral consequences that disappoint the human observer who would like to assume a proportion between invested means and effects obtained. This process can be illustrated, for instance, by failures in Christian education, when all educational means, which presuppose cooperation between a human person and God's grace, result in the growth of an immature person. If such a person displays either cynical or primitive reactions, we feel frustrated, and a problem emerges of how to explain rationally this failure in our system of behavior. Such explanation could be easy if the person in question were emotionally unbalanced or if the person's psychic propensities precluded effective cooperation between the natural and supernatural orders. Perhaps such was the case for the religious education of such personalities as Josif Stalin and Rudolf Höss. Stalin spent several months in an Orthodox theological seminary. Höss, the head of the Auschwitz concentration camp, was brought up in a good Christian family. Maybe their moral disorder depended on concealed psychic propensities that could explain their behavior, if only in our careful investigations we performed a scrupulous analysis of the given existential milieu. A few selected cases do not, however, eliminate the global problem. Statistics indicate that moral crisis very often has touched people who were both sensitive and open to religious values. In their moral choices there was nothing cynical. Nevertheless, after their life's critical period, they ended up choosing standards very different from Christian standards. How can we explain rationally how God turned out to be so ineffective in these moments of crisis and tolerated the choice of values that seem contrary to Christian values?

When we examine dramatic situations in the lives of people whom we appreciate for their commitment to Christian moral principles, we are puzzled that God does not seem to help them to overcome the moments of crisis. When we see this profound lack of proportion between initial conditions and final results, we can easily end with a skeptical assessment of the role of divine grace in transforming human personality. The realistic

recognition of human failures can then inspire a pessimistic philosophy in which moral evil seems to dominate both our good intentions and the cooperating divine grace. Introducing analogies from nonlinear thermodynamics, I show that such a pessimistic philosophy cannot be regarded as the only possible interpretation of the data.

In assessing human existential attitudes, we regard particular behavior as rational when definite perturbations in its initial conditions yield to proportional changes in final results. In the language of physics, such a correspondence may be called *the principle of linear evolution* of the particular system. Most simple systems we meet in everyday experience are subject to linear evolution, which can be described in terms of the relative stability of the system. This stability is expressed in the fact that small perturbations in the physical parameters of the systems result in small physical consequences, while important perturbations yield important effects. This unambiguous correspondence fails already on the level of simple thermodynamical systems examined in physics since the 1920s. In its earlier stage of development, thermodynamics, based on the principles proposed by Nicolas Carnot and Ludwig Boltzmann, studied only the simplest examples of linear evolution in physical systems, which always tend to a state of equilibrium (Gibbs 1876, 228). In this cognitive framework, the macroscopic properties of a system, such as temperature, pressure, and volume, determine the macroscopic evolution of the system and make possible predictions of its future states. In the case of more complicated systems, the equations of classical thermodynamics become meaningless and cannot be applied.

Physical research originated by Lars Onsager contributed to the study of irreversible processes in linear but nonequilibrium systems (Peacocke 1986, 142). In such systems the variation of significant parameters leads to a nonequilibrium state. There is a possibility of a relative normalization of the system, because its perturbations tend to a physical state in which entropy production is the lowest of all possibilities allowed by given physical conditions. The situation is radically different in the case of nonlinear evolution of physical systems. The state to which the evolution of such systems tends is called *attractor*, because in the entire evolution of the system it behaves as if it would attract the other stages of the dynamical growth. In linear thermodynamics, when perturbations affect the equilibrium state, immediately the principle of minimum entropy growth determines its further evolution. In nonlinear systems, however, there is no physical law that would guarantee the relative stability of the further evolution of the systems in question. Accordingly, the system can reach the state of bifurcation in which small statistical perturbations play a much more important role than the deterministic laws do. This bifurcation can be a breakthrough state after which a relatively stable evolution follows that is

subject to new physical principles. It can also lead to a new bifurcation bringing physical states that would be both unpredictable and implausible, even if we knew the initial conditions with absolute precision (Peacocke 1993, 50–53).

Nonlinear thermodynamics plays a very important role in contemporary studies of physical chaos (Gleick 1988). It makes possible the physical investigations of processes that could not have been investigated in the paradigm of nineteenth-century science. Before its rise, complicated physical phenomena such as turbulent flow in liquids or changes in atmospheric conditions seemed to be beyond the scope of scientific study, because small changes in physical parameters resulted in important perturbations that could not have been subjected to deterministic physical laws. This lack of corresponding proportions is expressed in what was called by Edward Lorenz “the butterfly effect.” In its metaphoric form it declares that because of complex causal interdependencies a butterfly disturbing the air in Europe today could affect the weather conditions in America a few months from now.

New conceptual schemes worked out in nonlinear thermodynamics helped physicists to discover an order hidden in biological systems, atmospheric phenomena, and physical chaos. What earlier had seemed irrational or even paradoxical became rational when the new cognitive framework was adopted. The dynamic systems in a far-to-equilibrium state are subject to physical laws. These thermodynamical laws, however, are much more sophisticated than they seemed to be within the framework of nineteenth-century physics.

When I introduce references to the evolution of thermodynamic systems, I do not mean to suggest that human behavior can be described as a dissipative far-to-equilibrium system with specified important parameters. I merely emphasize that we should no longer share the illusion that the complex reality of human behavior can be described in simple interpretive schemes appropriate for systems with linear interactions. Very often we introduce such schemes when we try to rationalize our moral failures and explain the lack of efficiency in cooperation between human freedom and God’s grace. Analogies concerning the growth of thermodynamic systems show that simple linear interpretations cannot result in satisfactory explanation of the multilevel reality of the human psyche, with its subconscious layers and hidden propensities. The influence of human surroundings on our consciousness is in many ways similar to perturbations that could yield to bifurcation in physical systems. Whether we mean physical or spiritual equilibrium, the system far from equilibrium evolves in a radically different way from what our common-sense expectations would suggest. The values that in our spiritual growth can be regarded as the counterpart of physical attractors strongly influence our spiritual system and introduce important perturbations in its earlier evolution. The impact of these

attractors can direct the entire evolution to existential states that radically differ from the initial states of the evolving system.

This analogy does not justify pessimistic conclusions concerning our spiritual growth. It only justifies realistic criticism of predictions concerning this form of growth. We cannot regard simple linear interpretations as a satisfactory description of human behavior. The profound cultural and social transformations characteristic of our epoch bring many more perturbations that affect the relative stability of the human person. These new cultural attractors can result in spiritual bifurcations that appear shocking to a mentality formed in the framework of classical education. The bifurcations constitute a new challenge brought by these factors, which were either unknown or almost unknown in classical models. They also bring a chance to determine and explain the nature of the complex regularities, which earlier seemed either mysterious or irrational.

AN AESTHETIC INTERPRETATION OF INTERACTION BETWEEN FREEDOM AND GRACE

Introducing another analogy to elucidate the nature of cooperation between human freedom and divine grace, I will refer to aesthetic metaphors in order to interpret the cooperation in the terms of Whiteheadian process philosophy. In this philosophy God is described as “a fellow companion of our suffering” who influences our behavior not by rigorous determination but by “subtle persuasion.” Whitehead uses the term “lure” to specify this form of God’s presence in our existential decisions and moral choices. To extend his description of the problem, I will introduce the analogy referring to the composition and performance of a musical symphony.

The harmony of human existence depends on cooperation between God, who defines our specific position in the universe, and human beings, who try to engage our free actions to perform divine plans. I regard as theologically erroneous the doctrine of Pelagianism, in which the role of God’s influence (grace) is reduced to zero. I also regard as erroneous various forms of fatalism, in which human freedom is reduced to zero. The latter philosophy dominated in the Hellenic concept of *ananke*, as well as in those forms of contemporary Islam in which the role of inevitable fate is stressed. The theological model of God the Emperor was influenced by both medieval social structures and the Eastern system of power. Its relics can be found not only in Islam but also in certain Christian theories of education. Very often they result in eliminating any form of human responsibility, in ignoring the significance of our actions and regarding God as the only real actor. In this framework, one can explain any failure by blaming God for insufficiently cooperating with us.

The nature of cooperation between God and the human person is well described in the Gospels. Jesus never forces the people to follow him or

necessarily to adhere to his ideal of life. He indicates these ideals only as a proposal, and the principle essential for his style starts with “if you want to.” Those who did not want to, like the rich man of Mark 10:17, always had the possibility of rejecting Christ’s proposal and choosing their own standards inspired by their own philosophy of life. In biblical descriptions of Christ’s weeping over Jerusalem we find the most heartrending illustration of the truth about the rejection of God through human free choices. This drama of the rejected God is expressed in Jesus’ words: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Matthew 23:37–38 NIV). This prediction of desolation, of existential emptiness chosen purposefully by the people, as well as the significance of Christ’s tears in his salvific mission, illustrates the dramatic effect of throwing away the divine standards that were supposed to inspire our moral choices in important existential decisions. The human person “not willing” God’s patterns of life chooses in a free act a different hierarchy of values from the one proposed by the subtle God who still longs to gather the children outside of the area of desolation. The picture of the powerless, weeping Christ differs radically from the traditional image of an all-powerful God.

The subtle God’s entrance into our life neither places restrictions on human freedom nor imposes an absolute necessity to reach divinely determined goals. God’s grace does not destroy human natural propensities but only brings into our existential domain new ideals of God’s harmony and beauty. A relative expression of human freedom is manifested in the possibility of our throwing away God’s proposal and following our private patterns of beauty. The doctrine of divine omnipotence can never be consistently reconciled with statements that suggest the following:

1. God could have created a computer that could produce a complete logical system isomorphic with Isaac Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*.
2. God could have created a *perpetuum mobile* on the basis of the present laws of nature.
3. God could influence human choice of moral evil.
4. God could restrict our freedom of choice to force us always to choose moral goodness. (Życiński 1988, 2:164)

According to the Christian understanding of God’s omnipotence, there is a theologically erroneous component in both the doctrine that God alone can change everything in our life and the self-consistent attitude in which everything is supposed to depend only on our own actions. The great concert in which our symphony of life is performed cannot be reduced to a soloist’s presentation. To express the richness of the divine-human sym-

phony, one must coordinate heterogeneous factors in a manner that cannot be reduced to simple algorithms and rational predictions.

The role of community in our cooperation with the creative God is well described by Marjorie Suchocki in her *God: Christ: Church* (1982). In her metaphor, the Christian community of faith is presented as a living symphony constituted by both God's patterns of beauty and human free performance. The structure of this performance is not a simple sum of its individual components. One can again distinguish here a nonlinear factor contained in the holistic emergence of a new quality that enriches the structure of human community. This quality was called *grace* in traditional theology. Its essence cannot be satisfactorily defined in rational terms. There is always an element of mystery, bewilderment, and amazement in the performance of the marvelous composition created by God and the people (Suchocki 1982, 215).

In this approach, the radical opposition between acting God and free human person disappears. God present in our moral inspirations is at the same time God who lives in the community of the church. For the same reason the opposition between divine grace and human freedom is overcome. Grace manifests its real nature by facilitating our recognition of truth and promoting our free choice. John Cobb characterizes in detail the nature of this cooperation by emphasizing that God's action can never be regarded as the only significant attractor or the physical determinant acting on the level of those determinants that constitute the order of nature (Cobb 1987, 86). Its presence highlights the horizon of our free choices and enlarges the domain in which the human person looks for self-actualization. Spiritual consequences can be described in Lukan terms of "hearts burning" (Luke 24:32). Our fascination with aesthetic beauty and with human gentleness and kindness and our openness to altruistic actions disclose the presence of God's grace at the level of our psychic experience. Of course, this presence cannot be reduced to psychological factors. It can also be found at the subconscious level, where without any rational justification we intuitively direct our attention to aims that reveal the divine hierarchy of values. In all these processes, the role of divine grace can be described in terms of strengthening our personal liberty. Its integrating function is revealed in the fact that three distinct elements—grace, freedom, and physical determinants independent of us—are combined in a manner that facilitates the selection of God's patterns of human life. Such selection discloses the meaningfulness of human existence in its harmonious coordination of the theoretical component and its existential consequences. As John Cobb and Donald Baillie emphasize, the more efficient divine grace becomes in our personal growth, the more mature our actions become, and the more responsible the human person becomes. Consistently, the very term *divine grace* at the level of human existence denotes

God's presence in our life, through which we can actualize the aims determined for us in God's plan for our growth to maturity (Cobb 1987, 84f.; Baillie 1984, 25). Whether we actualize them or not depends on our personal decisions, which are ultimately free in the sense that God never determines them independently of us. For this reason, God's role is compared by Alfred N. Whitehead to the role of the Poet who introduces a vision of truth, beauty, and goodness into our world.¹ This form of introduction appears as a proposal for harmonious existence but never as the strong determinant characteristic of thermodynamical attractors.

In a certain respect, this form of interaction can be described as a persuasion in which God proposes and reveals the internal beauty of certain proposals but always leaves the final choice to us. This is why grace can effectively transform our existence without diminishing our freedom. The last factor explains why we face the astonishing ineffectiveness of grace and the moral evil apparent in human free actions.

THE GREAT SYMPHONY OF LIFE AND ITS INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE

We never enter into creative dialogue between God and human person as a *tabula rasa* on which only God writes projects and determines the aims. We enter into life with our unique DNA code, with particular psychic propensities, intellectual talents, and concerns that are to a certain extent formed by our environment, which was given to us, not chosen by us. We also enter life with a deep disintegration in our nature, which theologians sometimes call "original sin." Leaving aside theological controversies, I use this expression to refer to the radical disproportion between the level of our dreams and the level of our fulfillment. Every one of us faces this profound lack of correspondence between our lofty ideals and plain reality with its failures and disillusionment.

Our personal propensities, prior to any responsible decisions, determine a general framework for our existential commitment. God, immanent in this framework, introduces a hierarchy of values, norms, and ideals that define an exemplary pattern for our existence. Some of these values are universal in nature, that is, they define necessary conditions for any mature and responsible human existence, regardless of differences in race, nationality, sex, or religious involvement. God's design for human existence also contains individual elements related to particular conditions of life and unique personalities. In theology this element is described in terms of particular existential vocation. It can be a vocation to family life or a professional vocation to particular forms of duties, or it can be a religious or priestly vocation. In any given situation, God's proposal introduces an unrepeatable shade and determines the perspective that appears different from others' proposals.

In this perspective one can develop a metaphor in which God appears to be at the same time a composer and a conductor, not only determining the patterns of harmony that can be actualized in our life but also helping us to actualize them. The specificity of God's cooperation with us is expressed in respect for our right to extemporized composition. The consequences of this respect may be expressed in both the creative novelty contributed by a human person to the richness of life and its specific beauty and in existential disharmony inspired by our shared illusions.

The cooperation between human freedom and God's grace develops in an existential perspective in which our natural propensities and the determinants of our surroundings relate to the goals and patterns of actions established by God. It does not imply that human action should be interpreted in causal terms and divine cooperation in teleological ones. Teleological categories also are important for our purely human choices. As human beings, we choose our own ideals and determine our existential goals. We also can reject the goals proposed by God. Our creativity and our dynamism of action, directed to distant purposes, are important components in our cooperation with God's grace. On the other hand, God influences our choices not only by the psychological attractiveness of certain ideals but also by causal cooperation in which our autonomy of free choice is respected.

The presence of God's grace in our personal choices is thus expressed in the fact that in the play of attractive illusions God reveals for us the capacity of our existence to disclose the genuine value of particular choices and to inspire the decisions in which the discovered truth is recognized. This divine factor, subtly present on the horizon of our existence, can again be regarded as a counterpart of the physical attractor already mentioned in the analogy dealing with nonlinear thermodynamics. Describing the very nature of this attractor in psychological terms, Whitehead uses the expression "the lure for feeling."² The causal influence of this lure can be described in categories of subtle persuasion that can influence our decisions at both the conscious and the subconscious levels. This form of divine persuasion yields behavior in which we pay special attention to given values and become fascinated, thoughtful, or amazed in situations that seemed trivial before. God, as a subtle Artist, never forces upon us certain patterns of beauty but respects our freedom as well as the possibility that we may reject such subtle persuasion.

Describing God's action in terms of persuasion brings a risk of anthropomorphism, because in human life persuasion influences the content of our psychic acts. Accordingly, it is important to remember that in our model of explanation one cannot reduce to the psychological level those elements that are theological and ontological in nature. Such a reduction would be ungrounded, because God's cooperation is also expressed in actions that are either unnoticed by us or never direct our consciousness to

the ideals aimed at by God. Even the Damascus experience (Acts 9:1–9) could have assumed quite a different form had Saul of Tarsus regarded his falling to the ground as a phenomenon that just happens from time to time. This especially strong form of divine persuasion could have been ignored or neutralized if Saul had assumed an interpretive framework in which all natural phenomena are explained by referring only to the set of other natural phenomena. Various versions of contemporary naturalism provide such an explanatory scheme in which the role of the transcendent factor is a priori eliminated.³ Instead of creative cooperation between God and the human person we have a model of a theological vacuum in which the human person, deprived of any relationship to the divine Composer, suffers from lonely meaninglessness.

The acting grace neither limits our freedom nor transforms us into automats programmed by God. It respects human choices even when the disharmony of moral evil follows from them. Such a situation occurs when the illusion of ontological self-sufficiency inspires us to undertake a solitary attempt to construct our own project of the world free of any divine restrictions. Sometimes this rejection of God's proposals occurs without any intellectual deliberation, just to demonstrate our independence or an "artistic" style of life. Nevertheless, the choice of evil always underlies an element of illusion in which a relative value is regarded as absolute. This drama of falseness and delusion is well illustrated in the metaphoric description of the sin in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:4–13). The metaphorically understood fruit denotes a relative value that suddenly attracts the attention of Adam and Eve as a source of strong sensation in which the fruit discloses its exceptional aesthetic, pragmatic, and personalistic content (3:4–6).

The drama of the free choice of pseudovalues repeats not only in individual life but also in community experience, for instance, when we try to subordinate the mission of the church to political or ideological purposes. For our further analysis of this problem, the phenomenon of the absolutization of relative values seems most important. In this process, our personal preferences obscure the divine structure of values. As a result, we reject the proposal of divine harmony and regard our private hierarchy of values as the expression of the highest beauty.

At such times the divine beauty disappears locally from our performance of the symphony of life. This does not necessarily result in a global rejection of the divine ideals of beauty. Sometimes the impromptu performance results in a return to the divine score. Sometimes local disharmonies do not hurt the global harmony of the entire composition. Very often, however, our freedom related to false values results in existential loneliness in which we lose our union with God and reject divine ideals of beauty. This loneliness, fortunately, is not ontological in nature. Only in our subjective feelings does the rejected God disappear from our life. Objectively,

though ignored and rejected, God is always present as One who never tries to restrict our freedom in order to reveal the beauty of divine love.

Many questions emerge in the context of the aesthetic model of cooperation between God and the human person: Could not grace be more effective in transforming the world and in attracting it to the divine canons of beauty? Could God not act more effectively against this ontological disharmony in which we find not only moral evil but also the dramatic suffering of the human family, as experienced in Auschwitz and Kolyma, Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Rwanda? Any attempt to answer such questions requires strong assumptions that must remain hypothetical in nature. We may be justified in assuming that a more efficient cooperation of divine grace and human freedom would imply imposing restrictions on human freedom to eliminate certain possibilities for free choice. The very existence of these restrictions cannot be reconciled with the theological thesis that grace ennobles human nature but never suspends it. We consistently suffer when facing human tragedies and moral evil, but the suffering is the price of God's recognition of human freedom. Certainly, it has been a high price, even when we take into consideration the theological aspect of human life with its openness to eternal existence. Can we argue, however, that a better solution would be provided by a world in which no one suffers but human freedom is restricted by God? Could a joyful symphony fascinate and make us happy in our experience of beauty if we knew that it had been performed by programmed automatons? God probably could have created us with different psychic propensities subject to the laws that determine the behavior of physical systems in linear thermodynamics. However, our actual existential attitudes are closer to an artistic masterpiece than to predetermined physical systems. For this reason God is described by Whitehead as "the great companion—the fellow sufferer who understands" (Whitehead 1957, 413).

In this aesthetic interpretation we must acknowledge that the most sophisticated masterpiece can easily be destroyed through actions as absurd as the madman's attack against the *Pieta* in St. Peter's Basilica. Consequently, in our life there has always been a dramatic coincidence of freedom and grace. This drama of human existence cannot be expressed in the language of simple equations that describe the evolution of unsophisticated physical systems. In the same way, the dramatic content of Shakespeare's masterpieces cannot be expressed in the logical language of computer algorithms. There are no algorithms that could guarantee the beauty of human existence. The divine design for this beauty, however, can be successfully performed in harmonious cooperation between God's grace and human freedom.

NOTES

1. "God's role is not the combat of productive force with productive force, of destructive force with destructive force; it lies in the patient operation of the overpowering rationality of his conceptual harmonization. . . . He is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty and goodness" (Whitehead 1957, 408).

2. "He is the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire. His particular relevance to each creative act as it arises from its own conditioned standpoint in the world, constitutes him the initial 'object of desire' establishing the initial phase of each subjective aim. . . . He shares with every creation its actual world" (Whitehead 1957, 406).

3. A good description of various versions of theological naturalism can be found in Drees 1996.

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