

Symposium: Is Nature Enough? The Thirst for Transcendence

IS NATURE ENOUGH? INTRODUCTION

by Michael Cavanaugh

Abstract. The forty-ninth annual IRAS conference on Star Island pursued the science-religion dialogue primarily in terms of two concepts: nature and transcendence. Robust Yes responses and likewise robust No responses were presented by both scientists and theologians to the theme question, "Is Nature Enough? The Thirst for Transcendence." After this introductory survey of the definitional landscape, representative papers from the conference are presented.

Keywords: nature; thirst; transcendence.

The essays in this section are edited versions of some of the principal talks given at the forty-ninth annual Star Island conference organized by the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS). The theme of that conference was "Is Nature Enough? The Thirst for Transcendence."

The conference was marked by two interesting dynamics. First, the speakers provided a strong set of responses to the theme question; this was not a conference that "mumbled." Both the Yes and the No answers to the question were represented by teams composed of both scientists and theologians. John Haught (2003) is a theologian representing the "No, nature is not enough" response; his scientist "partner" was physicist Lawrence Fagg, whose contribution was published in the September 2003 issue of *Zygon* and serves as a companion piece to two previous *Zygon* articles of his (1996;

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2002); in those earlier articles he argued for an aspect of God as purely natural and immanent in nature, whereas in the more recent essay he sees more to God than that—namely, a transcendent aspect.

Jerome Stone (2003) is the theologian representing the “Yes, nature is enough” response, and his scientist “partners” here are Ursula Goodenough and Terrence Deacon (2003). Stone presents a strong vision of a non-supernatural theology, and I predict that Goodenough and Deacon’s article will become a touchstone for all those who hang their philosophical and theological hats on the concept of emergence, which is quickly becoming the unifying principle of a naturalistic approach to philosophy and theology.

Barbara Whittaker-Johns focuses the theme on its deep personal and existential dimensions. Her premise that transcendence is “the radically indwelling capacity of love to bring new life and a sense of being at home in the universe” becomes the resource for cultivating our personal stories that frame our encounters in and with nature and with the faith and love that emerge in those encounters. She suggests that these stories can form the narratives that function as “personal scripture” for us as we live our lives in the world.

A second and equally important dynamic that marked the conference was that the level of collegiality and actual listening to one another was deeply felt. Several of the speakers and many conferees commented on the extent to which they had been changed by the week and the amount of new food for thought they took away. Indeed, I think you will discover as you read that significant common ground was cleared for all who are interested in the science-religion dialogue, partly by the presentation of new ideas and partly by the removal of some definitional and conceptual underbrush that often has complicated and confused the conversation.

As a first effort toward clearing away underbrush, one must recognize the many uses of the terms *nature* and *transcendence* and the different approaches one could take to teasing out those forms of usage. For example, in talking about nature, one could take a *historical* approach, considering first how the ancient Greeks or Romans looked at nature, then moving on to the Middle Ages, then to the Renaissance of the Greek ideas, then to the Enlightenment, during which nature was supposedly seen as machinelike, then on to Rousseau and the romanticizing of nature, through the Post-modern period, and finally to what I would call today’s “emergentist” era, in which nature is seen as emerging from very basic physical and psychological dynamics. Or, one could take a *cross-cultural* perspective and consider whether there are significant differences and similarities in the ways Eastern and Western traditions look at nature or the ways it is conceived by various native traditions in Africa, South America, Micronesia, Australia, or elsewhere.

Some speakers took these approaches, and in particular V. V. Raman (2003) offered some insights into the Hindu view, but the conference was marked mainly by analyzing forms of usage that prevail today, primarily in the Western world. Even in that limited context, there are at least five uses of *nature* that can be identified.

First there is the common distinction between the natural and the supernatural, often used to distinguish between what God does and what human beings do, leaving for further and perhaps separate discussion the place of nonhuman creatures and processes.

A second view holds that everything is included within nature, including what has traditionally been understood to be humanity, God, and everything else. This approach has been associated with the Stoics, and today it often is associated with physics-based theologies such as those process theologies that take much of their inspiration from quantum dynamics.

A third view uses the term *nature* to refer primarily to earthly things but with a distinction between human and nonhuman activities or products. Beaver dams, for example, are seen as natural, whereas tall concrete dams built by humans are somehow unnatural. Thus, *nature* and *natural* pertain to that which has not been “contaminated” by human beings.

Fourth, there is a popular usage of *nature* that distinguishes between what is natural and what is not, within humans. Often we think of humans without any significant culture as being within the realm of the natural, whereas we think of humans with any significant culture as having already transcended the realm of the natural. Thus, some argue that nature is *not* enough, because we must have culture—and indeed, the conference attendees were agreed on that, with further discussion required about whether culture is itself part of nature or has some nonnatural source.

A fifth use of *nature* distinguishes between what is natural and what is not within human beings by describing certain human activities as unnatural or perverted. Heterosexual activity or orientation, for example, was once described as natural and was contrasted to “unnatural” homosexual activity or orientation. What we consider natural has changed over time, but there persists a tradition of describing some human activities as natural and some as unnatural.

Transcendence is likewise used in different ways, and they intertwine profoundly with these various uses of *nature* and *natural*.

First, the word is used to refer overtly to God’s activities. Human beings cannot transcend; we are embedded in nature. God, however, can go beyond anything nature can offer, and with God’s help perhaps humans can, too. This is probably the most common meaning of the concept of transcendence. The question is, do humans have resources or mechanisms, maybe even natural ones, for entering the realm of the transcendent? Or do agents outside of nature possess the only resources and mechanisms for

bringing us into the transcendent realm? Or do mechanisms and resources from the two realms somehow have to work together?

Second, the word is sometimes used simply to mean that we exceed our own expectations—*transcend* our usual understanding of ourselves or of nature—for example when we momentarily overcome our tendency to be petty, aggressive, or nationalistic. Especially when we consider what might be called the social component of transcendence, we start hoping for ways that we can together go beyond, or transcend, what we could do as individuals and get beyond our past limitations and failures. There are of course serious questions as to whether we are being unduly idealistic when we hope to transcend our expectations and our prior experience with human nature. But when we do sometimes accomplish this, even if we conclude that it is not supernatural, we might nonetheless be inclined to say that it at least “feels” miraculous.

Third is the idea of “horizontal transcendence” (as opposed to “vertical transcendence”), which claims that we can find wonder and even a religious sense of awe and zeal in that which is totally natural, both as individuals and in community. This idea has been previously developed in *Zygon*, for example in an article by Goodenough (2001).

A fourth, though rare, use of the word is to define the universe itself as transcendent because every whole in it is more than the sum of its parts. This argument is advanced by Clifford Matthews (2002).

Fifth, the idea of transcendence is obviously related to ultimacy. Does *ultimate* mean simply going as far back as we can go in our explanations? Must we go even further back than that to be truly transcendent? What does it mean to go further back than we can go? Can we go further back in other ways than with explanations—for example, with art (represented at the conference not only by splendid music and poetry workshops but by the M.I.T. landscape architect Anne Spirn)? Are there other ways to preserve a close relation between *ultimate* and *transcendent*?

There is another word in the conference theme that bears a comment, and that is *thirst*. It is there because social and psychological dynamics are crucial to a modern understanding of the topic. At the conference, German ethologist Volker Sommer went into some detail about the evolutionary heritage that produces our longing for transcendence or something like it, and the Goodenough-Deacon essay in this section (which is derived from the paper given at the conference by Deacon) develops that idea further.

I have referred to speakers whose papers are not published in this section; obviously the conference ranged more broadly than the essays included here.¹ Yet, I am quite certain that reading these essays and relating them to your own life and approach to the theme question will be a dynamic and exciting experience for you, giving you both a flavor of the conference and new insights into the issues explored there. I hope that

you find these essays both enjoyable and challenging and that they stimulate you to offer your own contributions to the dialogue between science and religion.

NOTE

1. Two of the plenary speakers do not have papers included here and are not mentioned above. They are Pranab Das, Chair of the Physics Department at Elon University in North Carolina and David Sloan Wilson, an evolutionary biologist and author of *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (2002).

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