




BOOK REVIEW

Andrew M. Davis, *Metaphysics of Exo-Life: Toward a Constructive Whiteheadian Cosmotheology*

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This ambitious monograph outlines and defends an overarching philosophical and theological account of the universe and life within it based on the thought of the process philosopher and theologian Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). The author, Andrew M. Davis, however, does this in a novel way by taking six cosmotheological principles first put forward by the scientist and historian Steven J. Dick and then inverting them into metaphysical exemplifications using Whitehead. Thus, Davis’s goal is to bring two distinguished thinkers (one historical and one living) into a constructive dialogue in order to develop and deepen our cosmotheological thinking.

After setting the scene in the preface and introduction, Davis begins in chapter one by distinguishing between cosmology and metaphysics. Davis, following Whitehead, explains that cosmology ‘consists of the effort to formulate a system of ideas applicable not to *any and all* epochs of the universe, but to the *particular* epoch in which we find ourselves, and the manifold contingencies associated with it’ (p. 20). Metaphysics, in contrast, attempts ‘to identify the necessary principles of conditions that underlie and are exemplified in our experience as expressions of a particularly ordered evolutionary cosmos ... These principles “can never fail of exemplification”’ (p. 25).

The first three of Dick’s cosmotheological principles are cosmological negations. Chapter two examines the first of these, namely that ‘Humanity is not physically central to the universe.’ Davis inverts this into ‘Humanity exemplifies metaphysical principles that are utterly central to the universe.’ Davis’s strategy to justify this claim, following Whitehead, is best summarized using an analogy. Davis writes ‘we have not dropped into the cosmos from elsewhere, but have grown out of it like a flower out of soil’ and, thus, just as ‘The flower is intrinsically connected to the nature of the soil from which it has grown’ (p. 37) so too are we intrinsically connected to the cosmos and its metaphysical foundations. Therefore, it should not surprise us if we exemplify the same metaphysical principles that underpin the universe as a whole. Davis’s strategy of inverting Dick’s principles is clear here. We have gone from the claim that humanity is *not* the physical centre of the universe, to the claim that humanity *does* exemplify metaphysical principles utterly central to it.

Chapter three examines the second of Dick’s cosmological negations, namely that ‘Humanity is not central biologically, mentally, or morally in the universe’, inverting this into ‘Humanity exemplifies biological, mental and moral antecedents that are metaphysically central to the universe.’ Davis does this utilizing Whitehead’s thesis that there are

necessary metaphysical antecedents to the biological, mental, and moral domains, namely, organism, creative experience, and aesthetic attainment respectively. To oversimplify, for Whitehead the concept of 'organism' is much wider and deeper than we might think. It forms a fundamental part of the universe and is a necessary antecedent of biological life. Similarly, Whitehead advocated for a version of panexperientialism, according to which 'creative experience' is a fundamental building block of the universe and a necessary antecedent of our conscious lives. Finally, Whitehead also advocated for a version of 'panvaluism' according to which the world is infused with an aesthetic teleology. When these three necessary antecedents are considered together, we see an evolutionary drive not just 'to live', but 'to live well' and 'to live better' (p. 56).

Chapter four examines the third of Dick's cosmotheological principles and the last of his cosmic negations. According to Dick 'Humanity is not at the top of the great chain of being in the universe.' Davis inverts this into 'Humanity exemplifies the same metaphysical principles that are expressed in various intensities throughout the great chain of being in the universe.' Ultimately this follows from the principles established in the previous chapters. Organism and creativity (creative experience) are part of the nature of the universe. We, like everything, are products of these principles. We are not at the bottom of the cosmic hierarchy, but we shouldn't think ourselves the top because the universe and everything within it are constantly striving towards and evolving into endlessly novel forms of life which more perfectly instantiate these principles. Here Davis also introduces us to the distinction between actualities and possibilities. Actualities are the various things that actually exist. They are in an endless process of becoming and they embody the fundamentally creative nature of the universe. At the same time, there are infinite possibilities being actualized in the cosmic evolutionary process. Whitehead labels these possibilities 'eternal objects'.

The second three of Dick's principles are statements about what a cosmotheology must do. Chapter five examines the first of these, Dick's fourth principle, namely that 'Cosmotheology must be open to radically new and non-supernatural conceptions of God ... a God grounded in cosmic evolution.' However, as Davis makes clear, the 'God' Dick is prepared to countenance can hardly be called such, and is instead simply a very powerful extraterrestrial. Thus, Davis inverts this principle into 'Cosmotheology must be open to truly radical and non-supernatural conceptions of God, a God grounding and exemplifying the metaphysical conditions of cosmic evolution.' Davis then makes three separate points about this God. First, following Whitehead, whilst 'Creativity' is the ultimate foundation of all reality from which everything flows, God flows from and embodies creativity in a unique way, that is primordially. Therefore, both God and Creativity are necessary, standing in a reciprocal relationship to each other, with Creativity being the *ultimate reality* and God being the *ultimate actuality*. Second, God grounds and determines the possibilities available to the various contingent things that make up the rest of the universe. Infinite possibilities exist in the mind of God, but he determines and limits them in order to promote an ordered harmony to the universe. Third, in addition to God's primordial divine mental pole (his mind) God also has a consequent divine physical pole which is contingent and which 'truly relates, experiences, and evolves through incorporating the world process in every moment' (p. 85). Thus God, like everything, is dipolar with both a physical and mental pole. This aspect of God also grounds truths about the past in an otherwise endlessly changing and evolving world.

Chapter six examines the fifth of Dick's principles, namely that 'Cosmotheology must have a moral dimension, extending to embrace all species in the universe – a reverence and respect for life in any form.' Davis inverts this into 'Cosmotheology must provide the ontological basis and stimulus for ideals of moral reverence and respect in the nature of

things.' Ultimately, Davis argues that God is the aesthetic moral centre of the universe using what was established in previous chapters whilst responding to various criticisms.

Chapter seven examines the sixth of Dick's principles, namely that 'Cosmotheology must embrace the idea that human destiny should be linked to natural cosmic events, not to the divine.' Davis inverts this into 'Cosmotheology must embrace human destiny as inextricably linked to the destiny of the cosmos as an infinite evolutionary expression of the metaphysical conditions chiefly exemplified in the divine.' Ultimately, Davis argues that 'human destiny is inextricably linked to cosmological evolution as a participatory exemplification, and cosmological evolution is inextricably linked to a participatory God that chiefly exemplifies the metaphysical conditions rendering this universe possible, actual, and infinitely continuous' (p. 112).

The book ends with a brief concluding chapter, followed by a lengthy appendix which includes a history of process theology and extraterrestrial life written by Davis, as well as an article titled 'Theological Reflection on Extraterrestrial Life' (1968) by Lewis S. Ford.

I'll now make a few comments to stimulate further discussion, before giving my thoughts on the book as a whole. It would be too much to describe these comments as criticisms given the overall quality of the book, but one question I was left with concerned Davis's conception of God as a 'naturalistic' God. Davis, following Whitehead, seems to be at pains to clarify that the God of process theology is not 'supernatural' and that the schema as a whole is a version of 'naturalism'. This desire is understandable given the all-too-common hostility towards the supernatural in contemporary philosophy.

With this in mind, I think we can safely assume that by naturalism Davis means that everything that exists, including God, is, in some sense of the word, 'natural'. However, without a clear definition of the words 'natural' and 'supernatural', it is unclear what all of this really amounts to philosophically. As a result, it is unclear to me what 'work' these terms are doing within Davis's (and Whitehead's) schema.

To begin with, if one were to adopt a fairly standard account of what it means to be natural, perhaps one similar to G.E. Moore's, according to which something is natural if it is the proper subject matter of the natural sciences and psychology, then clearly Whitehead's God is not a 'natural' being. Presumably, therefore, Davis has a different account in mind.

Davis, whilst not directly defining natural and supernatural, does offer us a number of clues for how he understands them. For example, he makes it clear that God is subject to the same metaphysical principles as everything else, for example, God like everything else exhibits dipolarity. He also makes it clear that God's powers and actions in the world are persuasive as opposed to 'competitive and coercive', which are the hallmarks of supernatural theology (p. 71). However, I think there are problems with both these distinctions.

First, one could argue that many supernatural conceptions of God do apply the same metaphysical principles to him as to everything else. A Thomist theologian, for example, could analyse God in terms of act and potency, the four causes, and the distinction between essence and existence. Of course, such metaphysical concepts would apply to God in very different ways than for the rest of creation (for example, God's essence and existence would be identical unlike everything else), but the same could be said of the God of Whitehead. Whilst Whitehead argues that the same basic metaphysical principles apply to God as to everything else, they apply to God in a special way, that is to say, primordially and as 'chief exemplification' (p. 71).

Second, presumably by (a supernatural) God acting in a 'competitive and coercive' way Davis is thinking of miracles. Perhaps the concern is that, when performing miracles, God 'forces' things to act against their own natural dispositions, the laws of nature, or something similar. Certainly, this is one way to conceptualize miracles, but there are others which would make them appear far less coercive. Additionally, miracles are only one way in

which God can interact with the world, so it leaves much untouched. For example, according to Aquinas's fifth way God directs things towards their various ends. One could argue that this conception of God's interactions with the universe is not too dissimilar from how Whitehead's God grounds the various possibilities available to things within the universe whilst encouraging them to fulfil them in the best possible manner. Finally, at least from Davis's description, it is unclear why Whitehead's God couldn't interact with the world in a competitive and coercive way. It seems to be asserted that he does not, but it is unclear why.

No single monograph can answer every question and respond to every criticism and so I suspect that Davis could respond to these concerns if need be. It may be that our disagreement is merely terminological and that little rests on this issue. Alternatively, if this is an important part of his account, then I suspect he would be able to clarify his terms in such a way as to sidestep these issues. Thus, I merely raise these comments to stimulate further discussion.

Overall, I would heartily recommend this monograph. It will be of interest to both academics and students interested in the philosophical implications of alien life, but I would particularly recommend it to those less familiar with Whitehead's thought more generally. Davis has succeeded in making Whitehead's schema understandable whilst applying it to the fascinating topic of alien life. For this, he is to be commended!