Religious Studies (2024), 1–8
doi:10.1017/S0034412524000349

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is 'orthodox panentheism' unorthodox? A response to James Dominic Rooney

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(Received 4 January 2024; revised 28 May 2024; accepted 29 May 2024)

Abstract

James Dominic argues in response to a previous article by me that the view according to which God is the formal cause of creatures is unorthodox and ultimately incoherent. This is because it involves either making God a part of creatures, or dividing God into finite parts, both of which, he claims, lead to contradictions with traditional Christian claims. However, Rooney both misunderstands central parts of my presentation, and fails to make his case.

Keywords: panentheism; philosophy of religion; philosophical theology

Introduction

In 'On Orthodox Panentheism' (Carey 2024) I try to present a conception of the God–world relation which (a) is more intimate than the *folk* conception one tends to find in theistic religions, where God is thought of as a distinct person more or less like us (except better and more powerful and without a body), and yet (b) safeguards God's absolute transcendence and avoids collapsing into a simplistic version of pantheism where God and the world are simply identical. This conception is inspired by the writings of important Church Fathers from the Greek-speaking 'Eastern' tradition of Christianity, and tries to capture the idea that God really is immanent in all things while yet being utterly unique. Thus, I call it 'Orthodox Panentheism'–it is meant to be orthodox in being based on various strands in the mainstream (especially distinctively 'Eastern Orthodox') Christian tradition, as well as a version of panentheism insofar as it straddles the line between thinking of God as just another being alongside the universe and thinking of God and the universe as being one and the same thing.

I am not the first person to suggest such a view, and not even the first to do so from an Eastern Orthodox perspective.[1] But for many philosophers, the bare statement of such a view seems intolerably vague. Even if we grant that the claim that God is in all things, or all things are in God, is spread throughout the tradition, that doesn't yet amount to a distinctive metaphysical picture. What does it mean, exactly, to say that God is in all things and all things are in God? In what sense are these claims to be understood? I try to make this at least a little bit clearer.

In the original article, I introduced the view by way of a quick overview of a certain Platonic metaphysical inheritance in thinking about the forms or essences of things. For

now I will just jump to the two pinnacle figures of Byzantine thinking on creation and note two foundational claims: St Maximus the Confessor says that 'In himself, God is not known; insofar, however, as he is origin and end of all things, he is the simplicity of the simple, the life of the living, the superessential essence of essences and finally the fulfillment of all that is good' (Ambigua (PG 91, 1257B); quoted in Balthasar (2003), 86). St Gregory Palamas says that:

> God both is and is said to be the nature of all things, in so far as all things partake of him and subsist by means of this participation … In this sense he is the Being of all beings, the Form that is in all forms as the Author of form, the Wisdom of the wise and, simply, the All of all things. (in Palmer et al. 1986, 382)

However, St Gregory in particular also insists on making a distinction between God's *essence*, namely, God as he is in himself, and God's *energies*, namely, God as he reveals himself in his creative activity. This distinction is meant to help secure both knowledge of, and participation in, God. Following the earlier Cappadocian Fathers, St Gregory believes the divine essence is incomprehensible and unknowable. He also, like them, conceives of salvation in large part as *theosis*, or deification: our becoming Godlike through our participation in God. But if God is by nature unknowable, how can we worship or speak truly of him? And if God is simple essence only, how can we participate in him without being simply absorbed into the Godhead?

The answer to both questions for St Gregory Palamas is to be found in the divine energy or activity ('activity' being a common translation of the Greek *energeia*). We know God through his activity of and within creation, and we also participate in this divine activity in a more and more complete way as we are perfected. But God's activities are not, like our activities, disconnected and imperfect expressions of a changeable nature performed within time. They are rather perfect 'uncreated' expressions of the essence, and the primary referents for all that can be truly said of God. Thus, in a real sense, 'each divine power and each energy is God himself' (Meyendorff 1974, 214). Thus, to participate in God's energies/activities is to participate in God himself, but not in a way that makes one literally part of the Godhead. One does not come to share in God's essence, but in God's self-expression, if I may put it that way. The deified person is not God by nature, but God by grace (as St Maximus sometimes puts it)–and this grace just is God acting within creation.

My suggestion, in trying to describe a coherent and informative version of Orthodox panentheism, is to combine these two sets of ideas together. On the one hand, we have the claim that God is the simplicity of the simple, the superessential Essence of essences, the Being of all beings, the Form that is in all forms. On the other, we have the distinction between God's unknowable and imparticipable essence and his participable energies, in which he is nevertheless wholly present. When we put these together, we arrive at the possible view that God is in all things in the (more) precise sense that his creative activities/energies constitute the forms of things, and it is by participation in these energies (and thus God himself) that beings receive their being. God is 'in us' as actively making and constituting us as what we are; we are 'in God' in that we participate in his creative energy, which just *is* God in his mode of being *ad extra*.

This is the view I called 'Orthodox Panentheism.' It seems to me a distinctive approach to the God–world relation which is genuinely orthodox, deserves to be called a form of panentheism, and yet is not simply a vague statement of the idea that God and the world are somehow reciprocally 'in' one another.

In a recent response to my article, however, Fr. James Dominic Rooney, OP, raises a series of objections to the view. He argues that it is not an orthodox view (i.e. that it does not

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000349 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fit with the writings of the Church Fathers it is based on), and that it is in fact incoherent (Rooney, forthcoming). It is to these objections that I would now like to turn.

Clearing up some misunderstandings on method

Before getting to the deeper philosophical and theological objections, I do want to clear up a couple of the worries Rooney raises, and claims he makes about my approach, which seem to me simply based on misunderstandings. The first is his complaint near the end that I create a false dilemma by defining 'theism' as the view that 'God [exists] "alongside" the world he created,' and thus that I '[seem] to be confusing theism with *deism*' (Rooney, forthcoming, 10). This is a false dilemma, he says, because it leaves out the classical theistic view of things, where the 'world is simply not autonomous in *any* way concerning what it is or that it is,' and which thus gives us a perfectly intimate picture of the God–world relation without needing to move to panentheism (Rooney, forthcoming, 10).

This is an odd complaint since I spend a large part of my introduction explicitly contrasting what Brian Davies calls 'classical theism' and what he calls 'theistic personalism,' and making clear that the primary view I am opposing to my own approach is the latter, which seems to me mainstream both in folk Christianity and in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. I don't fail to acknowledge the existence of Davies's and Rooney's more scholastic version of classical theism, nor do I really try to argue, as Rooney claims, that Greek theology took a 'better path' than the Latin west. As I say in the final section of the introduction, my goal was just to explicate what seemed to me a genuinely distinct and interesting development in the Byzantine tradition that is too little known and discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion.

The second worry I'll discuss here is Rooney's complaint about my treatment of the sources. Near the beginning of the article, I include a fairly long list of quotations from patristic sources spread throughout the Greek theological tradition which come across as strikingly 'panentheistic'-sounding. Gregory of Nyssa saying that 'God clothes himself with the universe, and at the same time contains it,' Athanasius saying that God exists as 'enclosing all things and enclosed by none,' 'within all things according to his goodness and power, yet without according to his proper nature.' St Gregory the Theologian calling God 'an endless, boundless Ocean of Being,' who 'contains and possesses the whole of existence in himself,' etc.[2]

In response to this, Rooney insists that 'none of the "proof texts" Carey points to in the patristic tradition support his extrapolations' (Rooney, forthcoming, 3). Again, this simply misunderstands my use of the quotations in the context of the dialectic of the article. My aim in the beginning of the article was just to lay out the idea of panentheism as a distinctive view of the God–world relation, one where God is neither a being alongside the world nor simply identified within it, but where God is both really fully immanent and fully transcendent. The point of the patristic quotations was just to show that the most important theological writers in the early Greek-speaking Church said things which seem on their face to indicate they had a view of God that fits that description of panentheism. It is only after the fact that I try to give a somewhat speculative interpretation of the *sense* in which we can say that God is fully immanent in creation.

In other words, my aim was never to do historical exegesis, and I fully admit that my view goes beyond what we find in the quotations I give. None of the Church Fathers ever says, in exactly these terms, that God himself is fully immanent in all created things by, in his creative energies, constituting the forms that make them what they are. And this is at least in part because none of them was concerned with giving a theory of the God–world relation as such.

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On the other hand, I don't want to concede this point fully, either. I think it is fairly uncontroversial to think of St Maximus the Confessor and St Gregory Palamas as the pinnacles and highest points of the Byzantine tradition developed by those earlier writers. In the earlier writers, we get strikingly panentheistic-sounding claims without full elaboration. In St Maximus and St Gregory, on the other hand, we do in fact get the pretty clear claims that God is the 'life of the living and the superessential essence of all essences,' and the 'Being of all beings' and the 'Form that is in all forms as the author of form.' If Rooney is correct, then we need some good explanation for why these later figures, at least, are not saying what they clearly seem to be saying.

Where Rooney's discussion of the sources presents more substantive challenges, it seems to me to beg questions that cannot be settled without further argument. For example, he claims that looking at the wider context of one of the quotes from St Gregory of Nyssa shows that he 'presupposes – contrary to Carey's reading–that creation *ex nihilo* is opposed to the possibility that material objects compose a part of God and thereby render God composite, or vice versa, that God could be a component of creation' (Rooney, forthcoming, 5). The problem is that my reading does *not* claim that material objects 'compose a part of' God or make God composite, nor that God (in his nature, at least) is 'a component of' creation. I certainly never say such things. Rooney may think my view *implies* such claims, but it begs the question simply to assume it does at this stage in the discussion. He must argue the case. In the next section, I turn to some of the relevant arguments he gives.

Is Orthodox Panentheism incoherent or unorthodox?

Let me now try to address some of the more substantive concerns that Fr. Rooney raises. I must admit that it is difficult for me to find any clear statement of an *argument* for the conclusion that the view I present is incoherent. As far as I can tell, what Rooney is really trying to argue when he says it is 'incoherent' is that the view is *internally inconsistent* insofar as it claims to be orthodox and yet leads to contradictions when put alongside other orthodox positions like *creatio ex nihilo*, or the claim that creatures are not divine by nature.

Even so, it is still not easy to find in Rooney's discussion a clearly articulated argument to which to respond. Many of the arguments seem to me simply to fail to make the essence/energy distinction that is the whole foundation of the view. For example, in discussing some of the passages I quote from Church Fathers, he repeatedly draws attention to qualifying statements made. Yes, Gregory of Nyssa says God is 'clothed' by the universe, but he also aims to 'preserve a distinction between divine and human nature' (Rooney, forthcoming, 4) and insists that 'the Word is not identical with creation' (Rooney, forthcoming, 5). Yes, St Maximus says that the Word 'contained within Himself the preexisting *logoi* of created beings,' and that all things 'participate in God in a manner appropriate and proportionate to each.' But, he also insists that God is 'beyond all being, and is not participated in by any being whatsoever' (Rooney, forthcoming, 6). And so on. But all of that is precisely the point of the panentheistic view I present: to protect the sense in which God is both in all things (and all things in God), and the sense in which God is completely outside of everything. The various quotations, along with their various qualifications, require that we give a genuine sense both to God's being the Being of things and to his being 'beyond being.' On the view I present, he is in all things in his creative energy making them what they are, but outside of all things in his essence. Thus, there simply is not on this view any idea of making created things necessary beings or confusing the divine and created natures.

Let me try, nonetheless, to lay out Rooney's arguments in more detail. The first argument is for the conclusion that if God's energy constitutes the form of created things, then God

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is a *part* of created things, and thus, that created things are necessary, eternal, and even in a sense greater than God (since a whole is greater than its parts). The argument appears at various places, but the clearest short statement of it we get is this:

> Carey's account on which the energies are ontological constituents or metaphysical parts of created objects akin to substantial forms would entail *God* is a part of created things, since the energies *are* God in some sense. If God is a part of a thing, it appears as if created things would be divine. (Rooney, forthcoming, 8)

To begin with, I do want to say that I am uncomfortable with talk of 'parts' here. It does not seem right to me in general to say that the form of something is a *part* of it, however contemporary metaphysicians might disagree. It is true that a thing is more than just its form, but for all that its form is not just one of its parts. Perhaps that is neither here nor there, if we want to think of a 'metaphysical part' as a technical term, a sort of metaphor with limitations to be kept in mind.

In any case, even if we grant the parthood talk, the argument simply does not follow. Let's grant that it's true that if divine energies are the forms of created things, and if forms are parts, then God is *in some sense* a part of created things. Does it follow from this that created things are *divine*, in a problematic sense that would make them eternal, necessary, etc.? No. For to be divine in that sense would require that the *divine nature/essence* is the form of created things. But, again, the whole point of the essence/energy distinction is that the divine essence is imparticipable. The divine 'part' that created things participate in comprises the creative energies. And to participate in the creative energies just is what it is on this view to be a *created*, namely, finite and contingent, being. Put another way, the conclusion only follows if one denies at the outset that God can be a 'part' of something without that thing thereby sharing in the divine nature/essence. But denying that at the outset is just denying the essence/energies distinction at the outset; it is failing even to think the distinction.

Furthermore, and somewhat ironically, St Gregory Palamas is not as uncomfortable with the talk of 'parts' here as I am, but, unlike Rooney, he insists that such talk is perfectly acceptable, and in fact, required, to make sense of the picture of God's relation to the world he spells out. As Tikhon Pino puts it in a recent monograph (which Rooney himself cites as authoritative, incidentally),

> That 'participation' in God is indeed 'partial', and involves a literal (if not material) 'part' of God is a point that is stressed repeatedly by Palamas in order to prove that it cannot be the divine essence that is shared with creatures. Palamas points out that the word participation itself denotes not the possession of an essence or totality of essential attributes but precisely the possession of a part: 'What participates … has part of what it participates in. If it partook not of a part but of the whole, it would properly be said to have it (ἔχειν), not to partake of it (μετέχειν). If what partakes necessarily partakes of a part, then what is participated in is partial (μεριστόν)'. (Pino 2022, 119)

Though he is here talking about a 'part' of God rather than a 'part' of created things, the point is the same. The 'part' of God that on my view constitutes the formal 'part' of human beings is precisely *not* the essence, since *that* would imply the sorts of problems Rooney raises. Instead, 'human beings become temples and *organa* of God's grace not by containing the whole of God's uncreated power or nature but by appropriating the divine energy in a manner appropriate to themselves' (Pino 2022, 119).

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Rooney's other argument goes in the opposite direction, concluding not that my view makes created things eternal and necessary, but that it makes God finite and contingent:

> [On Carey's view, God's] energies would need to be such that they *essentially constitute* the entities they do at a given point in time … Thus, on Carey's vision, God's energies would by their essence be *parts* of created entities. But the entities they constitute are created and temporal (essentially). God would then have parts which are essentially created and temporal, contrary both to orthodox classical theism and to Palamas's claim that the energies are uncreated and eternal. (Rooney, forthcoming, 9).

This argument again seems to me to rest on a confusion. It is true that if God's energies are a 'part' of created things insofar as they are formal causes, then those energies are essential *to the things whose forms they are*. That is, those things would not exist without God's actively constituting them as what they are. But this dependence does not necessarily go the opposite way, as Rooney's argument seems to assume. Although God's energies are an essential 'part' of me, given that I exist, that does not mean that it is essential to God that he is a part of me. The necessary connection is one-way and conditional.

I admit that it is hard fully to settle all the questions raised by this talk of 'parts' introduced by Rooney because of the general difficulties involved in the discussion of metaphysical composition, and because of the differing ways the topic has been treated in the Scholastic, Byzantine, and modern periods, all of which are likely to impinge on our thinking in the present context. Saying a bit more about this history may help to clear up at least some of the confusions.[3]

In the later Scholastic period, a distinction was made between a material object's 'substantial' or 'metaphysical parts,' which are not themselves material objects (i.e. substantial form and prime matter), and its 'integral parts,' which are themselves other material things (e.g. parts of bodies that are themselves bodies).[4] Both of these count as 'parts' in the general sense, in that they are things 'out of which *x* comes to be' (cf. Boethius' *On the Trinity* 2). God, however, is traditionally said not to have any parts at all in this sense. And Palamas adamantly insists on this as well: 'But God is not among those things that is made up of parts … Thus, since the essence of God is one and contains no parts and is incomprehensible, utterly beyond causation and wholly of itself, it does not have essential differences and is not composite' (*Debate* 10–11, as cited in Pino 2022, 151).

So if we think of the substantial form as that which structures the other parts of something and makes it what it is, then we can say that on my view God's energies are substantial 'parts' of things precisely insofar as the energies in this sense refer to God's actively and immanently so structuring things. But while God is fully present in his immanent energy/activity, the energies are not 'parts' of God in any constitutive sense at all. Palamas is only willing to grant parts-talk at all due to the pressures and etymology of the notion of participation, while insisting all the same that the energies are not 'parts' in the same sense as substantial or integral parts are. Though critics of Palamas may balk here, we can appeal again to the analogical precedent of the Trinity, where Christians are forced to make distinctions within the Godhead while denying they involve dividing into (component) parts. In any case, it remains unclear why any of Rooney's worries should be thought to follow from the view given. The worries rely either on thinking of God's *essence* being the forms of things rather than his energies, or on thinking of the energies themselves as 'parts' of God in the sense of composition.

But what about the point that the energies are eternal and uncreated? Given that fact, doesn't it follow that if my form is constituted by a divine energy that is an essential

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part of me, I must also be eternal and necessary, or at least that God somehow depends on my existence? Here we need to distinguish between two senses of 'energy' used by St Gregory. Although he uses the word 'energies' in both cases, he is still careful to distinguish between God's eternal uncreated energies in the sense of his *powers* and *capacities* to create and deify, and the temporal *manifestations* or *exercises* of those powers. Thus, he says that 'divine energy, according to the Fathers, is the pre-eternal power of God manifested (φανερουμένη) through creatures. At the level of manifestation (κατὰ τὸ φανεροῦσθαι) it begins. But the power does not begin' (in Pino 2022, 92). 'Although potentially confusing,' Pino explains,

> the double sense of *energeia* that this introduces to Palamas's theology (wherein it is identified, on the one hand, with *dynamis*, and differentiated from it, on the other), is something that Palamas addresses directly. 'The same thing,' he notes, 'is called both power and energy. But the use (χρῆσις) of the innate power (ἔμφυτος δύναμις) is, properly, only energy.' *Energeia*, in other words, can refer to both the eternal and essential property of an essence, in which case it is synonymous with *dynamis*, or it can refer specifically to the use (χρῆσις) of a faculty, in which case it is distinguished, as activity, from power. (Pino 2022, 94)

So when I say that God's energies are the formal causes of beings, I mean that any created thing's being what it is is an active manifestation within it of God's eternal power to create that thing. This is not so very different from the Latin view, which also must make a distinction between God's eternal knowledge of created things and ability to create them and his actual creation. Aquinas himself even says that the forms of all things pre-exist in God: 'Likewise every form whereby each thing is constituted in its own species, is a perfection; and thus all things pre-exist in God, not only as regards what is common to all, but also as regards what distinguishes one thing from another' (ST 1.14.6). The difference (if there is one) is just the insistence on the Orthodox view that this manifestation of God's creative power constitutes a genuine presence of and participation in God himself (though not in his essence), rather than possession of a created form which is a mere similitude of the pre-existent form.

I do not deny that there is something deeply mysterious here, though I deny there is anything like incoherence. As St Maximus says, in a passage quoted in the original article:

> For who could really understand or explain how God is completely in all things as a whole and is particularly in each individual thing yet neither has parts nor can be divided; how he is not multiplied in a variety of ways through the countless differences of things that exist and which he dwells in as the source of their being; how he is not made uniform through the special character of the unity that exists in things; how he offers no obstacle to the differences in created essences through the one, unifying totality of them all but truly is all in all things, without ever abandoning his own undivided simplicity? (Ambigua (PG 91, 1257B), as quoted in (Balthasar 2003, 86)

While the view on offer does not allow us fully to understand or explain this, my hope is that it at least gives a helpful framework for thinking about it. The alternative represented by Rooney's discussion seems to me simply to deny that God really is in all things in the way St Maximus indicates.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000349 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Conclusion

I hope to have shown that the sort of panentheism I've tried to spell out is neither straightforwardly unorthodox nor incoherent. It tries to take seriously numerous key statements from the Patristic tradition on God's transcendence from, and immanence within, the world, and important aspects of the philosophical tradition to which it was heir. Despite Rooney's claims to the contrary, this view does not posit or straightforwardly imply any necessity to creation, and is not, in fact, representative of a stream of thought including David Bentley Hart and traceable to the writings of Sergius Bulgakov, both of whom, though being Orthodox and panentheists of a sort, have found little use for the essence/energies distinction that is foundational to my understanding of Orthodox panentheism. I have also not argued that the view is better than any alternatives, including scholastic classical theism, though I find it highly attractive. It is, however, an interesting and appealing view that deserves more (and more charitable) attention from philosophers.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Ware (2004).
2. For full list and sources, see Carey (2024, 3–4).
3. I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for the suggestion to look at the difference between late Scholastic 'substantial' and 'integral' parts.
4. For a treatment of this distinction and the terminology of a 'metaphysical part', which Rooney uses, see Pasnau (2011, 7–9).

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Cite this article: Carey J (2024) Is 'orthodox panentheism' unorthodox? A response to James Dominic Rooney. *Religious Studies*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000349