

A View of Our Wholeness

Summary: An article submitted to the Templeton Foundation Essay Prize and which will be published in the August issue. In it Alan proposes a new framework of understanding the Divine and our place in the Universe with the phrase 'Our Wholeness', which transcends and dwells within every individual and bridges the boundaries between belief and non-belief systems. He then works out the ontological and ethical implications.

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Two millennia ago we were implicitly asked to face the question, 'Are you going to love God and your neighbour?' Somehow over the centuries we have contrived to get away from that uncomfortable challenge by treating God as if He were a person or object of thought whose existence is at issue. Since existence is contingent and since God is not a contingent concept the question is meaningless in the form 'Does God exist?' and attempts to answer it are doomed to confusion. A closely related question is, 'Are you prepared to trust the integrity of Creation?' People may use the concept of God in their attempts to answer this question, but ancient verses such as 'God created the heaven and the earth' make it hard to get beyond the idea of a personal Being standing outside creation. We need a concept to fulfil the function of the word, but for many people today it requires rethinking and expansion.

In his book *God and the New Physics* Paul Davies explains that his aim is to reach a multi-faceted understanding of the world: "reductionist and holist, mathematical and poetical, through forces fields and particles as well as through good and evil." His suggestion that science offers a surer path to God than religion is a reminder that theology has to recognize the need for humility.

The independence of the physical world once assumed by science has been radically undermined by relativity and quantum theory. Both theories are evidence from science itself that observers are intimately bound up with observations. The idea of an independent absolute world 'out there' is mistaken. It is valid for most practical purposes, but if it is taken as the whole picture it leads to an ultimate dualism. However as soon as the idea of the interdependence of all our experiences is recognized it becomes possible to look at our experience with fresh eyes. Physical laws are no longer thought of as determining what happens, but as describing probabilistic bounding conditions. They are simply the best theoretical approximations to the living reality of our physical experiences that we can achieve.

Paul Davies points out that science has nothing to say about God's plan for the universe or about good and evil. So while recognizing the insights and grounds for wonder offered by science's portrait of the world, we also need to expand our Vision of God on the basis of a complementary view that acknowledges the significance of human decisions. Each scientific observation is a particular chosen human act. The observer is a self-aware being who observes phenomena and interprets them in terms of his or her conception of what is going on in the cosmos. The success of science springs from the integrity and self-critical questioning that lie at its heart.

This is where scientific reason links up with the much vaster realm of human intercourse that lies beyond its domain. We marvel at the creative imagination whose activity is revealed by science, and we respond aesthetically to its beauty and fine-tuning. But science can tell us

little about its meaning. If we wish to get to the heart of things we must dig deeper than science, which has no first person singular or plural.

In early times the human mind tended to split its thinking into areas of life for which different deities were responsible. Each mature culture has tended gradually to move beyond this towards a sense of a single ultimate reality. The way in which this has come about has differed widely. Hinduism remains open to all the lesser gods while recognizing the Supreme Being; Buddhism rejects them all with a single Nothingness. Judaism wrestles with its own historical God. Christianity extends this to all men and adds the concept of a Trinitarian God who is deeply involved at the human level. Islam discards this incarnational aspect and transforms the Christian God into a fully transcendent Being who is nevertheless immediately accessible to each Muslim. Marxism makes the state economy the ultimate power. Science takes the rational uniformity of nature as its god.

For the adherents of any particular corpus of beliefs and practices there is a huge investment in the historical and cultural complex that forms their spiritual context. It provides a vision that gives meaning and a sense of identity. The richer and more complete the vision, the greater the temptation to regard it as uniquely sacrosanct. Corpuses have to be very mature to recognize that the contributions of other corpuses are a condition of their own wholeness.

For most explicitly religious corpuses this means a shared vision of God. However the fellowship of goodwill includes not only those who declare a belief in God, but also those who deny this and those who are agnostic. All may hold their position in good faith. If we restrict the conception we are looking for to the word 'God', we are excluding the last group partially and the second group completely. No true vision can permit this kind of exclusiveness: if any part of the Whole is separated off it is no longer the Whole.

In order to embrace all human beings of goodwill we need to expand the traditional Vision of God into an understanding that suggests how everything can be conceived as making sense. For this we need to extend the concept of 'creation' to all experience - not only what we experience physically, but also our thoughts and categories, our feelings and longings, our suffering and our joys, our relationships with ourselves and others. Even the conception of a possibility or the flash of inspiration is an event that is created and experienced.

There is no point in trying to develop some explicit system that we can all struggle to agree on: it is not even desirable. But it is possible to share an implicit metaphysical framework for human life that has the same universality and absoluteness as mathematics has for the physical world. We can each translate this into terms of our unique situation.

We might start with the concept of 'the Whole', but this still carries hints of an object which is hard to address as 'you': it is essentially in the third person singular. We need to suggest richness of interpersonal relationship. A phrase that comes close to this requirement is 'Our Wholeness'. It points to fullness of integration as the ultimate reality. It suggests a living quality rather than an object, and the uppercase 'O' and 'W' help to emphasize the unique and sublime quality of true holiness which our materialistic age is in danger of forgetting. The pronoun 'Our' straddles the subjective/objective divide and allows everyone to be 'one of us' in principle. The phrase can even be used vocatively as addressing a 'You'.

The term allows a conception of reality that both transcends and dwells within every individual and every experience and every relationship and every communication. It bridges

the boundaries between belief (and non-belief) systems. It is truly infinite and universal. It offers the possibility of an expanded Vision of God which fulfils the longings of all those who genuinely seek the truth in faithfulness to their own starting point. It embraces every shade of belief while being absolutely specific in its requirements. Our experience becomes a search for wholeness by wholeness under wholeness's self-imposed conditions.

The conception leads to an ontology. We can interpret our experience in terms of two realms, finite and infinite. There are two categories in each realm. Our finite experience comes in the form of related pairs, ranging from simple opposites (left/right) to complex complements such as male/female. They can be called 'positive finite' and 'negative finite'. Two of the most fundamental are inner space and outer space (mind and matter) and past time and future time (knowable and unknowable).

The two infinite aspects are nothingness and wholeness, which appear in the doctrine of Creation *ex nihilo*. Nothingness imposes conditions on creation as an infinity of abstract forms that constitute the absolute relationships between concepts. It can be seen in the necessity that characterizes logic, and at a much more complex level in the sense of fairness which is among the constraints that Our Wholeness respects. Wholeness is both a category and the infinite reality that includes all categories.

This ontology treats the mental world as a contingent world like the physical world: the two are interdependent, just as observer and observed have turned out to be. We still tend to talk of the physical universe as the 'cosmos', and so we easily underplay the reality of the billions of minds that constitute the mental world. This contains all our ideas and categories and thoughts - the mental objects and events that we experience as belonging to the finite empirical realm. They are as 'real' and 'given' as physical objects and events, but we are only aware of them indirectly.

How are we to think of Our Wholeness? Each of us is eternally in a person-moment which we apprehend as 'here and now'. We have the task of 'being' Our Wholeness in a stream of decision points at each of which we have to seek to recognize the direction of wholeness and act. Each act is a spontaneous Yes or No to our personal integrity, which is identical with the integrity of Our Wholeness. There is an implicit absolute right or wrong in every shift of our attention. Every thought-act, speech-act, body-act, even the act of declaring belief, is a response to the needs of Our Wholeness as they are recognized in each situation. Each Yes adds to the sum of delight, and each No adds to the pain.

We usually think in terms of a context of space-time-cause that helps us to structure what is going on. Our individual consciousnesses relate to each other through the medium of this shared context. St Augustine's conception of time provides a still more profound perspective: he suggests that God is aware of creation as a single moment. So we can think of the whole of creation as a kind of multidimensional sculpture in space-time-cause based on the will-pattern - the pattern of Yes/No person-moments extending over all time.

Creation can be thought of as the precise presentation of the reality of the will-pattern in terms of our daily experience. As we experience each moment we share the fact of all interrelated Yeses and Noes. This fact is presented back to us in the next moment in such a way that each person is challenged with what is needed from him or her personally to meet the needs of Our Wholeness at that point. Everything in every moment takes everything into account.

The will-pattern is reflected in a state of disorder in the relationship between mind and matter. This is experienced as personal suffering of every kind. Our Wholeness has to 'create' with absolute integrity, presenting us in each unique moment with the opportunity to do the work needed. The cost has to be shared out on the basis of criteria that take into account considerations far beyond the range of our knowledge. The way this happens will often seem meaningless, and that is part of the meaning.

Right choice can be choice of enjoyment, and there is no problem with that. If it is right it is food for the spirit, a gift to be acknowledged with delight. But right choice can also be costly and painful, and it is intuitively clear that this makes it a means of healing the disorder generated by Noes. This is also true of imposed suffering. All suffering is the self-aware consciousness experiencing in seeming isolation the cost of the disharmony between physical world and mental world. Christian theology expresses the idea the Jesus' deliberate choice of necessary suffering has restored the possibility of human wholeness.

Creation can now be seen to extend far beyond physical laws and the physical universe. It is a sensitive dialogue with the whole being of each of us as we engage in the quest for wholeness. The complexity of the factors is totally beyond imagination, including not only observations and thoughts but also feelings, likes and dislikes, and personal judgements. Nevertheless we have a faculty for immediately recognizing the reality of the situation. This is of greatest significance in human relations, where what matters infinitely is good faith.

The conception outlined closes an intellectual gap. Many people still define goodness in terms such as 'This is what God commands' or 'this will maximize human happiness'. The first relies on authority and the second on reason. Neither takes proper account of the uniqueness of each choice. Each particular action is involved in the context of a particular perspective on the will-pattern and a particular configuration of personal relations. We are perhaps moving to a stage of greater maturity. The old perspectives give us working frameworks, but mature judgement realizes that good or bad lies in our direct awareness of what is right in the unique moment, and what is right arises precisely from the way in which the whole will-pattern relates to the moment. The circle is closed: 'ought' is firmly linked to 'is'.

If this ontology is taken seriously it will affect people's attitudes. Apparently meaningless and innocent suffering often leads to futile anger against 'God'. The conception of Our Wholeness can transform this into a strengthened will to goodwill. It also carries the implication that the act of trusting that it is true makes it true. It does not matter if we misunderstand or are uncertain or unwilling at the point of acting: what matters is that we act in openness to the question, 'Am I seeking to be true to myself and to Our Wholeness?' The evolutionary principle at the human level is not survival but integrity.

One of the hardest modifications to accept is the way we conceive of the physical universe and evolution. We experience everything as if it is 'really there', but only because this is the appropriate experience for us to have. The apparently unyielding 'thereness' does not arise from a brittle abstract rigidity but from a necessity recognized by Our Wholeness.

Many other shifts are implied. What we experience as miracles are infusions of wholeness made possible by Yeses - this includes genius, which is capable of creativeness beyond rational credibility. The idea of unattainable abstract perfection in the form of goodness, truth and beauty is replaced by the concept of the unique absolutely right action that takes

every consideration into account. The 'church' or 'the saved' at any moment consists of all those who are in a state of goodwill in relation to their own present awareness. Disagreement is a positive opportunity for reconciliation. Laws do not govern events or determine right and wrong absolutely, but are general guidelines based on experience of or insight into Our Wholeness. The universal law is that the infinite is intrinsically prior to the finite: 'wholeness first'.

With this view of Our Wholeness we can continue to use the word 'God' within bounded contexts where it does not cause offence to goodwill. Its historical roots are too deep for us to attempt to match its power with any alternative, and within limits it can be enormously valuable in deepening the spiritual sensitivity of those who are comfortable with it. But the word itself can be divisive, and its meaning is only to be found beyond the word and the way we use it. That depends on our recognition of the structure of the whole - our expanded Vision of God.

Our Wholeness is suprapersonal reality open to and recognizable by all, an expansion of the meaning of the traditional term 'God', impossible to represent as *he* or *she* or *it*. Our Wholeness is bound to respect those who genuinely regard the use of 'God' or the formulations of religion as damaging. Our Wholeness is a transcending and indwelling reality who acts in judgement on every attempt to define or impose obedience to particular words and particular ways of expressing our ideas. Our Wholeness calls for absolute honesty with others and above all with ourselves. Neither optimism nor pessimism about the future is relevant; what happens depends on each of us. Every moment in which we choose to trust in the integrity of Our Wholeness is a moment of eternal worth, an incarnation of 'I am' that allows wholeness to be.