

What is Panentheism ?

The term panentheism is Greek for "all-in-God," pan-en-theos. A panentheistic belief system is one which posits a god that interpenetrates every part of nature, but is nevertheless fully distinct from nature. So this god is part of nature, but still retains an independent identity.

The term panentheism appears to have been originally used by Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781-1832), although aspects of it can be traced all of the way back to Plato. Fuller elaborations of panentheistic beliefs can be found in the development of German Idealism in the 19th century, particularly in the work of Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling, and in the development of Process Theism in the 20th century, for example in the work of Alfred North Whitehead.

There is an understandable tendency to confuse panentheism with pantheism or even to consider panentheism to be a type of pantheism - a problem exacerbated by the fact that we simply don't hear the term panentheism very often and most people are unfamiliar with it.

What is the difference between standard pantheism and panentheism?

It is true that both panentheists and pantheists share the view that the universe and every natural thing in it is pervaded by divinity. However, since panentheism postulates that the universe is contained within God and not God in the universe, panentheists believe in a God who is present in everything but also extends beyond the universe.

In other words, God **is** the universe but is also greater **than** the universe. Often panentheists also believe that this God has a mind, created the universe, and cares about each of us personally. Pantheists on the other hand believe that the universe itself is divine and do not believe in personal or creator gods.

As a result, for those who are familiar with the concept, panentheism is a "middle way" between the extremes of impersonal pantheism in which personal freedom and creativity become nullified in an impersonal world, and extremes of philosophical theism in which the divine may be personal, but is too remote to be of any comfort or interest.

Panentheism differs from Deism, which only postulates a god separate from nature. It differs from pantheism in that the latter identifies God with nature, although it agrees with pantheism that the god includes nature as a part of its being. Probably the most definitive and systematic explanation of panentheism in modern times can be found in the writings of Charles Hartshorne, a follower of Whitehead.

According to Hartshorne, panentheism can best be understood through an analogy: just as a single organism exists both as a collection of semiautonomous, individual cells and as an autonomous individual who is **more** than just a collection of cells, God can be seen as both a collection of all the constituent parts of reality **and** as "something more" than the universe itself. Although we, along with the rest of existence, can be thought of as part of God's "body," God's mind or consciousness extends beyond that body and causes God to be more than just a collection of parts.

As parts of God, our freedom is not absolute - just as the freedom of cells in our body is not absolute. At the same time, our actions and thoughts are not dependent upon or controlled by God any more than we are able to consciously control and direct the actions of our individual cells. We may be more than our cells, but we depend upon our cells acting independently of our minds in order for us to grow and even to **be** in the first place.