At the end of our last lecture, we began to look at another of the major movements in contemporary theology in the end of the twentieth century, namely, process theology, and I had begun to sketch for you some of the backgrounds to this movement. We were looking specifically at the scientific developments that factored into process thinking, and I want to return to that and move beyond that in a few moments, but first as we begin, why don’t we do so with a word of prayer.

Father, we thank you for who you are and for what you mean to each one of us. Lord, as we continue to study about you and about the various conceptions of you, help us, Lord, to understand what these different theological movements are saying. We pray, as well, Lord, that we may take from them things that are of benefit to our own thinking. We thank you, Lord, that you are a God who does interact with us and who does care about us, and even though there are those who have said that traditional understandings of you do not allow that to be possible, we realize that not all conservative Christians throughout church history have thought this way. Help us, though, Lord to gain a better understanding of what the complaints are that process theology brings and then also to see what their proposal is for rectifying those problems. Help us then as we study. For it’s in Christ’s name we pray it. Amen.

We had been looking at various developments in modern science that are in the background of process thinking. We had talked about things like the move from a Newtonian physics to an Einsteinian relativistic physics, changes in electromagnetic theory and quantum mechanics, and right at the end I had mentioned also that the matter of evolution is also significant. Alfred [North] Whitehead noted that one of the major scientific changes in the nineteenth century was the rise of evolutionary theory, the doctrine which, to quote him, “has to do with the emergence of novel organisms as the outcome of chance.” Here

Even though some argue that neither specific evolutionary theories nor any overarching evolutionary cosmology played a significant role in Whitehead’s metaphysics, his metaphysics nonetheless presupposed some form of the theory, and they surely do not contradict it. In addition to that, I think it’s also fair to say that other process theologians don’t hesitate to admit an acceptance of evolutionary notions, specifically the idea of an upward biological development of the various species. So while process metaphysics is not necessarily generated from evolutionary thought, there is nothing per se in process thinking that contradicts the fundamental notions of evolution.

In noting the backgrounds of process theology, we noted that changes in science, developments in science, were significant. We also noted a second major factor, namely, process theology’s attack on classical theism, and I want to turn to that right now. And by classical theism, process thinkers mean precisely what we saw when we were discussing feminism, that view of God that sees God as static, as immutable, timeless, impassible, and all the rest.

What does process theology say about traditional classical theism? Process thinkers typically begin by attacking traditional theism. They tell us that its conceptions reflect outmoded Aristotelian and Newtonian physics. In addition, we’re told some of its fundamental notions present God in ways that are both logically incoherent and, on the other hand, morally repugnant. Those are pretty strong words, but we need to see what they have in mind. Process thinkers tell us that in our modern scientific world, secular human beings simply cannot accept many of the ideas of traditional theistic thinking, for example, the idea of a created universe as you find it recorded in Genesis 1–2. We’re told that today people understand that that is not a historical document, that’s myth. In addition, belief in biblical accounts of miracles is said to be no longer essential because many of these events thought to be miraculous can be explained by naturalistic processes and the other ones that oftentimes cannot be so explained are just taken to be records of expressions of faith on the part of the writers. They’re not references to actual occurrences that were produced by people who believed in God and then God responded with a miracle.
In addition, we’re told that Scripture’s eschatological perspective on things must be rejected, that is, the ideas of the last days, the end of the world; those things cannot be believed. Those promised events, along with the literal return of Christ, have never happened in over nineteen hundred years, and there’s no serious reason to think that they will. But it’s not just this general traditional theistic framework that is rejected; specifically, process thinkers have some major complaints about the God of classical theism, and the God that they’re thinking of is usually the process thinker’s interpretation of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Anselm, people like this.

The God of classical theism, we’re told, is very problematic. Classical theism supposedly relies on the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle. Plato and Aristotle believed in two different types of reality. On the one hand, there is the present world of becoming and time, change, and real relations, but on the other hand in Platonic and Aristotelian thinking, there is another world of timeless, changeless, and unrelated being which is alone real in the full sense of the word, and so alone is worthy of the epithet or the label “divine.” When traditional theism tied these ideas to God and the world, we’re told, the result was belief in a timeless, immutable God who is unrelated to the world and unaffected by what happens in it, and that latter point—being unaffected by what happens in the world—is meant by divine impassibility. God is portrayed in classical theism, or so process thinkers tell us, as totally transcendent, as the one who is the totally transcendent absolute with whom no relation is possible. Moreover, we are told that if the real is not in fact in this world that we experience but is in another world, what happens then in our world is really insignificant.

None of this sits very well with process theologians. If God dare not enter into real relations with His creatures because that would cause God to change, and, of course, God as immutable cannot change at all, then the God of traditional theism, we’re told, is really irrelevant to modern men and women. Charles Hartshorne, another very significant process thinker, adds to this by saying that God is love or for someone to say that God is love and to speak of God as Lord, all of which would suggest that God can express emotions and enter into relationship, to say that God is love and to speak of God as Lord and then to turn around and say that God is absolute, immutable, and impassive is to contradict oneself. You can see I think what the problem is that Hartshorne is suggesting. Incidentally, these ideas from Hartshorne come from
his significant work entitled *The Divine Relativity* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982].

A special bone of contention is the classical doctrine of divine impassibility, to which we’ve already alluded, and it is the logical corollary to divine immutability. The point is that if God cannot change, then He cannot feel emotions like compassion because that would constitute a change in God, moving from not feeling this emotion to then feeling it. Arguing from analogy, Hartshorne explains that we would not praise a parent whose actions or emotions totally depended on the whims of his child, but on the other hand, we wouldn’t praise a parent who was indifferent to his child’s actions or who responded the same whether the child was happy or sad. And then Hartshorne complains as a result of this, and I quote him again from *Divine Relativity*, Hartshorne says, “Yet God, we are told, is impassive and immutable and without accidents is just as He would be in His action and knowledge and being had we never existed or had all our experiences been otherwise.” Incidentally, if you’re wondering what does he mean when he says that God is without accidents, this refers to the doctrine of divine simplicity, which is typically held in a lot of forms of traditional theism by people such as Aquinas and Anselm.

Hartshorne then makes reference to Anselm. He cites Anselm’s claim that God is passionless and feels no compassion toward men and women, though God can express compassion in terms of our experience. That may sound very strange, but what it means is that God can do things to comfort us, to show that God cares, but He cannot feel that compassion for us Himself. He can’t experience that emotion. Hartshorne claims that this means that we should love God, not because God can sympathize with us. If God could, that might mean that God’s moods and feelings would depend in part on us, but classical theism won’t allow that at all. So we should love God not because God can sympathize with us, but because God can do things that benefit us. Hartshorne makes the following comment in *Divine Relativity*. He says, “Anselm’s God can give us everything, everything except the right to believe that there is one who, with infinitely subtle and appropriate sensitivity, rejoices in all our joys and sorrows in all our sorrows. But this benefit which Anselm will not allow God to bestow upon us is the supreme benefit which God, and only God, could give us.”

If God is unaffected by us and if our world is not the real world, then nothing we ever do or suffer in this world ultimately makes any difference to God, and nothing that happens in this world
seems to be of any significance. In addition, it is useless to speak of man’s aim as to glorify God because God as absolute is beyond our power to contribute to God’s greatness at all. Likewise, one cannot speak meaningfully of serving God because, as Hartshorne claims, and I quote Hartshorne, “If God can be indebted to no one, can receive value from no one, then to speak of serving Him is to indulge in equivocation.”

The ultimate problem in all of this, according to process thinkers, is that it simply contradicts the biblical portrayal of God and it contradicts common sense. Scripture portrays God as changing His mind on some occasions, and here passages like Exodus 32:14, 2 Samuel 24:16, and Jeremiah 26:19 are cited, so God is seen as changing His mind. Scripture shows God as entering into relationships with people. Think, for example, of the covenants with Abraham and David, and Scripture also shows God as one who has and expresses emotions like anger and compassion. All of those statements must be anthropomorphisms at best and mythology at worst if classical theism is correct in its view that God is impassible.

In addition, if God cannot enter time because that would mean changing, then God, in effect, is locked out of the world, but Scripture portrays God as other than that. We see Him very active in our world. And beyond that, the complaint goes, if this world is really insignificant, then why do we have the biblical emphasis on God’s acts to redeem fallen men and women in a fallen world? When you think about this, both from the standpoint of Scripture and common sense, you come to the conclusion that what happens in this world is very significant, both to us and to God.

Process theists also complain that the God of classical theism is a God of power and a God of force. God is portrayed as an absolute sovereign who determines and accomplishes His will in the world regardless of whether His creatures want to obey or not. This monarchical God who removes human freedom is really pictured as a kind of cosmic bully. By destroying human freedom, this God cannot hold His creatures morally accountable for what they do, but He does anyway. We can’t do other than what God has chosen for us to do; if that’s so, then why are we guilty? Traditional theism says we are anyway. It’s at a point like this that process theists say, “This God is utterly repugnant. It is ludicrous to think that modern men and women can possibly believe in, let alone love and worship such a God.” There has to be a better way, and process theists tell us that their construal of God is much, much more in
keeping with the picture of God that we find in Scripture. I should add, as well, that an awful lot of the complaint that you have just heard about the classical God is very, very much reminiscent of what we heard in feminist thinking as a complaint again about classical theism. You can see how these ideas go together very, very much.

In addition to the scientific background to process thinking and in addition to the attack on classical theology’s God, there are also some things philosophically that lie in the background of process thinking, and let me focus on some of that at this point. Many philosophical concerns influence Whitehead himself, but I’d like to note several of the more significant ones from the standpoint of his process thought. First of all there is the connection with Plato and Aristotle. From what I just said, you might suggest that he was very familiar, or I would suspect that he was very familiar with Plato and Aristotle, and that somehow or other he’d have something to say about them.

Whitehead reminds us that Aristotle introduced the notion of a prime mover, which was sort of his term and his figure for someone who many philosophers would say represents the concept of God, but Aristotle introduced this notion of prime mover in order to complete his metaphysics. He did so, that is, Aristotle did so not for religious reasons but to complete his own cosmology. In Aristotle, Whitehead didn’t see how to do this, but that it must be done and could be done without thereby making religion foundational to metaphysics. As a result, Whitehead invoked God to round off process metaphysics.

Whitehead also needed a way to relate the multiplicity of all physical entities, and he concluded that they ultimately depended on what he referred to as formative elements. Following Plato and Aristotle, who called these items arche or principles, he saw, that is, Whitehead saw three elements. In addition to all acting physical entities, he saw a general activity underlying all occasions of individual acting as their ultimate source. This notion was analogous, though not identical, to Aristotle’s notion of a substance. Whitehead’s second formative principle was the eternal objects, and what he has in mind by the eternal objects is akin to what Plato and Aristotle mean by their notion of forms, although Whitehead’s conception is actually closer to Plato than it is to Aristotle.
In Plato and in Aristotle, the third formative element was God. Whitehead agreed, although his concept of God differed from that of Plato and Aristotle, but he did agree with Plato that if there was to be a way of choosing between the many possibilities which an entity could become—some of those possibilities good, some of them evil—if there was going to be a way of choosing between those different possibilities, one of the formative elements; namely, God, had to be the source of distinction between good and bad, better and worse. Without such narrowing of options, it would be difficult to make actual choices for things that actually existed. So, for both Plato and Whitehead, God was, in Whitehead’s term, the principle of limitation.

There’s another philosophical item of significance that I want to mention in regard to Whitehead and process theology. There are some who note the influence on Whitehead of the British empiricists John Locke and [George] Berkeley. Berkeley’s theory of perception was especially important. Berkeley noted the difference in appearance of an object like a tower from a distance as opposed to the way it appeared when you stood nearby. He concluded that the difference was not in the tower itself but was in the act of perceiving the tower. Hence, sensory perception, he reasoned, depends more on the act of perception than on the thing perceived. As Whitehead noted, Berkeley said in Berkeley’s [A Treatise Concerning the] Principles of Human Knowledge [1710] that “what constitutes the realization of natural entities is the being perceived within the unity of mind.” Adapting Berkeley’s insight for his own uses, Whitehead then wrote, and I quote him, “That we can substitute the concept that the realization is a gathering of things into the unity of a prehension, and that what is thereby realized is the prehension and not the things.” This comes from Science and the Modern World by Whitehead.

The relation of prehension—that’s a term you heard in that last quote and you may wonder what does he mean by that? The relation of prehension to Berkeley’s notion of perception becomes even clearer when one sees how Whitehead defines a prehension. Whitehead explains as follows, and this again is from Science and the Modern World. He says, “The word perceive is in our common usage shot through and through with the notion of cognitive apprehension. So is the word apprehension. Even with the adjective cognitive omitted.” So Whitehead then says, “I will use the word prehension for uncognitive apprehension. By this I mean, apprehension which may or may not be cognitive.” A kind of sensing by feeling but not by the typical cognitive categories
that one might think of in thinking of *apprehension* or perception.

Others have traced Whitehead’s relation to [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge and to [William] Wordsworth through their relation to [Immanuel] Kant and also his relation, that is, Whitehead’s relation to [Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph] Schelling. In particular, Brackman shows the correlation between Whitehead’s concepts of creativity and imagination and Schelling’s philosophy. In addition, Whitehead’s interest in romantic writers like Wordsworth also suggests Whitehead’s concern for the aesthetic.

A final matter of philosophical background that we need to be aware of in order to understand process theology is the whole matter of contemporary epistemology, and on various occasions in this course and the previous one we have talked about what has happened in modern epistemology with the emphasis on empiricism, and we started out by talking about the changes with Immanuel Kant and what has happened since that. All of these things are presupposed by Whitehead and, as we have suggested on various occasions, although not everyone in the twentieth century agreed with Immanuel Kant or even with the way, let’s say, that the logical positivists took his empiricist doctrines, still this basic approach to knowledge; that is, that what can be known is known through contact with the world external to the mind and is learned somehow through the senses. This basic approach to knowledge continues to be very pervasive in modern thinking. One can see partly why so few people in the twentieth century have tried to create a metaphysical scheme, and why orthodox theology with its reflections on things beyond the empirical world is considered so outmoded, and we saw that with a God who is so far beyond the empirical, He becomes too transcendent and thus is meaningless and at a certain point in this century was declared dead.

In spite of all of this, Whitehead is not completely discouraged about doing metaphysics. As a matter of fact, he set out to structure a new metaphysic. He concluded that contemporary epistemology destroys metaphysics that go beyond the empirical, but that doesn’t mean that it destroys all metaphysics. Whitehead’s metaphysics rely heavily on the findings of science, but since science handles the empirical, Whitehead’s metaphysics are rooted in the empirical, they are rooted in the observable. Whether Whitehead and all of his followers are always consistent empiricists is debatable. And I’ll raise that question as one point or another along the way, but unquestionably their metaphysic
reflects the epistemology of their times.

Let me turn now to a fourth element in the background of process theology, and here I can be fairly brief because you’ve heard a lot of what I’m going to say already in the first course on contemporary theology and then in this course as well. I’m thinking here about the theological and religious climate of the times. As you know, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, non-orthodox theology was fundamentally in the grasp of old-line liberalism. Whitehead’s process in reality with its comprehensive new vision of reality was published in 1929, but initially it seemed to have little impact on theology and the church. Rather than non-orthodox theology turning to process theism, it earlier in this century [the twentieth] turned away from the bankruptcy of old-line liberalism to embrace Barthianism and neo-orthodoxy.

As you know, Barthianism with its dependence on existentialism had very little use for metaphysics. No metaphysical system could possibly capture the most important thing, namely, a person in the act of existing and becoming, and so a system like Whitehead’s that had a very elaborate metaphysic was surely not going to be something of interest at that point.

We’ve talked about the demise of neo-orthodoxy and then the move beyond neo-orthodoxy to God is dead. Neo-orthodoxy had a God who was very, very transcendent, so transcendent and many people felt impersonal that that God was as good as dead and was declared so shortly after the middle of the twentieth century. But as we’ve been saying all along, there were many who said we think that this pronouncement of the death of God is a little bit premature. We’d like to talk about some ways of resurrecting God, but surely not the God of classical theism. The God of classical theism was surely thought to be no better than the God of old-line liberalism or neo-orthodoxy, and so, as Hubert Ogden argues, the time was clearly right for a new vision of reality and a new vision of God. And what has come to fill the vacuum with a real vengeance in a lot of academic circles has been process theology.

It has risen to prominence, especially beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, even though process thinkers have been at work through much of the century. Up to this time, process theology has had it primary influence in an Anglo-American context, though it’s safe to say that it’s already becoming a significant factor even among Asian theologians. In light of its openness to world religions, as is evident in its understanding of Christ and of
redemption, I think its influence can be expected to increase. You find this incorporated into a number of different theologies. We’ve suggested that it was there in some of the things that Elizabeth Johnson had to say about God as suffering and entering into the concerns of the world. We will see as well that certain strands of postmodernism incorporated, and on its own right, it continues to be very popular and a lot of people find themself attracted to this view of God.

If that’s what lies in the background to process theology, what does process theology actually say? I’d like to begin, first of all, by offering a series of definitions of some central terms, and by defining these terms you’ll begin to get a little bit of an idea of some of the major concepts, but I think it would help us to define these terms before we go to the major concepts. The major concepts use these definitions anyway.

The first term that I want to define from process theology is the term “actual entities.” For Whitehead, these are the final real things of which the world is made up, actual entities, that is. There’s nothing behind these entities or occasions, which is more real such as some underlying substance. According to Whitehead, the world is a process, and that process is the becoming of actual entities. In addition, he claims that, and here I quote him again from *Process and Reality*. He say, “How an actual entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is. Its being is constituted by its becoming.” Actual entities are neither static, for they are always changing and developing. They’re always becoming. Nor are they isolated from other actual entities. For each actual entity can be incorporated into another entity and is capable of incorporating other actual entities into itself. If you think back about what we said in the last lecture about developments in science and the interconnectedness of things rather than the Newtonian picture of static isolated entities, you begin to see how this is being factored into Whitehead’s concept of an actual entity.

Whitehead says about actual entities that entities are frequently a nexus, that is, a set of actual entities united by their grasping of one another. Hence, for example, each person—you or I or anyone else that we know—is an actual entity, but we’re not just one entity in a certain respect, we’re a very complex one; that is, I am one actual entity, but I am one that is composed of many actual entities, and the same is true of you. In fact, the same is true of most things in the world, whether it is a person, whether it is a desk, whether it is a tree, whatever it might be.
In addition, as another process interpreter says, Low; Low explains that each actual entity, though it is in the process of becoming, at each stage of development it is a unique individual entity. Then a final thing that we want to say in defining actual entities is that actual entities are subjects, and by that Whitehead and the process thinkers mean that actual entities are centers of feeling. And if you say, “What do we mean by feeling?” a feeling is the appropriation of some elements in the universe to be components in the real internal constitution of its subject. What this means is that all actual entities, including animals, trees, and rocks, have qualities of mind and are in some sense persons; they are not mere objects. I’m taking these ideas from Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*.

Let me turn to a second term. We’ve already heard this term, but I want to give a fuller definition of it. It’s the term “prehension.” This is Whitehead’s term for the acting of one actual entity on another to relate the other to itself. Each prehension, and that word more literally means a grasping, each prehension or feeling is a taking of an item of the many into the arising unity of a new actual entity synthesized from the old actual entity. That new actual entity is synthesized from the old one, plus whatever it prehends or grasps into itself.

Whitehead then also distinguishes between different types of prehensions. He speaks about physical prehensions, and he speaks about conceptual prehensions. Let me explain what they are. A physical prehension is the grasping of an actual entity; whereas a conceptual prehension is the feeling of an eternal object. Whitehead also speaks about positive prehensions and negative prehensions. A positive prehension is a grasping that incorporates an object or objects into the emerging unity, or the emerging entity, I should say. A negative prehension is a choice not to incorporate things into the becoming entity.

In every prehension Whitehead says there are three elements. The first is the prehending subject, and the prehending subject is an actual entity. The second element in a prehension is the prehended datum, whether it be a physical or an eternal object, and the third element in a prehension is what he calls the subjective form of prehension, which is how the datum is prehended. There are varieties of subjective forms such as emotions, valuations, purposes, adversions, aversions, consciousness, and so forth. So to give you an example of how this works, if I prehend a new car, the subject form of my prehension might mean that I cry over its
beauty; that would mean that the subjective form of prehension, there was emotion. I might respond by considering it a poor car and determine not to buy it. That would mean that I had the subjective form of valuation. Or another subjective form would be the matter of purpose. As I prehend that car, I might make it my intention to raise money to purchase it.

Let me turn to another term in process thinking, namely, eternal objects. For process thinkers, eternal objects are the corollaries of the Platonic forms or the eternal ideas. Eternal objects are the pure potentials or possibilities which represent the range of possibilities for specific things that actual entities may become. Prehension of an actual entity in order to synthesize a new stage in an emerging entity, that happens, that is, prehension of an actual entity, occurs in virtue of the possibilities for enhancement of the prehending entity which are represented by the datum, the datum being the prehended object. According to Whitehead, God does not create eternal objects, they are just there.

Then one further term, we’ve got two or three more to go, but a further term of significance is the term “concrescence.” A concrescence in process thinking is the process of composition of prehensions. As Whitehead explains, and here I quote him from *Process and Reality*: “In the becoming of an actual entity, the potential unity of many entities, actual and nonactual, acquires the real unity of the one actual entity, so that the actual entity is the real concrescence of much potential.” Many prehensions then are brought together to form a specific actual entity.

The next term that I want to define is the term “subjective aim.” This refers to the goal of an actual entity in its process of becoming. In Aristotelian terms, a subject aim is the final cause of a thing. It’s the goal toward which it’s headed. Whitehead calls it the lure, whereby there is determinant concrescence. He says, and I again I quote him, “The subjective aim which controls the becoming of a subject is that subject feeling a proposition with the subjective form of purpose to realize it in that process of self-creation. Not only is there an ultimate aim for each actual entity, but also a subjective aim for each stage in the emerging entities becoming.

One final term is what Whitehead refers to as the “ontological principle.” This is the Whiteheadian principle that, and I quote here from *Process and Reality*, the Whiteheadian principle that “every condition to which the process of becoming conforms in any particular instance has it reason either in the character of
some actual entity in the actual world of that concrescence or in
the character of the subject which is in process of concrescence. It
means that actual entities are the only reasons, so that to search
for a reason is to search for one or more actual entity.” Now you
can see that if actual entities wind up all of them being empirical,
or at least having an empirical side to them, and if the reason for
anything to be lies in an actual entity, then you can see you’re
getting a metaphysic that is purely grounded in empirical data.
That’s why we say process metaphysics is one that is an empirical
metaphysic.

Having given these definitions, let me turn and begin to talk
about some of the central concepts in process theology, and we’ll
pick up more of this in our next lectures, but let me just begin at
this point. Though there are a lot of interesting process notions,
I want to focus primarily on the ones that are of importance for
theology, and most of them that we’re going to discuss in one way
or another are related to the process notion of God. The first one
is the idea that reality is to be seen as process or as becoming, and
let me just introduce this and then we’ll pick it up at the beginning
of the next lecture.

Process thinkers maintain that our world is a world of events;
that is, a coming out of, and it is a world of becoming. Actual
entities are not unchanging objects. Each thing becomes but it
also perishes, and by perishing that means that its present state
slip from subject immediacy, even as prior states already have. By
subjective immediacy that means that they move away from the
entities per view its immediate attention. As events in process, all
things can be characterized in four different ways, and let me list
these for you, and then we’ll close this lecture.

First of all, as objective results of events from which they arose,
actual entities reflect, and events in process, reflect the qualities
of those prior events. The second thing we can say about events
in process is that they are still subjects; that is, they are distinct
centers of feeling. Third, we can say of them that each stage of each
actual entity perishes from subject immediacy and is swallowed
up in the following events. As such, it becomes a permanent given
in the data of history which influences new events that are coming
to be. And the fourth and final point that I want to make here
about events in process is that though the actual entity maintains
continuity with its past, at each stage it is a new unique entity.
We’re going to see what this idea of reality as process and becoming means in terms of the overall process thinkers’ metaphysics, and then we’re going to go beyond that to see what they do with all of this in their interpretation of God, but more of that in the next lecture.