

Theme 5 – The Beauty of Coastal Landscapes

Presentation: Beauty and the Divine in Nature

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According to the sixth century theologian Dionysius the Areopagite, the fundamental name of God is 'good'. This essential good, by the very fact of its existence, extends goodness into all things (DN 4 693B). For Dionysius, therefore, what exists is good, and what is good is - among other things - beautiful.

The work of Dionysius has found an enduring place among the fathers of the Eastern Church and has deeply influenced the development of theology in the Christian West. Dionysius is concerned to give us a picture of the universe in which God is the source of all that is. He is the Creator, yet is radically different from his creation. He is the source of all things, whether visible or invisible. He is Being; he is Wisdom; he is Mind; he is Truth; he is Power; he is Beauty; he is Righteousness; he is Word; he is Faith; he is Redemption; he is Salvation. All that is comes from Him and all that is, is good.

In the world of Dionysius there are nine 'orders' of angels between God and the world in which we live. The lower order longs for God and thus longs to grasp and to understand that which is above it. In this it is positively helped by the higher order, whose task it is to purify, illumine and perfect the order below it. Thus in the Dionysian world there is a constant movement from above, through which the divine Goodness is mediated to the visible creation, and a returning movement from below, whereby the visible creation, through love (eros) returns towards God and in the course of this, is purified, enlightened and perfected. Dionysius, in his own way, and by the use of thought forms with which he is familiar, is expressing certain fundamental truths about the limitations of our understanding of the world.

Yet how are we to understand this hierarchy of 'intelligent and intelligible beings' who mediate for us the Goodness, the Beauty, and the very Being of God?

The Dionysian world can be compared with two aspects of modern thought: mathematics and the world of quantum physics. Bertrand Russell's *Principia Mathematica* had developed a generalised and all-embracing mathematical formalism that was intended to enable us to describe the real world in mathematical symbols and thus grasp reality in its entirety, but Kurt Goedel, an Austrian mathematician active in the 1920s and 30s, was able to show that logical thought is subject to certain unavoidable limitations. Specifically, he was able to demonstrate that any formal system rich enough to include mathematics is necessarily incomplete. This unsatisfactory situation:

can be eliminated for any particular system by shifting it onto a wider system of axioms, within which we may be able to prove the consistency of the original system. But any such proof will still remain uncertain, in the sense that the consistency of the wider system will always remain undecidable.¹

Part of what we find in Dionysius is an adumbration, in his own terms, of this mathematical truth. Each angelic order is able to comprehend and guide the order below it, but no one of them can comprehend or grasp the order above. The truth of any particular order is therefore contained not in itself, but in the order above. Though all the angelic orders are reflections of the truth, they are incapable, at their own level, of reflecting the whole of the truth, of being the truth, and in this they resemble axiomatic systems that have come to life, 'minds' (noes), which are structured in their relationship to each other much like the axiomatic systems of which Goedel speaks. In the Dionysian world an infinite regress is prevented only by God, the Creator of the angelic hierarchies, who is beyond and above all comprehension of what is created.

In the 1940s, A. Tarski went on to develop Goedel's arguments further, showing that if a factual assertion is made by a sentence *p*, then (in that particular axiomatic system) '*p* is true' is not a sentence. The effect of this would seem to be that the statement 'God is good' - statement *p* - cannot formally be shown to be true within the language in which it was originally made.

I suspect that in Dionysius we have an adumbration of Tarski as well. Dionysius accepts that the only way to speak the truth about God in the only language he has is to both affirm and deny at the same time. If you wish to express the truth that 'God is good', you will actually come closer to the truth if you assert at the same time that 'God is not good', the statement that 'God is not good' contradicting on a linguistic level the statement 'God is good' and thereby offering a chance to say something true about God within the language used, while on an ontological level it indicates at the same time that God is beyond all mere created goodness and therefore beyond comprehension of created beings and beyond all human language.

If we are to avoid an infinite regression of the type required by Tarski, we shall have to accept that our language must contain statements which are mutually contradictory. If we wish to understand God as he is, then we must transcend the affirmations we make, contradicting ourselves in order to grasp, in a way which ordinary reason cannot give us, the mystery of the Divine.

Dionysius speaks in this way of the world as he understands it:

We cannot know God in his nature, since this is unknowable and beyond the reach of mind or reason. But we know him from the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out of him, and this

order possesses certain images and semblances of his divine paradigms. We therefore approach that which is beyond all as far as our capacities allow us and we pass by way of the denial and the transcendence of all things and by way of the cause of all things. God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things (DN 7.3, 869C-872A).

The divine paradigms of which Dionysius speaks are the source of all beauty in this world. They are in God, and thus not directly accessible to us, nor even to the seraphim. Yet Dionysius knows they must exist. There is an ontological gulf between them and creation which is bridged by participation, but the relationship is one of type and archetype, in which the original leaves its mark on the material upon which it is impressed without at the same time leaving behind any trace of its being.

The Dionysian world-view can also be compared with the work of David Bohm, long-time professor of physics at Birkbeck College, London, whose last work, *The Undivided Universe*, written with Basil Hiley, appeared posthumously in 1993 (Routledge, London and New York, 1995). The subtitle of this work is 'An Ontological Interpretation of Quantum Theory' and the book carries forward previous work in which Bohm sought to give a 'clear, intuitive understanding of the theory's meaning and a coherent cosmology without having to assume an outside observer'.

One of the difficulties theologians have in making use of modern quantum physics has been its generally accepted status as an epistemology and not an ontology. The position of Bohr and Heisenberg, that quantum theory is better understood as being concerned only with our knowledge of reality, and in particular with how to predict and control the behaviour of this reality, leads to the scientist, qua scientist, being content to know how his instruments will function. It is enough to systemise their readings: it is not necessary to give an intuitively satisfactory account of the physical processes that cause these readings to appear.

However, for most of us, who are accustomed to working with what we think of as the real world, of which we have an intuitive grasp, the non-intuitive character of quantum theory makes it very difficult to fit into our scheme of things. For this reason alone Bohm's work should be interesting to the theologian but in addition Bohm's position deliberately deals with the universe as a whole. It is not a 'theory of everything', but he does insist that in any understanding at any level everything must be taken into account.

Bohm also rejects the conventional view that the wave function, by itself, yields the most complete possible description of quantum reality - and therefore of all reality. He concludes that local 'hidden variables' are possible, bound up with the existence of the measuring device itself, and proceeds to rewrite the formulae accordingly. He then seeks to show that certain existing experimental results, hitherto puzzling, can be dealt with satisfactorily on the basis of these new formulations.

Finally, Bohm seeks to integrate the phenomenon of 'non-locality' into his conceptual system. Non-locality is the puzzling feature of the quantum world whereby particles may be strongly connected even where they are far apart. What happens to one affects what happens to the other even though they would appear to be unconnected. Non-locality would seem to contradict the theory of special relativity, which is generally held to be as fundamental as quantum theory itself. Bohm proposes to understand the theory of relativity as applicable and valid for all statistical quantum results, as well as for the large-scale manifest world. In the 'hinterland' however, in the world of the individual quantum process, non-locality - in both space and time - is possible.

The world of David Bohm is therefore a layered world. Behind the Newtonian world in which we spend our ordinary lives, there lies the world of quantum mechanics, where special relativity holds sway and the wave function fully describes the observable quantum effect. Behind the quantum layer lies another layer where, in the individual quantum process, finer, more subtle relationships can, with difficulty, be observed, some of them non-local and involving information travelling faster than the speed of light, a limit belonging to the conventional quantum world.

How do these worlds relate to one another? The first thing that must be said is that there is only one world. The quantum world is a limited perception of that one world, and the Newtonian, everyday world in which we live and act is an even more limited perception of that one world.

Bohm suggests that we must greatly modify the way we look at things. For example, wherever I happen to be in a room, the order and structure of the whole room has been, as Bohm says, 'enfolded' into a space so small that it can pass through the pupil of my eye. When this order is 'unfolded' on the retina and in the brain, it somehow gives rise to an understanding of the order to the whole room. Similarly, he says, the order of the whole universe is enfolded into each region and may be picked up by various instruments such as telescopes from which it is ultimately unfolded into a conscious awareness of this order. The whole is present in each part.

The world of David Bohm is thus an undivided and completely interpenetrating whole which can be understood and perceived at different levels; the end result of Bohm's approach is a universe which is made up of an 'order of ever increasing orders of subtlety in the implicate order'. Each of these orders would seem to be capable of embracing the order below it, but would not be capable of being 'grasped' by the lower. Something in the higher order would always be incapable of being fully expressed in terms of the lower.

This structure resembles closely that outlined, in very different language, by Dionysius in the sixth century. Dionysius was able to speak, in his day, using a language about the real world that was common currency among educated people in his time. Theologians, today, find this very hard to do. We very much need to find a contemporary language with

which to speak about the world as we know it through science and then relate this to our spiritual concerns and to God. Our discourse must revolve around three poles: God, man and nature. If we cannot speak convincingly about nature, how are we going to speak convincingly about man who is part of nature, and about God?

An epistemological understanding may - and does - serve very well if what we seek is to predict and ultimately control the behaviour of the world; but we humans also need to commune with the world, to live with it at the level of contemplation. We can do this quite easily at the level of the explicate, perceptual world, but for the integration of our whole being, we will also need to be able to do this at the level of the mind. Dionysius was able to do this, and has enabled many others to do so as well. A modern Dionysius, to produce the same effect, will have to possess a language about the material world something like that of David Bohm, a language that opens out easily into the world of the mind and of the spirit.

For Dionysius, perceptible beauty is but a dim reflection of the unutterable Beauty of the Creator, and serves - or should serve - to point our minds and our hearts to its source. The beauty we observe in the Black Sea coastal landscape is an objective property of nature, quite as real as colour or sound, and is accessible to and perceptible by every human being. For the monotheistic faiths, the ultimate source of this beauty is God - the Source of all that is.

Herein lies the attractiveness of any region of the globe where men have never been, and of any plant or animal that we can observe 'in nature' The ugliness that we see is - sadly - the work of men. The inanimate world and the world of plants and animals conforms - to use the language of Dionysius - to paradigms that express the will of God, divine paradigms we are unable to perceive directly, but whose mediated presence, in a world that is structured in depth, we can intuitively perceive.

Mankind alone - together with a portion of the lowest angelic powers - does not conform to the divine paradigm he was created to reflect and therefore does not conform to the image of God in him. That image is not confined to his conscience, or to his reason, or to his radical freedom. It is found in the whole of his being. Each individual human being is a hologram of the universe: everything that is 'out there' is 'in here' as well. Each of us is a microcosm of the whole. That is why we can experience plants and animals as our sisters and brothers - their existence is implicate in the deeper levels of our being. Conversely, our existence, the deep structure of our being, is implicate in them, though the world works in such a way that this receives only partial expression.

Thus our ecological task is to find ourselves in the universe - and to find the universe, as intellectually and spiritually perceived, in us. Our understanding will never reach the depths that are in us. However, we do not have to know everything before we begin to act. We have never let ignorance stop us in the past. The truth of our actions will depend on our conforming to the deep structure of our own nature, and thereby bringing our mode of being, our mode of behaviour, into conformity with the will of God, which is known to us in part, at least, through the world.

All religious traditions have ways of helping their members to do this, and we must use the resources of our traditions for a common goal, a common good.

Note

1. Polanyi, M., *Personal Knowledge*, p.259, Routledge & Kegan Paul.