

SOME CORRELATIONS BETWEEN METHODS OF  
KNOWING AND THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS IN ARTHUR  
PEACOCKE'S PERSONALISTIC PANENTHEISM AND  
NONPERSONAL NATURALISTIC THEISM

by *Karl E. Peters*

*Abstract.* Differences in methods of knowing correlate with differences in concepts about what is known. This is an underlying issue in science and religion. It is seen, first, in Arthur Peacocke's reasoning about God as transcendent and personal, is based on an assumption of correlative thinking that like causes like. This contrasts with a notion of causation in empirical science, which explains the emergence of new phenomena as originating from temporally prior phenomena quite unlike that which emerges. The scientific understanding of causation is compatible with a naturalistic theism that holds a nonpersonal model of God as the creative process. However, focusing on the immanence of God, there is a second correlation between methods of knowing and concepts of God. Classical empiricism, used by science, correlates with God understood nonpersonally as the creative process. Radical empiricism, in which feelings and not only sense perceptions have cognitive import, opens up the possibility that one can experience Peacocke's personal, panentheistic God as pattern-forming influence. I illustrate this second method-concept correlation with a personal experience.

*Keywords:* *analogia entis*; causation; classical empiricism; empirical theism; empiricism; epistemology; God; immanence; naturalistic theism; panentheism; Arthur Peacocke; radical empiricism; religious naturalism; transcendence

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[*Zygon*, vol. 43, no. 1 (March 2008)]

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For many years I enjoyed conversing with Arthur Peacocke and his ideas—mostly in my own mind, and on a couple of occasions in person. For me the conversation continues. I appreciate Gloria Schaab's excellent overview and highlights of Peacocke's thought (Schaab 2008). She brings into my conversation with Peacocke a number of issues I'd like to explore further. These include the wastefulness of evolution and the problem of suffering, her own "female procreative model of divine creativity," and how we might understand God as incarnate in Jesus. In this essay, however, I focus on a perennial underlying issue in science and religion, namely, the correlation between our methods of knowing and the theological ideas we develop. How do we know what we know about the transcendence and immanence of God?

My thesis is that differences in our theological ideas about God are correlated with different methods of knowing. In developing this thesis I make some comparisons between my own empirical theism, which is a form of religious naturalism that develops a nonpersonal model of God as the creative process, and Peacocke's empirical-rational Christian panentheism with its personal model of God. Consistent with what Schaab has said, I would, first, characterize Peacocke's theological method as empirical—drawing on the experience and thinking of science. It also is rational in the philosophical sense, especially in his reasoning about the nature of God as transcendent. Further, as an Anglican priest and theologian, the central ideas of the Christian tradition constitute an equally important methodological criterion for his doing theology in relation to the sciences. My theological method is that of an empirical theologian. Following Charles Sanders Peirce (1965) and Henry Nelson Wieman (1968), everyday experience, refined by the experience of the sciences, is the methodological touchstone against which I measure my theological ideas.

The difference in our methods correlates with a difference in our overall theological outlooks. Peacocke's empirical, rational method as a Christian theologian correlates well with his personalistic panentheism. God is modeled as personal or suprapersonal and as more than the world but in-and-through the world. My empirical method correlates with a theistic naturalism in which God is modeled in a nonpersonal manner as the creativity that gives rise to the world in its cosmic, biological, and human phases. As an empiricist I cannot rule out the idea that God transcends the world, but I cannot rule it in, either.

Taking up the idea of transcendence, let's consider the methods that Peacocke uses to support the idea of the transcendence of God. In relation to the universe as "cosmic being," Schaab sketches Peacocke's rational argument for divine transcendence: "Because the cosmos is contingent and so depends on a source of Being beyond itself, Peacocke inferred that God is the transcendent Ground of the entities and processes of the finite universe" (Schaab 2008, 14). This reminds me of Thomas Aquinas's third

cosmological argument, that a contingent universe depends on a reality the existence of which is not contingent but necessary—a source that is God (Aquinas 1981, Ia.ii.3).

Another line of reasoning summarized by Schaab draws on our experience of ourselves as persons and infers that the emergence of human persons in evolutionary history leads to the idea that the “Being of God must be at least personal or suprapersonal in nature” (Schaab 2008, 14). As a critical realist, Peacocke is careful to recognize that there is more to God than our concepts can grasp. Still, he affirms that a personal understanding of God allows us to believe in a creative intelligence, who, metaphorically, is like a cosmic symphony composer and conductor who delights in the playful improvisation of chance and law in the evolution of the universe, life, and humanity.

I wonder: On what basis might we infer that the ultimate cause of human persons is personal or suprapersonal? What is the assumption that allows a rational move from human persons to divine person—even to a transcendent divine person? I wonder if it is a very old assumption in much of human thought, namely, that like causes like. The cause must be equal to or greater than its effect and must be of the same kind of reality as the effect. Such thinking is found in Plato’s ideas of eternal forms and in Aquinas’s fourth cosmological argument: “the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus” (Aquinas 1981, Ia.ii.3). I think that such reasoning is an example of what some call correlative, correspondence, or typological thinking—a kind of microcosm-macrocosm connection—in which the small world we inhabit corresponds to the larger world. This type of thinking assumes philosophically an analogy of being, *analogia entis*, between different levels of reality, including a level that transcends our experienced space-time world.

Now, I am not sure whether I’m reading Peacocke correctly at this point. His inference from human persons to a divine person as ultimate cause could perhaps have another basis. If so, it would be helpful to discuss this. However, if I am accurate in my reading, we may be facing a fundamental methodological issue that underlies some of the disagreement between scientists and theologians. Scientists as scientists, it seems to me, have consistently held that the cause of something does not need to be like its effect. The conditions that bring something into being must be prior in time to what is created, but they can be quite unlike that which is created. This, in a sense, is the whole idea of emergence. More complex phenomena emerge out of the interactions of simpler phenomena in the evolution of the cosmos and of life on Earth. According to most scientists, the same applies to the creation of human beings. Humans are remarkably complex, and, as a result of our complexity, we can create ideas about how creation occurs. Nonetheless, like everything else, we have emerged out of a long evolutionary history through a multiplicity of prior events that constitute a complex network of natural causes.

Peacocke accepts this evolutionary, emergentist view. However, he suggests that God guides this process through a series of pattern-forming influences at all levels. When I discuss God as immanent below, I suggest a method of knowing by which I may be able to agree with Peacocke's idea of a personal God guiding creation. The issue I am raising now, however, is the assumption that like causes like. I see this assumption operating when Schaab says of Peacocke: "In view of the emergence of human beings, Peacocke infers that the Being of God must be at least personal or suprapersonal in nature" (Schaab 2008, 14). This to me sounds like correlative thinking, which is quite different from the temporalistic causal thinking of modern science.

Let me make this more concrete with an image. In presenting his pantheism, Peacocke uses an interesting metaphor when speaking of God as transcendent—Augustine's metaphor that the world is like a "sponge floating in the infinite sea of God" (Peacocke 2007, 22). What strikes me about this is its positive nature. Even though God transcends the world, the metaphor suggests something consistent with the "like causes like" way of thinking, namely, that the same sea that penetrates, that is in-and-through, the sponge also transcends the sponge.

This can be compared with another metaphor that is compatible with my own empirical methodology, which holds that one can neither affirm nor deny that God is transcendent. If one wishes to suggest that there is a transcendent ground of the world, as an empiricist I cannot say anything about the transcendent God other than it is mystery. In the video *Spirit and Nature* (1997) Seyyed Nasr speaks of Bedouin Arabs sitting around a campfire on a starless night. The campfire illuminates their immediate surroundings, but beyond the light is impenetrable darkness. Nasr explains that this darkness is not a negative image. While the flickering light of the campfire represents visible reality, the darkness suggests unmanifested reality—God's reality—out of which the world that we can see and know emerges. To me this metaphor indicates that all we can know is the manifest world. The campfire in the darkness suggests that there are limits of our knowing capabilities. We may believe that there is something more, and perhaps we can to a limited extent expand our light to see more of the darkness. But what the darkness, the more than the universe, is like remains largely unknown.<sup>1</sup>

The issue I wish to raise is this: What methods of inquiry can we theologians use to support ideas about the nature of God as transcendent, beyond the idea that the ground of being is mystery? How can we justify our methodologies in relation to those of contemporary science? If we wish to follow Peacocke, it seems we have to establish that there are different ways of knowing, other than ways of scientific empiricism. Differences in methodology, which correlate with different kinds of concepts—such as personal transcendent God or nonpersonal evolving nature—may be an underlying

problem that makes “mutually illuminative interaction” (Schaab 2008, 10; Peacocke 1987, 11–12) between theology and science more difficult.

There may be another way of affirming a personal understanding of God as transcendent. It is a way that I think is not open to classical theism, which holds that God is independent of the world. But it may be a way for panentheism, which holds that God is in-and-through the world although more than the world. If the idea of panentheism itself is accepted, it seems to me that it would be consistent to claim that God as “more-than,” God as transcendent, is the same as God “in-and-through,” God as immanent. If this is the case, we may ask whether we can experience God as personal in our own lives, thus using an empirical method. If we can, we can follow the ocean-sponge metaphor and reasonably hold that God as the transcendent ground of the world is also personal. So let us turn now to God as immanent and ask: What do we experience when we experience God?

In my own thinking I have been developing a theistic naturalism that focuses on the question of how God is present or immanent in the world. I have suggested, as one theological option, that the word *God* can refer to a pattern of interactions within the world that gives rise to new possibilities of existence and then selects some of these to continue. This understanding is very close to the thinking of Gordon Kaufman, who characterizes God in the world as serendipitous creativity (Kaufman 2004, 53–70). The experience that grounds this thinking in my empirical, naturalistic theology is what I sometimes call the experience of grace—of things coming together in a way that produces some new good in my life.

In reading Peacocke’s “A Naturalistic Christian Faith for the Twenty-first Century” I am intrigued with his suggestion that God, more than the world but in-and-through the world, “may perhaps best be construed as a pattern-forming influence—like a flow of what has come to be known technically as ‘information’” (Peacocke 2007, 46). What intrigues me is that I think I have experienced such influence. It is not uncommon in my everyday life for things to come together in unexpected yet helpful ways that are beyond my control. Some may say that such events are simply the result of “chance and law.” I have called them occasions of serendipity—serendipitous creativity. Yet, I wonder if something more is involved, some kind of guiding presence.

I can understand such experiences when I open up my own empiricism in the direction of William James’s radical empiricism (James 1938). Radical empiricism may be compared with what some thinkers call classical empiricism. Classical empiricism focuses on discrete sense perceptions as a way to experience the world and to test ideas about what is experienced. An important part of the scientific method is the appeal to this kind of experience. Radical empiricism holds that experience includes not only sense perceptions but also feelings in relation to what is experienced. Following James, it also holds that our initial experience of something is an

experience of a whole, and this includes the experience of ourselves as persons in relation to that whole. It is our thinking that analyzes the whole experience into discrete sense impressions, particular feelings, and their relationships.

The distinction between classical and radical empiricism results in two types of empirical theology, represented respectively by Wieman and Bernard Meland. Philosopher of religion Nancy Frankenberry sums up the difference as follows:

Following Henry Nelson Wieman, some empirical theologians restrict the term “knowledge” to that which involves interpretation, reflection, and prediction. Others, after the fashion of Bernard Meland, prefer to widen the term “knowledge” so as to include the mode of acquaintance by which what is directly given is grasped feelingly, and feeling is taken to have cognitive import. The issue between these two approaches turns on the type of data to which one chooses to attend. (Frankenberry 1992, 45)

The distinction between these two kinds of empiricism may underlie two ways of looking at some of the experiences Peacocke describes in the latter part of “A Naturalistic Christian Faith for the Twenty-First Century” (2007), experiences that I call events of grace. One may view events of grace as the workings of a nonpersonal creative process—serendipitous creativity, if you will. Or, following radical empiricism, one may experience in events of grace the pattern-forming influence of a personal divine intelligence. When I recognize these two ways of experiencing events of grace, I can bring to the fore something that often occurs in my own spiritual experiences—the feeling of a guiding presence that is part of my experience. Peacocke conceptualizes this aspect of my experience very well when he writes that the activity of God is one of shaping events with pattern-forming influence.

To illustrate these two ways of experiencing the same event I give the following personal example. I offer it as a way of paying tribute to Peacocke and expressing my thanks for his thought.

In early April 2006 my wife, Marj Davis, and I visited our granddaughter Jana, who was in her first year at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The university campus was lovely. It was a beautiful spring weekend with cherry trees and other flowers blooming. We enjoyed two of Jana’s classes and had meals and meaningful conversations with her and four of her friends—the kinds of conversations that make an older generation hopeful about the future. On Saturday evening we attended a beautiful concert performed by high school and university choirs. On Sunday morning we drove to Arlington, Virginia, to attend worship at an Episcopal church. We went because Jana’s college women’s choir was providing some of the music for worship.

The church was an “English style” building—a comfortable house of worship. We sat in the third pew, right behind our granddaughter and her choir-mates in a sanctuary that was almost full. The service was conducted

by three priests, two of them women. Some of the liturgy was beautifully sung. But, as a naturalistic theist, I was turned off by the theology of the hymns and the ideas in much of the liturgy. However, the sermon by one of the woman priests, emphasizing love and service, was quite moving. And when our granddaughter and her choir-mates sang their first anthem, the crisp pure sound of their harmonious voices was “heavenly.” From that point on I experienced a change, a feeling of warmth and love, permeating the atmosphere of the sanctuary.

The feeling reminded me of one that I had had years earlier at an ecumenical science-and-religion conference, where I was the sole Unitarian Universalist. As the outsider I was warmly welcomed by openhearted Christians. At the end of two days of congenial, fruitful discussions, I attended the closing worship service, the Eucharist conducted by the Episcopal clergy. Because I felt that I was in a community of love, I joined my companions in taking communion with them in the presence of love—the presence of Christ.

In Arlington that same feeling of love was present as the priests and congregation began the celebration of the Eucharist. One of the priests gave a heartfelt invitation to all present to celebrate. Sitting next to my wife, with whom I do not usually attend church because she is a minister of the United Church of Christ and I am a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I realized that this was a rare opportunity to share in significant religious ritual. I whispered to her, “Let’s go up.” And we did—to kneel at the communion rail to receive the “body and blood of Christ.” Jana and a friend from the choir also came to the rail. And so the three of us from our family, none of whom is Episcopalian, celebrated communion together. In that celebration we grew closer together in love.

Reflecting on this event as a scientifically minded classical empiricist with a nonpersonal model of God as the creative process, I can see how the various elements that I have described—the family relationships, the beautiful weekend, the choir music, the setting of the service, the way it was conducted, my past experiences, my understanding of God as present when love is present—all came together serendipitously as an event of grace. I can think of the event as an example of serendipitous creativity—of God as the creative process—at work in my life.

Reflecting on this same event as a radical empiricist who attends to feelings as well as perceptions, I also have as part of the experience a “feeling of being led.” As the parts of the experience came together, interacting with each other in my mind, I can say that a new event emerged, and a part of the experience of that new event was a feeling of a pattern-forming influence. So, I can understand this event as an example from my own life of that which Peacocke suggests, namely, that a personal, loving intelligence is causally present in the world as pattern-forming influence.

To conclude, I suggest that in our religion-science discussions we always keep in mind that the methods we use are correlated with the theological concepts we develop. Differences in method probably underlie some of the most intractable differences between scientific and religious ideas. This also holds for the difference between James's radical empiricism and the classical empiricism of modern science. Nevertheless, I recommend that we explore in relation to scientific thinking the tradition of radical empiricism in American theology as an empirical method that may be helpful in supporting the idea that God is a personal presence in our lives.

## NOTES

A version of this essay was presented at the Arthur Peacocke Symposium, 9–10 February 2007, organized by *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* and the Zygon Center for Religion and Science with support from the John Templeton Foundation. Portions are reprinted from "Empirical Theology and a 'Naturalistic Christian Faith,'" in *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*, copyright © 2007 Augsburg Fortress. Used by permission.

1. Of course, Muslim thinkers, like Peacocke, also speak of the transcendent God positively. In a lecture, Nasr combines the campfire-darkness metaphor with the infinite ocean metaphor used by Augustine and Peacocke (Nasr 1992, 89–90). Still, the two images nicely illustrate the method-concept correlation I am making.

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