

Engaging James E. Huchingson's Pandemonium Tremendum: Chaos and Mystery in the Life of God

CHAOS, COMMUNICATIONS THEORY, AND
GOD'S ABUNDANCE

by James E. Huchingson

Abstract. As the creator, God is the source of the abundance for immense variety manifest in creation. The reservoir for this abundance is the primordial chaos, identified as the *Pandemonium Tremendum*. God manages this inexhaustible "storehouse of the snow" through decisions or "willings," giving rise to constraints that result in the ordered array of creation. Without this active and decisive vigilance, the *Pandemonium Tremendum* would scour and ravage the creation. Also, as an omniscient, unobtrusive, and impartial witness, God manages the primordial chaos without compromising its unfettered variety. What is the role of chaos as the *Ungrund*? All creatures are the consequence of acts of decision. God alone is self-decisive and, hence, the uniquely sovereign creator. That is, God arises spontaneously through an aboriginal act of in-speaking. Otherwise, and in utter contradiction to its radically unprincipled character, the primordial chaos would provide the *arche* or sufficient reason for divine causation. This mythic and metaphysical account falls in the tradition of Meister Eckhart and Nicolas Berdyaev and is expressed in the rubric of communication theory.

Keywords: Nicolas Berdyaev; communication theory; cosmological question; divine sovereignty; Meister Eckhart; *Pandemonium Tremendum*; primordial chaos; *tsimtsum*; *Ungrund*; variety.

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[*Zygon*, vol. 37, no. 2 (June 2002).]

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“[THE DIVINE LIFE] is the ground of all abundance, and it is abundance itself” (Tillich 1967, 1:242). This insight from Paul Tillich is the concise theological summation of our model based on an ontology of information. The *Pandemonium Tremendum* is this source of abundance without which God could not be God. Yet, positing a reality that seems to stand apart from God, apparently capable of being characterized without any reference to God, suggests that God is not one, that God is at least two, that God draws upon some other reservoir for divine power and influence, or that God is not supremely simple and certainly not sovereign. And the suggestion that this reality, chaos, reigns with God encourages the conclusion that God cannot conquer that contrary power that frustrates the deity’s plans for an orderly creation and corrupts that order once it has been established. The present task is to mount an argument on several fronts to answer these and other questions that are stimulated by the polemic appraisal of the primordial chaos in the theological tradition. These fronts include the role of the chaos in the divine life, God’s employment and control of the chaos without compromise of its defining fury and spontaneity, and, finally, God’s self-causation as self-address.

Given the traditional assumptions about chaos, the most urgent, if not loaded, question concerns the status of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* with respect to God: How does the primordial chaos stand apart from God in defiance, a contrary, recalcitrant force that God must live with?¹

GOD AND THE *PANDEMONIUM TREMENDUM*

Variety and Vector. It matters little if the *Pandemonium Tremendum* is conceived as apart from or a part of God. On the one hand, insofar as it can be distinguished as a necessary element in the divine life and discussed accordingly, it stands apart as some “other,” demanding its own ontological status. On the other hand, God, to be God, must embrace the primordial chaos as integral to God’s own being. The inclusion of chaos within God’s life is a major reason that God is God. Here is the key: The primordial chaos does not compromise the power and perfection of God. On the contrary, it is a necessary and inseparable ally of the divine life without which Tillich’s claims for divine abundance make little sense. The primordial chaos serves God instrumentally in that it is the source of numerous capacities assigned to God, including divine sovereignty, limitlessness, and creativity.

Also, without these elements it is difficult to account for the immense variety and novelty in the creation within a theology of nature. Unless an appeal is made to the classical image of God as *actus purus*, some sense of divine creativity and some sense of divine abundance of God must be associated with the idea of the divine life, that is, of God’s dynamic, self-initiated, and productive action. The God of Thomism is a God who does not move, because, being all a divinity can be, this God of pure actuality con-

tains no potential and thus has nothing more to achieve. The *Pandemonium Tremendum* gives a power, depth, and richness to the account of God that is missing in such models of divine perfection and immutability.²

While the model proposed here speaks audaciously, almost in terms of a flow chart, of God's functioning components, the intelligibility of such a scheme opens up into mystery. The infinite field of variety is unconstrained, but these words are of the *via negativa*. The *Pandemonium Tremendum* itself is simply unimaginable. By definition it descends into the divine "heart of darkness," the *Ungrund* of the divine mystery. Creaturely chaos is really a shadow in that it consists of particular orders that mingle or move in very complex and random ways. True chaos, chaos itself, embraced by God, distinguishes God from the created order and its chaos. The unconditioned is incomparable.

Locating true chaos in God is not to suggest that God is chaotic, that God and the *Pandemonium Tremendum* are identical. The instrumental inclusion of chaos within God is a necessary premise for speaking of God, but it fails to exhaust the divine nature. In communication theory, variety and constraint, though dialectically related much like yin and yang, are equally necessary for any complete account. The same is true in God. God is at once the infinite source of variety and also the unwavering unerring source of constraint.

The *Pandemonium Tremendum* is the source of variety, but the divine will is the source of direction, the agency of determination. Will, divine or creaturely, is not easily defined. It is not identical with the intellect or with intuition or emotion. "Will" is the abstraction representing a class of determinations best described by the somewhat awkward term "willings." A willing is a specific event requiring decision and intention, or at least direction. A willing is similar to the notion of a vector in mathematics. On paper, a vector diagram is simply an arrow of specific length that indicates the magnitude and the direction of the applied force. A willing is a vector in that it specifically includes these two factors of magnitude and direction. The force is one of urge, resolve, and commitment, as in the declaration "I will do this." The direction is the specific content of the willing, the "this" that one is resolved to achieve. The abstract "will" is the capacity, power, and freedom to generate willings and to move toward their realization.

In terms of process, the will of God lies between the primordial chaos, which is the source of variety, and the creation, which is the vast and ordered array of specific beings. Indeed, the divine will is necessary for any creation at all. The primordial chaos contains its own power and energy but lacks either the supportive environment or the directive agency required for constraint to arise. The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume developed an alternative hypothesis to the design argument by using ideas taken from the Greek atomists (Hume 1970, 176–82). Perhaps,

Hume suggested, the ordered world is the accidental consequence of the descent of eternal atoms in the void. The atoms swerve, collide, and combine, thereby giving rise to some persistent order. That order is the order of the world that we perceive and erroneously attribute to an omnipotent divine craftsperson. The fall of atoms is the crude equivalent of the primordial chaos. However, the difference is crucial. The primordial chaos is incapable of generating by random processes of collision any enduring collocation of elements and events that constitute the created order. It lacks entirely any favoring environment for an abiding and durable pattern to emerge and prosper. It therefore cannot serve even as an accidental agent for creation.

Storehouse of the Snow. The ground of difference requires agency. God is necessary as the agent of specification and concretion, the one necessary metaphysical individual for Ogden. The *Pandemonium Tremendum* is, at most, a collection. Yet, even this minimal attribute is too strong, for the elements of the primordial chaos have no relations, no locus, no occupation of a common space giving them a togetherness that would appropriately be characterized, even minimally, as a primitive collection. The very extreme diffusion and dispersion of the primordial chaos means that it is unbounded and infinite. Yet, somehow, it is the source for the bounded and finite creation. The movement from chaos to cosmos is through God as willing agent. The primordial chaos serves as the reservoir or the storehouse upon which God draws for variety in the acts of transmission that subsequently result in the creation and operate to sustain it.³

Indeed, the image of the storehouse drawn from the Hebrew Bible, the book of Job, provides a metaphor that is especially fitting for this requirement for God. God interrogates Job in order to reveal his abysmal ignorance about the common and astonishing phenomena of nature. With a slight hint of rhetorical sarcasm, God asks, "Have you entered the storehouses of the snow?" (Job 38:22). Snow consists of delicate hexagonal flakes of ice, each with an intricate and novel geometrical design. As a deluge of countless exquisite flakes, a blizzard is an accurate and revealing symbol for the infinite variety of the *Pandemonium Tremendum*. Snow is sent by God, but what is its origin? A scientifically innocent fantasy would imagine a storehouse for the snow, available to God to send upon the earth. In like manner, but placed in a metaphysical framework, the primordial chaos is the storehouse of variety that God likewise releases upon the earth to create, constitute, and sustain its integrity and order. If this image is accurate, God is necessary as the power that contains the primordial chaos, the one who "stores" it and places it "at hand" as a ready source of nurturing variety.⁴

Robert Neville's notion of determinative context is useful here (see Neville 1993). Neville maintains that all things require an ontological context to

determine or condition them. The ontological context provides the field of relevance for things to be together, that is, to be mutually determinate, if only in some rudimentary way. To have a context is to have another or others about, to be among them, to be located in terms of some reference, to be a member and hence conditioned by other members. To be conditioned is to be determinate, a specified individual, a “this” with respect to a “that.” God is no exception. The creation gives the relevance for God’s determination. Consequently, it is not an incidental appendage to God’s life, a mere excrescence. Rather, in providing necessary context, the creation is a cocreative companion to God.

The vast *Pandemonium Tremendum* is unconditioned, indeterminate, and ungrounded—absolute bedlam. In this stateless state, it is unavailable instrumentally as the material source for creating and creation. Thus, God, in a manner to be explored momentarily, must provide a context for the primordial chaos such that it is made available. But this context cannot be understood as constraint placed on the infinite field of variety. For constraint would deprive the primordial chaos of its inherent potential and compromise its radical indeterminateness. The “wilderness” (*Wüste*) would be a domesticated field. Internally and intrinsically, the elements of the chaos are completely out of place, that is, nowhere, present literally to nothing. There is texture but no contexture. But without context there can be no source standing at hand for the continuous stream of variety generating and sustaining the created order.

The only way to avoid this dilemma is to grant that God confers a minimal context upon the *Pandemonium Tremendum*. This context must be sufficient to render the stuff of variety available to God as the raw material for decision and transmission. But it must not constrain the chaos and limit its inexhaustible power. God gives the primordial chaos a collective aspect, a togetherness such that it is determined to be alongside or adjacent to God. In this sense the chaos is a *complete* chaos, a totality. We might even claim that the very notion of the primordial chaos would be unintelligible (for it could never be properly characterized as “chaos” in relevant contrast to “nonchaos” and so determined in this primitive way) without this minimal determination. As the measureless context of the infinite and unbounded primordial chaos, the divine embrace raises it to the level of availability. That is, God may now take the nowhere of the chaos and employ it somewhere, anywhere God wills.

Spatial images of God’s relationship with the *Pandemonium Tremendum* are inadequate and even misleading. It is true that in some sense the chaos must be “alongside” God for there to be the requisite context allowing both God and the chaos to be distinguished and indeterminate. But making too much of God’s enclosure of the chaos is problematic, because it is in a state of infinite dispersion and any containment would compromise this necessary feature.

Witnessing Chaos. The way to resolve this dilemma is to specify the divine context of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* in terms of God's function as witness. The divine context is not one of spatial locality but of noninvasive watchfulness and attention.

As an act, knowing may be noninvasive and unintrusive while still remaining intimate, that is, complete in all details. This kind of divine knowing is similar to that found in Hebrew scripture where knowing is deep, complete, and intimate. Ironically, a necessary condition placed on divine knowledge of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* is that it impose no order, arrangement, or organization on the primordial chaos. This, of course, would compromise its function, reduce its power, and, consequently, reflect back upon God to proportionally limit divine sovereignty. God entertains the chaos by attending to its every particular and every move but without altering the perfect havoc within. That is, God does not police the chaos in any way to direct the swarm of infinitesimals by enforcing external constraints. Rather, God stands back and witnesses. Without this omniscient attention, God would be unable subsequently to utilize the chaos as a storehouse and source of messages. So, we may say that God *assays* (witnesses) the chaos as a preliminary stage, and eventually God *esays* (evaluates and composes) the chaos by employing its variety to compose the creation. God comprehends but does not apprehend the chaos. The chaos is thereby given the necessary context but without the sacrifice of its absolute unconditioned character.

It seems odd to argue for conditions placed upon God for the purpose of defending the character of absolute bedlam, reputed to be God's supreme adversary. Nonetheless, the argument is pursued for the purpose, ultimately, of redefining the divine attributes, moving away from essential to operational definitions. Any interference into the fundamental unstructured quality of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* would deny God the power and freedom to be God, since to limit the primordial chaos would be to limit the infinite source of variety from which God composes creation.

God's appreciation of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* that is unadulterated by order or arrangement includes a restriction on the divine foresight. In keeping with traditional accounts of chaos and evidence taken from instances of chaos in human experience, the primordial chaos contains motion. The chaos is not only various in its limitless manifold states, but also is variable, that is, capable of being characterized as process. The chaos is in spontaneous flux where multifarious particulars appear, vanish, and perhaps reappear unpredictably. The flux is continually shifting and wavering; the mutability of the chaos is complete and capricious. Process is necessary because the chaos is power, not only potential power that passively awaits realization by an external manipulative agent but also power in its own right, capable of exploding and spilling over into the cosmos. Further, the chaos is appropriately processive, because variability requires

it. Each possibility represented in the infinite field transforms incessantly with each passing manifestation counted as a contribution to the ever growing sum of the variety itself.

Chaos is rarely depicted as a quiescent state. From the stormy waters of Genesis to the fiery impermanence of *anicca* in Buddhism, literature, mythology, and metaphysics universally describe chaos in dramatic and violent terms. Chaos is a state of maximum excitation or, as information theorists would say, total noise. The infinite assortment of discrete states shifts incessantly with complete instability. This aspect of turbulent mixing, of elemental agitation, in the ceaseless shuffling of possibilities in a roiling chaotic broth means that God cannot predict any immediate subsequent state of the chaos, at least none based on the extrapolation of previous patterns or trends. The history of microstates offers no clues as to the future. All states are anomalous with respect to past trajectories. But here, even anomalies make no sense, for anomalies are data that fail to conform to a pattern. No pattern, no anomaly. If there were a pattern, no matter how weak, then of course the chaos would be counterfeit. Given this reality, God's knowing of the chaos is active and continuous. God cannot blink. God must "look again" to renew knowledge of the chaos, which is, by definition, always discrete and momentary. One may say that while God has no knowledge of the chaos, God knows it as the "eternal now" of God's witness.

In yet another sense, God may be spoken of as "knowing" the *Pandemonium Tremendum*. W. Ross Ashby provides an insight for this point: "A set's variety is not an intrinsic property of the set: the observer and his powers of discrimination may have to be specified if the variety is to be well defined" (Ashby 1961, 125).

The sweep of God's knowing is particular and yet cumulative. The survey is something of a continuing inventory of the possibilities of the primordial chaos. Without this survey, God's employment of the chaos as the material for creation would be impeded. Ironically, for God to use the chaos fully and avoid the predicament of Plato's Demiurge—to struggle with a resistant or inert matter—the sheer dynamic confusion of the chaos must be respected and preserved.

For God to be all-knowing, divine knowledge must extend far beyond the actual events and objects in the particular concrete world, a world that represents perhaps a tiny segment in the vast spectrum of possible worlds. Divine omnipotence must include these unactualized worlds. A God who is in partial ignorance of the potential set of messages that might be sent in order to bring about an orderly world is not very articulate. The world that comes from the messages transmitted by such a narrow-minded and inexpressive deity will be missing much of the richness and detail it could have had. Classical theology has God as the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega of history. In the sense discussed here, God is also the

Sigma, the sum of all possibilities as the source of the divine abundance.

Ashby's dictum further suggests that chaos is the equivalent of confusion in a mortal observer who is in no position to define the variety present in a complex situation. But God is not confused. God is certain about every particular of the infinite field of variety. Hence, although there is no system, there is knowledge. In the world, chaos is disorder with respect to a particular order or class of order. The *Pandemonium Tremendum*, however, is disorder with respect to any possible order or class of order. This is true except for God, whose knowledge is complete though changing, and for whom the chaos is not confusing. God's sweeping and penetrating survey of the primordial chaos is congruent with the infinite range of the field itself, and in perfect resolution of detail, even to those depths approaching the void. This combination of breadth and depth is a kind of ordering of the chaos. For order, in one of its definitions, is a state of complete knowing. If the position of every element in a random distribution is known to an observer, then that state is not chaotic for that observer. Rather, it displays a unique order, unique in the sense that its particular arrangement is not an instance of some more inclusive pattern, nor is it generated by an algorithm.

The Professor's Office. A good analogy of this rendering of omniscience along the lines suggested by Ashby's insight is a professor's disheveled office in which piles of books and papers are strewn everywhere. A student entering the office will, to paraphrase Mark Twain, have to take soundings in order to navigate through the clutter. In the absence of any rhyme or reason to serve as a guide, the student will be in a state of complete uncertainty with respect to the location of any particular item. However, the professor, far from being absentminded, can locate any item without hesitation. Unlike the ignorant student, the professor's certainty resides in the knowledge of the whole territory in absolute detail—in all its microstates. For the professor in his office, no pattern exists, but certainty does.

God may be said to possess knowledge of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* in the same way the professor possesses total knowledge of the office. God's inventory is complete for any combination of microstates that the system of variety assumes in its constant shuffling. Each state is preserved with respect to its "leastness," understood as absolute context independence, simplicity, and irreducibility. God's perception of the chaos is not derived inductively from existing patterns, but individually. Each infinitesimal microstate is an object of divine attention in its pure context-independent status. Knowledge of particulars rather than of collections is perhaps the only way the chaos can be known without compromising its fundamental autonomy. A field of infinite difference requires unlimited discrimination or resolution. God's survey of the chaos is inclusive yet discrete. Divine

discretion is just this absolute and undivided attention paid to “the least of these,” even to the depths of the chaos. God’s perfect distinguishing of the infinitely subtle states of the chaos can be identified partially with the divine omniscience. God’s powers of discrimination are unlimited (an understanding of omniscience), and God’s powers to communicate and create are also unlimited (an understanding of omnipotence).

With respect to God, the delicate task of envisioning the *Pandemonium Tremendum* is to know its content without containing, constraining, or otherwise introducing bias into the complete bedlam. Since, as we shall see, creaturely perception requires some sort of prior selection process before something definite is known, the divine perception of primordial chaos cannot be modeled after the perception of creatures. Even the Whiteheadian deity grades and ranks the eternal ideas in order of relevance among themselves and in terms of their compatibility with the order of the real world. For the God who keeps the storehouse of the chaos, this process of grading cannot be the case, for it would be utterly destructive of the potential of the chaos for creation and constitute a limit on the power of God overall. Thus, God’s perception of the microstates of the chaos must be completely indifferent, at this point, with respect to their instrumental or intrinsic value in any divine scheme or plans.

Sigma and Sovereignty. Divine sovereignty, a combination of power and the freedom to exercise it unconditionally, is in turn based in the divine omnipotence. God’s complete survey of the *Pandemonium Tremendum*, from Alpha to Omega through the process of Sigma, or summation, renders the elusive and freestanding microstates of the chaos available to God in the process of self-constitution and eventually for creation as well. God’s functions as witness (this unbiased inventory) and agent (the implementation or shaping of the material of chaos in communication) are inextricably connected, as they are in the human creature and, indeed, in all intentional beings. God’s actions, though they may be analyzed into antecedent and subsequent phases, are nonetheless accomplished in one continuous sweep. It is in this seamless process that one may speak of deity as “simple” or claim that all of God’s necessary attributes are necessarily unified in such a fashion that to speak of one is to speak of all.

God surveys the *Pandemonium Tremendum* with impartiality, for partiality would mean a movement away from the equiprobability of any microstate. This bias or preference would predispose the chaos away from its unconditioned state to one with built-in bias. Without this bias, the elements of the chaos are properly neither here nor there, and that is exactly where they must be. The entire field of variety is circumviewed by God, who takes inventory of its microstates through summation or tally yet holds each distinctly in sight. In this sense of summation, God contains the primordial chaos without restriction. The mathematical process

of summation or simple counting serves better than the metaphorical image of spatial containment of the infinitely dispersed field of variety. God “counts” the microstates and, subsequently, “counts on” this variety.

That God counts on the *Pandemonium Tremendum* as the source of divine abundance renders the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing) inconsistent with the system we are proposing. The doctrine receives extensive support from most theologians. Philip Clayton gives voice to this support when he says, “The theological significance of a creation out of nothing cannot be overestimated” (Clayton 1997, 21). The main reason for such enthusiastic endorsement is that some sort of eternal material alongside God would be coercive, limit the divine freedom, and compromise God as the single source of all reality. But acknowledging the idea is no easy thing, for its acceptance includes the obligation to explain how the only alternative, pantheism—the creation of the world out of God’s own being—is avoided. Most responses include appeals initially to omnipotence and eventually to mystery. It seems that the idea was embraced by early Christian theologians, not because it was persuasive but because it was protective. To some extent, *creatio ex nihilo* is a defensive doctrine intended to refute charges of a compromised and weakened deity if some coeternal material were allowed.

The assumption that a coeternal reality to God would fatally compromise divine sovereignty is not the case for the *Pandemonium Tremendum*. In actuality, the primordial chaos serves as the source of divine power and freedom and is the storehouse for the abundance that originates and nourishes the creation. Recognizing its copresence with God simply acknowledges these contributions. Moreover, the primordial chaos is no antagonist to God. It represents the grounds of all possibility and is available to God on call as the vocabulary of the divine speaking out.

SHIELDING THE CREATION FROM CHAOS

On the Leeward Side of God. The problem presented by the primordial chaos is not for God, but for the creation. As its name suggests, the *Pandemonium Tremendum* is not a passive, bounded region of moderate activity. It is nothing but trouble. The fundamental feature of absolute dissipation compounds the inherent fury of the chaos by expelling its power radiantly. If this profound volatility alone were the case, then the cosmos would never arise, for any region of order would be devoured immediately upon its birth. Chaos may be the necessary material cause of the world, but an appeal to it for the complete explanation for the world is insufficient because it cannot behave itself.

For there to be a creation, God must fulfill several responsibilities. One is to channel requisite variety into the cosmic regions, where it builds order. God nurtures the world by releasing impounded variety provisionally,

or, to use a stronger image, God pumps a rationed and rational (in the sense of proportion) quantity of variety as the material for the construction of orders in creation and creaturely systems. A second major responsibility of deity is to contain the chaos as it strikes out insanely against any attempt to contain its dissipative ferocity. God shields the cosmos against this surge. Resting on the leeward side of God, the order of the cosmos is divinely protected from being swept away.⁵

In between chaos and cosmos lies the entire range of regulated flow. The degree of this regulation is the result of God exercising powers of separation and decision. Divine agency is exclusively the agency of communication. God's power to transmit is itself without limits; otherwise, God would be unable to baffle the *Pandemonium Tremendum* entirely. The margins of the containment would leak daunting variety. This consequence of spillage onto the creation is what one would expect of a lesser god or demiurge.⁶

God halts the dissipation of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* by containing it in an envelope of constant decision. These decisions gather variety into differentiated regions, the regions of yes and no. They are the first order of business for God—the primordial determination that provides material for the creation itself. Differentiation is the origination of all order. It is as primitive as waves separating from the smooth featureless surface of the sea. But it is enough to baffle the expanding squall of chaos. It proceeds no further.

The baffling of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* is nothing like constructing a firewall or partition. It more closely resembles a chess match in which one player knows all the possible moves on the board and uses this exhaustive knowledge to counter the opponent at every turn. This, of course, was the intention of Deep Blue, the IBM computer that challenged reigning world chess champion Gary Kasparov.⁷ God's interdiction ("to speak between") of the primordial chaos is similarly the divine countermove for the random excursions of every infinitesimal.

Does divine interdiction contradict the earlier insistence that God must not violate the *Pandemonium Tremendum* if it is to perform as the unlimited source of God's abundance? Perhaps, but we should emphasize that the power of God to interdict is the consequence of God's own variety—it takes variety to counter variety—and the sole source of God's variety is the primordial chaos. Hence, the chaos can be baffled only through the preservation of its own infinite and chaotic character. God fights fire with fire.

This metaphysical description of divine interdiction of primordial chaos has a profound theological message as well. In a mythic and metaphysical interpretation, John Haught makes the important point that the divine *kenosis* (the self-emptying or self-limiting of God), usually reserved for discussions of Christology, may be imaginatively applied to the creation, especially when combined with insights from kabbalistic Judaism. Haught's reference to Michael Wyschogrod's interpretation makes the connection

nicely: “[The kabbalists] invoked the notion of *tsimtsum*, by which they meant that the absolute God, whose being fills all being, withdraws from a certain region, which is thus left with the being thinned out in it, and in this thinned out region man [the cosmos] exists” (Wyschogrod 1983, 9–10, quoted in Haught 1998, 242). With respect to our scheme, what is “thinned out” is the *Pandemonium Tremendum*, whose omnipresence would frustrate the nascent creation. The divine kenotic act is to baffle the primordial chaos, protecting the creation from its overwhelming power.

THEOGONY

The Cosmological Question. In a broader and more inclusive sense, the subject of creation is not limited to a discussion of the first chapters of Genesis. Creation does not begin with “In the beginning . . .,” because God was already present in that beginning. The audacious mind will push the inquiry further into the metaphysical past, asking, “What is the beginning of God?” Classical theism has always considered this question of ultimate priority to be nonsense, or at least to rest on a complete misunderstanding of the nature of God as no more than a very great being whose attributes, equally great, are nonetheless similar to the characteristics of any existing being. In the language of ontology, God’s essence is existence. God cannot be conceived as not existing, any more than a triangle can be conceived without three angles. Triangularity is as necessary for the concept of triangle as existence is for the concept of God. Since no creature enjoys necessary existence, each creature is contingent, and questions about its cause are legitimate. But God is not contingent, and the question of a cause for God is nonsensical.

Furthermore, to qualify as God, a being must possess several additional unique attributes, including eternity and omnipotence. In practical terms, that which is eternal by definition has no beginning. The question of birth cannot be put to it. With respect to omnipotence, a being of infinite power has no peer or rival, no other being who could be the cause of its arising. With respect to both attributes, God is everlasting.

The deity of classical theism is itself the unconditioned power of being. Consequently, it endures none of the predicaments of finite, creaturely beings, including the necessity of being caused to be and the fate of ceasing to be. In any event, if the true nature of divinity is rightly grasped, the question of its cause simply vanishes.

However, for certain models of divinity, the question of divine origin is valid. In process theism, inspired by Whitehead, God is an individual, ubiquitous and everlasting, a very special individual, to be sure, but nonetheless one whose explanation is not clearly contained in its existence. God and creation share a common status. It is just that God is the maximal individual, while creation consists of countless other individuals who col-

lectively depend on God to shepherd them. This total system of God and world has no obvious explanation. It simply is, and, according to Whitehead, always has been. This is a universe similar to the one described by Bertrand Russell as the one brute fact, by which he meant that, although the universe is contingent, it has no first cause; it always was and will be. Perhaps, as some have argued, the vaunted principle of sufficient reason applies to particular things in the universe but not to the universe itself, in which case the adventure of reason ends finally in absurdity: the existence of a total contingent system without an originating cause. This inexplicable givenness of the cosmos, seemingly by magic out of nowhere, is hardly satisfying.

The model we are proposing transparently resembles Whitehead's system, albeit with several very real differences. It therefore is subject to the same problem, the so-called cosmological question (Owen 1971, 52). The cosmological question is valid because the system of God and world seems to have no grounding beyond its own structure. It sits upon nothing. Whitehead conceded as much when he wrote, "God is the ultimate limitation, and his existence is the ultimate irrationality" (Whitehead 1925, 221–22). Classical theism, in contrast, has a powerful grounding, the infinite ground of being, being itself, for which the question of sufficient reason (why does the God of being exist?) fails to apply.

A response to the problem involves both mythic and metaphysical elements, a kind of *Urgeschichte*, or primordial history, about the timeless "once" that logically precedes the "once upon a time." The mythic narrative about a series of connected occurrences is about realities that are beyond time. What sufficient grounding can we identify for the chaos-God-creation system proposed here?

Plenteous Emptiness: The Void-Plenum. We submit that the chaos, or *Pandemonium Tremendum*, is the proper source of that grounding. As described earlier, chaos mediates between radical nonbeing (*ouk-on*) and relative nonbeing (*me-on*). The chaos is transformed by continuous degree as its microstates descend into ever greater regions of multiplicity and dispersion. The image is one of a deepening maelstrom of pure indeterminateness populated with riotous particulars in complete context independence. The limit of this descent is the void. The primordial chaos consists of microstates that approach *ouk-on* asymptotically.

The *Pandemonium Tremendum* is theoretically without context, too, unbounded and unconditioned. But, effectively, God, in the divine surveillance of the chaos, provides a type of context, not so much for the whole, the collective, as for each microstate with respect to God, but not with respect to one another. God is the great determiner, on the one hand, but also the unobtrusive witness, on the other. The void, residing at the depths of the primordial chaos, is plumbed by God yet remains itself without context.

The meonic reality of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* (its noise), its potency, fades with the manyness of its microstates or infinitesimals into a radical emptiness (its silence). It would be tempting to characterize this emptiness as the void or abyss, but that would be misleading. While it is literally nothing, it is what remains when nothing is left or, more appropriately, when all is present. The primordial chaos in its dispersion and its infinity may equally be characterized as a plenum, an infinite multiplicity. The chaos is the *Ungrund*, the fundament and basin of the divine life, the ground and groundlessness of God, eternal and uncaused, at once the answer to the cosmological question and the most profound mystery.

The conclusion of this story is that, if the *Pandemonium Tremendum* contains radical nonbeing, then the cosmological question has a possible answer. Nonbeing is accounted for within the framework of fundamental things. The primordial chaos is grounded in absolutely nothing. All creation takes place from the power of the chaos through the will of God. In an absolute sense, it is *creatio ex nihilo*.

God's Self-creative In-speaking. The task remaining in this proposal as a solution to the cosmological question is to account for God as will and intention, as the agent who shapes the stuff of chaos into creation.

Perhaps a word of caution is prudent here. The following speculative account of how God achieves determinateness by arising from the *Pandemonium Tremendum* may seem excessively primordial and metaphysical—some distant preface to Genesis 1:1. The intention is to continue the story of the primordial chaos, God, and creation progressively and coherently. The landscape upon which this scene is played out is the far country encountered by any attempt to push the margins of the imagination and stretch ordinary language to describe extraordinary situations. To this extent, the scene differs little in character from descriptions of the quantum field out of which the initial singularity spontaneously appeared as the seed of the Big Bang and eventually our sprawling universe. Also, this account, though possibly strange to monotheists, may well resonate comfortably with Hindus, Taoists, and Buddhists, whose traditions deal with limit situations all the time.

God represents the power of decision. For anything to be requires decision, the yea or nay regarding a set of possible messages, signals, or states. But this God is also the result of such an act. *Theogony*, the birth of God (Hesiod 1983) is really the arising of a conditioned particular reality (God as will, witness, and intention) from the primordial ground of the unconditioned. God is born out of an act of self-address, an aboriginal posit, spontaneous and unattended, from which God derives God's own context, thereby giving God determination to be the great determiner.

The idea here is that God is constituted, actually self-constituted, by an internal act of communication, wherein variety taken from the *Pandemonium Tremendum* is configured to give content to the divine will. The

question is thus, How does God arise *causa sui* as a determinate reality, given the account of the primordial chaos? One response lies in the concept of context. Context dependence and thus determinateness means to have an *other*. Absolute simplicity, that state attributed to divinity in refined yet uncompromising fashion by medieval theology, actually results in no God at all because the requisite other is missing. To be is to speak and be spoken to. “When we are silent we are one, when we speak we are two” (de Boer 1974, quoted in Peacocke 1979, 138). The appearance of God is the primordial posit, the aboriginal taking place, the divine self-creation of God as out-spoken in the creation of the other as context. The originating seed of divinity is the primordial bit, the yes or no that is reduced to zero bits by a great decision to be rather than not. God separates from the primordial chaos through this spontaneous declaration and takes a stand in it. Henceforth, both God and creation become possible as mutual others, partners in a common context.

Meister Eckhart (d. 1327), the great German mystic, envisioned divinity in a radical and yet similar way. On the one hand, Eckhart speaks of the Godhead, an ultimate state beyond existence and nonexistence. On the other hand, God comes forth from the Godhead into being and engages the creation. Indeed, creatures have significant say in the becoming of this God: “God ‘becomes’ God,” writes Eckhart, “when all creatures speak God forth: there ‘God’ is born” (Eckhart 1994, 234). This “God,” while possessing all the attributes appropriate to a singular deity, including eminent being, is nonetheless apart from the Godhead. Eckhart speaks of God residing in the *parvis*, or outer sanctuary of the temple, rather than within the heart of the Godhead (Eckhart, “*Renovamini spiritu*,” cited in Almond 2000, 331).

Eckhart’s vision of deity resembles the communication model in several respects. His Godhead corresponds to the *Pandemonium Tremendum* where absolute noise and silence coincide in a state beyond being. His God is the engaging conversational deity who emerges from the primordial chaos and self-completes by breaking this noise-silence in out-speaking the creation as other. “All creatures” subsequently talk back, and God (who resembles Janus, the Roman god of the threshold, in facing both chaos and creation) becomes determinative through this cocreative context.

The notion of some preexisting divine *telos* or generative Platonic form of God is not part of the process of divine self-arising.⁸ Where would this form come from? It could not be part and parcel of the primordial chaos; that option is denied by the teleologically indifferent nature of the chaos as the formless and noisy abyss.⁹ If God is will that draws upon the chaos as the material source of its content, there can be no eternal principle, no *arche* or *logos*, that God actualizes. The content of the divine will is therefore not a result of the realization of some divine essence. It must be completely spontaneous.

Indeed, an etiological myth about the very beginnings even of God's self-communication could include a primordial utterance, an original spontaneous sound (resembling, perhaps, the "Om" sung out by Brahma, the Hindu god of creation, as the vibratory essence of the creation). Then, as one might reasonably continue in verse 2 of this genesis of God, the divine will constructs or integrates its own certainty around the nucleus of this aboriginal utterance before turning to the task of creating the world. God constitutes God through the act of surveying variety, selecting from its richness, and self-sending a message. Uncertainty is relieved, even in God, in this sense. God then constructs a new synthesis from this material by taking bearings and constructing the divine life.

The oddness of an internal conversation in God is not so strange if we relate it to what commonly goes on inside our heads. Thinking requires language. But how does the mind assemble the words to have a thought? The perplexing quandary is that in order to express a thought one must have "something to say" that directs the selection of proper words or phrases to build a statement that conveys the thought. Indeed, sometimes we know what we want to say but we can't find the right words. In what way or mode is that initial thought present in the mind briefly before it is rendered into language? Prior to any articulation, the thought resides in the shadows of the subconscious as intuition and intention. Finding the words is a selection process in which one draws upon a vocabulary and then conveys the words as messages to one's self. The will or pregnant intention, the latent thought, may then be expressed in no uncertain terms. The creative act of divine self-communication is the simple unbroken movement from willing to a definite result.

Through communicating, or in-speaking, God becomes more than simple will. Divine willings become possible as definite distinguishable elements. A *logos* arises concurrently with the primal act of self-definition. The *logos*, as Tillich says, opens up the divine ground and its darkness and makes its fullness distinguishable and definite (Tillich 1967, 1:251). This *logos* is the continuous process of discrimination out of which God constitutes the divine being with certainty. The *logos* is this certainty that itself becomes the consequent principle for the selection of further variety and the communication of ever more complex messages in an everlasting process of raveling and constructive reflection. God speaks God's word, initially internally in the act of self-composition and then externally in the out-spoken act of creation. Through this process God becomes a unified center of decision.

We are mistaken if we understand information only in a narrow technical sense as a quantitative measure of the raw material of communication that passes through a channel on its way from output to input, from speaker to listener. Information is power, if by power we mean to select and evoke, to shape and build with high resolve. Speech is the most obvious mode of

communication. It is a medium of information, and, like information, it is the exercise of power, and in this case, the very process out of which God self-constructs.

Divine Sovereignty and the Pandemonium Tremendum. Divine sovereignty is often interpreted as the absence of any restraint or condition upon God's being and actions. Power and freedom are connected. Clearly, in the theological scheme of things we are describing, divine power resides in God's willings as they draw upon the primordial chaos as their material expression. This infinite potency exists as a necessary attribute of deity. The prevailing assumption is that the chaos is over against God and that God overcomes its terrible confusion through the exercise of divine power, the source of which is certainly not that freestanding chaos. Far from being frustrated by the chaos or required to overcome it, God's freedom and power are enabled by chaos. Absolute sovereignty in God requires a limitless source of potency that can only be the infinite field of variety, the *Pandemonium Tremendum*.

God is God, first of all, as the original lord, the author of the primordial creative posit, the original decision, based on nothing, that provided the single event from which all subsequent events take their bearings. This first act is the only act of pure spontaneity since it is based on no prior settled context and no preexisting principle of *arche*. It is the parent seed for contingency and contributes to an explanation for the radical contingency of the creation. For, if the cosmos were based on a structure derived from an eternal principle, the cosmos would itself share in both its eternity and necessity. The constitutive creative event is the one true act of anarchy, and its product, the creation, contingent. This is one understanding of what theology means when it speaks of both the sovereignty of God and the *creatio ex nihilo*. God is constrained by nothing, and the birth of the creation is triggered by no previous impulse. The initial act is radically free and spontaneous.

The divine primordial posit becomes the context or bearing for further development. God provides the original bounds as well as the original orientation. This, indeed, is what it means to be a creature—to take one's bearings from God.

This is a strong sense of divine sovereignty in that there is no compelling reason why God would do this rather than that, or even do anything at all. Divine sovereignty means no less than complete spontaneity, at least insofar as it is experienced from our side through the limited vision of finite creatures. Far from being capricious and arbitrary, God, of course, has reasons beyond our know. Karl Barth is one theologian who insisted on this view. It provided him with the basis for a theology founded on the absolute transcendence of deity. Barthian categories of lofty majesty, holiness, and glory are based in the supreme self-determination of God, and

they are certainly compatible with our model. But here Barth diverges from our program. He insists that God remains in essence unknowable except insofar as God is voluntarily self-disclosing. Divine aseity is the key to divine sovereignty. It seems that this communication model does not suffer from this fault. God's utter sovereignty is protected and assured in the model. The *Pandemonium Tremendum* is a way of making divine independence plausible. God is liberated from all constraint (negative freedom), and God is the source of absolute abundance or potential (positive freedom). Together, these give us a God who is capable of steadfastness and novelty. The storehouse of the snow is inexhaustible.

At this point we are patrolling the border between the provinces of negative and positive theology, between metaphysical accounts of the divine life and the *Mysterium* itself. Barth's view inspires a radical claim that is by no means rare in Christian theology: "In the first act of creation, God appears as the creator of the world. . . . Out of the divine nothing, the *Gottheit*, or the *Ungrund*. . . . God the creator is born" (Berdyayev 1960, 87; see also Hefner 1984). Theology has consistently testified to a certain duplexity in the divine nature. The Greek fathers denominate the deity into the "unoriginate," or *Agenetos*, the uncontained or invisible, and the living, expressive, redeeming, engaging, and responsive Yahweh of biblical testimony. For Meister Eckhart, these were the *Gottheit* and *Gott* respectively (Otto 1960, 30). Hindu speculation categorizes them as Nirguna and Saguna Brahman. The Tao Te Ching speaks of the "Nameless" and "Named" Tao, and Tillich has his "God beyond God." In this model, we have the *Pandemonium Tremendum* and God.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to refurbish the reputation of the primordial chaos by recognizing its contributions, first to the divine life and second to the creation, in terms taken from communication theory. Far from being a mythological fiery dragon or storm god dispatched by a prevailing warrior divinity, the *Pandemonium Tremendum* is the reason for God's absolute sovereignty and the limitless source of variety for the creation. God manages the primordial chaos through the witness of a complete internal survey and the embrace of external acts of decision. Included within this embrace are the grounding of the chaos in *ouk-on*—absolute nonbeing—and the in-speaking of God in the act of self-creation. Together, these accounts provide one answer to the cosmological problem and reinforce the irreducible theological declaration of divine sovereignty.

NOTES

1. Very few theologians and philosophers have considered this question. One is Christian Ehrenfels in his *Cosmogony* (1948; also excerpted in Charles Hartshorne and William Reese's

Philosophers Speak of God [1953, 352–57]). In this selection, Ehrenfels writes, “The infinite something in which God works, we can think of only negatively, as the opposite of all that characterizes God. We call it Chaos. God and Chaos constitute the world. . . . All unity and universality come from God, all manifoldness from Chaos. Without Chaos God would be just as incapable of producing the world, as Chaos without God” (p. 343). While this description fits nicely into our account of God and chaos, reading further discloses a dualism in Ehrenfels that distinguishes his system from our own. His Chaos is the antagonist locked in an eternal quarrel with God from which arises the creation. Our *Pandemonium Tremendum* is the very source of the manifoldness of creation.

2. Despite our preference for a process-style divinity, the model of God as the unmoved mover of pure act is, surprisingly, compatible with communication theory, at least upon first thought. The set of messages available to a transmitting agent may be settled and determined. Only the waiting receiver is uncertain about which messages to expect. Donald MacKay (1978, 38–39) makes this point nicely: “If I offer to read out to you the sequence of digits down the right-hand column of your local telephone directory, the probability-for-you that the last digit (or any digit) will be 9 may be 1 in 10. But for the people at the exchange, every digit is fully specified, and talk of probability would be pointless. . . . [The directory] is so highly ordered that not a single misprint could be tolerated.”

If the numbers in the phone book can be likened to the ensemble of actualized forms that constitute the impassable Thomistic deity as already determined, then the transmission to creatures constitutes the relief of their uncertainty as they progress toward the fullness prepared for them by God.

3. For further development of this notion of reservoir, see Heidegger 1977.

4. This account is a version of Alfred North Whitehead’s “Ontological Principle.” Causally put, that principle requires that everything must be somewhere. For Whitehead, the only place this could be is in an actual occasion. Beyond or between actual occasions lies “nothing, nothing, nothing.” Whitehead’s presiding and everlasting actual occasion is God, in whom are located the eternal objects—potential forms for all transitory actual occasions that make up the world (Griffin and Sherburne 1978, 19).

5. In Christianity, the calming of the storm and the stilling of the sea by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (4:35–41) is a story indicating that Jesus possessed God’s power to command chaos to obey his will for the protection of the endangered.

6. In fact, this option is one of several available to theodicy, the theological attempt to justify God, given the presence of evil in the world. By questioning God’s omnipotence (defined here in part as the baffling of the primordial chaos), the greater attribute, God’s omnibenevolence, can be salvaged. God wants to shield the creation but can’t.

7. Of course, the analogy can be carried only so far. In its first match with Kasparov in 1996, the computer was defeated. A rematch one year later had different results. After receiving additional information from its handler programmers about contextual situations, the machine was victorious.

8. For an excellent argument against eternal guiding principles in the Godhead, see Hall 1978.

9. The model under discussion here is governed by the ideal of parsimony or elegance. Proliferating or multiplying modes in the divine life unnecessarily violates this principle.

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