

# Panentheism or pandeism?

An internet search will reveal that panentheism is a much more popular doctrine than pandeism. While pandeism states that God ceased to exist as a separate being at the time of creation, panentheism claims that God is greater than the universe and observes the universe from outside it. Panentheism differs from theism in claiming that God and the world are inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Traditional theistic systems emphasize the difference between God and the world while panentheism stresses God's active presence in the world and the world's influence upon God."

It is interesting to trace the history of these doctrines with reference to the Christian Church. While the term pantheism was coined by Joseph Raphson in 1697, pantheistic ideas may be traced back to antiquity. The Gospel of Thomas was rejected by the early Christian Church and was lost until it was discovered near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. It is estimated that it was probably written between A.D. 40 and A.D. 140.

This is a quote from the Gospel of Thomas:

Jesus said, "It is I who am the light (that presides) over all. It is I who am the entirety: it is from me that the entirety has come, and to me that the entirety goes. Split a piece of wood: I am there. Lift a stone, and you will find me there."

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/thomas/gospelthomas77.html>

This has been interpreted in a pantheistic sense, or more precisely "panchristic".

St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) objected to pantheism on the grounds that if a created being such as Man is a part of God, then it would not be possible to condemn the immorality of

this being:

“Concerning the rational animal himself – that is, man – what more unhappy belief can be entertained than that a part of God is whipped when a boy is whipped? And who, unless he is quite mad, could bear the thought that parts of God can become lascivious, iniquitous, impious, and altogether damnable? In brief, why is God angry at those who do not worship Him, since these offenders are parts of Himself?”

(St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 4 Chapter 13)

Panentheism is essentially a watered-down version of pantheism. A prominent advocate of panentheism in the twentieth century was Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). It is my contention that panentheism, unlike pandeism, cannot solve the problem of evil. The problem of evil refers to the question of how to reconcile the existence of evil with an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God. An argument from evil attempts to show that the co-existence of evil and such a God is unlikely or impossible.

In considering the problem of evil with reference to pantheism, we need to be clear about what we mean by pantheism. There may be some pantheists who consider the pantheist God to be a “person”, which view would entail a problem of evil similar to that faced by Christian theism. That view of pantheism, however, is not one held by the majority of modern pantheists. Pandeism, as I understand it, precludes the existence of a “personal god”. The divine being who existed at the time of the Big Bang, whatever its prior nature may have been and about which we can only speculate, disintegrated at the moment of creation and now exists only as scattered finite conscious entities. These finite conscious entities may commit acts of evil, but neither pandeism nor the view of pantheism held by the majority postulates an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God currently existing. The problem of evil therefore does not arise.

Panentheism, as I stated earlier, accepts the existence of a God who is transcendent as well as immanent, and thus faces the same problem of evil as Christian theism. Books have been written by theologians like Alvin Plantinga which claim to explain away the problem of evil, but I am not convinced. (Plantinga, Alvin (1977). God, Freedom, and Evil)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvin\\_Plantinga%27s\\_free\\_will\\_defense](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvin_Plantinga%27s_free_will_defense)

To emphasize that the problem of evil is not something merely theoretical, consider this example from The Blackwell Companion to The Problem of Evil:

“A Google search on the term “child torture” retrieves the following case among others: in 2010, four-year-old Dominick Calhoun of Argentine Township, Michigan, died after days of being beaten and burned by his mother’s boyfriend. “I’ve been doing this a long time, and this is the worst case of child abuse I’ve ever seen,” said the local police chief; “in all respects, he was tortured.” Dominick’s grandmother reported that “burns covered his body” and that his brain was “bashed out of his skull.” A neighbor told police he heard Dominick screaming, over and over again, “Mommy, make him stop.” Dominick’s crime? Wetting his pants. **Where was God while this was going on? Why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect God stand by and let someone torture Dominick to death?** Atheists of course reply, “Nowhere: there is no God in the first place.” Some theists answer by offering theodicies: attempts to explain why the universe is in some sense better, or at least no worse, if God allows Dominick’s torture than it would be if God prevented it. In their view, God’s letting Dominick suffer must achieve some compensating good (or prevent some evil at least as bad) that not even God could achieve (or prevent) otherwise. Theodicies try to specify those goods (or evils). Those in the theodicy business face a daunting challenge. On reflection, the only goods we can think of seem to fail, individually and collectively, to

provide a sufficient moral justification: either they look too small to offset the disvalue of Dominick's suffering, or else we cannot see how an omnipotent God would need to allow Dominick's suffering in order to achieve those goods. Even after thinking hard about it, we cannot see how God's permission of that suffering could be justified by (1) a four-year-old child's somehow deserving it, (2) the value (if any) of the boyfriend's libertarian freedom to torture Dominick, (3) the value of someone else's libertarian freedom to do something in light of the torture, or (4) whatever beneficial attention to the problem of child abuse this case may generate. Justification (1) looks preposterous, and (2)–(4) seem, at best, to violate Dominick's autonomy by treating him merely as a means to some good end that even consequentialists must admit does not look good enough. Even if we consider possible benefits of a less mundane kind, such as Dominick's "experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God," we cannot see how achieving those benefits would force an omnipotent God to permit Dominick's suffering. Or consider instead the prevention of some horrific evil: suppose that Dominick, had he not been killed, would have grown up to commit brutal murders. Even on that wild supposition his suffering remains unjustified, since his painless death would have prevented that future evil at less cost. Furthermore, such speculation about Dominick's future brutality could provide the justification we seek only if we had some reason to believe it, and we do not. Again, our search for an adequate justification comes up empty. According to leading versions of the evidential argument from evil, the best explanation

of our inability to find an adequate moral justification for God's letting Dominick suffer is that no such justification exists; we cannot find what is not there. But any action or permission of a perfect God must be morally justified; therefore, no such God exists. **This partly abductive reasoning is the most popular philosophical argument for atheism to emerge in the last several decades.**"

It may be an argument for atheism, but it is NOT an argument against pandeism, for the reason stated above. It is an argument against panentheism, which I therefore reject.

Another example quoted in the Blackwell Companion is the persecution of so-called witches, mostly female, by the Roman Catholic Church. The justification for these atrocities was partly the identification of Eve as the seducer who induced Adam to commit the Original Sin:

“Associating the female with that which is evil is not without consequences for real women. The most notorious example of this, according to the feminist philosopher and post-Christian theologian Mary Daly, is the witch craze of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. For Daly, these events can only be understood if one identifies the deep-rooted misogyny which lends itself to “gynocide” (her term for the systematic murder of women) (Daly 1991, 306). In making this claim, Daly draws attention to the rhetoric of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1484), the Vatican-endorsed tome which acted as the handbook for the fifteenth-century witch-finders. Its writers describe the weaknesses of women, which they suggest make them more prone to become the devil’s familiars than men. Somewhat contradictorily, they argue both that women are the weaker sex and that they are powerful enough to enact extreme evil. Importantly, if the evil embodied by the devil is to be identified and defeated, every tool available must be used, and that includes torture. A sickening dynamic is thereby justified: in order to defeat evil, the witch as the conduit of the devil can be treated as less than human, and acts of unbelievable cruelty can legitimately be inflicted upon her (Summers 1971, 223). More recently, Margaret Denike (2003) has developed Daly’s argument, drawing attention to the way in which the definition of witch as evil incarnate leads the Church to sanction a system that persecuted scapegoats. But this is not all. Denike argues that the witch craze reveals the mechanisms behind patriarchal attempts to control women.

How better to keep women submissive than by designating some of them as witches who are then subject to torture and horrific forms of execution? What an abject lesson for the rest!"

**10 models of God:**

<b>Concept of God</b>	<b>Creator?</b>	<b>Active in the world?</b>	<b>Currently fully conscious?</b>
Atheism	No	No	Not applicable
Agnosticism	?	?	?
Deism	Yes	No	Yes
Pandeism	Yes	Not active as God	Not conscious as God
Pantheism	Yes	No	No
Polytheism	No	Yes	Maybe
Henotheism	Maybe	Yes	Maybe
Theism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Panentheism	Yes	Maybe	Maybe