

Pantheists in Spite of Themselves? Pannenberg, Clayton, and Shults on Divine Infinity

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SUMMARY

Christian theology has traditionally affirmed that God is infinite. But some contemporary theologians seem to think that this affirmation stands in tension with the Christian belief in the reality of a finite world distinct from God. These theologians exhibit an unsettling tendency toward monism and, hence, toward pantheism. Although they may shrink from this conclusion and try to provide ways to avoid it, these escape routes are less than convincing, so that their rejection of pantheism represents merely a failure on their part to carry out their views to their logical conclusions. I show that there is no reason to think that God's metaphysical infinity entails being absolutely unlimited in the radical sense presupposed by these theologians. Indeed, such a notion is shown to be self-referentially incoherent. Rather God's metaphysical infinity should be understood in terms of His superlative attributes which make Him a maximally great being.

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Introduction

Christian theology has traditionally affirmed that God is infinite. But some contemporary theologians seem to think that this affirmation stands in tension with the Christian belief in the reality of a finite world distinct from God. These theologians exhibit an unsettling tendency toward monism, the view that all reality is one, namely, God, and, hence, toward pantheism. Although they may shrink from this conclusion and try to provide ways to avoid it, these escape routes may strike us as less than convincing, so that their rejection of pantheism represents merely a failure on their part to carry out their views to their logical conclusions.

The Monistic Argument

Although the roots of this tendency may be traced back to German idealism, its contemporary progenitor is Wolfhart Pannenberg, whose theology is deeply influenced by Hegel's metaphysics. Here, for example, is how the problematic comes to expression in Pannenberg:

In the concept of infinity freedom from limitation is not the primary point. Strictly, the infinite is not that which is without end but that which stands opposed to the finite, to what is defined by something else¹²⁶. . . . the basic point in the concept of the Infinite is the antithesis to the finite as such. Hence the concept of the Infinite could become a description of the divine reality in

distinction from everything finite

¹²⁶Cf. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, I, ¶156.2; and Hegel, *Science of Logic*, I, ¶1, ch. 2c, whose first simple definition is that the Infinite is the 'negation of the finite.' To be finite is to be in distinction from something and to be defined by the distinction. The relation of something to something else is an immanent definition of the something itself. From this fact Hegel derives his famous thesis that the Infinite is truly infinite only when it is not thought of merely as the opposite of the finite, for otherwise it would be seen as something in relation to something else and therefore as itself finite. [1]

Now *prima facie* this definition of the concept of the infinite does not seem to make sense. Pannenberg appears to say that the basic concept of the infinite is *that which stands opposed to the finite*, where the finite is understood as *what is defined by something else*. So on this account, the infinite is defined relationally with respect to the finite, in terms of the relation *stands opposed to*. But then it follows that the infinite is finite, which is a contradiction.

Similarly, in the attendant footnote, we are told that the finite is *that which is in distinction from something and is defined by the distinction*. Now as the "negation of the finite," the infinite must lack at least one of these properties of the finite, that is to say, either the infinite is not distinct from anything or the infinite is not defined by the distinction. But we have just seen that the infinite *is* defined by its distinction from the finite. The infinite is the opposite of the finite. It follows that the infinite must not, therefore, possess the first property of the finite, *being in distinction from something*. Therefore, the infinite and the finite cannot really be distinct; rather the infinite must be finite, which is a contradiction.

It might plausibly be thought that this apparent incoherence results largely from the English translator's glossing over some important distinctions. The word *bestimmen* (or *Bestimmung*) is used in at least two different senses in this passage. [2] It is first used in the semantic sense to mean "define," specifically to define a concept (*Begriff*). But, secondly, it is used in an ontic sense of "determine" or "render determinate." Concepts are defined; things are determined. Relational concepts are defined in terms of something else, but that does not imply that the thing falling under that concept is determined by the other thing. For example, being taller, being larger, or being older is each a relational concept; but that does not imply that a thing having such a property is determined in its height, size, or age by the thing to which it is compared.

Pannenberg follows Schleiermacher in defining the concept of the infinite as “that which stands opposed to the finite” (*das dem endlichen entgegengesetzte*). But neither Schleiermacher nor Pannenberg need be understood to define the concept of the finite as “that which is *defined* by something else” but rather as “that which is *determined* by something else” (*das durch anderes mitbestimmte*). Thus, the fact that the basic point (*Grundbestimmung*) in the concept of the Infinite is its antithesis to the finite (*Gegensatz zum Endlichen*) does not imply that the infinite is determined by something else.

Similarly in the attendant footnote, “the negation of the finite” is the definition of the concept of the infinite (*Bestimmung des Begriffs des Undendlichen*). But a nuanced translation reveals that to be finite is not “to be in distinction from something and to be *defined* by the distinction”; rather it is to be in distinction from something (else) and to be constituted in the determination of its being through the distinction from something else (*etwas im Unterschied zu anderem sein, also auch in der Bestimmtheit seines Seins durch den Unterschied zu anderem konstituiert zu sein*). Thus, one is not absurdly claiming that because the concept of the infinite is defined relationally the infinite is therefore finite; for the infinite itself need not be determined in its being by the finite.

The problem with pinning this confusion on the translator, however, is that Pannenberg himself seems to endorse the Hegelian conclusion that “Insofar as the relation of something to something else is conceived as ‘an immanent determination of the thing itself,’ this thing is determined as finite” (*Insofern das Verhältnis des Etwas zu Anderem als ‘immanente Bestimmung des Etwas selbst’ erfasst ist, ist dieses Etwas als Endliches bestimmt*). [3] Pannenberg here appears to endorse the notion that because the *concept* of the infinite is relationally defined therefore the infinite itself is determined in its being. The problem is that is not at all clear nor has any argument been given to think that we should consider a thing’s relation to something else to be an immanent determination of that thing; indeed, an “immanent determination” sounds like what we normally call an intrinsic property, in which case a relational property *cannot* be an immanent determination of the thing itself. It appears, then, that it is not the translator but Pannenberg himself who has conflated the two senses of *bestimmen*, and Bromiley has faithfully preserved this confusion of ideas in his translation.

From the conclusion that anything standing in relation to something else is determined in its being and therefore finite, Hegel is said to develop his famous thesis that the true infinite is not to be thought of as merely the opposite of the finite, lest it be seen as itself something over against something else and therefore as finite (*nicht nur als Gegensatz zum Endlichen gedacht wird, weil es*

sonst selber als Etwas gegenüber Anderem und somit als endlich vorgestellt wird). As Pannenberg notes, in Hegel's thinking if the infinite were merely the opposite of the finite, it would stand in relation to something else and therefore be finite. [4] Hegel sought to solve this perceived problem by distinguishing between the spurious infinite and the true infinite. He asserted, "The infinite as thus posited over against the finite, in a relation wherein they are as qualitatively distinct others, is to be called the *spurious infinite*. . . ." [5] What Hegel called the "true infinite" he identified as the process of becoming which includes both the spurious infinite and the finite as moments. [6] This is the ultimate reality. Because the finite and the infinite are ultimately One, there is no real opposition or distinction between them.

Now Pannenberg appears to endorse such reasoning. He says,

The Infinite that is merely a negation of the finite is not yet truly seen as the Infinite (as Hegel showed), for it is defined by delimitation from something else, i.e., the finite. Viewed in this way the Infinite is something in distinction from something else, and it is thus finite. The Infinite is truly infinite only when it transcends its own antithesis to the finite. [7]

Here Pannenberg seems to repeat the Hegelian argument and endorse Hegel's escape from the looming contradiction.

The argument as Pannenberg explains it seems to be something like the following:

1. The finite is that which is defined by its distinction from something else.
2. The infinite is defined as that which is not finite.
3. Therefore, the infinite is defined by its distinction from something else.
4. Therefore, the infinite is finite.

Since (4) is a logical contradiction, either (1) or (2) must be false. Pannenberg, following Hegel, seems to reject (2) in favor of something like

- 2'. The infinite is that which includes the finite.

No contradiction follows from (1) and (2'), since the infinite is not defined in terms of its distinction from something else. Indeed, given (2'), there just is nothing distinct from the infinite. Such an infinite is, in Hegel's view, truly infinite.

Since the concept of the Infinite can be used as a description of divine reality, Pannenberg does not shy away from expressing his theological understanding of the God-world relation in the

Hegelian language of Absolute Idealism:

The thought of the true Infinite means that the distinction between one thing and another cannot be applied unrestrictedly to God as the true Infinite. As the one who is not one among others, God must be absolute. As one, the Absolute is also all. Yet it is not all in one (pantheism) but transcends the difference of one and all.²³⁵ It is thus the One that also embraces all.

²³⁵For Plotinus, then, the one is no part of the all As such the absolute One is *apeiron*, not something. More precisely, as truly infinite, it is both something and not (merely) something. [8]

Pannenberg seems to be of two minds here. We are told that God cannot be distinct from any other thing and so is not one being among many. But we are left wondering as to the force of the qualifying word “unrestrictedly.” God, the Absolute, must be all, we are told, because He is not one among others. This seems undeniably monistic and, hence, pantheistic. But then we are told that such a view is not pantheism, since pantheism affirms all in one. But if God is one and is not one among others and God is all, then there can be no being distinct from Him. If pantheism were not true, there would have to exist something distinct from God and apart from all, which is incoherent. If God is all and God is One, and these affirmations are understood as identity statements, the transitivity of identity entails that all is one. So all must be in one, since all and one are identical. If we understand these affirmations, not as identity statements, but as predications, then God has the property of being everything there is and the only thing there is. Thus, any and everything that exists must exist “in” God.

Pannenberg asserts that God transcends the difference of one and all. This cannot mean that God transcends the categories of one and all, since He has been affirmed to be one and all. Nor can it mean that there is no difference between one and all with respect to God, since that is precisely what pantheism affirms. The reference to Plotinus is unelucidating, since for Plotinus the One is beyond being and therefore cannot even be said to exist. That is why the One is “not something.” If God does not exist, then nothing exists, since God is all. Moreover, God is affirmed to be “something,” which entails that He is not beyond being. To say that He is not merely something is not to negate this affirmation but to heighten it: God is at least something and more. The “more” seems to be everything: God is all there is. Such would be a reasonable interpretation of Pannenberg’s conclusion that God the Absolute embraces all.

So there is a strong tendency toward monism in Pannenberg’s understanding of God as truly

infinite.

Certain followers of Pannenberg seem to have ventured even further in the direction of monism. Here, for example, is how the argument from infinity appears in Philip Clayton:

. . . it turns out to be impossible to conceive of God as fully infinite if he is limited by something outside of himself. The infinite may without contradiction include within itself things that are by nature finite, but it may not stand *outside of* the finite. For if something finite exists, and if the infinite is 'excluded' by the finite, then it is not truly infinite or without limit. To put it differently, there is simply no place for finite things to 'be' outside of that which is *absolutely unlimited*. Hence, an infinite God must encompass the finite world that he has created, making it in some sense 'within' himself. This is the conclusion that we call panentheism. [9]

Though obviously inspired by Pannenberg, Clayton's argument takes as its point of departure what Pannenberg denied: that freedom from limitation is the primary meaning of the concept of infinity. [10] To be truly infinite is to be absolutely unlimited. Clayton elsewhere explains,

Being limited or bounded (*begrenzt*) intuitively implies the idea of something that is *un* bounded or infinite. To think a something is to think at the same time the border that makes it this something rather than another. Beginning with finite things, our mind stretches toward the indefinite, whether it is indefinite in number, size, or quality. But to (try to) think the totality of things that are bordered leads to the idea of something that is beyond all borders, which Hegel calls the 'truly infinite.' [11]

This explanation helps us to understand why Clayton thinks that if the infinite exists "outside" the finite, then it is not truly infinite. For if the infinite is distinct from the finite, then there is a "border that makes it this something rather than another." There will be something which the finite is not and thus in this sense a limit to it. In this peculiar sense even a metaphysically necessary, self-existent being is limited in its existence by the presence of some metaphysically contingent, causally dependent being because it is *this* and not *that*. It follows that a truly infinite being must have no borders to its existence: nothing other than it can exist. Thus we are brought to the same conclusion toward which Pannenberg gravitated: there is nothing distinct from God. God is everything there is, which is pantheism.

Clayton's argument, then, is not infected by the confusion between "define" and "determine" that besets Pannenberg's version. Rather it appeals to the idea that the infinite must be absolutely unlimited. Clayton's reasoning can be formulated in terms of a conditional proof as follows:

1. God is infinite.
2. If something is infinite, it is absolutely unlimited.
3. If something is absolutely unlimited, it has no bounds.
4. If something is distinct from another thing, then that other thing bounds it.
5. If something is bounded by another thing, then it has bounds.
6. God is distinct from the world. (Premiss for Conditional Proof)
7. Therefore, the world bounds God. (4, 6)
8. Therefore, God has bounds. (5, 7)
9. Therefore, God is not absolutely unlimited. (3, 8)
10. Therefore, God is not infinite. (2, 9)
11. Therefore, if God is distinct from the world, God is not infinite. (6-10, Cond. Proof)
12. Therefore, God is not distinct from the world. (1, 11)

This argument can be generalized to show that God is not distinct from anything else.

Even a few evangelical theologians seem to have been mesmerized by this sort of reasoning. For example, in explaining Pannenberg's doctrine of God, LeRon Shults opines,

. . . it is important to stress the importance of the 'true infinite' concept. Here we have a distinction that transcends yet embraces the distinction between God and the world. This special distinction has been emphasized by many theologians over the centuries, but recently it has been radically thematized. Robert Sokolowski describes it in this way: '(God plus the world) is not greater than God alone.' . . . If the world and God together were 'more' than God alone, then we have something 'greater' than God,' namely, God and the world. [12]

This is not, in fact, Pannenberg's argument, though it is one rooted in the tradition of Absolute Idealism. [13] Shults's argument presupposes the Anselmian notion of God as the greatest conceivable being and claims that if God and the world are distinct entities, then there is some entity greater than God, which is impossible. Shults elsewhere expands on the assumption that God and the world together constitute some greater reality:

Often we imagine 'all that is' as divided into two generic kinds: divine and non-divine. This way of construing the distinction between Creator and creation succeeds in protecting against pantheism,

but it easily leads us into the opposite problem: conceptualizing the relation between Infinity and finitude (or between Eternity and time) in terms of a simple dualism in which God and the world are two parts of a broader whole.

. . . If one conceptualizes the God-world relation in terms of two kinds of being (infinite and finite) that together compose 'All,' then this All replaces God as the Absolute. Both God and world become parts of the 'Whole'. . . this way of speaking is not consistent with the idea of God as the unlimited and unconditioned, but marks 'God' off as that part of the Whole that is limited (and so conditioned) by the finite. [14]

In this last remark we see how Shults's argument links up with Clayton's (and in fact Shults at this point footnotes Clayton's argument cited above). In Shults's view if God were an entity distinct from the world, then He would be just a part of a greater reality comprised of God and the world and thus be limited by the world. Thus, one is led once again to deny that God and the world are distinct entities and, hence, to pantheistic monism.

We may formulate Shults's reasoning as follows:

1. God is the greatest conceivable being.
2. If God were an entity distinct from the world, then God and the world would be parts of a greater whole.
3. If God and the world were parts of a greater whole, then there would be something greater than God.
4. If there were something greater than God, then God would not be the greatest conceivable being.
5. Therefore, there is nothing greater than God. (1, 4)
6. Therefore, God and the world are not parts of a greater whole. (3, 5)
7. Therefore, God is not an entity distinct from the world. (2, 6)

Thus God, as the greatest conceivable being, a truly infinite being, must encompass all there is.

Escape from Monism

Now none of these three Christian theologians wants to be a pantheist, and so each tries to escape or reinterpret Hegelian monism so as to maintain Christian orthodoxy.

Pannenberg, despite his Hegelian proclivity towards monism, is clearly neither a pantheist nor a monist. Rather he reconstrues the antithesis of the infinite to the finite in such a way that they are reconcilable even as their distinctness is preserved. Simplifying, we may say that Pannenberg construes the antithesis between God and the universe as an almost literal sort of opposition, which is then overcome by some sort of relationship of God to the world which achieves reconciliation. In this reconciliation the distinctness of the *relata* is not dissolved. Pannenberg is fond of the word *aufgehoben* to characterize the opposition between God and the universe. The connotation is that the distinction at issue is not annulled but taken up to a higher level where the opposition is overcome even as the distinction is preserved. To give our own illustration, in marriage the antithesis of two persons is *aufgehoben*, as husband and wife come together in a deep unity even as their distinctness as persons is preserved. In the same way the opposition between infinite and finite, God and the world, is *aufgehoben* in that God is intimately related to the world in various ways even as the ontological distinctness between God and the world is preserved.

To see this worked out systematically, one should turn to Pannenberg's exposition of "The Infinity of God" in part 6 of the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*. [15] There he expounds divine infinity in terms of God's attributes of holiness, eternity, omnipotence, and omnipresence. He takes the idea of holiness to be so closely linked to divine infinity that it is needed for its elucidation, while eternity, omnipotence, and omnipresence may be seen as "concrete manifestations" of God's infinity. Already it is noteworthy that God's existence is conspicuously absent from this analysis; there is no suggestion that God's existence is at odds with finite existence.

Pannenberg takes the basic point in the concept of the infinite to be the antithesis to the finite as such. As his exposition will bear out, we should place the emphasis here on the notion of the infinite as standing opposed to the finite. Pannenberg does not, in fact, think of the infinite as something that annuls or extinguishes the finite, for in order for the infinite to stand in opposition to the finite the distinction between the two must be real. If they were one, they could not stand opposed. "In this regard," says Pannenberg, "the concept of the Infinite links up especially with that of the holiness of God, for the basic meaning of holiness is separateness from everything profane." [16] God's holiness threatens the profane world because of divine judgement; yet that same holiness goes beyond judgement to bring salvation. Pannenberg sees this motif of reconciliation overcoming opposition as the key to understanding divine infinity. He explains, Thus the holiness of God both opposes the profane world and embraces it, bringing it into

fellowship with the holy God. We see here a structural affinity between what the Bible says about the holiness of God and the concept of the true Infinite. The Infinite that is merely a negation of the finite is not yet truly seen as the Infinite (as Hegel showed), for it is defined by delimitation from something else, i.e., the finite. Viewed in this way the infinite is something in distinction from something else, and it is thus finite. The Infinite is truly infinite only when it transcends its own antithesis to the finite. In this sense the holiness of God is truly infinite, for it is opposed to the profane, yet it also enters the profane world, penetrates it, and makes it holy. In the renewed world that is the target of eschatological hope the difference between God and creature will remain, but that between the holy and the profane will be totally abolished (Zech. 14.20-21). [17]

Pannenberg sees the same structure in the work of the Holy Spirit, who, as God, is opposed to the profane world and yet who sanctifies creatures by giving them fellowship with God. What we see here is that when Pannenberg speaks of the infinite's transcending its own antithesis to the finite, he is speaking in purely relational terms. The ontological difference between God and creatures is not abolished, but God and creatures come to be related in a special way.

Pannenberg thus thinks that the problem posed by Hegel's monistic argument is met by emphasizing the relationality of God and the universe, which overcomes their opposition while preserving their distinctness. He says,

the abstract concept of the true Infinite . . . contains a paradox It tells us that we have to think of the Infinite as negation, as the opposite of the finite, but also that it comprehends this antithesis in itself. But the abstract concept of the true Infinite does not show us how we can do this. The thought of the holiness of God and the understanding of the essence of God as Spirit bring us closer to a resolving of the contradiction. They express the fact that the transcendent God himself is characterized by a vital movement which causes him to invade what is different from himself and to give it a share in his own life. The biblical view of the divine Spirit in his creative and life-giving work also contains the thought that God gives existence to the finite as that which is different from himself, so that his holiness does not mean the abolition of the distinction between the finite and the infinite. [18]

Pannenberg sees the reconciliation of God and the world as the way in which the antithesis between finite and infinite can be overcome while preserving the difference or distinction between them.

His handling of eternity, omnipotence, and omnipresence is similar to his analysis of holiness. In

each case, the antithesis to finite existence is overcome by postulating some relation between God and creatures. With respect to eternity, Pannenberg rejects the Platonic conception of an unqualified divine timelessness in favor of a doctrine of divine atemporality plus a relation to temporal things. Unfortunately Pannenberg does not explain how God can transcend time while sustaining relations with temporal beings or events—all he offers is non-explanatory appeals to Trinitarian theology without any real account of how the reconciliation is to be achieved. But the relational synthesis is isomorphic with divine holiness:

The thought of eternity that is not simply opposed to time but positively related to it, embracing it in its totality, offers a paradigmatic illustration and actualization of the structure of the true Infinite which is not just opposed to the finite but also embraces the antithesis. On the other hand the idea of a timeless eternity that is merely opposed to time corresponds to the improper infinite which in its opposition to the finite is defined by it and thereby shows itself to be finite. [19]

Just as the eternal does not abolish or obliterate time but is positively related to it, so the infinite's embracing the finite should be understood, not as swallowing it up, but as standing in some positive relationship to it.

With respect to omnipresence, Pannenberg sees an antithesis between God's immensity and creatures seemingly isolated from God, an opposition which is overcome by God's immediate presence to all things. "As in the case of his eternity, then, there are combined in his omnipresence elements of both immanence and transcendence in keeping with the criterion of the true Infinite." [20]

Again, Pannenberg seeks to explicate this transcendence and immanence of God in terms of Trinitarian theology, appealing (without, it must again be said, any account) to the consubstantiality and perichoresis of the three persons of the Godhead in order to explain the presence of the transcendent Father to believers through the Son and Spirit. The point to be emphasized is that once again we are dealing with purely relational concerns in overcoming the opposition of the infinite and the finite. "The trinitarian life of God in his economy of salvation proves to be the true infinity of his omnipresence." [21]

Finally, with respect to omnipotence, that God is omnipotent means, according to Pannenberg, that God's power is as unlimited as his omnipresence and eternity. As such it stands opposed to creatures. But that cannot be the whole story, if omnipotence is a manifestation of God's true infinity.

Omnipotence rules absolutely, and what is ruled by it is at the mercy of its whim. This one-sided view of omnipotence which sets that which rules in opposition to that which is ruled misses the true concept of omnipotence . . . As Creator, God wills the existence of his creatures. Hence, his omnipotence cannot be totally opposed to them if he is to be identical with himself in his acts and to show himself therein to be the one God. [22]

The omnipotent God therefore allows creatures to exist which have a measure of autonomy: “they can achieve an independent existence which is distinct from God and yet stay related to the origin of their life.” [23] Once again we see that the overcoming of the alleged antithesis between infinite and finite is accomplished relationally, in such a way that the distinction of each is preserved.

God’s holiness, eternity, omnipresence, and omnipotence are the concrete ways in which God is infinite. None of them, on Pannenberg’s view, abolishes the ontological distinction between creature and Creator. So when Pannenberg come to discuss the unity of God and says that “The thought of the true Infinite means that the distinction between one thing and another cannot be applied unrestrictedly to God as the true Infinite,” [24] the force of the word “unrestrictedly” is that while God is distinct from other things He must also stand in relation to them. When Pannenberg says that God “transcends the difference between one and all” and is “the One that also embraces all,” he is speaking loosely of the various relationships in which God as concretely infinite stands to His creatures, affirmatively embracing them just as a husband embraces his wife.

So God’s unity is not a matter of ontological unity with the world but God’s being united to the world in relationship.

By the unity of reconciliation by love which embraces the world and bridges the gulf between God and the world, the unity of God himself is realized in relation to the world By the love which manifests itself in his revelatory action God’s unity is constituted the unity of the true Infinite which transcends the antithesis to what is distinct from it. [25]

Here the infinite’s transcending the antithesis to distinct entities is accomplished by love, which bridges the gulf between God and the world. The ontological distinctness between God and the world is not annulled, but affirmed, on pain of reducing God’s love of the world to self-love. Notice how Pannenberg affirms with respect to God’s infinite attributes the ontological distinctness of God and the universe:

Only the doctrine of the Trinity permits us so to unite God’s *transcendence* as Father and his *immanence* in and with his creatures through Son and Spirit that the *permanent distinction* between

God and creature is upheld. The same holds good for an understanding of God's *omnipotence*. The power of God over his creation as the transcendent Father finds completion only through the work of the Son and Spirit because only thus is it freed from the one-sided antithesis of the one who determines and that which is determined

The same holds good also for an understanding of God's *eternity*. The incarnation of the Son sets aside the antithesis of eternity and time as the present of the Father . . . is present to us through the Son the removal of the antithesis of eternity and time in the economy of God's saving action according to the wisdom of his love is the reconciliation of the antithesis between Creator and creature. [26]

The overcoming of the perceived antithesis between the infinite God and the finite world is thus achieved, not by blurring the distinction between them, but by seeing them as existing in a loving relationship. Pannenberg sums up:

The same holds good finally for an understanding of the basic statement of God's infinity. The thought of the true Infinite, which demands that we do not think of the infinite and the finite as a mere antithesis but also think of the unity that transcends the antithesis, poses first a mere challenge, an intellectual task which seems at first glance to involve a paradox. In the abstractly logical form of the question there appears to be no way of showing how we can combine the unity of the infinite and the finite in a single thought without expunging the difference between them

. . . divine love in its trinitarian concreteness . . . embraces the tension of the infinite and the finite without setting aside their distinction. It is the unity of God with his creature which is grounded in the fact that the divine love eternally affirms the creature in its distinctiveness and thus sets aside its *separation* from God but not its *difference* from Him. [27]

That last phrase encapsulates Pannenberg's solution to the problem of the infinite and finite: God's love overcomes the world's estrangement from Him while affirming its ontological distinctness.

Pannenberg, then, eschews both pantheism and monism. All this Hegelian talk about the antithesis of the infinite to the finite, the infinite's embracing the finite, God's not being unrestrictedly distinct from other things, and so on, is just fancy window dressing for the traditional doctrine of creation, which affirms God's distinctness from the universe and His relatedness to it.

But very little reflection is needed to realize that Pannenberg has greatly underestimated the force of the Hegelian argument. His affirmations of God's being related to the world while remaining

distinct from it display Pannenberg's orthodoxy (despite his use of rather unorthodox language), but they do nothing to refute the argument for monism. Pannenberg, it will be recalled, seeks to avoid the contradiction that the infinite is finite by rejecting

2. The infinite is defined as that which is not finite

in favor of

2'. The infinite is that which includes the finite.

But (2') appears to be monistic. In order to avoid that conclusion Pannenberg interprets words like "includes" (e.g., "embraces," "transcends the antithesis to," "removes the antithesis between," and so on) to have the force "is positively related to." The perceived antithesis of God to the world is a sort of antagonism which is removed by God's being related to the world in affirming ways. The ontological distinctness between God and the world is actually presupposed by, rather than undermined by, such relatedness. But if this is all that is meant by God's (or the truly infinite's) inclusion of the world (or the finite), then (2') is just impotent to resolve the original contradiction. For Pannenberg is still thinking of God or the infinite as something that is distinct from the world or the finite. So what he means by (2') may be more accurately expressed as

2". The (truly) infinite is that which is distinct from the finite but positively related to it.

But in that case the infinite is still being defined in terms of its distinction from something else and therefore, according to premiss (1) of his argument, is still finite. (In one sense, this whole line of reasoning is sloppy and confused, since, as we have said, *words* or *concepts* are defined, not *things*, but to the extent that we accept for the sake of argument the original premisses, it remains the case that the infinite is "defined" by its distinction from the finite. [28]) One cannot avoid the infinite's being relationally defined by merely piling on more relations, like *being temporally related to*, *being present to*, and so on, in line with the concrete ways in which God is supposed to be truly infinite. If we let "*R*" stand for any of the special relations in which the infinite God is said to stand to the finite world, then on Pannenberg's view, God is infinite = _{def.} God *R* the world. But then God's infinity is defined in terms of something else, that to which He stands in the relation *R*. So it follows from premiss (1) of the argument that God is finite. Therefore, Pannenberg has not avoided the contradiction that impelled Hegel to a monistic understanding of (2') in terms of ontological inclusion.

It is hard to understand how Pannenberg could have thought that by positing additional, positive

relations of God to the world, he had thereby overcome Hegel's contradiction. It seems that he took the antithesis involved to be an almost literal sort of opposition or antagonism which could then be overcome by positing some positive relations. But the antithesis involved here is of a conceptual and ontological sort: the infinite is defined as the not-finite and so an infinite being is one that is distinct from every finite being. Postulating further relations between them has no effect on this fundamental antithesis.

Clayton also tries to avoid pantheism. He proposes that we adopt panentheism instead as a way of affirming God's true infinity. Such nomenclature is misleading, however, for panentheism is typically taken to be the view that the world is partially constitutive of the divine being, that is to say, the world is a proper part of God. But Clayton, despite some incautious statements that "we are 'composed' out of him who is Being itself", [29] explicitly affirms that the world is ontologically distinct from God, having been created *ex nihilo* at a point in the finite past and subsequently conserved in being by God. [30] What, then, does Clayton mean when he calls his view "panentheistic"? He means that the universe is literally located in God. [31] At first blush this is reminiscent of Newton's view of divine immensity and absolute space. According to Newton infinite space is the physical by-product of God's omnipresence, and objects moving through space are actually moving through God, who is present throughout space.

But how can any such Newtonian view be compatible with Clayton's affirmations of *creatio ex nihilo* and his recognition that standard Big Bang cosmogony involves an absolute origin not just of matter and energy, but of physical space and time themselves at the initial cosmological singularity? Clayton's answer is that the divine space "transcends and encompasses physical space." [32] By this assertion Clayton seems to mean that God exists in an embedding hyper-space in which our 4-dimensional spacetime manifold exists. Moreover, Clayton affirms repeatedly that God literally existed temporally prior to the Big Bang singularity, at which physical time began. [33] So there must be an embedding dimension of hyper-time as well. Clayton's view, then, is that God exists in a hyper-spacetime in which our 4-dimensional universe is located, a view very close to the thesis of God's "extra-dimensionality" popularized by the Christian apologist Hugh Ross. God is thus ontologically distinct from the world though the world exists in God.

Such a novel view of God's relation to the world is, however, once again simply irrelevant to the Hegelian argument for monism as Clayton formulated it. Recall that according to premiss (2) of Clayton's argument, anything that is infinite is absolutely unlimited. In premiss (3), being absolutely unlimited is explicated in terms of having no bounds. Clayton takes the notion of having bounds

very radically: a bound or border is that which “makes a thing this something rather than another.” [34] Even bare identity conditions for an entity thus constitute bounds for that entity. So premiss (4) tells us that if anything is distinct from another thing, that other thing bounds it, and premiss (5) asserts the obvious, that if something is bounded by another thing, then it has bounds. Now since Clayton emphatically affirms that God and the world are not identical, but are ontologically distinct, it follows immediately that God is not infinite, since He is bounded by the world. Even if the world exists in God, the world remains as distinct from God as a bacterium in the stomach of a cow is distinct from that cow. Just as the cow is not a bacterium and so has a boundary to its existence set by that bacterium (and vice versa as well), so God is not the world and so has a boundary to His existence. It follows then that God is not absolutely unlimited (He is not the world) and therefore, according to the argument, is finite.

Again, it is bewildering that Clayton could have thought that by embedding the universe spatio-temporally in God he had done anything to remove the boundaries to God’s existence. He seems to have been misled by his own naive language of the impossibility of the infinite’s existing “outside of” the finite. He proposes to solve the problem by embedding the world “within” God. [35] This breezy solution completely fails to appreciate that the exteriority with which one is grappling is not spatial but ontological. Any being that is distinct from another is bounded by that other on this analysis, regardless of where they happen to be spatio-temporally located. So even if God has the world inside of Him, He is bounded by the world in that He and the world are two different things. Being thus limited, God, on Clayton’s proposal, remains finite.

Finally, LeRon Shults thinks to avoid monism by emphasizing God’s relationality. He says, After the (re)turn to relationality, the metaphysics of substance that forced the choice between pantheism (one substance) and dualism (two substances) was severely challenged. If the divine nature is truly Infinite, so that God embraces while transcending the distinction between infinite and finite, then finite creaturely sharing in this nature does not have to mean that the finite becomes (substantially) infinite, nor that the finite is a constitutive ‘part’ of the infinite, nor that God’s nature is one (infinite) substance defined over against other (finite) substances. [36]

Now despite his opening sentence, Shults does not, it seems, really mean to abandon a metaphysics of substance in favor of pure relationality. Such a metaphysics would appear absurd, since relations obtain between substances. Moreover, Shults goes on to speak approvingly of God’s having a nature and later of things existing in relation to God. In any case, premiss (1) of

Shults's argument, that God is the greatest conceivable being, itself affirms that God is a substance, a being, so that if this is denied, one cannot reach the conclusion (7), which, on this interpretation, Shults means to affirm, namely, that God is not an entity. So Shults does not mean to assert that there literally are no things. He errs in thinking that Christian theism affirms dualism, for in this context that would be to assert that there are only two substances, two things, in existence. Christian theism is committed to a plurality of substances. Moreover, Christian theism affirms that those substances, including God, stand in a wide variety of relations. So what does Shults mean by the (re)turn to relationality? He explains,

I suggest a terminological distinction between existing, participating, and sharing in the divine nature. Romans 11.36 tells us that *all things* are from, through, and to God. This means that to be creaturely is to *exist* in their dynamic movement in relation to God Human persons *participate* in a way that is qualitatively different than the experience of other creatures; self-conscious creatures experience a personal knowing, acting, and being as *becoming* I normally reserve the term *sharing* for the intensification of the religious relation to God, which Christians experience as the indwelling and transforming presence of the Spirit [37]

This exposition is altogether innocuous and unremarkable. But is it also impotent to turn back the force of the monistic argument endorsed by Shults. According to premiss (2) of that argument, if God were a distinct entity from the world, then God and the world would be parts of a greater whole. Shults could avoid this conclusion by holding that there is no such entity, no such substance, as God. But that would be to affirm that there is no God, which Shults does not want to seem to do. Rather he wants to say that creatures, while distinct from God, share in the divine nature. But that sharing relation is then explicated in terms of an intensification of one's religious relation to God in Christian experience. As we saw with Pannenberg, the positing of such a relation does absolutely nothing to defeat any of the premises of the argument for monism which Shults endorsed. On Shults's view God's nature may not be one substance "over against" other substances in the sense of antagonism or opposition, but it certainly is in the sense of ontological distinctness. So long as God is an entity (which Shults seems to affirm), it follows from Shults's argument that God cannot be distinct from but related to the world, as Shults wants to affirm, for then there would be something greater than God, namely, the entity comprising God and the world. So the world and God must be the same entity, which is to affirm pantheism.

In sum, these three Christian theologians have not been able to frame successful defeaters for the monistic and pantheistic conclusions of the Hegelian-style arguments they have endorsed. So long

as they continue to endorse the premises of those arguments, they will be stuck with pantheism in spite of themselves.

Failure of the Monistic Argument

Fortunately, the Hegelian-style arguments offered by our three theologians are not at all compelling. In the first place, the premises of those arguments presuppose a concept of the infinite which is deeply flawed and even incoherent. About fifty years after Hegel's death, revolutionary developments in the concept of the infinite were taking place in mathematics, spearheaded by his compatriot Georg Cantor. Cantor also claimed on behalf of his concept of the infinite that it was the "true infinite," in contrast to the "improper infinite" which had prevailed up until that time. [38] Cantor's positive definition of the infinite soon swept through mathematics and lies at the foundations of modern set theory (which many mathematicians believe to be foundational for all of mathematics) and transfinite arithmetic.

Cantor differentiated between a potential infinite and an actual infinite. Up until his time the concept of infinity was purely a limit concept. Infinity serves as the ideal terminus of unceasing processes which ever more closely approach but never arrive at infinity. For example, the number of segments into which some distance could be divided exceeds any natural number; as the dividing goes on the number of segments approaches infinity. Aristotle had maintained that the infinite thus exists merely potentially but never actually. By contrast Cantor enunciated the concept of a quantity that is actually infinite. On Cantor's analysis, a collection is actually infinite if and only if it has a proper part which has the same number of elements or members as the whole collection. A proper part of a collection is a part which is not co-extensive with the whole collection; that is to say, there are members of the whole collection which are not members of the part. Two collections have the same number of members if and only if their members can be paired in a one-to-one correspondence. So, for example, on this analysis, the natural number series 0, 1, 2, 3, . . . is actually infinite, having a proper part (say, the odd numbers) which is numerically equivalent to the whole series.

0, 1, 2, 3,

↕, ↕, ↕, ↕,

1, 3, 5, 7,

On the other hand, a collection is finite if the number of members of the collection is some natural

number n .

Cantor's definitions completely subvert the Hegelian argument. For it is not true, as Pannenberg's version of Hegel's argument affirms, that

2. The infinite is defined as that which is not finite.

Cantor gave positive content to the concept of the infinite; it was not defined merely as the negation of the finite. Even apart from Cantor's analysis, the ineptness of (2) should have been evident anyway. The "not-finite" is no more synonymous with "infinite" than the "not-black" is synonymous with "white". The not-finite encompasses not only the actual infinite but also the potential infinite, as well as anything to which the category of quantity is inapplicable. For example, in the first case, the size of a geometrically closed but ever-expanding universe is potentially infinite and so cannot be equated with any finite number or any actually infinite number. As for the second case, while it is true that "The color blue is not finite" because the category of quantity is simply inapplicable, that is not to affirm the absurdity, "The color blue is infinite." Thus, the definition offered in (2) is clearly defective.

Neither, on Cantor's account, is it true, as Pannenberg suggests, that

2'. The infinite is that which includes the finite.

For (2'), on Cantor's definitions, is clearly false, for one can have infinite collections which have no members in common. So, for example, -2 is not included in the natural number series, despite the fact that that series is infinite.

Cantor's definitions also make it clear that Clayton's premiss

2. If something is infinite, it is absolutely unlimited.

is false. The collection of natural numbers have a lower bound 0 but is nonetheless infinite. The series of fractions between 1 and 2 has both an upper and lower bound, namely, $2/1$ and $1/1$, but is for all that infinite. Thus, given Cantor's definitions, the crucial premises in the monistic arguments are false.

Of course, Pannenberg and Clayton will respond that the true infinite is not a mathematical but a metaphysical concept. Pannenberg differentiates between Hegel's "qualitative definition" of the infinite and the "quantitative mathematical definition." [39] He sees the former as more basic than the latter, for

freedom from limitation is a consequence of negation of the finite, and this freedom can have the form of unlimited progress in a finite series. The infinite series—including the indefinite sequence of finite magnitudes in space and time—actualizes the antithesis of the infinite and the finite only in a one-sided way, namely, by an unrestricted addition of finite steps. [40]

This explanation makes it evident that Pannenberg is still thinking of the mathematical infinite in pre-Cantorian terms as a merely potential infinite. As we have seen, the concept of the actual infinite has nothing to do with the absence of limits. This is the case even if, historically speaking, the idea of the actual infinite evolved out of reflection on the potential infinite and freedom from limits. The definition of the concept of actual infinity makes no reference to absence of limits and so is independent of that notion.

Now suppose we do distinguish between the mathematical (or quantitative) and the metaphysical (or qualitative) infinite (as, in fact, I think we should). [41] Two questions then present themselves. First, why think that the metaphysical infinite is privileged over the mathematical infinite as the concept of the “true infinite”? Why not think that the true infinite is the mathematical concept, and the qualitative idea just an analogical notion? Indeed, given the rigor and fecundity of Cantor’s analysis in contrast to the imprecise, subjective, and poorly understood metaphysical concept, do we not have good grounds for elevating the mathematical concept to the status of the true infinite? At least there is no reason to make it play second fiddle to its metaphysical cousin.

Our theologians might plausibly reply that they are not privileging the metaphysical over the mathematical infinite so much as maintaining that mathematical or quantitative concepts are simply not at issue here, since one’s concern is with God’s infinity, and divine infinity is not a quantitative notion, having nothing to do with collections of definite and discrete members.

This reply seems quite correct. But then we come to the second question occasioned by the distinction between the mathematical and metaphysical infinite, namely, why think that the Hegelian concept of the metaphysical infinite is correct? Why think that Hegel has correctly understood the notion of the metaphysically infinite? Here we come to the heart of the issue, which is most clearly expressed in Clayton’s

2. If something is (metaphysically) infinite, it is absolutely unlimited.

Why think that (2) is true? The intuition behind (2) consistently seems to be that if something has any limits at all, then it is finite. Moreover, limits are understood here very loosely, so that even the existence of another entity constitutes a limit to a thing’s existence. Although he denies that

freedom from limitation is the primary concept of the infinite, such an understanding seems to be presupposed by Pannenberg's

1. The finite is that which is defined by its distinction from something else.

If something is distinct from something else, then that other thing constitutes a limit to its existence, revealing it to be finite. Similarly, one will recall, Shults thinks that conceiving of God and the world as substantially distinct is inconsistent with speaking of God as unlimited, but marks God off as that part of the whole which is limited by the finite.

So on this view, if it were the case that only God and the moon existed as distinct entities, then even if God is necessary, self-existent, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, omnipresent, and so on with the rest of His superlative attributes, God is nonetheless finite because He is not the moon. That is because the moon is a boundary to His existence and so limits God to being *this* thing but not *that* thing.

Now this understanding of "limit" has peculiar consequences. For, perversely, had God in this case not created the moon, then only God would exist and thus nothing would limit God's existence, so that God would be infinite! In that case God would be all there is. But if He exercises His omnipotence and creates the moon *ex nihilo*, then He is not all there is. Even though God has undergone no intrinsic change whatsoever in His attributes, He is now a finite rather than an infinite being simply in virtue of the moon's existence.

The above thought experiment suggests that our neo-Hegelians have confused "infinite" with "all." If God and the moon exist, then God is not all there is, but it does not follow that He is not infinite. God is intrinsically the same with respect to His attributes whether the moon exists or not. So if we take Clayton's (2) to mean

2". If something is (metaphysically) infinite, it is all there is.

then this premiss is plausibly false. The infinite need not be absolutely unlimited in this sense.

Here we connect with Shults's argument, which makes no explicit appeal to the metaphysical infinite but which also conflates "infinite" with "all." We may agree with Shults that if God and the world were parts of a greater whole, there would be something greater than God. But why accept his

2. If God were an entity distinct from the world, then God and the world would be parts of a greater whole.

This premiss assumes a philosophical analysis of parthood which most philosophers would find incredible. Shults seems to think that for any two entities, their mereological sum constitutes a thing of which they are parts. But this seems fantastic. Do my left hand and the lamp on Jim Beilby's desk constitute an object of which they are parts? The answer seems obviously, no. Ironically, Shults turns out to be a more radical substance metaphysician than those he criticizes, for he reifies such arbitrary sums into bona fide substances. He must take these sums to be real substances, otherwise his claim that God would no longer be the greatest conceivable being would be unjustified. So, if Shults is to defend (2), he needs to give some powerful argument for thinking that arbitrary mereological sums constitute objects or else show why in God's special case the mereological sum of, say, God and the moon is an object of which God is a part. We all agree that if God and the moon exist, then God is not all there is; but it does not follow that there exists therefore some object of which God is a part.

To return, then, to Clayton's (2), not only is there no good reason to accept (2) as true, but we have, moreover, good reason to reject it. For the concept of an absolutely unlimited being is incoherent. According to Clayton, a border or limit is that which makes a thing *this* thing rather than another. But that entails that even if God existed alone, in utter solitude, so that He was all there is, He would still be a limited being. For He would still have specific properties that make Him what He is rather than something else. God would still have limits to His being in that He is not, say, a mouse or the moon. Indeed, if God's attributes are essential to Him, then God is necessarily limited in His existence to what He is. Hence, for a being to be absolutely unlimited, there cannot be any predicates at all that are applicable to it.

But then incoherence immediately follows. For if nothing can be truly predicated of some being, then the predicate "being absolutely unlimited" cannot be truly predicated of that being. But then the statement

2. If something is (metaphysically) infinite, it is absolutely unlimited.

is false or truth valueless, which contradicts the hypothesis. To put the same point another way: if a being is absolutely unlimited, then it is *not* limited. Hence, there is a boundary to its existence; there is something it is not: it is not a limited being. An absolutely unlimited being *cannot* have any predicates—which is to posit a limit to its being. [42]

Therefore, we have compelling reasons to reject Clayton's (2), for the notion of an absolutely unlimited being, in the curious sense in which "limit" is being employed, is self-referentially

incoherent. Hence, the understanding of the metaphysically infinite presupposed by our neo-Hegelian theologians must be rejected.

So what, then, do we mean when we affirm with Clayton that

1. God is infinite.

Here Pannenberg's insight that God's infinity has concrete manifestations provides the key. There really is no separate divine attribute denoted by "infinity." Rather "infinity" serves as an umbrella-term for capturing all those properties which serve to make God the greatest conceivable being. In saying that God is infinite, we mean that God is necessary, self-existent, omnipotent, omniscient, holy, eternal, omnipresent, and so forth. Were we to abstract these properties from the concept of God, there would not remain some further, undefined property *infinity*. Rather God's infinity is constituted precisely by these great-making properties. All of these properties have been given careful definitions by Christian philosophers in the analytic tradition, definitions which do not surreptitiously reintroduce the concept of infinity; but unfortunately the Christian theologians whom we have discussed in this essay evince little familiarity with this literature. [43] This is greatly to be regretted, for these discussions in analytic philosophy of religion could have helped them to steer clear of the conceptual *Sackgasse* into which their reliance on Hegelian idealism has led them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, the idea that God is metaphysically infinite should not incline us towards monism. Neither should we think that the fact that a real world exists and God is not all there is implies that God is finite. If there were a tension between God's infinity and the reality of the world, the mere postulation of relations of God to the world while preserving their ontological distinctness would avail for nothing. Nothing short of monistic illusionism would avert the contradiction. But there is no reason to think that God's metaphysical infinity entails being absolutely unlimited in this radical sense. Indeed, such a notion is self-referentially incoherent. Rather God's metaphysical infinity should be understood in terms of His superlative attributes which make Him a maximally great being.

Footnotes:

[1]

Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 1: 397. Bromiley's translation is rather free, and the sentence

footnoted 126 is in the German a direct quotation from Schleiermacher

[\[2\]](#)

It is also used in the elided words in the sense of an “individual” (what Bertrand Russell called a “term”), when Pannenberg speaks of “unlimited progress in a finite series,” or, literally, “unlimited progress in the series of finite individuals (*Bestimmungen*).”

[\[3\]](#)

This is apparently the sentence translated by Bromiley as “The relation of something to something else is an immanent definition of the something itself.”

[\[4\]](#)

Hegel says,

“This contradiction occurs as a direct result of the circumstance that the finite remains as a determinate being opposed to the infinite, so that there are two determinatenesses; *there are two worlds, one infinite and one finite, and in their relationship the infinite is only the limit of the finite and is thus only a determinate infinite, an infinite which is itself finite*” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, translated by A. V. Miller London: Allen & Unwin, 1969, Vol. 1, Bk. 1, Sect. 1, Chap. 2, Pt. B, Sub-pt. (c), par. 278).

[\[5\]](#)

Ibid., par. 277.

[\[6\]](#)

Ibid., par. 300.

[\[7\]](#)

Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1: 400.

[\[8\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 443-4

[\[9\]](#)

Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. . Cf. his endorsement of the argument in “Panentheism in Metaphysical and Scientific

Perspective,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, ed. Philp Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 81.

[10]

Elsewhere Clayton distinguishes between what he calls the *intuition* of the infinite and the *concept* of the infinite. He thinks that the primitive intuition of the infinite is the idea of “something without limits” or “the unlimited.” He claims that this intuitive idea is underdeterminative for the concept of the infinite; indeed, one should really speak of a plurality of concepts, since the intuitive idea of the infinite can be variously conceptualized. He thinks that “each demands separate evaluation as one moves from one’s starting intuitions to constructing metaphysical systems based on them” (Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000, p. 119; see pp. 118-120. It is odd, then, that in the quotation cited in the text he says it is “impossible to conceive of God as fully infinite if he is limited by something outside of himself.” Since different conceptions of the infinite are possible, this assertion seems plainly false. Clayton’s argument is based, rather, on his intuitive idea of the infinite, an intuition which reflection might reveal to be incoherent and therefore untenable as a concept of the infinite. It may turn out that what is impossible is to conceive of God as “truly infinite” as that expression is (mis)understood by Hegel and his *Anhänger*. Indeed, Clayton seems to admit this (*ibid.*, pp. 152-3; but cf. p. 168).

[11]

Clayton, *Problem of God*, p. 125. Cf. Hegel’s statement:

“The infinite *is*; in this immediacy it is at the same time the *negation* of an other, of the finite. As thus in the form of simple being and at the same time as the *non-being* of an *other*, it has fallen back into the category of *something* as a determinate being in general — more precisely, into the category of something with a limit. . . .” (Hegel, *Logic*, par. 275. Cf. par. 278).

[12]

F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 100-1.

[13]

Cf. Hegel’s reflection that if we think of the infinite and the finite as existing without connection, then “The infinite, in that case, is *one of the two*; but as only one of the two it is itself finite, it is not

the whole but only one side; it has its limit in what stands over against it; it is thus the finite *infinite*. There are present only two *finites*" (Hegel, *Logic*, par. 288).

[\[14\]](#)

F. LeRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage, *Faces of Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), pp. 161-4.

[\[15\]](#)

The notion of infinity plays a prominent role throughout his *Systematic Theology*. Read in isolation, some passages might be misleading. For example, when Pannenberg says that "finite objects are conditioned by their being carved out of the infinite and defined by it" (1: 140; cf. 165, 353, 356), this sounds monistic; but in fact Pannenberg is talking about our vague, pre-conceptual awareness of the infinite, which is then differentiated by rational reflection (see 1: 114).

[\[16\]](#)

Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1: 397-8.

[\[17\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 399-400.

[\[18\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 400.

[\[19\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 408.

[\[20\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 412.

[\[21\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 415.

[\[22\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 416.

[\[23\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 421.

[\[24\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 443.

[\[25\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 446.

[\[26\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 445-6 (my emphases).

[\[27\]](#)

Ibid., 1: 446 (my emphasis).

[\[28\]](#)

Perhaps we could formulate the argument more accurately as follows: for any being x ,

x is finite =_{def.} x is distinct from something else.

x is infinite =_{def.} x is not finite.

God is infinite.

Therefore, God is not finite.

Therefore, God is not distinct from anything else.

Pannenberg would avoid the conclusion by replacing (2) with

2'. x is infinite =_{def.} x is not finite, but x is positively related to the finite.

But (2') does nothing to avert the problem. For from (2') and (3) it follows that

God is not finite, but He is positively related to the finite,

from which it follows logically (by Simplification) that

4. Therefore, God is not finite,

and the conclusion then follows as before.

[\[29\]](#)

Clayton, *God and contemporary Science*, p. 47.

[\[30\]](#)

Ibid., pp. 20-1, 157-8, 260-2.

[\[31\]](#)

Ibid., pp. 87-90.

[\[32\]](#)

Ibid., p. 89; cf. p. 90.

[\[33\]](#)

Ibid., pp. 95, 157-8, 190.

[\[34\]](#)

Clayton, *Problem of God*, p. 125.

[\[35\]](#)

Ironically, on Clayton's view the infinite God still exists outside of the world even though the world does not exist outside of God. So the infinite remains "outside of" the finite on his view.

[\[36\]](#)

Shults and Sandage, *Faces of Forgiveness*, p. 166.

[\[37\]](#)

Ibid., p. 167.

[\[38\]](#)

Georg Cantor, *Contributions to the Founding of the Theory of Transfinite Numbers*, trans. with an Introduction by Philip E. B. Jourdain (New York: Dover Publications, 1915).

[\[39\]](#)

Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1: 397.

[\[40\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[41\]](#)

On this distinction see the fine treatment by A. W. Moore, *The Infinite*, *The Problems of Philosophy*:

Their Past and Present (London: Routledge, 1990).

[\[42\]](#)

Cf. the critique of Avaita Vendanta Hinduism by Robin Collins, "Eastern Religions," in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 188-92. The monism implied by Hegel's argument is not one according to which the world is a part of God, in the way that one's hand is a part of one's body. For the whole and the part are on such an account still distinct; the body is not a hand. Hence, Hegel's own solution to the contradiction between the infinite and finite was inadequate, for so long as the distinction between God and the world is preserved in their higher unity, they still limit one another. As Collins points out, views which deny the reality of distinctions between beings amount, not to pantheism but to illusionism. The Absolute is the only reality and the world of objects distinct from it is illusory (*maya*). Thus, what our neo-Hegelian Christian theologians are driving toward is a monism akin to that of Taoism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Vendanta Hinduism, on which see Stuart C. Hackett, *Oriental Philosophy: A Westerner's Guide to Eastern Thought* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979). Cf. Alvin Plantinga's critique of John Hick's notion of the ineffable Real in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 49-55.

[\[43\]](#)

For discussion and literature see *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), Part III: "The Coherence of Theism."