



## Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000)

Charles Hartshorne was born in the small town of Kittanning Pennsylvania (pop. about 4,000 at the time) located about 40 miles north of Pittsburgh on the Allegheny river. His father, a descendent of Quakers, was an Episcopal minister. Charles attended Haverford College 1915-17 before serving 2 years as a medical orderly in World War I. After the war, he attended Harvard College where he earned a B.A. in 1921, an M.A. in 1922, and a Ph.D. in 1923 (all 3 degrees in 4 years, a feat that may be unique in Harvard's history). His doctoral dissertation was titled "An Outline and Defense of the Argument for the Unity of Being in the Absolute or Divine Good." He then spent 2 years studying in Europe, first under Edmund Husserl at the *University of Freiburg* and then under Martin Heidegger at the *University of Marburg*. Upon returning from Europe, he was a research assistant at Harvard to Alfred North Whitehead, and, with Paul Weiss, edited the collected works of Charles Sanders Peirce, volumes 1-6. He taught from 1928-1955 at the *University of Chicago* in philosophy and was a major influence in the *Chicago Divinity School*. He taught philosophy 1955–1962 at *Emory University* before moving to the *University of Texas at Austin* where he remained until his death in 2000 at the age of 103. His main philosophical interest is the philosophy of religion and metaphysics. He produced a novel *modal* version of the ontological argument for the existence of God, but his most famous contribution is his attempt to develop Whitehead's *process philosophy* into a *process theology*.

Charles was also an avid birdwatcher and accomplished ornithologist. He never smoked, drank alcohol or owned an automobile. He was active in the Unitarian Church for seven decades. His brother, Richard Hartshorn, is a well-known geographer at the *University of Wisconsin-Madison* who has made contributions to economic and political geography and the philosophy of geography. Charles' wife Dorothy, herself a colorful character, an avid birdwatcher and a classically trained soprano, would sing Mozart to Charles, which he said left him feeling blessed. The Paul Arthur Schlipp volume XX in the *Library of Living Philosopher Series* dedicated to Hartshorne lists 18 philosophical books attributed to Charles, not counting the 6 edited Volumes

of Pierce's works, and a total of 482 philosophical articles and reviews, plus 1 additional book and 16 articles dedicated to ornithology in various journals. His book on ornithology is titled *Born to Sing: An Interpretation and World Survey of Birdsong*, which, by the way, Hartshorne understood as relevant to his philosophical and metaphysical views.

### **Primary Philosophical Influences**

Hartshorne acknowledges many philosophical influences but his strongest single influence is clearly A.N. Whitehead. He also found the views of Henri Bergson, Charles Sanders Pierce, and William James quite congenial. Hartshorne is unique among major Western philosophers in his attempt to combine Western and Eastern ways of thinking. He saw Buddhism as a process philosophy quite congenial to his own view, but he rejected the Vedanta philosophy, which he saw as the opposite of process philosophy. He was also influenced by the "mystical" poets Emerson and Wordsworth: Wordsworth "was doing a phenomenology of direct experience better than Husserl ever did" and describing nature as it is directly experienced as opposed to as it is given to scientific abstractions.<sup>1</sup> Hartshorne even states in the same passage that Wordsworth "saved" both him and Whitehead from materialism and dualism. The fact that he was influenced by these philosophers and traditions, including even Whitehead and Buddhism, does not, however, mean that he did not sometimes criticize them. There are no recorded criticisms of Wordsworth.

### **Hartshorne and Buddhist Philosophy**

Hartshorne stated that "I was already almost a Buddhist without knowing it long before I read much about Buddhism" and later added that he was "more Buddhist than some Buddhists."<sup>2</sup> However, he found deficiencies in the Buddhist conception of God and in its conception of the life-process; still he felt that the Buddhist metaphysics can be improved by an encounter with his and Whitehead's process philosophy. One of his aims was to conceptualize a "Buddhist-Christian" religion that combines the best aspects of the two.

The similarities and differences between Hartshorne's and Buddhist philosophy can be summed up in three main points. First, both Hartshorne's and Buddhism's philosophies are thoroughgoing *process* systems utterly lacking in substantial elements. Both accept the "no soul" or "no self" doctrine, the "bedrock of Buddhist philosophy and practice," which holds that the human individual is really a series of momentary acts, with no soul or substance performing the

acts, the view, roughly, that there are deeds but no doers.<sup>3</sup> Both agree on this fundamental insight: the foundation of Buddhist ethics that “to attempt to serve the ‘self’ is to attempt the impossible.”<sup>4</sup> Since there is no substantial self, one obviously cannot serve it.

Second, Hartshorne and Buddhism agree that life is *self-creating*, meaning that what we ordinarily falsely think of as the substantial self, continuous throughout the life-process, is really a series of momentary *self-creating* acts. Rather, Hartshorne sees the present entity as an “emergent synthesis” from the past.<sup>5</sup> There are, however, some differences between the two views, and Hartshorne could not be clearer: “To be is to create.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Hartshorne sees some ambiguity in the Buddhist view. That is, since he holds that every actual event is something *new and unpredictable*, he affirms *freedom* and rejects *determinism*. Unfortunately, as he sees it, Buddhism, with its doctrine of *karma*, the view that every act is conditioned by prior acts, is equivocal on this matter. However, the Buddhist view that it is possible to achieve *nirvana* and escape bondage *may* enable Buddhism to reconcile with Hartshorne’s unambiguous philosophy of creativity.

Third, Hartshorne feels that Buddhism’s atheism contrasts with his own theism. Hartshorne does not endorse *pantheism*, roughly, the view that identifies God with the World, but does endorse *panentheism*, roughly, the view that everything is *in* God but God is qualitatively greater than the sum of all of its parts.<sup>7</sup> This means that God is *qualitatively emergent* from all of its parts. This, Hartshorne claims, avoids the two main objections to pantheism, first, that pantheism either reduces God to the totality of things, which would mean that God is not greater than the world, and, second, that in pantheism, the individual organism, e.g., a human being, loses their individuality by being absorbed in the sole existent actuality. On Hartshorne’s “organic” vision, by contrast, the integrity of finite organisms is preserved because God, the organism that includes all the other organisms, is, as it is said, greater than the additive sum of all these lesser creaturely organic parts.<sup>8</sup>

### **Hartshorne and the Vedanta Philosophy**

Hartshorne agrees with Buddhism to just about the same degree as he disagrees with the Vedanta philosophy. Whereas Hartshorne venerates Buddhism as being the greatest precursor in antiquity of modern process philosophy, he sees Vedanta, with its radical monism, its “static” view of reality, its extreme doctrine of permanent and unchanging substance, its doctrine of an externally

self-identical substantial self that is identical with ultimate reality (Brahman) beyond time as the opposite of process philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

**Richard McDonough**

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<sup>1</sup> Hartshorne, "Some Causes of My Intellectual Growth," p 13

<sup>2</sup> King, "Buddhism and Hartshorne," p. 235

<sup>3</sup> King, *op cit*, p. 241

<sup>4</sup> King, *op cit*, p. 239

<sup>5</sup> Viney, "Charles Hartshorne and the Existence of God," p. 81

<sup>6</sup> Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*, p. 1

<sup>7</sup> Cobb, "Hartshorne's Importance for Theology," p. 176

<sup>8</sup> Cobb, *op cit*.

<sup>9</sup> Arapura, "Hartshorne's Response to Vedanta," pp. 253-54