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A RADICAL THEOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

A Radically Condensed Vision

By

Jay B. Gaskill

Our Relational Universe

A new theology flows from a new understanding.

At the level of the unimaginably tiny, at sizes below what physicists call the Plank limit, the material universe ceases being classically material. There, quantum effects, cognizable only in their mathematical description (that description itself is a systematic set of relationships), completely replace discrete objects, and what we call matter becomes one with its relational description. The quanta that constitute matter and energy can no longer be accurately described as little balls, nor as wave forms, nor (even) as always either “here” or “there” or “now” or “then.”

Quanta (such as quarks and photons) can become entangled with each other across distances in a way that makes them act like a single connected object – connected and one, integrated in behavior, but occupying different locations - theoretically millions of miles apart without any “physical” link whatsoever. It is though, in the quantum world, we are witnessing the limits of the purely material, the boundary between a Platonic realm of non-material, eternal form and order (the realm where there is, in effect, but one circle), and that of the more-or-less predictable, but messy, realm of events.

String Theory, one of science’s latest attempts to arrive at a comprehensive explanation of the material realm at this level, offers an even more comprehensive relational description of matter and energy as something resembling higher level geometry. Whether string theory will be the last, best word is not the point. This development is just the beginning. The genie is out of the bottle: Starting with Einstein’s insight that time and space, matter and energy cannot be described except in relationship with each other, we are rapidly moving to a more radically comprehensive view: Nothing can be adequately described except in its relationship with the rest of reality.

Science pursues prediction. But it does so by finding explanation. And the holy grail of scientific explanation is the conviction that physical reality is integrated. This is why science prefers the explanations that tie together all of the evidence and fully integrates the related theories. Science eschews the arbitrary and the unnecessarily complicated. Science's pursuit of the grand integration of explanation is really a faith stance. It comes out of the core conviction that everything can be explained in that way because reality ultimately is that way.

When we add to the scientifically driven faith stance that reality is integrated, the insight that all reality is *ultimately relational* in essence, we have set the stage for a new basis for theology.

This universe (a universe that some cosmologists believe may be one of many iterations) is *relational in essence*. That is to say, the universe is fully describable in purely relational terms, in that no element within it can be fully accounted for nor understood except as it exists in relationship with the rest of the elements. No element may be omitted.

Science may pursue the holy grail of comprehensive integration, but it achieves practical results by pursuing integration on smaller, more manageable scales. Science gets useful results by ignoring or editing out the parts of the universe that don't seem strongly relevant for a particular calculation.

But for purposes of teasing out the ultimate meaning of things, the ultimate Origin of everything cannot be redacted. Moreover, if we are serious about achieving deep explanation, we can hardly edit ourselves out of the universe. Our own sense of being, the very consciousness that we experience as primal reality, belongs at the center of explanation. If the universe is relational in essence and integrated, then so also is the very being that we experience as conscious life.

Therefore I am proposing that the relational multi-universe¹ is *necessarily* understood as the product of the original proto-aware Being whose intrinsic perfection and deep symmetry enfolds all potential benign creation. In this view, what human cultures have referred to as deity (by many different names or none at all) is now understood to be the massively integrated, normatively rich Source of all being, beings, or "beingness" whose variegated complexity is always beyond full expression within any space-time limited context. This vision supplies the *meaning* of the multiple iterations of the universe posited by cosmology.

¹ I am referring to a fully unified conception of material and non-material reality, sketched out here, and more fully developed in another work. Among the implications of this comprehensive reality integration: (1) Rejection of the simplistic arch-materialist view that matter/energy deployed in space-time offers a complete explanation of all that is, seen and unseen; (2) Recognition that the organizational/non-material features of reality cannot be subordinate to space-time limited event space; (3) Understanding that comprehensive integration includes "mind-space" and "value-space" as emergent aspects of space-time limited event space; (4) Belief that the very notion of emergence as a phenomenon in event space represents a phase change between the non-material and material aspects of integrated reality. See the MS: *The Ghosts Outside Plato's Cave- Implications of a Relational Universe* by the author.

This is God seen as at once perfect and self-perfecting, broken and healed, creator and created, latent and emerging, remote and present to all times.

The Cosmic Genesis

Deity's first act was one of self creation. In the sole primordial act of self-creation that explains and accounts for all that is seen and unseen, a proto-aware Ur-God brought *event space* into being as a subset of total reality² and thereby achieved self-awareness.

Event space is that realm from which all universes were/are/will-be spawned, each with the potential for the emergence of realized elements of "God-being" within localized space time enfolded nodes.

The Unfolding Deity

The emergence of any aspect of God-being in event space (in the sense that we can recognize God-being as partly expressed in any sentient intelligent being with some capacity of creation-engendering activity) recapitulates the essential God-being nature at an *incomplete level of resolution* (much as optical technology reveals that a piece of a hologram captures the entire scene but at a reduced level of resolution). This notion is consonant with the essential account of Genesis that (hu)man is made in the "image" of God, but extends the reach of the observation to all conscious, intelligent beings in all universes in all times and settings.

The Great Self-Shattering

The profoundly painful consequence of the initial act (Ur-event) of creation was a divine self-shattering that distributed the "God-essence" within all of the new event-space-holding universes, initially as a potential physical manifestation, over time as emerging being. This idea was partly captured by the theological notion of the "fallen" status of human beings.

All conscious being manifests in event space as localized nodes of sentience and conscious, creative intelligence in every instance, a reduced resolution iteration of the form/architecture of God-being. Each local conscious being is therefore a God-bit (an insight captured in the Hindu atman / Brahman conception) linked through the relational multi-universe to the proto-aware, now awakening God. In this conception, God is both complete and developing (i.e., "incomplete" in relationship to event space and local conscious being). This overarching deity aspect that is manifest in the relationship between God --as perfect but remote-- and the local God aspects as they emerge in event

² As I have proposed in "Ghosts", the ultimate essential character of reality is its comprehensive relationality in which the special characteristics of event space are three sets of relationships: the temporal group, the spatial group, and the deterministic/indeterministic, all of which allow creative development to emerge from the Ur-source whose rich information content is beyond full expression within any universe.

space – is God as the ever expanding meta-being, now “lit up” as its shattered parts distributed throughout event space achieve awakening.

Thus God, in its self shattered aspect scattered in event space, experiences the pain of existence and incompleteness in every single point of awareness in every part of every universe. This is the insight that animates the theology of the divine suffering of Jesus.

Therefore the pain experienced by deity is *essential to the very act of creation*, bound up as it is in the very architecture of the divine relationship to all that is. That essential pain is potentially balanced by the ongoing joy of creation, and it is redeemable by our joy in the experience of the healing awareness of unity with the deity whose very nature is made more *alive and present* through that very conscious relationship with us.

This notion of a redeeming state that follows one’s awareness of benign divine attention is captured by the theological idea of Grace. The notion of mutuality, of the *reciprocal* nature of the grace relationship seems radical to the modern mind, even though it was prefigured in very early religious thinking.

The ethical implications are consonant with received wisdom. Each person we encounter in life is at once a partial *portal* to the God being and a *localized site of the God condition* in event space. Compassion is a necessary consequence of this knowledge. Love is the longing for the reconciliation and connectedness of the shattered deity aspects. Evil represents the forces of separation and disintegration that can block the connections between separate, local conscious being and deity.

Fourth Stage Monotheism

This overall theological conception fits within the conception of *Staged Monotheism*. This is a description of the historical evolution of our species’ developing understanding of deity that incorporates the implications of the God presence emerging as the essential unity within event space. The stages are as follows:

- (a) In Stage One, a single deity rules other putative deities;
- (b) Stage Two is One Deity existing in relationship with human beings;
- (c) Stage Three is deity as Ultimate Unity of Being;
- (d) Stage Four is the realization of the complex multifaceted nature of divine being as the shattered and self-reconciling ultimate Unity of Being.

The Radical Shema

The theology proposed here is radical in its vision of deity as shattered and incomplete within the worlds, but also existing outside space-time as Perfect and Whole, a vision in which deity’s “shatteredness” causes a mutual longing for completeness.

Deity is held up through a massively uplifting coherence which is achieved via the struggle to maintain a trans-temporal self-relationship (between the deity essence in us

and deity as beyond space-time). This is the ongoing drama of deity's emerging self-reconciliation, through ongoing creation in event space, and the necessity that divine love be returned.

The local self-non-local deity relationship, therefore, becomes *mutually* nourishing. The prime commandment captured in the Hebrew Shema, "Love God with all your might", flows directly from these insights into the nature of divine being.

The perspective that we need God is not radical. The realization that God needs us is radical indeed. Grace is reciprocal.

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The author's book length work (about 55,000 words), *The Ghosts Outside Plato's Cave: Implications of A Relational Universe*, is available in **pdf** format on special arrangement with the author.



Author Contact Information:

Jay B. Gaskill

Attorney at Law

California, USA

law@jaygaskill.com and jgaskill@yahoo.com

Further contact information on request.

[Profile on line: <http://www.jaygaskill.com/Profile.pdf>]