

GOD EMBODIED IN, GOD BODYING FORTH THE WORLD: EMERGENCE AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

by *Steven D. Crain*

Abstract. I expand on Philip Clayton's application of emergence—in the context of a metaphysical position he calls *emergent monism*—to conceiving God's relationship to the world. Like Clayton, I adopt a panentheistic perspective, but in a way that I argue is consistent with classical philosophical theism and its grammatical analysis of Christian discourse about divine transcendence. In order to exploit further the analogical potential of an emergentist account of human mentality and agency, I argue that the standard panentheistic metaphor *The world is the body of God* should be complemented by the metaphor *God is the body of the world*.

Keywords: divine transcendence; emergence; emergent monism; panentheism.

In applying the concept of emergence to Christian theology, Philip Clayton continues to work out the details of an extraordinary research program in philosophical theology. Clearly, his work is not finished (whatever that would mean); hence venues such as this one to probe, explore, elaborate, and modify. Nevertheless, the program is impressive in its scope and depth. As a philosophical theologian I find it wonderfully thought-provoking, with implications that touch on the full range of theological disciplines.

Broadly speaking, there are two components to Clayton's program, one scientific and metaphysical, the other theological. The first constructs and defends a metaphysical position he calls *emergent monism*. The attractiveness of emergent monism derives especially from its fruitful lines of attack on the mind-body problem and on the nature of human agency, although the theory also aims to make sense of a broad range of results across the

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physical, biological, neurological, and human sciences (see Clayton 2004a). The second component of Clayton's program applies the conceptual apparatus of emergent monism to longstanding problems in philosophical theology concerning God's action in the world (see Clayton 2004b). *Emergent panentheism* looks to me one of the stronger candidates for reconceiving God's relationship to the world in a way that is consistent both with the Christian tradition and with the results of contemporary science. My goal in this essay is to build on Clayton's work in ways that may prove fruitful.

For the sake of this essay, I presuppose that emergent monism will remain a viable and productive alternative to reductive physicalism on the one hand and to various vitalist or dualistic nonreductionisms on the other. I therefore cast my vote with Clayton in wagering that emergent monism is on the right track in producing the most plausible analysis of what appears to be the causal and ontological "layering" of the natural world, especially at the interface between the mental and the physical where persons and personal agency emerge. Having simply asserted my scientific and metaphysical groundwork, my focus here is theological. In particular, I choose two areas for my probing: first, theological anthropology, and second, a cluster of issues concerning the relationship between God and the world and God's action in the world. I argue for a new analogical twist to the metaphor *The world is the body of God*. To this I would add the complementary assertion *God is the body of the world*.

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

It has become a commonplace of biblical interpretation that with few exceptions biblical authors conceive of the human person as a psychosomatic unity. Contemporary systematic theologians typically aver that by returning to these biblical roots they flesh out a view of the person more consistent than dualism with the goodness of creation and with the anthropological implications of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Emergent monism constitutes a sophisticated explication of this psychosomatic unity that addresses the philosophical conundrums confronting anyone who wishes to give the neurosciences all their due while at the same time doing justice to our subjective experience of perceiving, thinking, and especially acting. The linchpin of this analysis is the claim that mental properties are not epiphenomenal but have real causal efficacy that is downwardly active on the very physical constituents from which these properties themselves emerge. That is, as emergent, mental properties depend on their subvenient, neurophysiological bases for their very existence. However, as causally efficacious, these properties possess causal powers whose operations are (1) not determined by subvenient chains of cause and effect and (2) can reach "down" and modify those very chains, albeit in ways consistent with natural laws obtaining at the subvenient level.

Details of this metaphysical picture still need to be worked out, but, as a fundamental component of a nondualistic Christian anthropology, emergent monism pays considerable theological dividends. Gone are the deleterious effects of mind-body (soul-body) substance dualism. The person is rendered essentially embodied, such that if humanity be declared “good,” it is so precisely as embodied. The body, therefore, cannot be disparaged as a dispensable dimension of our existence. While a person is more than her body, she is no less. The ethical implications are immense. Actions that harm—much less kill—the body fundamentally aim at destroying the person. Moreover, because the image of God in us does not simply take a human face but *requires* that face, to threaten the body is simultaneously to threaten the integrity of that image. So, for example, the atrocities at Abu Ghraib constitute a mockery and denial of that image and as such are an affront to creation itself.

The anthropological implication that I find most important, though, is the notion that the body *empowers* the mind and thereby the human person *from within* in such a way that it does not determine the causal story of the human agent. This is to say that the body continuously confers upon the human person its capacity to be a free agent. Hence, on the one hand, a mind is irreducible to its body and as such can shape the causal history of that body in a way that can be captured only by a unique causal story that we call biography, a history of personal self-determination. On the other hand, the body possesses an ontological priority and dignity precisely because it provides the subvenient basis for that history. If I may strain the English language a bit, the physical “bodies forth” the mental and the personal, continuously sustaining and energizing the human story from within. As I will now explain, I find this way of conceiving the relationship between mind and body important not only for theological anthropology but also for evaluating Clayton’s pantheistic approach to God’s relationship to the world, the issue to which I now turn.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND THE WORLD

Pantheism offers an analogical picture for God’s relationship to the world that emphasizes God’s immanent presence within the world while at the same time asserting divine transcendence over the world. The root metaphor for the analogy is spatial: The world exists in God, while at the same time God’s being infinitely surpasses the world. The finite world is, as it were, embedded within the infinity of God’s being. As existing within God, the world enjoys the closest possible intimacy with God, who dwells within the world in a sense analogous to that in which the human mind dwells within the body. The world therefore is analogous to the body of God. The specific version of pantheism that Clayton elaborates, emergent pantheism, applies the conceptual apparatus of emergent monism to flesh out this pantheistic analogy, articulating in some detail the

manner in which mind can be understood to indwell the body and therefore, analogously, how God can be thought to indwell the world.

To understand the importance of panentheistic models to contemporary philosophical theology, Clayton (1998) urges us to see their development in historical perspective. The panentheistic analogy serves as an alternative to classical philosophical theism (CPT). According to Clayton, CPT conceives of God as wholly distinct and separate from the world and therefore omnipresent within the world only insofar as God somehow communicates that presence “from the outside.” Clayton argues that the panentheistic option was not available to theologians until substance ontology could be replaced by an ontology of persons or subjects. Prior to ontologies of persons or subjects, the only viable alternative to a substance-based CPT was *pan*theism, for two substances, God and world, cannot be conceived as occupying the same ontological space unless they are identical to each other. Emergent monism provides one example of an alternative ontology that opens up the *panen*theistic option. Like other panentheistic models, emergent panentheism asserts a personal divine indwelling that unites rather than separates God from the world. Moreover, it does so in a way that suggests an approach to yet another problematic aspect of CPT—the problem of rendering credible in an age of science the conviction that God acts in the world.

Clayton argues that from the perspective of classical philosophical theism divine action is both scientifically and theologically suspect insofar as it seemingly requires God to “intervene” within the workings of nature from a vantage point “outside” the created order. Hence, by placing the world within God, emergent panentheism provides a promising way of working out the sense in which God can act in God’s own creation without intruding into it by interrupting the very natural regularities for which God is responsible in the first place. Emergent monism’s analysis of human agency provides the key that dissolves the problem of intervention. For just as the emergent mind acts downwardly on its subvenient base without violating the laws obtaining at that level, so too can we conceive of God’s acting downwardly upon the world without disturbing natural regularities (Clayton 1997, 100–102; 2004a, 187–93). I too find this composite scheme of emergent panentheism highly suggestive of much theological fruit to come. But I want to draw out this theological potential in a way that deemphasizes its conceptual distance from classical philosophical theism and at the same time makes more thorough use of emergent monism’s analysis of human agency.

Let me explain. Clayton has argued that classical philosophical theism maintains the distinction between God and the world by positing that God creates the world “outside” God’s being, thereby separating God from the world. I argue that there is an alternative way of working out the classical theistic paradigm. I am aware of at least three classical theists—

Robert Sokolowski, Kathryn Tanner, and David Burrell—who in explicating what Sokolowski calls “the Christian distinction” are careful precisely not to posit this separation between God and the world (Sokolowski 1982; see also Tanner 1988; Burrell 1993).¹ Instead, they understand that “the distinction” between God and world demands that God be viewed neither as identical to nor as alongside and separate from the world. Rather, as Tanner puts it, the “grammar” of Christian talk about God and creation requires that we eschew both alternatives in favor of a third: a “non-contrastive characterization of divine transcendence” (Tanner 1988, chap. 2).

What does this mean? My approach here is inspired by Tanner without following her in every detail.² According to a “contrastive definition of transcendence,” we think of God’s otherness from the world in analogy to the way that we distinguish finite things from one another within the world. In such a contrastive approach, we say that God is distinguished from the world as, say, the chair in my living room is distinguished from the sofa. We can draw up a list of contrasting properties: The chair is blue, the sofa green. The chair occupies space on the left, the sofa on the right. Yet the chair and the sofa share some properties in common: they both are colored, for example. It is in virtue of this sharing that, as distinct objects, they are seen to exist parallel to each other within the same world.

If we are to assert God’s transcendence by way of contrast, we take every property of the world and deny it of God, so that, once the contrast is complete, God is seen to exist in no sense within the world. But in order thereby to assert God’s transcendence, we have first placed God within the horizon of the world—as a being alongside other beings—so that we can contrast them. Through the process of contrast we end up with a God who is not in the world by virtue of being parallel to the world. I agree with Tanner that this understanding of transcendence is not radical enough. A God who radically transcends the world must likewise transcend this mode of nonidentity through contrast. Therefore, God transcends the world not only by virtue of not being part of or identical to the world but also by virtue of not being alongside of and separate from the world. Neither identical to nor outside of and separate from the world—this is noncontrastive transcendence. I conclude therefore that classical philosophical theism, insofar as it adopts the notion of noncontrastive, radical divine transcendence, implies that God must not be conceived of as separate from and alongside the world. Whither, then, does CPT now take us?

Sokolowski’s name for divine noncontrastive transcendence is “the Christian distinction” between God and the world. Sokolowski shows where the concept of noncontrastive transcendence leads us: to a gracious, non-necessary act of creation. For if we must conceive God to be God without contrasting God to the world (“apart from any relation of otherness to the world or to the whole”), the world’s existence is contingent, meaning, God can be God without the world being at all (Sokolowski 1982, 32–33).

The world therefore exists because of the utterly gracious act of divine creation. Hence, the following statements mutually imply one another. Following Tanner, I call them grammatical rules—rules that govern our discourse about God and creation.

1. God radically transcends the world.
2. God's transcendence of the world is noncontrastive.
3. God is neither identical to nor alongside of and separate from the world.
4. God can be God without the world's having to exist at all.
5. God creates the world in an act of sheer grace.

In sum, were God not the creator of a world that did not have to be, God's transcendence of the world would not be "radical," and God could not therefore be the creator of a world in which God is thereby intimately present precisely as its creator. To put it the other way, were God not the creator of a world in which God is, as creator, thereby present at the world's very "roots," God could not be conceived as transcending that world in a way that eschews contrast as well as identity.

I agree with Tanner that an analysis of divine transcendence leads to our discerning what deserves to be called a grammar, a set of rules, for Christian talk about God and creation. I say *a* grammar, because I recognize that other rules are possible. For what it is worth, though, I believe that we have here a grammar that deserves to be called classical, and this grammar implies that if God radically transcends the world and therefore does not exist separately from or alongside the world, both the divine presence in the world and divine action in the world are nonintrusive, noninvasive, and noninterventive. They must somehow well up from within the world rather than invading the world, as it were, from without. Finally, and crucially for this essay, this grammar also implies that God is radically immanent within the world that God radically transcends in virtue of continuously giving it the gift that might not have been: the gift of being.

This surprising conclusion seems to imply that classical philosophical theism is ultimately nonclassical! Be that as it may, working within a classical framework, I agree with Clayton that rejecting the picture of God as alongside the world is necessary in order to conceive of a God who is radically immanent, "nearer to us than we are to ourselves" (Tanner 1988, 79).

GOD AS THE BODY OF THE WORLD

I now consider emergent panentheism from the perspective of this grammatical analysis. With one significant caveat, which I describe momentarily, I find Clayton's emergent panentheism consistent with the grammar of Christian talk about God and creation as I have laid it out here. More than that, emergent panentheism gives us some means to picture the sort

of relationship for which the grammar lays out the parameters. *How* can “radical transcendence” be modeled so as not to place God outside the world or the world outside God? *How* can radical transcendence and radical immanence be brought together so as to imply that divine action in the world is noninvasive? Emergent panentheism suggests how we, especially we classical theists, might picture what our grammatical rules constrain us to say about God and the world. Indeed, the model helps us to see that the grammatical rules we developed really do hold together in virtue of laying out syntactically, as it were, what the panentheistic analogy pictures—namely, that transcendence in immanence empowers agency, both human and divine. For just as the human mind, because it emerges from the body, can thereby act through the body, so God, *as if* emergent from what is analogous to God’s body—namely, the world—can act within that world.

Two considerations, however, suggest that the analogy represented by emergent panentheism is incomplete insofar as it asserts only that the world is the body of God. The first consideration: If God’s relationship to the world is analogous to the human mind’s relationship to the body, there is an important asymmetry between the two analogates left unaccounted for. Whereas the human mind depends ontologically on the body and as such is empowered and enabled by the body, the body that is the world depends ontologically on God, who empowers and enables it and especially empowers and enables *our* stories as free agents within it. So we see that the ontological arrow, the arrow of being and empowerment, runs in opposite directions between the two analogates.

The second consideration concerns the sense in which emergent panentheism mirrors the relationships specified by the grammatical rules outlined earlier. That mirroring fails in one important respect. The grammar for talk about God and creation specifies that neither God’s transcendence nor God’s immanence be conceived apart from the divine act of creation. But emergent panentheism and the metaphor *The world is the body of God* sever that connection, picturing divine transcendence and divine immanence without picturing how these two are necessarily woven together with the ontological dependence of the world on God.

These two considerations are interrelated. One cannot discern from emergent panentheism together with the metaphor *The world is the body of God* that the world ontologically depends on God, nor can one discern that God’s act of creation empowers, among other things, human free agency within that world. I therefore suggest that emergent panentheism, and the accompanying metaphor *The world is the body of God* be complemented by a metaphor that might strike us at first as incompatible with basic Christian doctrine: *God is the body of the world*.

What can I say on behalf of this new metaphor? Three things. First, in emergent monism, minds depend on bodies; bodies empower minds. The metaphor *God is the body of the world* therefore captures a key aspect of the

world's relationship to God that the metaphor *The world is the body of God* lets slip. Returning to my earlier analysis of theological anthropology in the framework of emergent monism, the metaphor *God is the body of the world* places God at the ontological roots of the world so that, just as the body empowers the mind and thereby the human person from within, so God empowers the world from within, especially in bringing forth human free agents among God's creations. God is seen here to possess that ontological priority and dignity that emergent monism confers upon the body in our theological anthropology. Thus, just as we can say that the physical "bodies forth" the mental and the personal, continuously sustaining and energizing the human story from within, so we can say that God bodies forth the world, continuously sustaining and energizing its story, especially its human stories, from within.

Second, *God is the body of the world* undercuts a dualism that the analogy *God is to the world as the mind is to the body* might suggest—namely, that God is in some important sense "above" body. To see God as the body of the world powerfully suggests God's humility and the act of creation as an act of humility wherein God does not consider sustaining and empowering a story other than God's own to be somehow "beneath" God. The dignity of creation is thus seen to be the dignity of empowerment, of service that lifts up the one served through bowing beneath her and bearing her. The metaphor suggests how the act of creation is of a piece, therefore, with the act of the incarnation: God who is the body of the world can humble Godself to be a body within that world. God who bodies forth the world at its ontological depths can fall, through death, like a seed into those depths in order to recreate the world.

Third, *God is the body of the world* is a metaphor that, like all metaphors, falls short—in this case, insofar as it suggests that the world is more than God rather than God is more than the world. But, when combined with the metaphor *The world is the body of God*, the two together fall short in complementary ways, or, rather, their strengths complement each other. One successfully suggests the transcendence in immanence of God; the other succeeds at communicating the world's ontological dependence on God. I argue that the grammar of Christian talk about God and creation demands that we press into service the two metaphors together as a complementary pair whose sense is given by emergent panentheism.

Like seeds, I cast all three—the grammar, the twin metaphors, and Clayton's emergent panentheism—into the ground before me to see what fruit they might bear.

NOTES

A version of this essay was presented at a religion-and-science session during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Philadelphia, 19 November 2005.

1. I am indebted to Burrell for drawing my attention to and for conversations about the connections between Sokolowski's and Tanner's work. See especially Burrell 1993, 102–3.

2. See Tanner 1988, 42–47. Specifically, I expand on her discussion of the grammar of Christian discourse about divine transcendence without proceeding to discuss the corresponding grammar for discourse about “God’s creative agency” and its relationship to finite, created agency. Clearly, the two subjects are related, but I am still sorting out the tangled web of longstanding philosophical and theological problems concerning the latter. I rest content here with the analogical assertion I make below, namely, that God empowers finite created agency as the human body empowers human mentality and agency. In future work I intend to explore further the analogical potential of emergent monism for shedding new light on the relationship between divine and human agency from a classical theistic perspective.

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