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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Grounding panentheism

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Abstract

Panentheists advocate for a unique and rival view of God and his relationship to the cosmos. A common panentheistic slogan says *the cosmos is in God, but God is more than the cosmos*. God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. However, it's unclear how we should interpret this slogan. Focusing on key passages in the *Bhagavad-Gīta*, I propose three desiderata that a minimal account of the panentheist's God-world relation must adhere to and argue that the relation of metaphysical grounding meets all three. On my view, panentheism is the view that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos. I develop this view in opposition to rival accounts and argue that we can plausibly demarcate panentheism from traditional theism in terms of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo.

Keywords: panentheism; traditional theism; grounding; creation ex nihilo; *Bhagavad-Gīta*

Introduction

Panentheism is the view that the cosmos is in God. The term *panentheism* is constructed from the Greek terms *pan*, meaning *all*, *en*, meaning *in*, and *theos* or *theism*, meaning *God*. A common panentheistic slogan says *the cosmos is in God, but God is more than the cosmos*.[1] While God is 'more than' the cosmos and so transcends it, the preposition 'en' is meant to capture God's immanence, which panentheists stress at the expense of God's transcendence. As Philip Clayton (2013, 371) notes, 'At its simplest, panentheism is a model of the God-world relation that emphasizes inclusion rather than separation'. Panentheism is therefore intended to be a kind of middle position between traditional theism (henceforth, 'theism') and pantheism.[2] On the one hand, the theist's distinction between God and cosmos is too sharp because, on that view, God is radically transcendent and wholly other. On the other hand, the pantheist errs in making no distinction at all between God and cosmos. The panentheist unabashedly blurs the distinction between God and cosmos, neither affirming that God is absolutely different from, nor identical with, his creation.

However, the panentheist's slogan above is ambiguous and unclear. As a result, there has been much discussion lately about how to understand what panentheism is and how it differs from rival forms of theism. I weigh in on this debate here. Focusing on key passages in the *Bhagavad-Gīta*, I propose three desiderata that a minimal account of the panentheist's God-world relation must adhere to. The relation in question must be (1) asymmetric, (2) quasi-mereological, and (3) generative or ontologically productive. I argue that the relation of metaphysical grounding meets all three conditions. On my view, panentheism is the view that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos. God transcends the cosmos

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insofar as God's existence is ungrounded, and therefore fundamental. But the cosmos is 'in' God insofar as grounding entails that the cosmos ontologically overlaps with God. The being or existence of the cosmos is shared with, and so in an important sense not additional to, God's being or existence.

Readers may be initially puzzled by my understanding of panentheism. If all panentheism amounts to is saying that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos, then it looks virtually indistinguishable from theism because many theists have affirmed that the cosmos is grounded in, or ontologically dependent upon, God for its very existence. I'll call this 'the demarcation problem'. One of my goals in this article is to offer a solution to this problem by appealing to the doctrine of creation ex nihilo: traditional theists affirm it while panentheists deny it. As we'll see, the issue here ultimately comes down to how intimate a relationship between God and cosmos theists can tolerate. These are complex and difficult issues that, to my eye, lack the level of clarity and consensus that would be ideal for developing a more decisive solution to the demarcation problem. So, I offer my views in this paper tentatively. If there is a substantial difference between panentheism and theism, articulating it via creation ex nihilo strikes me as the most plausible approach.

In what follows, I clarify my understanding of panentheism and defend it against alternatives. In the next section, I present my three desiderata derived from the *Bhagavad-Gīta*. I then survey several extant accounts of panentheism and argue they fail to meet these desiderata. I then argue that understanding the panentheist's God-world relation in terms of metaphysical grounding meets all three of my proposed desiderata. In the final section, I argue we can plausibly demarcate panentheism from theism in terms of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. I conclude the article by discussing some methodological considerations of this debate.

What is panentheism? Three desiderata

Panentheism involves a claim about God's immanence and his transcendence. The cosmos is in God but God is more than the cosmos. How should we go about developing a more philosophically precise interpretation of this view? One approach is to survey textual traditions that purport to be panentheistic, or are otherwise interpreted in a panentheistic fashion, and see what the texts in question say about the nature of the divine and its relationship to the cosmos. While panentheism is found in many religious and philosophical traditions, the *Bhagavad-Gīta* presents us with arguably one of the most well-articulated and well-known statements of panentheism, at least in the classical Indian tradition.[3] My methodology, therefore, involves deriving three desiderata from various verses in the *Bhagavad-Gīta* that I think a minimal account of panentheism must adhere to.

Since panentheism is a theological and philosophical view about the relationship between God and the cosmos, my three desiderata are conditions that any minimal account of this relation must satisfy. My first desideratum says the relation in question must be asymmetric.

Desideratum 1: Asymmetry The relation that obtains between God and the cosmos must be asymmetric.

An important passage in the *Bhagavad-Gīta* expressing Asymmetry is the following from chapter 9, where Krishna describes his relationship to the cosmos.

> I pervade the entire universe in my unmanifested form. All creatures find their existence in me, but I am not limited by them. Behold, my divine mystery! These creatures do not really dwell in me, and though I bring them forth and support them, I am not

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> confined within them. They move in me as the winds move in every direction in space (Easwaran 2007, 173).

As Silvestre and Herbert (2024, 19) note, a key term in this verse is *stha*, which means 'to support', 'to abide in', 'to rest in', or 'to stand in'. They argue this term picks out a strong notion of ontological dependence; the very existence and/or essence of creatures depends upon the existence and/or essence of God. Insofar as creatures derive their existence from God, but God is not limited by them, this relation is arguably asymmetric.

Some understand panentheism as the *interrelatedness* of God and cosmos: the cosmos is in God and God is in the cosmos. And this implies a symmetric relationship rather than an asymmetric one. For example, John Culp (2023) writes, 'Panentheism considers God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world'. Similarly, Philip Clayton (2013, 372) says, 'The "*en*" of panentheism is almost always a two-fold "in": the transcendent is in the immanent, and the immanent is in the transcendent. Or, in the beautiful words of the Bhagavad Gita, "He who sees Me everywhere and sees all in Me; I am not lost to him nor is he lost to Me"'.

While the interrelatedness of God and cosmos may be a feature of some panentheistic traditions, I believe we should avoid this interpretation with respect to the *Bhagavad-Gīta*. Theologically speaking, strict interpretations of interrelatedness, according to which God is in the cosmos in the exact same sense in which the cosmos is in God, undermine God's transcendence, where 'transcendence' is understood in terms of God's ontological independence or fundamentality. If we interpret the 'en' of panentheism in terms of a dependence relation as Silvestre and Herbert (2024) do, then strict interrelatedness amounts to saying that God is ontologically dependent upon the cosmos in the very same way in which the cosmos is ontologically dependent upon God. That would make God a dependent being. But the *Bhagavad-Gīta* very clearly affirms what the Western tradition calls 'divine aseity', from the Latin *a se*, meaning *of* or *from* itself. *Aseity* denotes God's fundamentality or ontological independence. And the *Bhagavad-Gīta* is replete with statements of this doctrine, especially in later chapters. Consider the following verses.

> I am the source from which all creatures evolve (Easwaran 2007, 184).

> I am the seed that can be found in every creature, Arjuna; for without me nothing can exist, neither animate nor inanimate (Easwaran 2007, 189).

> I will tell you of the wisdom that leads to immortality: the beginningless Brahman, which can be called neither being nor non-being. It dwells in all, in every hand and foot and head, in every mouth and eye and ear in the universe. Without senses itself, it shines through the functioning of the senses. Completely independent, it supports all things (Easwaran 2007, 217–218).

These verses express clearly the notion of God's aseity and the cosmos's dependence upon God. Silvestre and Herbert (Silvestre and Herbert 2024, 21) agree, arguing that the *Bhagavad-Gīta* affirms that 'God is the (only) absolute fundamental entity; he is the ontological foundation of all that exists'. To preserve God's transcendence or fundamentality, therefore, we ought to say that the sense in which the cosmos is in God differs from the sense in which God is in the cosmos. For example, we might say that the cosmos is 'in' God in the rough sense that it depends upon God for its existence, while God may be 'in' the cosmos through his divine power or omnipresence.

My second desideratum says the panentheist's God-world relation must be a relation of overlap. The relation in question must capture the important sense in which the cosmos

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is 'in' God, and so must be a quasi-mereological relation. I say 'quasi-mereological' because the relation can't literally be the part-whole relation of standard mereology. Instead, I argue below that the grounding relation offers a non-technical sense in which two things can *ontologically* overlap by sharing their being or existence.

Desideratum 2: Overlap The relation that obtains between God and the cosmos must be a quasi-mereological relation.

In my view, as we'll see shortly, this desideratum expresses the essential core of panentheism that distinguishes it from rival accounts.[4] This requirement is, of course, implied by the very term 'panentheism' itself. And it's clear from many passages in the *Bhagavad-Gīta* that the cosmos is in some sense supposed to be 'in' or 'part of' God, which implies there is no sharp distinction between God and cosmos.

A particularly important passage is when Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna in that terrible vision of chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad-Gīta*. Krishna says, 'Behold the gods of the natural world, and many more wonders never revealed before. Behold the entire cosmos turning within my body, and the other things you desire to see' (Easwaran 2007, 94). Arjuna responds,

> O Lord, I see within your body all the gods and every kind of living creature. I see Brahma, the Creator, seated on a lotus; I see the ancient sages and the celestial serpents. I see infinite mouths and arms, stomachs and eyes, and you are embodied in every form. I see you everywhere, without beginning, middle, or end. You are the Lord of all creation, and the cosmos is your body (Easwaran 2007, 196).

Here, we find the famous idea of the cosmos as God's body that later influenced Rāmānuja's theorizing.[5] Similarly, in a later verse Arjuna says, 'Lord of the gods, you are the abode of the universe' (Easwaran 2007, 199). As we'll see below, some thinkers offer interpretations of the 'en' of panentheism that fail to respect the mereological or quasi-mereological sense of the term used in the *Bhagavad-Gīta*. One of my key contentions, then, is that an adequate account of panentheism cannot forgo the idea of the cosmos overlapping with God.

My third desideratum says the panentheist's God-world relation must be ontologically generative or productive. Simply by virtue of being related to God in the appropriate way, the cosmos derives its very being or existence from God. Thus, the relation in question must have the ability to generate or produce the existence of the relata in question.

Desideratum 3: Generation The relation that obtains between God and the cosmos must be generative or ontologically productive.

We've already seen this idea of ontological generation or production in some of the quotes presented above. For example, Krishna expresses the idea of generation when he says, 'I am the source from which all creatures evolve' (Easwaran 2007, 184), and 'I am the seed that can be found in every creature, Arjuna; for without me nothing can exist, neither animate nor inanimate' (Easwaran 2007, 189). So, our third desideratum is a corollary to the second one since ontological overlap – the notion of two things sharing their being or existence – entails a notion of ontological generation or production.

Nonetheless, it is worth formulating our third desideratum explicitly because it precludes appealing to relations that connect entities whose existence is logically independent of their standing in that relation to begin with. For example, on a Humean conception of causation, cause and effect merely instantiate a regularity. When *x* causes *y*, it is not the case that *x* produces or generates the very existence of *y*. A Humean view of causation, therefore, wouldn't be suitable for understanding the panentheist's God-world relation. To have

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God as the source in virtue of which all things derive their very existence, the panentheist needs an 'oomphy' or inflationary relation that is ontologically productive.

I've presented three desiderata that an account of panentheism must adhere to. The Panentheist's God-world relation must be (1) asymmetric, (2) quasi-mereological, and (3) generative or ontologically productive. Below, I argue that the relation of metaphysical grounding meets these conditions. Panentheism is the view that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos. But first I consider several extant accounts of panentheism in the next section and show that they fail to meet the desiderata I've outlined here.

Extant accounts of panentheism

The difficulty with providing an adequate account of panentheism stems from, in part, the implausibility of straightforward mereological interpretations of the sense in which the cosmos is in God. To see why, consider Oliver Crisp's (2019, 32) toy account of what he calls 'mereological panentheism'.

> God does not create a world outside of Godself; he does not bring about something entirely distinct from Godself. Rather, he (somehow) 'makes room' *within himself* for the created order. The creation is radically dependent upon God for its existence ... Thus, creation is a 'part' of God. There is God; and there is the world he creates; and these are two overlapping entities that together comprise one mereological whole that is God plus the world.

Given the spatial connotation of saying the world is *in* or *overlaps with* God, we might naturally understand panentheism in straightforward mereological terms. But everyone seems to agree it is implausible that the cosmos is a part of God in the same way that the legs are part of my desk. One issue has to do with dependence. As Silvestre and Herbert (Silvestre and Herbert 2024, 26) argue, if the cosmos is part of God in this sense, then God would be a dependent being because at least some mereological wholes are dependent upon their parts. Furthermore, if the cosmos is a part of God in this sense, then it follows God is a mereologically complex whole, which is incompatible with the doctrine of divine simplicity (Crisp 2019, 35). Crisp notes further issues as well, not least of which is the troubling result that God, who is supposed to be incorporeal, has a physical part.

However, rejecting a straightforward mereological account of panentheism provides little guidance for how to move forward. While there are many extant proposals, it isn't clear to me that any of them meet the three desiderata I proposed above. For example, Benedikt Göcke (2013) argues that classical theism and panentheism differ with respect to the modal status of the world. For the panentheist, the world is 'an intrinsic property of God', such that the world exists necessarily. Alternatively, for the classical theist, the world is an extrinsic property of God's, and so exists contingently. As Göcke (2013, 66) says, 'According to panentheism, "God requires a world"'.

My concern with Göcke's account is that it runs into problems with the asymmetry of dependence, which is my first desideratum above. If the world is an intrinsic property of God, then God has this property in virtue of God's own nature rather than in virtue of anything extrinsic to God.[6] In other words, you can't have the world without God. But this modal approach to God's relationship with the world can't capture an asymmetric relation of dependence between them. In fact, it seems to license a symmetric instance of dependence. Suppose we said the following.

> The world depends upon God for its existence just in case, necessarily, the world exists only if God exists.

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The problem with this modal approach, noted by Kit Fine and others, is that it makes dependence symmetric.[7] On Göcke's proposal, it is necessarily the case that if God exists, then the world exists. But it is also necessarily the case that if the world exists, then God exists too because the world is an intrinsic property of God. They are, in an important sense, inseparable. So, the problem is that this modal approach will license dependence running in both directions, making it symmetric. This is not to say that Göcke's view on the modal status of the world isn't an important aspect of certain accounts of panentheism. But it looks like we'll need to appeal to something more than the modal status of the world to capture the asymmetric dependence between the cosmos and God that my first desideratum demands.

Ryan Mullins tentatively suggests an account that identifies God with time. And since the universe is in time (but not identical with time), it follows that the universe is in God (Mullins 2023, 251). This approach promises to offer a literal interpretation of the cosmos being in God. While interesting in its own right, Mullins's account also fails to meet my three desiderata. Consider the overlap desideratum, which I take to be central to panentheism. Any account of panentheism needs to say in what sense the cosmos overlaps with God. Mullins understands this condition in terms of the universe being in time. But rather than clarify what it means by the universe to be *in* time, Mullins instead focuses on clarifying what it means to say *God is time*. Mullins presents the following definition of time. 'Time is (i) a natured entity that makes change possible, (ii) the ontological source of moments, and (iii) that which orders the moments' (Mullins 2023, 254).

Mullins suggests that God is identical with time insofar as he plays the roles of time specified in the above definition. For the first condition, God is a natured entity that necessarily exists and makes change possible. For the second condition, the existence, nature, and actions of God serve as the ontological source of moments in time. For the third condition, the exercise of God's freedom can explain the ordering of those moments.

So, for Mullins, the sense in which the cosmos is in God is simply the sense in which the cosmos is in time. But to say that the cosmos is in time is not to say that the cosmos and God overlap in any sense. Rather, it is simply to say that the cosmos is temporal. Mullins's account, therefore, seems to abandon a quasi-mereological interpretation of 'en' that I and many others have argued is essential to panentheism.

Georg Gasser (2019) proposes to understand panentheism in terms of God's omnipresence, or more accurately, God's divine activity. On Gasser's view, God is wherever he acts. Since God acts upon all of creation everywhere and anytime, God is therefore omnipresent. Thus, Gasser (2019, 43) proposes to read the 'en' of panentheism in an agential sense: 'God is in the cosmos by creating and sustaining it and the cosmos is in God by constantly being within the sphere of divine activity'. I think Gasser's approach is initially plausible. It does have the resources to meet my first desideratum, Asymmetry, because God's creative activity is asymmetric. The world is created and sustained by God, and not vice versa. Similarly, one might argue that the cosmos, as a derivative entity, overlaps with God insofar as it is constituted by God's creative activity, which is more fundamental. And one might also think that God generates or produces the existence of the cosmos through his creative activity.

However, this approach is ambiguous when it comes to the notions of overlap and production. God's omnipresence is undoubtedly an important component of panentheism, as I mentioned earlier. But it is unclear to me how the creative-activity relation, whatever it is, can capture the relevant notions of overlap and production that my desiderata target. If there is a unique non-grounding notion of overlap and production that the creative-activity relation delivers, then my suspicion is that this notion of overlap would be somewhat strained. Recall that the notion of overlap my desideratum targets is a quasi-mereological

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one. It is supposed to mirror mereological overlap without actually being a kind of mereological overlap. And it is unclear how the creative-activity relation can do this. My own view, presented below, is that we'll need to appeal to a notion like metaphysical grounding to capture the relevant notions of overlap and production that I have in mind.

Silvestre and Herbert (2024) provide an account of panentheism that I think is much closer to meeting my three desiderata outlined above. They propose to understand the claim that 'the cosmos is in God' in terms of the claim that 'all that exists ontologically depends on God', where *x* ontologically depends upon *y* just in case *x* depends upon *y* for its very being or existence and nature (Silvestre and Herbert 2024, 20). They develop this account in terms of God's *prakṛti*, where *prakṛti* is 'a metaphysical primitive denoting the intimate relation that exists between matter and conscious living beings on one hand, and God on the other' (Silvestre and Herbert 2024, 18). On their view, all that exists is God's *prakṛti*. They argue that *prakṛti* involves both intrinsic intimacy in the form of parthood and ontological dependence, which leads to the following thesis: '*Law of prakṛti*: if X is a *prakṛti* of God, then (1) X is part of God, and (2) X is ontologically dependent on God (like physical things depend on space)' (Silvestre and Herbert 2024, 27).

On Silvestre and Herbert's view, the cosmos is part of God in the sense that the cosmos is God's *prakṛti. Prakṛti* involves both an intrinsic notion of parthood and ontological dependence, as specified in their definition of 'Law of *prakṛti*' above.

I think Silvestre and Herbert's decision to understand the panentheist's God-world relation in terms of ontological dependence is the correct approach. Indeed, their account of panentheism is similar to the one I offer below because ontological dependence and metaphysical grounding are similar notions. Silvestre and Herbert affirm that ontological dependence is an asymmetric relation, which meets my first desideratum. But their account fails to explicitly address my second and third desiderata. Saying that the cosmos is God's *prakṛti* doesn't specify in what sense, exactly, the cosmos overlaps with, and is ontologically produced by, God. So, while I think Silvestre and Herbert's account is on the right track, my account in the next section provides much-needed supplementation.

Grounding panentheism

Earlier, I proposed three desiderata that a minimal account of panentheism must adhere to. The panentheist's God-world relation must be (1) asymmetric, (2) quasi-mereological, and (3) generative or ontologically productive. My view is that the relation of metaphysical grounding meets all three conditions. Panentheism, on my account, is the view that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos.

Grounding is a non-causal form of metaphysical explanation and dependence.[8] While there are different approaches to grounding in the literature, my approach here understands grounding as a relation that obtains between facts. Grounding is non-causal in the sense that when some fact, *f*, grounds another fact, *g*, *f* doesn't cause *g* to occur. Rather, the relationship between *f* and *g* concerns the constitutive generation of a dependent outcome (Schaffer 2017, 305). In this sense, grounding is often distinguished from causation via a levels metaphor: grounding relates facts synchronically or non-temporally in a 'vertical' manner through levels of reality, while causation relates events diachronically in a 'horizontal' manner. As a result, grounding is also associated with a notion of absolute and relative fundamentality, whereas causation is not.[9] Those facts that are ungrounded are absolutely fundamental. And insofar as some fact, *f*, grounds another fact, *g*, *f* is more fundamental than, or ontologically prior to, *g*.

As I mentioned earlier, grounding is similar to ontological dependence. Both are non-causal relations, and both involve a kind of constitutive metaphysical dependence. But there are important differences. First, most assume that grounding is a primitive notion,

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and so opt to leave it undefined. Ontological dependence relations, by contrast, are typically defined notions. Second, many grounding enthusiasts believe grounding is a unified notion.[10] Ontological dependence, by contrast, is comprised of a family of such relations (Tahko and Lowe 2025). Granted, ontological dependence does seem appropriate for characterizing panentheism in some respects. Various forms of ontological dependence are, for example, asymmetric. But it's less clear whether ontological dependence relations are 'quasi-mereological' and generative in the relevant sense that grounding is. And given the vast array of different forms of ontological dependence, surveying each would simply take us too far afield. As I argue below, grounding uniquely meets all three desiderata outlined above.[11] I address each of my proposed desiderata in order.

Asymmetry

First, there is a general, though not unanimous, consensus that grounding is an asymmetric relation. The standard or orthodox view is that grounding forms a strict partial order: it is asymmetric (anti-symmetric and irreflexive) and transitive (Raven 2013). Several thinkers have challenged this view. For example, Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015) argues grounding is not a strict partial order. Ricki Bliss (2018) maintains that grounding can be reflexive. And Naomi Thompson (2016) argues that grounding can be non-symmetric.

While it is beyond the purview of this article to defend the asymmetry of grounding, I'll simply note that denying the orthodox view of grounding as a strict partial order is incompatible with grounding's theoretical roles. As David Kovacs (2018) argues, grounding's theoretical utility is comprised of both an explanatory and structural role. To focus on grounding's structural role, it is understood in terms of the notion of relative fundamentality. If f grounds g, then f is more fundamental than g. This imposes constraints on ground's logic since *more fundamental than* is asymmetric (and transitive). For example, reflexive instances of grounding, where some fact f grounds g and $f = g$, would allow facts to be more fundamental than themselves. And anti-symmetric instances of grounding would allow facts to be both more and less fundamental than each other. Since an asymmetric notion of ground is introduced to capture the phenomenon of relative fundamentality in the first place, this rules out symmetric and reflexive cases.

While much more could be said here, getting any further into this issue would take us too far afield. So, I'll simply assume the orthodox position moving forward. This conception of metaphysical grounding meets our first desideratum. God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos, but not vice versa.

Overlap

Second, there is a plausible sense in which grounding entails a non-mereological notion of overlap. In a technical sense, mereological overlap involves part-sharing. So, objects A and B overlap in a strict sense if they share a part with each other. One can also understand overlap in terms of spatiotemporal coincidence or colocation. For example, the statue and the clay out of which it is made are spatiotemporally coincident, and so overlap in that sense. But groundees arguably overlap their grounds in a non-spatiotemporal and non-mereological sense.[12] Paul Audi characterizes this non-mereological notion of overlap as *ontological overlap*. On his suggestion, when A and B ontologically overlap, A and B 'share their being' (Audi 2020, 579).

Audi (2020, 571) distinguishes between a making-conception of grounding and a building conception, and associates ontological overlap with the latter. On the making-conception, grounding is analogous to causation or what's sometimes called 'metaphysical causation'.[13] On the building-conception, grounding is more like constitution.

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Causation and constitution are 'different breeds', as Audi puts it. We tend to think of causation as a 'horizontal' relation and constitution as a 'vertical' relation. It's for that reason that Audi suggests that the building conception of grounding, but not the making conception, requires the notion of ontological overlap. Grounding on the building conception is a relation of ontological priority that 'builds' or orders reality in a hierarchical manner. The lower-level more fundamental entities ground the higher-level less fundamental entities.

So, the core idea of ontological overlap is that when f grounds g, g overlaps with f in the sense that g derives its very being or existence from f. In some important sense, the being or existence of g is shared with f and so isn't anything 'new'. Contemporary metaphysicians working with the notion of metaphysical grounding often invoke various metaphors to characterize this idea. For example, many invoke a creation metaphor to illustrate the relationship between fundamental and derivative entities. Sara Bernstein (2016, 25–26) writes,

> The sense in which grounders 'produce' groundees is not the same sense in which causes produce their effects. To use Schaffer's terms, groundees 'inherit their being' from grounders, but effects do not inherit their being from causes … all God had to do was create the grounders in order to make the groundees. The nonfundamental facts come for free.

The idea here is that the non-fundamental or derivative facts 'come for free' because their being or existence is already accounted for by the fundamental facts, which they are derived from. And Ricki Bliss (2019, 359–360) appeals to a seed metaphor, writing, 'God, in His infinite cleverness, realised that He could save Himself a whole lot of work if contained within a small number of particularly important entities were the seeds for all the rest of it'. For Bliss, the derivative entities – 'all the rest' – are contained within the fundamental entities as 'seeds'.

The notion of ontological overlap, therefore, nicely captures the sense in which the cosmos is *in* God that avoids the difficulties associated with a technical or strict mereological interpretation. To recall Crisp's words from earlier, most panentheists would say something to the effect that 'God does not create a world outside of Godself; he does not bring about something entirely distinct from Godself. Rather, he (somehow) "makes room" *within himself* for the created order' (2019, 32). Since panentheism, on my account, is just the view that the existence of the cosmos is grounded in God's existence, it follows that the cosmos is in God in the sense that the existence or being of the cosmos ontologically overlaps with God's. God doesn't create anything entirely distinct from himself because the cosmos's being simply is God's being. To put it differently, when God creates, there are more *beings*, but there is not more *being*.[14] This implies that the distinction between God and creation is blurry for the panentheist. And I think this is the correct result given that many theists have been intent on affirming an absolute or sharp ontological difference between God and creation.

However, moving away from a technical notion of mereological overlap towards a less technical notion of ontological overlap does result in a loss of clarity. The idea of two things sharing their being is admittedly vague and metaphorical. And I'm not ultimately sanguine that we can get beyond these metaphors and offer a more literal definition of the notion. While some fault panentheism in this regard, I think this criticism is unwarranted. I argue in the conclusion that appeals to metaphor are unavoidable if we are to faithfully characterize the essential core of what panentheism is supposed to be.

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Generation

Finally, many hold that metaphysical grounding is ontologically generative or productive. For Jonathan Schaffer (2010, 345), when *x* grounds *y*, *y* depends for its very nature and existence upon *x*. Kelly Trogdon (2018, 189) writes, 'a relation is generative just in case its instantiation brings things into existence. Grounding is generative given that grounded entities exist *due to grounding*'. And Sara Bernstein (2016, 23) says, 'production does play an implicit role in concepts and elucidations of grounding which take it to be a kind of synchronic generation or "bringing into existence." Production undergirds a "thick" concept of grounding according to which grounders transfer being to their groundees.' Of course, this conception of grounding is controversial. Some thinkers, like Shamik Dasgupta (2017) for example, advocate for a more deflationary conception of grounding. But again, wading into this debate here would take us too far afield. So, I'll simply assume an inflationary conception of grounding in what follows.

This notion of ontological production or generation corresponds to Audi's 'building' conception of grounding that I highlighted earlier. Indeed, Karen Bennett makes this notion of generation a condition for what it is for something to count as a building relation at all. On her view, all building relations are (1) directed (they are anti-symmetric and irreflexive), (2) necessitating, and, most relevant for our purposes, (3) generative, 'in that the builders generate or produce what they build. Built entities exist or obtain because that which builds them does' (Bennett 2017, 32). On Bennett's view, grounding is a building relation and so is generative in the above sense.

If God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos, then our inflationary view of grounding entails that the very existence of the cosmos is produced or generated from the existence of God. As I mentioned earlier, this third desideratum is a corollary to the second one regarding overlap. If God and the cosmos share their being or existence, this naturally entails that the cosmos's existence is produced by, or derived from, God's. But to reiterate my earlier point, it's important to state our third desideratum explicitly since specifying the panentheist's God-world relation as a generative one precludes relations that relate distinct entities whose existence is logically independent of their standing in that relation to begin with. And like the notion of ontological overlap, ontological production or generation is admittedly vague and metaphorical. But I take it this notion of ontological production is just constitutive of what grounding is on the building conception. And since grounding is a primitive notion, the corresponding notions of ontological overlap and production are also primitive notions.

On my account, therefore, panentheism is the view that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos. We're now in a better position to understanding the panentheist's slogan that *the cosmos is in God but God is more than the cosmos*. The cosmos is 'in' God in the sense that it ontologically overlaps, and so shares its being or existence, with God. But God is 'more than' or transcends the cosmos in virtue of being ungrounded or fundamental. Since grounding is an asymmetric relation of metaphysical dependence, the cosmos depends upon God for its existence but not vice versa. And since grounding is ontologically productive, God is the ultimate source of the very existence or being of the cosmos.

However, it isn't initially clear how this understanding of panentheism results in a unique and rival view of God's relationship to the cosmos. Indeed, at first glance, my account of panentheism looks indistinguishable from theism. I turn now to the demarcation problem.

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The demarcation problem

An adequate account of panentheism needs to demarcate the view from rival forms of theism. Mullins (2019, 204) has been a vocal critic of panentheism, arguing that 'panentheism cannot distinguish itself from well-established and clearly articulated rival models of God such as classical theism, neo-classical theism, open theism, and pantheism'.[15] I don't have the space here to offer a fully worked-out solution to the demarcation problem with respect to each rival model of God that Mullins identifies. Instead, I focus on pantheism and theism as rivals to panentheism. As we'll see, demarcating pantheism from panentheism is straightforward. Not so for theism. In this section, I argue we can demarcate theism from panentheism vis-à-vis the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. While addressing all the relevant issues of this proposal in sufficient detail would take me too far afield, I believe laying out the broad contours will suffice to show that my proposal is a plausible avenue for panentheist's to explore further.

First, my account of panentheism above offers a clear path to demarcating panentheism from pantheism. On my view, panentheism is the view that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos. Pantheism, by contrast, maintains that God is numerically identical with the cosmos. While grounding is a strict partial order (asymmetric and transitive), identity is an equivalence relation (symmetric, reflexive, and transitive). The logical incompatibility of the formal properties of the grounding and identity relations precludes panentheism from collapsing into pantheism.

Second, I believe the doctrine of creation ex nihilo can help to illuminate the difference between panentheism and theism. Theists are committed to creation ex nihilo. As we'll see below, I argue panentheists are not. Mullins isn't sanguine about this approach. He offers, what is in my view, the following non-standard definition.

> *Creation* Ex Nihilo: A creation *ex nihilo* occurs if and only if (i) a particular universe, set of universes, or all possible universes are freely caused to exist by God, and (ii) there is a precreation moment or state of affairs where God exists without a particular universe, set of universes, or all possible universes (Mullins 2023, 239).

On this definition, creation ex nihilo means God and the created order are not co-eternal. Mullins maintains that panentheists reject creation ex nihilo, and so are committed to what he calls The Necessity of the Cosmos: God must exist with a universe or multiverse of some sort.[16] But he asserts that 'nothing about affirming the necessity of the cosmos tells us anything terribly interesting or unique about the nature of God, which is precisely what a model of God needs to do' (Mullins 2023, 242). I think the necessity of the cosmos is irrelevant for the demarcation problem. Working with a standard conception of creation ex nihilo will arguably provide the resources for demarcating panentheism from theism.

What I call 'the standard' understanding of creation ex nihilo, at least in the Christian tradition, involves God creating the cosmos from no pre-existing 'stuff'. As Wes Morriston (2002) notes, the doctrine is often stated in Aristotelian terms. God is the efficient cause of the universe. But there is no material cause, no 'stuff' out of which God creates. Morriston (2002, 24) defines creation ex nihilo as follows: '*x* is created *ex nihilo* by *y* if and only if i) *y* causes *x* to exist, and ii) *y* does not cause *x* to exist by transforming some other material stuff'. And Julius Lipner (1978, 54) describes the standard interpretation of creation ex nihilo as the 'thrusting into being, so to speak, of a *reality* not existing qua being hitherto ... of being that had not pre-existed or remained hidden qua being before the creative act (except in the loose and related senses of being objectively possible to God and existing in him as seminal ideas)'. So, I think God's freedom to create and God's creating ex nihilo are

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independent issues. If we affirm that the cosmos has a material cause, I don't see how it follows that God *must* exist with a cosmos, contrary to Mullins's claim.

However, the notion of material causation that is operative in creation ex nihilo requires clarification. 'Material causation' is a placeholder for a more precise notion because the terms *making* and *building*, which are standardly invoked to characterize material causation, are ambiguous. As Bennett (2017) argues, there are many different relations that capture the sense in which one thing is *built out of* or *made from* another. As I mentioned earlier, she calls them 'building relations' and identifies at least six candidates including set-formation, micro-based determination, constitution, realization, composition, and grounding. My contention is that 'material causation' most plausibly denotes the grounding relation due to both relations' link with metaphysical or ontological priority.

Unlike efficient causation, material causation is presumably a kind of constitutive relation, at least in the sense that it is synchronic rather than diachronic. While we typically think of efficient causes as temporally prior to their effects, material causes are ontologically prior. For example, Felipe Leon (2024, 293) says, 'by *material cause*, I mean the temporally or ontologically prior things or stuff *from* which (though not necessarily *of* which) a thing is made'. So, unlike efficient causation, material causation is a kind of 'vertical' dependence relation.[17] And since grounding just is a constitutive or 'vertical' relation of ontological priority, it's the best candidate out of Bennett's building relations for clarifying what material causation is. On this view, saying that the pieces of wood are the material cause of the desk is equivalent to saying that the existence of the desk obtains in virtue of, or is *grounded in*, the existence and organization of its constituent materials.

We can then interpret *ex nihilo* in a non-causal or grounding sense. For example, when we say, 'Nothing comes to be *from nothing*', we can mean that nothing comes to exist without a *ground*. So, I propose the following definition of creation ex nihilo.

Creation ex nihilo *x* is created ex nihilo by *y* iff *y* is the efficient cause of *x*'s coming into existence and there is no *z*, either distinct from or identical with *y*, such that *z*'s existence grounds *x*'s existence.

On this definition, God's creation of the cosmos ex nihilo entails that the existence of the cosmos is fundamental.[18] God is the efficient cause of the cosmos at a finite time in the past. But God creates out of nothing in the sense that neither his existence nor the existence of anything else grounds the cosmos's existence. In other words, there are no underlying facts or entities in virtue of which he creates. Theists are, of course, committed to creation ex nihilo. But since panentheism just is the view that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos, panentheism therefore rejects creation ex nihilo as I've formulated it above. My grounding interpretation of creation ex nihilo, therefore, provides a way to demarcate theism from panentheism.

A pressing issue for my proposal is that it forces theists to deny what I'll call 'the Grounding Thesis', namely, that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos. On my definition, there can be nothing at all whose existence grounds the existence of the cosmos, neither God nor anything else. Creation ex nihilo, on this strong view, contradicts the principle, *ex nihilo nihil fit*: nothing comes from nothing.[19] But this is problematic given that many theists do affirm the Grounding Thesis. For example, Kenneth Pearce (2017) argues that God is the foundational ground of the entire past causal history of the universe. Einar Bohn (2018, 2) formulates a view called 'Divine Foundationalism' as 'Anything distinct from God is existentially grounded by God'.[20] One can also find affirmations of something like the Grounding Thesis among historical thinkers. For example, because Aquinas thinks created beings don't exist by their very nature, they are therefore radically ontologically dependent upon God.

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So, the theist might object that creation ex nihilo was never meant to contradict *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Instead, she may endorse a weak version of creation ex nihilo that is compatible with the Grounding Thesis, according to which *x* is created ex nihilo by *y* iff *y* is the efficient cause of *x*'s coming into existence and there is no *z* distinct from *y* such that *z*'s existence grounds *x*'s existence. On this definition, God creates the world ex nihilo so long as there is nothing *distinct from himself* that grounds the existence of the cosmos.

But this move seems to make creation ex nihilo synonymous with creation *ex deo* – creation *out of* or *from* God – which leads to an uncomfortably close relationship between God and cosmos for the theist. Augustine is sensitive to this issue. In his *Confessions* (Book 12, chapter 7) he writes,

> You created heaven and earth but you did not make them of your own substance. If you had done so, they would have been equal to your only-begotten Son, and therefore to yourself, and justice could in no way admit that what was not of your own substance should be equal to you. But besides, O God, who are Trinity in Unity, Unity in Trinity, there was nothing from which you could make heaven and earth. Therefore you must have created them from nothing, the one great, the other small. For there is nothing that you cannot do (Augustine 1961, 284).

Augustine's worry is that if God creates *out of* himself or his substance, as the Grounding Thesis entails, then we blur the distinction between God and creation and thus undermine God's transcendence. It seems Augustine is happy to affirm that God's creation ex nihilo isn't constrained by the principle, *ex nihilo nihil fit* since, as he says, there is nothing God cannot do.

For better or for worse, it looks like panentheism is the result of endorsing a weak version of creation ex nihilo and the Grounding Thesis. For example, Daniel Soars (2021) argues that, according to Aquinas (the paradigmatic traditional or classical theist), creation ex nihilo is really a form of creation *ex deo* and so doesn't contradict the *ex nihilo nihil fit* principle.[21] Soars (2021, 957) then goes so far as to argue that it is only a short logical step from Aquinas's views on causation, which in many ways resemble the notion of grounding, 'to affirm that all created effects (viz. the world) must be pre-contained in their supreme cause (God) or, to put it in the slightly more daring terms not unknown to some medieval Christian mystics, that the world exists "in" God'. But that's just panentheism. To avoid panentheism, the theist therefore needs to adopt my strong definition of creation ex nihilo and reject the Grounding Thesis.

This has revisionary implications for our categorization practices. So long as a philosopher or theologian affirms the weaker version of creation ex nihilo and thereby the Grounding Thesis, such that God creates out of or from himself, my account of panentheism says we should identify them as a panentheist despite any designation otherwise.

Conclusion

The panentheist's slogan says *the cosmos is in God but God is more than the cosmos*. I've argued that articulating the panentheist's God-world relation in terms of an inflationary conception of metaphysical grounding puts us in a better position to understand this slogan. On my account, panentheism is the view that God's existence grounds the existence of the cosmos. The cosmos is 'in' God in the sense that it ontologically overlaps, and so shares its being or existence, with God. But God is 'more than' the cosmos in virtue of being fundamental. I then proposed to demarcate panentheism from theism in terms of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo: theists affirm it while panentheists deny it.

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I want to conclude on a methodological point. Many of the key notions that my account of panentheism has appealed to in this article, like ontological overlap and ontological production, are admittedly vague and metaphorical. And one might fault my account for this reason. For example, Mullins confesses not understand what the panentheist's slogan above means. He says, 'To be honest, I don't have a clue what most panentheists mean by this slogan. It usually just looks like they are playing with metaphors' (Mullins 2023, 250–251). Mullins prefers to offer a more literal interpretation in terms of identifying God with time, as I discussed above.

In response, I think offering a literal interpretation of the panentheist's slogan will be preferable only to the extent that doing so doesn't compromise the essential core of what panentheism is supposed to be. In my view, Mullins sacrifices fidelity to the essential core of panentheism for a literal interpretation that few actual panentheists may accept. I also don't think that panentheists's claims about the nature of God and his relationship with the cosmos are uniquely obfuscatory or metaphorical. We ought to seek as much clarity as the subject matter allows. It is, therefore, inevitable that speculating about something as profound as God, with so few constraints on our theorizing, will lead to playing with metaphors. I think it's simply the best we can do.

Competing interests. None.

Notes

1. See Mullins (2023) for a general discussion, as well as Clayton (2008, 166; 2013, 371).
2. I use the term 'traditional theism' broadly to encompass both classical theists of a Thomistic stripe and so-called 'Neo-classical' theists. I take the common core of traditional theism to be, at least in part, a commitment to God's aseity and various other divine attributes such as immutability, omniscience, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, etc.
3. See Silvestre and Herbert (2024), and Silvestre (2024) for a discussion of panentheism in the *Bhagavad-Gita*.
4. Clayton (2010, 184–185) agrees. He affirms that 'inclusiveness', or what I call 'overlap', is a core component of panentheism.
5. See Lipner (1984) for an important treatment of this issue.
6. See Lewis (1983, 197) for his characterization of the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction.
7. See Tahko and Lowe (2025) for a discussion of modal existential dependence. See Fine (1994) for problems with this form of dependence.
8. See Fine (2001), Schaffer (2009), and Audi (2012) for seminal papers on metaphysical grounding.
9. See Bennett (2017) for dissent.
10. There is some disagreement on this issue. See Fine (2012, 39–40) for a version of moderate grounding pluralism. See Berker (2018) for a defence of the unity of grounding.
11. I'm not arguing that Silvestre and Herbert (2024) are necessarily wrong for appealing to ontological dependence instead of grounding. If there is a notion of ontological dependence that can meet the three desiderata I've proposed, great. My claim is that Silvestre and Herbert's (2024) account is limited because it doesn't explicitly address all the desiderata I've argued are essential for understanding panentheism.
12. Karen Bennett (2011) identifies this notion of overlap when originally developing her account of building, which is analogous to the notion of grounding (she includes grounding as a building relation). In her earlier account, Bennett (2011, 92) opts to leave this notion of non-mereological overlap as a primitive notion. In her more recent account of building (Bennett 2017), she drops the requirement of overlap altogether.
13. See Schaffer (2016) and Wilson (2018).
14. Soars (2021, 956).
15. See also Mullins 2016.
16. See also Clayton (2008, 166). He writes, 'I find myself compelled also to defend the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* – the belief that there has not always been a world, and hence that the world is not co-eternal with God'.
17. Bennett herself argues that it isn't easy to distinguish 'vertical' building from 'horizontal' building because, on her view, the family of building relations is 'causally tainted'. Indeed, on her view, causation itself is a kind of building relation. But these views are controversial. So, I elide them here.

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18. To be clear, this doesn't necessarily entail that the cosmos is *a se* in the way that God is. Rather, God's aseity on this view might plausibly be construed in causal terms. So, God's being the first uncaused cause of the cosmos would guarantee God's supremacy over his creation despite both God's and the cosmos's existence being ungrounded.

19. Simon Oliver (2017, 36) argues that the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is remarkable, in part, precisely because it clearly contradicts the principle, *ex nihilo nihil fit*.

20. See also Rasmussen and Leon (2019, 8).

21. See Boersma (2025) for disagreement. To be clear, I'm not endorsing Soars's reading of Aquinas here. I'm simply presenting Soars's view to show what I think are the panentheistic implications of creation ex deo.

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