

THEOLOGY AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

Topic: Resurrection and the Dialectic Between Matter and Spirit
 Convener: William Stoeger, Vatican Observatory Group, University of Arizona
 Presenter: Joseph Bracken, Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio
 Respondents: William Stoeger, Vatican Observatory Group, University of Arizona
 Michael Barnes, University of Dayton

Relying on the insights and metaphysics of both A. N. Whitehead and C. S. Peirce, Bracken presented an account of matter and spirit as “dialectically related dimensions of one and the same physically reality.” Here “matter” is conceived as the objectively accessible form or pattern which persists and is communicated to successive “actual occasions” as evolution proceeds, instead of as something purely inert and passive. “Spirit” is the complementary self-constituting subjective aspect of an entity. Although “spirit” at the most fundamental level, is, according to Whitehead, continually perishing and arising—thus failing to provide subjective continuity for the objectively persistent forms which characterize matter—Bracken expands and develops another Whiteheadian notion, that of “society,” to provide a complex subjective continuity at higher levels of organization.

In virtue of the Creativity which provides the ground of being and action, constituent fundamental actual occasions, through their emerging interrelationships, dynamically co-create the objective unity proper to the given society as a whole, thus constituting “a structured field of activity” which at the same time enjoys a high degree of subjective continuity. This is taken up and incorporated into larger and larger contexts—ultimately into God’s own Trinitarian life.

The final actual occasion of such a society—at its death, the death of a human being, for instance—thus enjoys both objective and subjective completion within God. This realizes resurrection. In this way, according to Bracken, we avoid matter-spirit dualism, and account for the resurrection of the body in a “natural” way—one that flows from the unity of matter and spirit without divine “supernatural” intervention, or “re-creation.”

In his response Stoeger strongly supported Bracken in his program to avoid dualism and to provide a “natural” pantheistic path to bodily resurrection. He stressed, however, the importance of providing scientifically, as well as more broadly experientially, accessible correlates to the categories and relationships that function in the ontology Bracken, following Whitehead and Peirce, has constructed. Without such correlates there is no warrant for his account. Stoeger gave examples of how such correspondences could be established. What is essential here is careful scientifically and experientially supported descriptions of the constitutive relationships within nature at every level. Stoeger also stressed the need to clarify the coherence of the process of “entitization” or individuation, that is inherent in Bracken’s account, as well as how dualism of matter and spirit is really avoided in transition to resurrection through the process of death. In order to accomplish this

death must be in some way a fuller realization of a given society, and not simply a transition to a new way of being.

Michael Barnes also complimented Bracken on the direction of his program, but attempted to push his proposal farther from dualism. He asked for further clarification of the metaphysical language in Bracken's description of the dialectical relationship between matter and spirit. Somehow mind must be at work at every stage of the cosmic process, from the Big Bang onwards. There is a definite responsiveness of reality at each level. But then, too, there are "the special individual souls" which emerge from the "ensouled" cosmos. How are such "structured fields of activity" grounded in the panpsychic cosmos? What is "a soul"?

Bracken agreed with much of what Stoeger and Bracken pointed out. Matter and spirit are never separate from one another—and at all levels relationality is central. He went on to reemphasize the limitations of a purely scientific approach. The key context is divine Creativity, in which all other activity participates, enabling the activity shaped by spirit into the forms and patterns of matter. At every level there is self-constituting responsiveness—of actual occasions and of actual occasions marshalled into societies. Lively discussion of these issues followed, exploring the consequences and applications of Bracken's vision and approach, and clarifying its meaning.

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