

Space, Time and Deity: Considerations on Theological Presuppositions of Inquiry

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In my statement, I want to *reverse* a “key questions” of the conference: *In what way is your perspective on contemplation informed/affected by the brain research? Or not...?* My answer has two parts. Part one: No, the scientific perspective on brain processes in relation to contemplative practices has not changed my understanding of them.

However—part two—*the very physicality and organicity of contemplation* that brain research *indicates* has greatly changed my interpretation. This is due to the focus on the *physical and organic basis* of the understanding of contemplation and what it contributes to what I think contemplation *is*.

The following considerations will be about this second part of my answer. My assumption is that certain *unquestioned theological presuppositions*, if they reign over contemplation, generate corresponding theological categories *and* frame the direction of certain research-projects. In addressing these presuppositions, I do not wish to assume that the challenged interpretations and their corresponding research-projects are wrong, but I want to allow for alternatives.

In a sense, it must not come as any surprise that *all* experience is physical. Hence, it will *also* not be surprising that subjective experiences of any kind and mode, including feelings, consciousness, religious experiences in general, and contemplation in particular, can be understood *as* organic processes that *essentially* involve our body, and, therefore, without doubt, also our brain.

I know that the exact nature of the relationship of experience to its physicality has a

longstanding history of epistemological, philosophical, and theological discussion—regarding, for example, “secondary qualities,” the “binding problem,” or the body-soul interaction.

I also realize that in Christian tradition the *very fact* of this physical embodiment of experience in general and of religious experience in particular has led to sometimes fierce reactions against scientific/experimental/empirical approaches, assuming they would attack Christianity’s genuine authority with regard to the origin and nature of thought, consciousness, and experience as ultimately being a divine gift.

It is a deep-rooted fear that such an inquiry might detect the *illusionary* character of these phenomena; that it might prove their exclusively *mundane* nature and, hence, the profoundly *projective* nature of their theological understanding.

I confess I don’t have this fear. Moreover, I think it is based on certain theological presuppositions that misconstrue the physicality and organicity of *all* processes of emotional, mental, conscious, or contemplative events either as secondary or as a threat.

Contrasting these assumptions, I want to propose that the *organic character of contemplative experiences* is not just a “biological” *basis* for their happening, but that the *contemplating organism* itself is an indication of the *very reality, nature, content, and meaning of contemplation itself*.

I will explore this claim in the following five theses.

First thesis: In Christian tradition there is a strong inclination to understand contemplation to be one of divine origin or nature that can only be experienced by essentially *overcoming the conditions of space and time*. By striving for a *state beyond* space and time, one is allowed to be lifted into, or even to participate in, the sphere of the divine.

Paradoxically, only by negating the *event* of its own happening (in this world), contemplation participates in a state of “permanence” that not only defies *any* actual “happening” by reaching a state of “being” untouched by space and time, but thereby erases its own condition of “becoming,” of becoming and perishing *as such*. Contemplation, so it seems, is about what in itself is *the negation of space and time*—the immutable, permanent, timeless, always present, eternal, placeless One.

It is well known that classical theological expressions of the Christian tradition have identified “God” with this realm that is *essentially* beyond space and time, but in experience and interpretation *eternal and immutably present*.

What (classical) theology has identified as the most basic divine proprieties—eternity and all-presence—*coincides* with the very condition for any contemplative experience of the divine. The *eventless divine substance* of always permanent “presence” is what must be *experienced* in the participation in its very state of time- and spacelessness.

Second thesis: If—as indicated in *thesis I*—contemplative experience has, as a norm, left behind the spatio-temporal nature of the event of its own happening in order to find a home in the divine itself, it must not surprise that what certain neurospiritual research indicates as happening in a state of contemplation is precisely *the loss of ordinary space and time orientation*.

Andrew Newberg’s and Eugene D’Aquili’s experiments, e.g., have suggested that contemplation reduces neural activity in regions of the human brain that stand for motoric activities, allowing us to *reduce* the feeling of our own bodies and our being “in the world” of space and time.

It is only a little step, then, to further *expect* that this loss of spatio-temporal orientation not

only generates a shortcut reflection of the mind on itself but induces itself as a feeling of *divine* presence. (*Why God Won't Go Away*, ch. 1)

While I do not doubt the stringency of the experimental framework and the fascinating results it generates, I doubt their *theological presuppositions*. If, the practitioner, for her act of contemplation, presupposes the framework of spatio-temporal transcendence and the experiment generates the data to support this framework, for me, the conclusion is that their correspondence is *self-reinforcing* or *self-generating*.

In my view, this excludes another, often-implied consequence, namely that the correlation between contemplation and brain-activity in any way *proves* that one *causes* the other, that is, for me, such a correspondence *neither* proves any divine essence precisely of the nature the practitioner was presupposing, namely its eventless, space- and timeless presence and permanence, *nor* that the encountered character of the divine state and nature is merely generated *from* the physical state of suppression of activities of certain brain regions.

All it *does* prove is a *correlation* between a deeply buried theological presupposition through which the *expectation* of space-and timelessness and the physical appearance as inhibition of space and time in the brain.

Third thesis: Even if my *thesis II*, namely that the presupposed theological expectation of space-and timelessness is generative of scientific evidence of this eraser of space and time—is worth considering, it faces two obstacles: on the one hand, philosophy of science would question the *influence* of such theological presuppositions on its empirical experiments; on the other hand, a practitioner of contemplation would strongly question that such an interpretative framework can *undermine* the immediacy of the experience itself.

In other words, *both* empirical science and experimental experience would argue for their *independence from such interpretative frameworks as contaminating their purity and immediacy*.

At this point, I want to introduce Alfred N. Whitehead's body of work—known today as philosophy of organism, process philosophy, and process theology. I will concentrate on the very basic argumentation Whitehead employs.

Regarding the *experimental* discussion, Whitehead—about half a century before Thomas Kuhn—held that all experimental inquiries are theory-laden. In *Process and Reality* (1929), he opposed Francis Bacon's program of experimental immediacy, by insisting that every "scientific memoir in its record of the 'facts' is shot through and through with interpretation" (PR 15).

Some years earlier, in *Science and the Modern World* (1925), he suggests that all scientific theory is embedded in the cultural frameworks overarching epochs in such a way that all experiment answers only a *working hypothesis* that will always be overcome by new experiments and will change with the metaphysical framework underlying cultural epochs.

Whitehead's important point is *not* relativism of scientific methods, but the warning that to suppose the existence of *uninterpreted* reality is almost certainly tantamount to the suppression of the recognition of its *becoming*. The enterprise of interpretation, that is, of the uncovering of metaphysical presuppositions in all scientific endeavors is, in fact, liberating science of deeply rooted assumptions and power structures.

Regarding the *experiential* discussion, Whitehead held the interesting position that what to us in ordinary life seems to be *immediate* in experience is in fact a *symbolic* process of the interference of more basic modes of experience.

In his book *Symbolism* (1927) he proposed that, against the inclination of the whole Western philosophical tradition and in alignment with many postmodern philosophies today, the

mode of experience that we ordinarily employ when we think of “immediate experience” of consciousness and presence, our “presentational immediacy,” is *evolutionarily emergent* in higher organisms that in their experience of “immediacy” actually *hide* the high complexity of this immediacy.

Whitehead, instead, proposed our experience to be rooted in another, more primitive mode, he calls “causal efficacy” and understands as the condition of experience *as such* insofar as it describes the pre-conscious, pre-sensual, visceral, and massive feeling of pull and push, of extension and retraction, of attraction and repulsion, of “being caused” and “influencing,” “generating,” “giving birth,” “producing”; of a “conformation to realities in the environment” (S 43).

Fourth thesis: If—as proposed in *thesis III*—both scientific experiment and immediate experience are, in fact, complex processes of interpretation based on a interfering modes of experience, then both contemplative experience of *a state beyond space and time* and neurological experiments *that confirm such an eraser of physical space and time* would express a correlative conceptual framework rooted in Whitehead's *derivative* mode of “presentational immediacy.”

While this mode, indeed, “halts at the present, and indulges in a manageable self-enjoyment derived from the immediacy of the show of things,” *it erases the traces of its own origin* in “causal efficacy,” the mode of experience in which we gain “contact of the things gone by, which lay their grip on our immediate selves”; where we feel our self-constitution “from a world of things with characters in their own right, characters mysteriously moulding our own natures” (S 44).

Consequently, contemplation *based on* “presentational immediacy” will always lead us into a *derivative* realm of space- and timelessness where the “present moment is then all in all” (S 42) thereby *inducing* the correlated understanding of the divine as timeless presence (*nunc stans*).

However, if we find access to this more basic mode of experience, contemplation might be about the experience of its own *event of space and time as organically connected* to “the environment” through “our bodily organs” and with them “to the vague world which lies beyond them” (S 43). Its very physicality and organicity opens us to the *diversity, multiplicity, complexity, and infinite depth of the bodily world*. Here, we might really contemplate “a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures” (PR 50).

In his 1933-book, *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead suggests that in “presentational immediacy” we miss “that intimate sense of derivation from the body, which is the reason for our instinctive identification of our bodies with ourselves” (AI 226). In “causal efficacy,” however, we experience a *connectivity* that does not seek space-and timeless unity but spatial and temporal diversity in which in “a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times” insofar as “every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world” (SMW 91).

In its own turn, this interconnectedness involves a connectivity of self, body, and brain where “the brain is continuous with the body, and the body is continuous with the rest of the natural world.” Our selves in all that, then, are acts “of selforigination including the whole of nature, limited to the perspective of a focal region, located within the body, but not necessarily persisting in any fixed coordination with a definite part of the brain” (AI 225).

Fifth thesis: If contemplation is about such an physical and organic experience of connectivity, differentiation, and diversification of an infinite background in the continuity of

self, brain, body and world-body—as proposed in *thesis IV*—this not only changes the framework of contemplation but also the theological presupposition that came with “presentational immediacy” namely that in contemplation we approach an eternal (time-less) and non-extensive (all-present) reality *as divine*. In other words, “God” is not to be understood as timeless, placeless being of perfect permanence, as a pure negation of the *event* of space and time, but rather as its *generation, affirmation, and fulfillment*.

I cannot elaborate on this notion of God as *event* as developed by Whitehead throughout his body of work, which has been essential to process theology ever since. However, I want to indicate one important implication of understanding “God” to be *generating, affirming, and fulfilling* space and time, namely that this divine event or the divine in every event of contemplation must also be about *physical and organic connectivity*.

In a fascinating passage in his last book, *Modes of Thought* (1938), Whitehead hints to the famous work *Space, Time and Deity* (1920) of the contemporary English philosopher Samuel Alexander proposing that the divine event of space and time names that *character* of space and time that, indeed, *connects* physical experiences instead of being their negation.

The divine of the contemplative experience, then, is that *by which* we experience the “unity of a transcendent universe, and the multiplicity of realized actualities.” It is precisely the *diversity of the world-body* that “enter[s] into our experience by this sense of deity” and apart “from this sense...the otherness of reality would not enter into our consciousness.” Indeed, in this new framework we no less than “owe to the sense of deity the obviousness of the many actualities of the world” (MT 102).

I wonder what a brain research-project correlating with such changed theological presupposition would find.