

Navigating the “Human” and “Divine” Natures in a Holistic World

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Abstract: In a world in which it might be argued strict materialism is under threat, it is necessary to question whether nature and that which is “beyond” are as distinct now as they once were, or whether the rise of scientific accounts of holism fundamentally challenge our categories of “material” and “immaterial”. Science now raises deep and unavoidable *metaphysical* questions in a way that perhaps haven’t been seen since it was understood as “natural philosophy” and offers a worldview in which holism, and a move towards a holistic account of the incarnation challenges our definition of “natural” being amenable to scientific discovery. If we are to understand fundamental reality as something that is neither material nor immaterial, or as being based in a relational ontology then the question of the nature of the hypostatic union becomes a question of how we are to define “divine” and “human” “natures”. This is not to imply that the incarnation is to be understood in purely semantic terms, but that the divide of part-whole and substance-accident that can be applied to the medieval models also produces a far more productive division of the discussion than can be achieved by the traditional modern divisions. The reason for this division of the discussion rests in the fact that once one removes the properties of “material” and “immaterial”, “body” and “soul” as ontological categories, the distinction between different “substances” comes down to a discussion of different “properties” in a way that is more meaningful than accidental qualitative properties, but that isn’t occurring at the ontological division of “substance”. The reason that the move to ontological holism as opposed to reductionism offers such a paradigmatic shift for our understanding for our theological discourse rests in the very fact that understanding the metaphysics underlying the incarnation is fundamental in understanding the doctrine as a whole. This paper will examine the theological implications of holism on our understanding of “nature” with a particular emphasis on the relational models of holism proposed by Michael Esfeld. Having examined the importance of our definitions of “material” and “immaterial” at an ontological, rather than purely semantic, level I argue that these need to be radically changed in order to capture the nature of the incarnation, and conclude by tentatively setting out how God may be understood to sit within (or without) a natural world in which “material” and “immaterial” and indeed “human” and “divine” are not incompatible bi polar categories.

Keywords: Esfeld, Holism, Incarnation, Nature, Ontology, Substance

Short Paper: The conference theme asks us to consider the questions of transcendence and immanence in our “natural world”. Such a proposition whilst not necessarily assuming a position of *methodological* or even *ontological* naturalism does assume that our current approach of dividing material and immaterial into discrete categories is correct. I have previously discussed some of the issues raised by reductionist ontologies for our theological discussion (Lawson, 2016, 2018a, 2018b), the focus of this paper is how we are to navigate “human” and “divine” natures in relation to the incarnation and in light of the fact that our most fundamental understanding of the of the world points towards ontological holism.

It has been argued that moving towards a holistic understanding of the nature of the world over a reductionist model lands solely at the feet of quantum physics, and in particular issues relating to quantum entanglement. However, Esfeld contests this view arguing that whilst understanding quantum entanglement as non-separability can lead to a metaphysics of relations (Esfeld, 2004), it can also be shown that many of the properties we take to be intrinsic properties of physical objects are relational (Esfeld, 1999, p. 319). If the fundamental properties are relations then, taken to its extreme, materialism itself admits a form of holism as it descends into field theory. Thus, if ‘the metaphysics underlying the incarnation is an important element in understanding the doctrine as a whole’ (Cross, 2002, p. vii) we must consider how we are to understand the incarnation in relation to holistic metaphysics.

Under a reductionist approach we are pushed in to considering the immaterial as “supernatural” it should only properly be considered as reducible to (preferably) or emergent from the physical. For there are ‘only natural things: only natural particulars and only natural properties’ (Pettit, 1992, p. 296). Whilst the original utterances of faith may have been made within an enchanted world where divine manifestation could be easily pointed to here on earth, we are now unarguably residents of a disenchanted world, where there are secular, scientific explanations for much that was considered divine, and if there are not currently explanations there is a belief that, given time, science will establish an explanation. It would seem that the “natural” world, as currently understood consists of that describable by the physical sciences and in doing so places God irretrievably outside our world, unknowable and inaccessible. As such nature does not point beyond itself in describing self-reflective beings because the “mental” is still of nature. As Jubien notes ‘the mental properties, like the physical ones, are entirely natural properties, in the sense that they are instantiated by natural beings’ (Jubien, 2010, p. 343). This would imply that “supernatural” beings such as God(s), angels and immaterial souls are not of nature. Whilst it may be possible to argue this simply means such beings should be studied by theologians rather than scientists, in the person on Christ we arrive at “natural” material man joined with “supernatural” immaterial God and to deny either aspect is to descend into heresy. It is this joining of the material with the immaterial in a meaningful and fundamental manner that is particularly problematic for theologians and scientists alike. However, I argue that attempt to unite such disparate “substances” is based on a flawed understanding of the nature of reality and that to progress our theological understanding of the nature of the immaterial and material, divine and human, we have to acknowledge

that 'the physicalist conception of nature, based on the invalidated theory classical physical theory, might be profoundly wrong in way highly relevant' to our discussion (Stapp, 2011, l. 341).

Reductionism and theology *Via Negativa*

However, before exploring the impact of a shift from reductionist to holistic ontology it is important to understand that the notion of God's nature being inexplicable does not stem from the rise in scientific thought alone. What is important in faith is often deemed to be the ineffable, personal, religious experience. Our religious experience is so totally different to our everyday empirical experiences that we cannot hope to explain it adequately in "scientific terms" therefore it could be argued, as Wittgenstein did, that we should remain silent. Yet, whilst it is important to understand and acknowledge the "otherness" associated with our understanding of the divine, if we take this to its ultimate conclusion we find ourselves as theologians engaged in a pointless exercise. As Macquarrie notes 'if the religious experience were absolutely inexpressible, then it would follow that the reflective attempt, called "theology", to explicate the content of religious faith in words, is an altogether mistaken endeavour' (Macquarrie, 1970, p. 24). Therefore, the challenge is to find a way to navigate these conflicting views.

It has been argued that perhaps the only true way to navigate between our knowledge of the material and immaterial is to speak *via negativa*. It is only in speaking of what God is not that we are able to avoid reducing God to a finite entity and yet there is a question as to how far speaking in *via negativa* terms is able to genuinely advance our knowledge of God. Whilst in some instances it is possible to gain much information from negative statements, such gains in knowledge rely, to a certain extent, on a Boolean conception of the world. For example if whilst playing chess one said they were "not white" the implicit assertion is they are using the black pieces; however if commenting on which colour of the rainbow their house was one stated "not orange", this doesn't allow for the other person to gain any real knowledge about the colour of the house. The knowledge one is able to gain *via negativa* is dependent upon the number of alternatives available. To return to the divine, to say that God is "not corporeal" doesn't necessarily imply that God is a spiritual being (although this may be how we instinctively interpret it), scientific theories, imaginary numbers, dreams etc. are all non-corporeal but cannot be said to be "spiritual". In fact one can argue that the vagueness associated with *via negativa* statements about God appears to make them 'wholly vacuous...scarcely indistinguishable from agnosticism' (Macquarrie, 1970, p. 27). Whilst it is important to allow for a level of "reverent agnosticism" true and justified faith is possible 'only on the basis that God has granted some positive knowledge of himself' (Macquarrie, 1970, p. 27). Acknowledging the difficulty of talking about God is not the same as saying we cannot talk of God in a meaningful way. Rather it is to acknowledge that our language has been built to talk about our everyday, temporal, physical(?) experiences, this is not to say we *cannot* talk of God, but rather that our current language is limited.

The truth is that our current language isn't limited only for theology, but for science too, the fact that quantum physics points us towards a world that is holistic (whether that holism is universal or limited to the microphysical is not important) causes us difficulty in finding language to adequately describe the nature of our world. This is particularly true regarding the metascientific questions, that require a 'style of thinking... that initially might come more readily to a Trinitarian theologian than to a traditional scientist' (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 47). Our challenge is to recognise the imperfection of our language and comprehension without writing off all talk as meaningless, as Jantzen states 'whatever picture we paint of God must be inadequate because it is of human workmanship' and our only other choice is to 'refuse to paint altogether' (Jantzen, 1984, p. 1).

To refuse to engage altogether would appear to return to the idea that the task of theology is a completely mistaken endeavour, therefore it would appear that whilst our language is imperfect, it allows us to say more than can be said *via negativa* alone. What I am attempting to do in re-examining our understanding of the incarnation in holistic terms is to provide a new way to understand what we already affirm in the creeds. I am not seeking to provide a new explanation of God and man in Christ, but a new way of understanding how God and man were in Christ. Thus, I do not seek to create something utterly new and unfamiliar, but instead to 'portray the familiar in a novel way, so that some aspect of its true nature' (Jantzen, 1984, p. 2) can be understood. To work towards an understanding of the incarnation that is able to highlight the "difference-in-similarity" between our new holistic understanding of ontology and how such holistic unity occurred in the person of Christ. In what follows I aim to draw upon that which we already understand or can comprehend to show how our current comprehension of the union can move closer to a more truthful account.

Holism and the Move to a Metaphysics of Relations

Metaphysical¹ holism states that 'in the last analysis, there is only one independent thing. Everything that exists is a way of being the one thing' (Esfeld, 2009, p. 120). A difficulty with both reductionism and naturalism is that they assume an underlying metaphysics of individuals, characterised by their individual properties. It is these independent individuals embedded in space-time that we study in the physical sciences and it is the relationship between two particular individuals that that we are asked to consider in the incarnation, even if one of them appears to be embedded in space-time at most temporarily. According to the majority view of a metaphysics of individuals we know these embedded objects are individuals because (a) they are located in space-time (b) properties can be attributed to them (c) their qualitative properties can be used to distinguish them from other individuals². When it comes to understanding the incarnate God on the basis of these properties it is easy to

¹ I am using "metaphysical holism" to refer to the claim that there are systems in the world (and even the world itself) that can be understood as not being composed of/characterized by the intrinsic properties of the parts i.e. it stands in opposition to atomism. In some literature this is referred to as "ontological holism", however I am using ontological holism to refer to a specific form of metaphysical holism as referred to by Healey (Healey, 2016).

² This includes, at the very least, its location in space-time

understand how the person of Jesus of Nazareth can be seen to exemplify all three, and indeed the same could be said for the embodied Son of God. However, the big issue this raises for the Son of God is how, as an individual, we are to relate His incarnate self with His pre-existent and post-ascension "selves".

Within a metaphysics of individuals, some of an individual's qualitative properties can be understood as basic or intrinsic properties meaning that they are fundamental to that individual and unable to be reduced to other properties. An individual has intrinsic properties irrespective of the existence of other contingent beings, whereas 'all other qualitative properties are extrinsic or relational' thus they are 'independent of accompaniment or loneliness' (Esfeld, 2004, p. 602). One of the reasons for arriving at a metaphysics of individuals (even if properties are fundamentally relational) rests in the fact that it would seem that the relations require there to be things that are standing in those relations. In other words, it is necessary for there to be objects whose intrinsic properties are not relational (or least are not fundamentally relational). However it is possible to argue that whilst relations require something to be standing in that relation, it is not necessary for those things to be something in and of themselves – they 'do not have any intrinsic properties that underlie the relations in which they stand' (Esfeld, 2004, p. 602). An explanation of Esfeld's full argument goes beyond the scope of this short paper, however I will summarise his argument from epistemology to metaphysics before making some tentative suggestions as to its impact on our understanding of "human" and "divine" natures in a holistic world.

There is currently no way to empirically determine whether a metaphysics of individuals or relations is more accurate. The argument against adopting a metaphysics of individuals rests in the fact that it leaves us ignorant as to the intrinsic nature of things as follows³:

1. If the world fundamentally consists of individuals, then we understand the nature of these individuals through their interactions with our senses and measuring devices. We gain knowledge about what they *do*.
2. This knowledge may or may not refer to the intrinsic properties of the individuals.
3. We can only identify physical properties via their relations. Our explanations of fundamental physical properties are relational.
4. Identity of relations doesn't imply identity of intrinsic properties.
5. Because of the epistemic gap between our "observation" of the fundamental properties and the intrinsic properties of the individual 'we are ignorant of the intrinsic nature of things' (Esfeld, 2004, p. 614)

Thus, there is a gap between our metaphysical theory (of individual things with intrinsic properties) and the apparent limitation that our fundamental physical theories provide only information regarding the relationships that physical things stand in. Faced with this gap between epistemology and metaphysics we have two options (a)

³ Adapted from (Esfeld, 2004, sec. 4)

maintain a belief in a metaphysics of individuals but accept this means we are unable to gain knowledge about the intrinsic properties of the individuals in so far as they are intrinsic (b) discard a metaphysics of individuals in favour of a metaphysics of relations according to which at the fundamental level only relations exist. 'There is no a priori argument that excludes a metaphysics of relations' (Esfeld, 2004, p. 615).

Theology and Relational Metaphysics – Tentative Suggestions

The inherent appeal of relational metaphysics for the theologian rests in the fact that it opens up a space for immanence at the most fundamental level of nature. This is not to posit a god of the epistemological gap but rather if one brings to the table an understanding of the world in which unknowable intrinsic properties become superfluous and so relationality lies at the heart of nature, we would appear to arrive at a metaphysics in which our theological understanding of the relationality of the Trinity, and the incarnate God sits within the scientific understanding of the world. Whilst we may not be able to describe more fully the "how" our lack of description does not negate our theological conceptual framework more closely mirroring the scientific framework in a manner that isn't currently seen within our theological dualism.

However perhaps the biggest problem, is one that isn't new – if we are dealing with a fundamentally entangled and relational metaphysics, how are we to distinguish between God, the world, the two natures of Christ etc and avoid a rapid descent into pan(en)theism? Once we have stripped away the qualitative properties, and we have no access to intrinsic properties even if they were to exist, the question then becomes how do we distinguish between the human and divine? Does it come down to a matter of degree? Epistemic freedom? Contingency? Our current metaphysics of individuals poses challenges for the theologian, and whilst a holistic metaphysics offers "solutions" to some of these issues it also brings to bear new challenges (Lawson, 2018a). However, I feel that the potential offered by holism is for an opportunity to allow for genuine immanence and interaction both with the world and in the person of Christ and it is this that needs exploring further, to establish how our scientific grammar of holism can be brought to bear on our theological grammar regarding the nature of human and divine in Christ.

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