

The Emergence of Spirit

Written by Philip Clayton

Sunday, 14 June 2009 21:07 - Last Updated Thursday, 20 August 2009 17:01

"The Emergence of Spirit", by Philip Clayton

How exactly should we conceive divine action within the Cosmos given the law-likeness of the physical world, the increasing complexity of the biological world, and the conscious agency that we have found to be indispensable in the world of human actors? Just as importantly, if the history of the Cosmos does reveal a gradual "becoming conscious" of the spiritual nature of the universe and its creator, in what sense was that spiritual dimension present and efficacious from the start? Does God only emerge gradually along with the creation (but then the creation can't be attributed to God!); or is there some sense in which the same God is present and active in the world in different ways during the different periods and at the different levels of cosmic evolution?

It is easy to formulate several unsatisfactory ways of interpreting the suggestion that God affects the physical world. On one side, there are problems with supposing that God is constantly performing physical miracles by communicating divine purpose to rocks and plants and animals, thereby directly causing them to behave in ways that they otherwise wouldn't. On the other, if theism is viable, then talk of divine action can not be purely otiose, merely adding a religious rhetoric to what is better explained in natural terms...

[...] Fundamental physics does not offer any openings for divine influence (with the possible exception of quantum indeterminacy---a debate that I will not reopen today). If one asks about the matter, i.e. about causation prior to the emergence of life, the answer must be that whatever divine input or organization or there might have been must have been built in from the beginning. Nothing in our understanding of physics suggest the possibility of subsequent direct divine influence over rocks.

The Emergence of Spirit

Written by Philip Clayton

Sunday, 14 June 2009 21:07 - Last Updated Thursday, 20 August 2009 17:01

Yet in biology we found reason to break with a purely materialist view: there is an informational element in biology, involving the role played by form, structure and function, that is crucially different from physics. Moreover there is some anticipation within the biological order of the kinds of purposes we see fully expressed in mental phenomena. To avoid anthropomorphism I used the Kantian phrase purposiveness without purpose. If one grants my position on God's causal position in influencing thought, and grants proto-mentality in the biological sphere, then one would expect to see divine causal agency, appropriately limited, at levels in the natural history of life prior to the emergence of conscious being. But how is such causal agency to be conceived---especially if, like most theologians in this field, one is committed to avoiding an account that is either interventionist or occasionalist. Theologians today are correct, I believe, in eschewing answers that imagine God introducing a new form of energy into the physical universe or directly causing deviations in the motion of created entities. But if one accepts this limitation, in what sense can God be set to exert a causal influence on or within creation?

[...] Panentheism changes the framework: if the world remains within and is permeated by the divine: then it is possible to speak of divine purposes and goals being expressed even at the stage at which there are no other actual conscious agents. Even the lawful behavior of the natural world can now be an expression or manifestation of the divine character or intentionality.

Because physical phenomena do not function with anything we can identify as "focal" or direct purpose, we may speak of them as manifesting only God's "autonomic agency," just as the actions of our own bodies are divided between autonomic processes and focal intentions. For the pantheists, the regularities of natural law represents the autonomic or, as it were, habitual operations of divine action apart from God's specific or focal intentions. By contrast, should God sometimes consciously influence conscious thought processes in humans or other animals, we would speak of these as focal divine actions.

As organisms evolve and begin to undo the in more complex ways, pantheism allows one to speak of the category of divine action that is not merely autonomic---that is, not completely explicable as a mathematical result of God's autonomic agency---but that nevertheless stop short of focal purpose. We can speak of the central features of the biological realm as reflecting the divine character and influence without claiming that kidneys or amoebas themselves possess the goals of functioning as they do...

[...] Like physical regularities, biological regularities reflect the divine character; yet here, because organisms also behave in a purposive manner, there is a place in principle for speaking of divine influence. The influence in question must be intermediate between the conscious influence that is possible in relation to conscious beings and the apparent

The Emergence of Spirit

Written by Philip Clayton

Sunday, 14 June 2009 21:07 - Last Updated Thursday, 20 August 2009 17:01

impossibility of influence (outside of natural law) in physics. If biological organisms are indeed more than machines, and if it is correct to ascribe drives, strivings in nonconscious goals to them, then there is room for influence on these goals.

[...] When the pantheistic account is developed in a manner consistent with the logic of emergence, human thought and intent appears as (at least) a three-level phenomena, with a distinct type of divine influence corresponding to each level. (1) Since thought is built upon the enduring regularities within the one physical cosmos, it (like everything else) reflects the constant character of the all-pervading God. Given the framework of panentheism, we may view these regularities as an expression of autonomic divine agency. (2) Like other forms of activity in the biosphere, the human neurological system is not only conditioned by the autonomic or natural-law level, but also by the level of biological drives and goals. It is thus open to the sort of biological influence or constraint described above. (3) Finally, if human consciousness is indeed an emergent property of our complex neurophysiological structure, then humans (and perhaps some other animals) also exercise a distinctive form of causation: conscious agency. This would in principle allow God to influence our thoughts and motives at the same mental level that other persons influenced them, even though the means may be rather different.

Human thought in this threefold sense is thus not simply a direct, unmediated expression of God's own focal thoughts and purposes. We might say that human thoughts are divine thoughts that are removed from any simple identity with the divine will by their location in a context determined by the various "lower" expressions of divine agency, i.e. by the whole course of natural history.

Sources

"The Emergence of Spirit", by Philip Clayton

The article appeared in the fall 2000 issue of the bulletin of CTNS, the Center for Theology & the Natural Sciences.

The Emergence of Spirit

Written by Philip Clayton

Sunday, 14 June 2009 21:07 - Last Updated Thursday, 20 August 2009 17:01
