

THE SPIRITUAL CONNECTION: HOW GOD ACTS IN THE WORLD

FREDERICK SONTAG*

Those who consider God, and the possible way in which divinity might influence the world, have always had difficulty trying to spell out how this effect might take place. In point of fact the question is not so different from the one any nontheologian might consider: how the soul affects the body or vice versa. Of course there are behaviorists who want to get rid of the problem by doing away with any nonmaterial notion such as "soul," and there are materialists who solve the problem by claiming that nothing exists except forms of matter. Still, the mind-brain problem offers us a perplexity even in modern times, since it seems impossible to reduce what we know as mind (or consciousness) to the physiological brain (or the physical body).

In any case a secularist who allows more than one type of basic substance in the world has the same problem any theologian has in describing how forms of substance different in kind can act on each other. We know that Spinoza solved the problem by claiming that there is only one substance with infinite attributes (e.g. thought and extension) and that these parallel each other so that no interaction is either necessary or possible. Of course Spinoza does this by accepting the loss of human freedom or contingency, since perhaps only in an interaction between substances different in kind and in mode of operation (e.g. mind, body) does the possibility of contingency and uncertainty enter in. Descartes stressed the autonomy of mind, and he had trouble accounting for how it might link with and affect the body's action.

In a sense our root problem goes back to Aristotle, as it so often does. Aristotle liked neither Plato's concept of the soul nor his World-Maker. The Aristotelian Unmoved Mover does not need to worry about interacting with the material world, since the Unmoved Mover did not create it (it is eternal). The divine method of imparting motion is by arousing a desire to imitate its excellence, its state of perfect actuality and rest. Many later theologians took over some of Aristotle's attractive metaphysics, but the problem in doing so is that it does not easily fit the Christian notion of God's relationship to the world. Of course modifications were made, but the basic problem of how to specify God's avenue of interaction with the world is still present. The difficulty was that God had to remain unmoved in any and all action, if one begins with Aristotle's metaphysics.

* Frederick Sontag is professor of philosophy at Pomona College in Pomona, California.

To continue our parallel, Aristotle's problem of the relationship of body to soul has the same built-in problems. Aristotle prefers to make the body primary in this relationship, which makes his psychology attractive to the modern-day psychologist. The soul was to be thought of as the "form of a body, having life potential within it." Aristotle preserved the notion of soul, but it became a derivative concept subsidiary to the primary source of activity, the body. Plato's soul had been described as a self-moved mover, essentially immortal. On the other hand, Aristotle obviously had difficulty in finding any way in which the individual soul could survive the body since, as the form of a living body, soul has no essential function to perform without that body.

Again, Aristotle's soul posed problems for the Christian philosopher, just as Aristotle's Unmoved Mover did. One of the keys to both of these dilemmas may be Aristotle's notion of "matter." No matter exists in the Unmoved Mover, nor in the form of the soul, so obviously the physical world must contain original matter that is formed in various ways to function as natural objects, bodies, stars, and so forth. Matter for Aristotle becomes the source of potentiality and incompleteness in objects, so that one is always trying fully to actualize his or her material aspects, which leads toward the perfect state of actualization and rest. Matter obviously stands at the opposite end of the scale from form and must be different from it in kind. One acts, the other is acted upon.

Although Aristotle came to be at odds with Plato's metaphysics, and many have supported him in this, it might be wise to take a second look at Platonic and neo-Platonic models, given our difficulties in working out how God might act in the world and the necessity the theologian has to provide such a connection. Early modern physics, as I understand it, fit fairly well with Aristotelian metaphysics, its dualism and its role for matter. But I have a suspicion that in contemporary physics the notions of inert matter and of the radical separation of nonmaterial substance from material substance are no longer necessary concepts. Let us see if another metaphysical model might be acceptable today and allow us to explain God's action on the world more easily.

We need to begin by postulating one basic substance of which all things, both in the world and out, gods and universes, are made. This may be molded into as many different varieties as you like. Biologist, botanist, geologist and anthropologist seem to find the basic kinds or species in the world to be finite in number. This is like the old (or new) atomic theories, which go as far back as the pre-Socratics. Such atomic theories, however, tended to be materialist, whereas I would propose that for the present day we think of the basic substance of all things as spiritual, nonmaterial in the sense of not occupying physical space, but capable of being modified or of modifying itself so that it can become spatial and temporal, or what we call material.

Obviously God becomes for the theologian the primary example of spiritual substance. Just as Spinoza connected his God to matter, we know that such a primordial spiritual substance is capable of assuming

material form, or of becoming material in its aspects, properties and manifestations. At least since Thales we have been aware that substances can assume a variety of forms (e.g. water changing from ice into vapor). There is no particular difficulty in accepting the fact that one substance can assume many forms, each with different characteristics. One happy result is that it makes the Christian notion of God's incarnation in human flesh easier to account for, and the prologue to John's gospel becomes obvious physics.

Returning to Plato and Plotinus, the neo-Platonists developed Plato's metaphysics more consistently and may offer us the best model. Plato began with universal forms and moved toward unity among them, but Plotinus was more systematic and began with the One, the single principle responsible for all forms of existence. Beneath itself perfect unity begets multiplicity and rationality (the One in itself has no need of reason, as mystics keep discovering) all the way down to matter. Thus all forms or rational concepts, souls and material bodies are various permutations of one principle or substance. This scheme makes it easier to account for the sympathy and resonance one person or form of life can feel for another. There is a basic unity of substance in all of nature, despite its vast variety of forms.

Soul becomes the inherently active neo-Platonic principle, the mover of all things, and the source of motion we see in ourselves and in all things around us. How a soul might move a body, or how a universe or a flower might possess a soul, is no great problem. The exchange between the various forms that nature assumes is not hard to imagine. All at base spring from one substance. Their harmony and interplay is natural and requires no contrived or artificial or indirect connection. The orders in nature need not be rigidly separate, although there certainly are different forms or functions to be described in different ways. It is up to natural science to tell us how many different forms there are in fact.

Although this is a happy consequence for theologians puzzling over how God can act on the world, does it mean that stars and mountains, trees and rocks, suddenly become illusions and are not the natural objects they appear to be, but instead spirits masquerading? Not in the least, I hope. Whatever properties and ways of behaving natural objects have, they have. They are just what they are and not another thing, to borrow a phrase. But they are forms of one substance, one capable of taking all the forms found in the variety before us and how many other forms we do not know. The basic substance is one; it forms many, tending to absolute infinity. Our economy and unity is found in the underlying substance, not in the variety of forms substance can possibly take.

Those who know Bishop Berkeley may suddenly think this suggestion simply another form of his idealism. Again, I hope not, and I do not think so. Berkeley said no material substance lies behind the material objects we see providing their unseen origin. Our ideas of things are what they are with the properties they have, but no unseen material substance lies behind them, Berkeley tells us. I am certainly not proposing a return to

an unseen material substance, but neither am I saying that all we experience are ideas. Berkeley, you recall, had to call in God to keep the ideas of nature alive when unperceived by us. No, I believe every natural object exists just as it is, on its own, interconnected with its natural order, operating just as natural science describes each. It is just that, I suggest, all are forms of one underlying spiritual substance.

Even if hundreds of philosophers might be willing to accept this unitary substance metaphysics, or at least allow it as a possible alternative in the spectrum of metaphysical schemes, does it really ease the theologian's problem of accounting for God's action on or in the world? If God's substance is at base not different from ours, just a different form, although the primal form, and if our substance (body and soul) and the substance of the oceans are not different from God's but the same substance assigned different forms with different capacities, interconnection and intercommunication should be much simpler. Like is dealing with like, basically.

Even if one substance is capable of assuming so many various forms, all difficulties are not instantly removed. The operations and styles of individual substances, even within our species (i.e. human), are so various that it takes much study to determine the common base. Because of this, we are subject to racial prejudices and human misunderstandings. Could we agree, however, to the common origin of our base substances (e.g. human and fish), we could bend our energies to find the common origins or basic overlaps, rather than protesting our completely different base and our lack of commonality with those whose form differs from our own. Radical differences become a matter of the form one essential substance takes, not a difference in basic substance. And obviously it is possible for the forms substance takes to change, although probably not so much that all species become one. Certain lines of demarcation seem to have been fixed for this universe; variety is locked into a prescribable form.

So much for identity among human nature and nature. Still, does this make it any easier to account for God's activity? If God represents the spiritual substance from which all substances, material and otherwise, spring, why was a basic resonance between all forms of life not established? This does not mean, as some hopeful theologians and divines have thought, that we can look for traces of God that are easily seen in the world, or that human nature somehow obviously does or should see its kinship to the divine. Augustine has told us that God has made us "restless till we rest in Thee." Yet for many that doctrine does not seem to be true, except among those who pursue one religion or another. The divisions of nature, as they have been called, seem quite well demarcated, so that one may easily study one form and not be led to anything other than its description if you wish to narrow your vision.

But from God's point of view, the primal substance responsible for all forms that substance assumes should have no difficulty communicating or passing orders between the levels. True, a degree of independence and autonomy of operation seems to have been established so that worlds

operate without waiting for daily instructions except for the primal orders of operations (e.g. DNA). Interference in natural orders is at a minimum. As Hume noted, by definition miracles are extremely rare occurrences, not common happenings. Still, the prologue to the gospel of John makes perfect metaphysical sense. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. A spiritual speaking can bring forth flesh. A spiritual thought can transmute spirit into material forms of substance.

Even if we discover this spiritual connection, and even if a metaphysics postulating a basic spiritual substance is workable, does it solve every problem regarding how God acts in the world? No, we have only opened up the means whereby the connection can be made. We still need the *logos* of the *theos*, the rational description of how and why divinity operates as it does. The divine nature still requires a full explication, if we are to account for why the operations of God in the world take the form they do, or why the divine spirit does not always act in the material world when we might hope for it to do so, especially when we have discovered that the connection is so easily made. God may be as mysterious after you read this paper as before, unless you can provide an explanation for us. "Speaking for God" is still our task, since God rarely seems to. But conceiving how God might act in the world is now no roadblock to thought.

Haydn's *Creation* is not far off. At God's command, the world came into view. Why not? Voice is the outward form of spirit, and words are spirit's concrete manifestation. Spirit through words assumes new substantial form. Why not? It happens in human creative activity every day. The empiricist's theory that novelty consists of old sense impressions rearranged is actually much harder to believe, given what we see that the human creative spirit can bring into being. Why should God be restricted to do any less? Spirit can give voice, we know that. And words or symbols properly activated can produce physical change and even create physical substances out of ideas. Composers do it. Set designers do it. Politicians do it. Why not conceive God's activity in the world along similar lines—the spiritual connection?