



Theology Corner

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“Are all Creatures a Part of God?”

This is a very interesting question because it is one that can bring quite a bit of confusion about the nature of God and his creation, as well as the relationship between the two. It seems to me that the main concern amongst those asking this sort of question lies in the fact that, in creation, there is an obvious dependence upon God, who must be the sustaining cause for his effects in the world. But if all creatures have an existence that is dependent upon God, it would seem that in some way, we are all a part of God insofar as he gives us his existence. This is not a new idea, but one proposed by many philosophers throughout the ages, most notably by the modern philosopher Baruch Spinoza. But, how do we go about explaining this relationship between Creator and creation in a way that is consistent with scripture? What we should know right off the bat is that creation cannot be of the same “substance” so to speak, as God. As Christians, we know this because if this were so, then we would be forced to say that creation is divine – which of course leads to pantheism. This is a view which holds that the universe *is* God. Since we know through reason and divine revelation that there is only one God, one must reevaluate this understanding of the world so that it is in harmony with what has been revealed to us and what is according to human reason. Thus, a more coherent understanding of this relationship between God and his creatures lies in a distinction between *having* existence and *being* existence itself.

First off, every being that is not God, is a creature. The very fact that a thing is a *contingent* being, lets us know that it cannot also be God, who is the *necessary* being. There can, of course, never be two Gods because in order to distinguish between the two, one would have something the other lacks. If one God lacks anything at all, it is not perfect, and therefore is not God. So, when we discuss any created being having existence, we know that it must derive its existence from the source which is existence itself. Since God is the source of all existence, namely, existence itself (*ipsum esse*), then all created beings exist by participation. By participating in the existence of God, this does not make us of the same substance as God, but something that is distinct from God because of our composition of matter and form, essence and existence, or substance and accident. We are composite beings, but God is Simple and One.

I have heard of Bruce Lee saying that once a cup was filled with water, it *becomes* the water. I think that it is evident to our senses that this is false. The cup never changes substance, but takes on a different quality, namely being filled with water. This explains why the cup still remains a cup once someone dumps out or drinks the water. Thus, it is better stated as one the cup is filled with water, the cup becomes wet by containing within it, water. To make this even clearer, (but still using water as an example) I want to share with you a recent, and rather silly debate I had with someone about whether water is wet. I said there is clearly a difference between water *being* wet and other objects *becoming* wet. The distinction here is that water cannot *become* wet as if there was any potential for water to move from a state of dryness to a state of wetness. The reason for this is because water is wet by its very essence. Water does not have the potential to be dry since its nature is wetness itself, i.e., it has no other option but to be wet. For example, water cannot get wet like the computer I’m writing this on can get wet, because my computer is a dry object and thus has the *potential* to be a wet object. As the old Latin axiom goes: *Nemo dat quod non habet* – one cannot give what one does not have. In other words, water cannot give off the effect of wetness if it does not in some way possess wetness. It can be said, then, that water is wet *preeminently* insofar as it is the direct cause of wetness in all other things that are not *essentially* wet. Therefore, all other things that get wet (i.e. that are not wet by their very nature) can be said to be wet inasmuch as they participate in the wetness of water itself.

This is the same concept that can be applied to the existence of all of us, or any other created being for that matter. Just as my computer being wet does not transubstantiate into water (with the computer no longer being a computer), likewise, just as we participate in God’s existence as his effects, we do not take on the being of God himself, but remain individual substances that are dependent upon God.