

## Metaphor, Mystery and Paradox at the Confluence of Science and Faith

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### Objective and Subjective Truth

In the many ongoing discussions about the relationship between science and faith, often the central issue for believers is how accepting what scientific investigation has discovered and proposed about the physical world (including the age of the earth, common descent of living creatures, etc.) affects our understanding of the trustworthiness of Scripture. More specifically, though, the debate touches on our understanding of humanity's identity as God's image-bearers in the world; at issue is the question "What does it mean to be human?" and the way science and faith seem to give two very different explanations for how we came to have the physical forms in which we live our lives. On one side we find atheistic materialists who see no value in revealed truth or non-empirical evidence, and on the other we have Christians who find any naturalistic account of origins to be logically inconsistent with a direct reading of Scripture.

For many combatants on both sides of the field, then, the assertion that science and faith provide two *different* ways of approaching the world—each with its own body of beliefs and distinctive set of practices for framing the evidence—is fundamental to the way these arguments play out. This way of looking at the argument was famously stated by Stephen Jay Gould when he described faith and science as "non-overlapping magisteria,"<sup>1</sup> but the popular conception has been that science concerns material "facts," while faith and religion provide a softer kind of subjective knowledge, more along the line of "opinions" that are important both personally and culturally, but that are nevertheless neither as "real" nor as reliable as the concrete, testable sort of knowledge that scientists are credited with producing.

There are surely some Christians who are happy enough to accept this parsing of the situation, but most recognize that in our technology-dominated society, a statement about the world that claims "objectivity" (especially supported by scientific methodology) begins with a significant rhetorical advantage over a claim about the world that begins by citing subjective experience, whether of the individual or a group. By contrast, admitting that a perspective is "subjective" prejudices many hearers against it before any attempt can be made to explain or explore how it might also be true. While this surely has negative ramifications for encouraging others towards a personal faith relationship with Christ, it often seems that even the antagonists agree that the more critical issue here concerns public discourse, rather than individual experience; in other words, it often seems that the main problem for Christians committed to engagement in the public square is that the rhetorical disadvantage of the "subjective" badge translates into less influence in political and cultural debates over how the world *ought to be*—debates about how we should organize our lives together.

In response, then, those Christians who are not ready to accept that religious beliefs and experiences constitute a second, lesser class of resources for interpreting the world have been inclined to provide two counter-arguments. The first response is to say that pronouncements from scientists are just as subjective and dependent on the scientists' own philosophical commitments (usually, it is claimed, to atheistic materialism) as Christian claims about the reliability of Scripture are based on prior commitments to the concept of divine revelation. The second counterargument is to say that Christian beliefs are not, in fact, superstition or wishful thinking or opinion, but are and have always been firmly rooted in logic and reason, such that, historically, it was the church's ideas about the natural world's regularity and openness to investigation that *enabled* the development of science in the West as a way of approaching what we see around us.

While the historicity of both of these claims can be demonstrated fairly easily, the point I will make is that *as deployed by many Christian culture-warriors*, these arguments may actually do more to bolster the Enlightenment rationalist worldview that many believers find so objectionable than to counter it with a distinctively faithful phenomenology of knowledge—in other words, a particularly Christ-centered way of going about our interacting with and understanding the world.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is rather more a mark of the church’s subtle accommodation and conformation to the world that so many of its presumed champions have—practically if not theoretically—accepted that a pure objectivity is not only the hallmark of science and reasonable (that is to say, narrowly “logical”) thought, but is the very measure of truth.

This twofold response begs the question of whether science as practice and worldview really is all about “objective facts” in the first place, notwithstanding those scientists who make subjective claims under the guise of science. Even putting aside the assumed necessity of seeking only naturalistic processes as explanations for observed phenomena, does the cultural power of science really flow from mere description of material properties, or even the predictive powers of biological and cosmological theories? And beneath that question lies this: Does the process of discovery in science really proceed by disinterested observation and simple deduction, apart from any subjective forms of thought?

## The Art in Science

On the contrary, British Philosopher Mary Midgley has argued that science has the cultural power it does precisely because it operates as a worldview with its own mythologies and imaginative structures over and above the objective practices of field research, and that such organizing image/concepts as the *atom*, the *machine*, and (of course) *evolution* have been instrumental in both understanding and communicating about complex systems and relationships in the natural world, each becoming pervasive in the general—not just scientific—language of the West. Though they have also been used to support dangerously over-reaching claims for science’s usefulness as *the* organizing system for human society, it is important to note that Midgley does not suggest that such “myths” or image systems are bad in themselves, but rather that it is the very power of symbolic representations (both visual and verbal) to help us make sense of the world that also makes them prime candidates for abuse, either by being extended into areas in which they are really not all that appropriate, or by being so “naturalized” that even scientists forget they are abstractions. Indeed, Midgley suggests that “machine imagery [describing living things] has been so useful in so many scientific contexts that many people no longer think of it as a metaphor but as a scientific fact.”<sup>3</sup>

In effect, such science-based images achieve a life of their own, and Midgley notes that though a succession of new models comes to dominate scientific discourse as new fieldwork and theories refine or displace the old, the older images remain and exert cultural and imaginative influence long after they have been supplanted by new “objective” descriptions of the material realities they were first coined to describe, in direct contradiction to seeing the self-purifying quality of science as absolute. Somewhat conversely, it is more the rule than the exception that imaginative structures actually *pre-exist* the collection of material data that support them, though the imagery comes to be understood differently once concrete details from observation and experimentation are added to the initial theoretical form. The atom is the perfect example of both of these features of scientific symbolism: Greek philosopher Democritus first posited the term (and image) for a basic structure of the material world in roughly 400 BC, and though it was argued and speculated about for centuries, it was only experimentally “discovered” in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with each new revelation about atomic behavior requiring a reassessment of the model used to describe it.

Though we still speak casually of the atom as the Greeks did—as the singular, fundamental object or building block of the material world—technically we have come to understand it as a cluster of related, even-smaller (*more* fundamental) particles, held together and organized by forces and relationships that continue to be the object of study and speculation: first protons, electrons and neutrons, then all the varieties of quarks and exotic particles proposed as carriers of electromagnetic and even gravitational force (in the case of the hypothetical *graviton*). Yet while the atom itself, as a unit of the material world, no longer holds its place as the ultimate, most basic feature of matter, what has persisted and continues to organize both research and dispositions towards reality is the more far-reaching idea that there must be *something* that is “most basic,” and that by disassembling matter into its tiniest component parts we will somehow reach a better understanding of the whole—the truth about the universe, or how it “really” is. The atom as originally conceived of has been dethroned, but philosophical belief in a “new atom” continues to drive many in physics forward.

Similarly, the idea that living organisms and systems can be described in terms of machinery came into vogue when technological progress made clockwork devices familiar (though still remarkable and almost “miraculous”) to a wide segment of the population, rather than only the elite few. The image is still with us, of course: not only do we still debate the validity of Paley’s “watchmaker” analogy and regularly use mechanistic descriptions of how parts of cells behave and interact, we have updated the “clockwork” trope to reflect more contemporary technological marvels, even describing the human brain as a “computer.” Midgley’s caveat is particularly important to remember in conversations about the “design inference” and related ideas, when we perhaps uncritically refer to such structures as the bacterial flagellum as “machines” that must have been designed. And while referring of DNA as “information” or a kind of “code” similarly affirms an agency by whom it was written, those images also carry with them the subtle implications that—on the one hand—it is *hidden* information to be revealed to only the few, or—on the other hand, when considering that such things as transcription errors are a key element of genomes as we find them—that the code-writer was sloppy and technically inefficient. It is not that the use of such metaphors is not in some ways appropriate, but we need to use them with extreme caution.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the danger of misapplying or applying these central images too broadly —forgetting that they are still only approximations and analogies for what we observe—such pictures of reality are vital, and we must not leap to any sort of general condemnation of such “creative license” on account of its quality of subjectivity, assuming it to be antithetical to “true science.” For if Midgley makes the case that scientific discourse is pervaded by symbolic language, chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi argued that such imaginative structures are not just imported from outside science (a bastardization of some pure mathematical rationality necessary to simplify complex theory for public consumption), but that personal engagement and creative subjectivity is actually integral and indispensable to scientific inquiry at the most basic level, and even more so in those instances where great leaps of understanding are achieved.

Indeed, though he set out to better understand how scientific progress and discovery happens, he eventually broadened his investigation to include the highly subjective, even non- or pre-rational qualities that underpin *all* sorts of complex forms of human understanding, faith not least among them. Polanyi’s insight was to give full weight to the importance of insight, itself—literally, what we perceive from within—even (perhaps especially) when such flashes are not readily available to our rational, verbal minds. His catch-phrase “we know more than we can say,” points not only to the idea of interpretive resources that lie outside our formulating selves, but also to the idea that many of the most significant discoveries and

perceptions *remain beyond our ability to describe in simple, straightforward ways*, and are unachievable by a “strictly formulized procedure.” In this sense, surety and clarity are not the only hallmarks of the most profound science, but are often accompanied by beauty and surprise.<sup>5</sup>

My point here is that the common idea that science is defined *above all else* by its commitment to a detached rational analysis of the material “evidence” is not actually true. Nor is such a commitment to strict objective analysis beneficial. To recognize that science is an art, so to speak, is not a critique of the field, but a praise—despite arguments to the contrary from some within the scientific community itself. And to push the point just a bit further, drawing on Polanyi’s investigation of the inescapably (gloriously) subjective nature of scientific inquiry we may go with him so far as to say that the hierarchy of knowledge we so often accept as given can not and should not be sustained:

“We see now that not only do the scientific and the humanistic both involve personal participation; we see that both also involve an active use of the imagination. . . . [And if] personal participation and imagination are *essentially* involved in science as well as in the humanities, meanings created in the sciences stand in no more favored relation to reality than do meanings created in the arts, in moral judgments, and in religion. At least they stand in no more favored relation to reality on a basis of the supposed presence or absence of personal participation and imagination on the one rather than the other. To have, or to refer to, reality—in some sense—may then be a possibility for both sorts of meanings . . .”<sup>6</sup>

So to be clear: I am not arguing that what we usually think of when we say “scientific methods” are untrustworthy, but that their trustworthiness depends on their integration with all other truly human modes of understanding, modes which must also be integrated with scientific research on the basis of their shared subjectivity and openness to moments of insight and revelation. Happily, there are subtle signs of such a synthesis of approaches happening within the scientific world, as many parts of the research community (the environmental and evolutionary sciences, especially) have come to appreciate the explanatory benefits of looking at the “big picture” of relationships between “parts” in a more fluid and complicated way than by looking for (or insisting on) unidirectional causalities on the small scale. Indeed, the recent resurgence of interest in ecological thinking among younger Evangelicals who see the material and spiritual worlds to be in intimate connection represents a very promising arena in which science and faith (and even arts) communities are recognizing commonalities in their interests, rather than antagonisms.

And, as Arthur J. Stewart pointed out in a recent letter to *Science*, there are several “recent educational efforts to formally link poetry and science at the middle school level,” and that “encourage scientists to incorporate poetry into the way they think about, and communicate, important ideas uncovered by their studies.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most important thing to note in Stewart’s observation is not that scientists are recognizing an aesthetic element to their work, but the promise that using complex and provisional methods may make it easier for scientists, themselves, to be reminded of and then communicate to a popular audience the interpretive imprecision that is inherent to science as a whole, and hence the need to collaborate with non-scientists when answering the question of “What does it all mean?” Again, it’s not that objective attention to material facts is not or should not be the primary focus of scientific practice, but that science is not and cannot be *exclusively* composed of “de-personalized” knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

## Complementary Approaches

So what do we make, then, of claims by Christian believers that scientists are actually not “scientific enough” (i.e. that they “import” subjective beliefs into their professional pronouncements) when they exclude divine agency in the natural world, especially when believers simultaneously argue that their own literal interpretations of various biblical texts have the weight of logic, reason, and objective fact behind them? While few defenders of the reliability of Scripture would explicitly claim to be placing their trust in human logic (divine gift though it is) above their faith commitment to the text of the Bible, proposing to judge these issues primarily according to whose position proceeds in the most logically consistent manner without embracing the special role that subjectivity plays in a fully human consciousness implicitly grants that rationalism is the foremost measure of truth, and accepts the lie that this is and *ought* to be the way knowledge and understanding move forward. By ignoring or denigrating the ways in which science’s oft-denied subjective aspects might actually strengthen, rather than weaken its claims to be a reliable system for explaining the physical world, such views keep Christians from recognizing and championing key ways that science and faith are compatible, complementary and coextensive responses to God’s revelation in the natural world.

Put another way, when arguing that Scripture-focused approaches to interpreting natural history are as trustworthy as materialist scientific ones because they are “just as rational,” while at the same time trying to provide *material* evidence for the accuracy of their readings of Genesis and other biblical texts, believers risk getting wrong both the essence of science *and* the essence of faith. The point is not to use nature to prove the Bible, it’s to see both the Bible and nature as witnesses and pointers to the person of Christ and the Kingdom he inaugurated. We ought not have just a “biblical worldview,” therefore, but a “Christ-centered worldview,” interpreting all things (both scriptural and worldly) in light of Him. For this reason, instead of retreating to “fundamentals” in the religious realm or, likewise, applying the reductionist “Occam’s Razor” in the scientific realm, the proper accounting for and practice of a fully human way of understanding the world must claim its place at the complex intersection of these seemingly-contradictory cognitive and investigative practices, just as the model of “being human” we have in Jesus is incarnational—mysterious and marvelous and *true* precisely in the way it brings together the material and the spiritual, the finite and the infinite.

Just as it is incorrect to insist that Scripture must be wrong when it describes features of the natural world or events in the biblical narrative that don’t comport with technical knowledge of the natural world as we find it today, so is it a mistake to insist that the physical cosmos must correlate in a simple materialist way with the cosmic order described in Scripture—for example, by saying this or that interpretation of physical and biological processes and their history cannot be true because they do not *prima facie* agree with (especially Old Testament) biblical descriptions. We must not fall into the trap of thinking and acting as though we stand outside of the history (natural and biblical) that we examine and argue about, judging one as more reliable than the other based on our own current tastes and predilections. Because both are gifts we have always only partially unwrapped, both sets of knowledge must be allowed to interpret each other in tension and in light of the whole witness of God’s working in nature and culture, without either “text” dominating the other.

We must also always recognize that the Spirit continues to be at work in the minds and hearts of individuals and is the primary (in the sense of “foundational”) interpreter of the whole witness, both past and present. This formulation is analogous to the way we think about the Spirit interceding *in* us as much

as *for* us in the process of prayer, actually equipping our hearts and minds to approach the Father. It also recognizes that God has made Himself known in the physical world—even to non-believers—as an act of common grace, and through the Spirit remains active in kindling all humankind’s desire to know and understand what we see around us. It also assumes that such an always-detached understanding is not sufficient to God, for His primary desire seems not to be the transmission of knowledge, but its unfolding within the human-divine relationship.

To claim that one aspect of God’s revelation of Himself trumps the others is analogous to arguing that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, but *not* like leaven hidden in a peck of flour; not only does such a stand deny God’s freedom to reveal himself in both nature and culture (not to mention the complexity of the whole of reality in its integrated spiritual and material parts), it is hubris in its implicit claim that we do (or can) understand the totality of *either one* of the witnesses with such certainty and fullness as to make us the masters of its meaning—for who has exhausted our understanding even of either of those familiar parables, much less the whole of Scripture or the book of Nature? Instead, we must always approach God’s revelation of Himself to us as He gives it, trusting that neither realm (Scripture or Nature) is sufficient nor desirable on its own, and always coming to the matter in a posture of humility and thanksgiving that He chooses to reveal Himself at all.

To return to the problem set out at the beginning of this essay, then, establishing the ways science and faith partake of a common subjectivity in addition to sharing important aspects of objective rationality may be where we find the most powerful critique of the idea of science and faith being “non-overlapping,” for, as Christians, we believe that the fullest revelation by God of Himself occurred in the person and practice of Jesus—the very epitome of “overlapping” spheres of reality. Just as it has been the historic witness of the Church that Jesus was the most fully human being ever to have lived because he was both fully God and fully man, both science and biblical interpretation (indeed all of our cultural and interpretive endeavors) are most human—indeed, most inspired—when they are beautiful and imaginative and integrative, not when either are at their most reductionistic. The “common ground” we stake out between them must also be the “high ground”: that territory of human understanding that truly is most representative of our status as God’s image-bearers.

What remains for us to clarify, finally, is the character of the proper and beneficial overlap between these modes of discovery and description, and, therefore, the proper tools and practices by which we may faithfully follow Jesus’ example and receive what God has to teach us about ourselves and our relation to him, to each other, and to the natural world. Foremost among these is the practice of attending to symbolic relationships—the poetic or parabolic linkages between the natural order as we find it through careful examination, and the spiritual order as it is revealed to us in Scripture through the Spirit. We should, after all, be alerted to the possibility that such linkages—always subtle, often confusing, sometimes contradictory—hold the promise of bringing us closest to the heart of the Father by the fact that that such poetic, dramatic, imaginative connections were the almost-exclusive mode of communication favored by the Son. But second only to the general attentiveness to image and metaphor should be the realization that what is most true often resists our every attempt to quantify, codify and resolve. When we, the inheritors of eighteenth-century Rationalism, read the ancient texts of the Bible especially, we are tempted to deny or domesticate the strangeness we find there either by re-framing it as literal description subject to proof, or by interpreting it as mystery and myth, by which we mean “untrue” at least to some extent. Therefore, it may be that another gift that the church can give to our time is the rediscovery and embrace of *paradox*, a category of tension that we find at the intersection of the subjective and objective, when we

are unable to explain or even fully describe how we experience the material world despite our ongoing practical engagement with it, and which should always culminate in the distinctively faithful attitude and posture of *worship*.

## Connecting the Parts and the Whole

Given my foregoing attention to and embrace of subjectivity, some might understand me to be aligning myself with the post-modern sense of radical relativism—that idea that because all knowledge is filtered through social, historical and material conditions, no individual’s subjectivity has any more bearing on the truth than any other’s, which thinking can be followed logically to the question of whether or not there really is any “objective” truth at all. First, while this idea has come to have more popular traction over the last few decades, the idea that all knowledge of the world is subject to the limitations and distortions of individual experience is at least as old as Plato’s analogy of the cave. These doubts about the reliability of subjective experience have been so persistent in the West that they practically undergird our now (almost unreasonable) belief in the explanatory power of “objective” truth as described by science: we want to believe that by quantifying and analyzing every aspect of our material existence we can do away with the existential uncertainty we all must face every day. Put simply, we want to know for sure and in full, despite the fact that the biblical witness (not to mention practical experience) tells us in no uncertain terms that we will not and can not, at least not in the current age.

Furthermore, the popular conception of postmodern hyper-subjectivity and relativism places rather too much emphasis on the specificity of the individual without attention to the way our personal subjectivities are rooted in common shared structures and practices and spaces that emerge from the aggregate of our individual lives and the lives of those who have gone before us, and which in turn are changed by individual engagements with such forms of culture—ranging in scale from the singular action to the long skein of a human life. Thus while rejecting claims of simple determinism, we may nevertheless say that individual subjectivities are rooted in very real, *objective* social/material contexts. Sociologists have offered various descriptions for this subtle give and take between individual freedom and experience and the large-scale contexts and constraints within which we act and upon which we act: Anthony Giddens used the term “structuration” for this dynamic relationship between self and society, with his “common sense” paralleling Pierre Bourdieu’s “*habitus*” or “feel for the game” (neither unrelated to Polanyi’s *tacit knowledge*), as our naturalized ability to negotiate the social world in which we live—the implicit knowledge of available options in a local culture that guides actions within it. “Individual subjectivity,” therefore, is neither wholly individual, nor does it lack essential grounding in objective conditions that we share and can study.<sup>9</sup>

My point, then, is that our best way of approaching “objective truth,” is actually to claim our subjectivity even as we also utilize objective tools; moreover, we must make this claim for a complete and integrated practice of seeking truth not primarily as individuals, but collectively as the family of man, and—most essentially and fully—as the Body of Christ. Indeed, it is because I am so confident not just of the *reality* of a truth that supercedes and encompasses our individual (and even cultural) subjectivities, but also of its power and magnificence and complexity, that I believe that the only way we can approach it is by the communal project of bringing our subjective selves to bear on what we find in the objective world, both natural and social.

Is it too obvious to state, then, that such a “reality” is both large and complicated—what people once called “awesome and sublime” when they still used those terms as markers of scale and experience

that elicited fear as well as wonder? The scope of creation, and even our aggregate apprehension of it, is so grand that we can not take it all in at a piece. And even when we do get glimpses of the totality we are overcome with the scale of it as much as with its beauty. This is and has always been the reason behind the human need to break things down into smaller, more manageable bits to study and describe; most people working in science are acutely aware of this fact, and hence focus all or most of their efforts in the attempt to come to understand one small part of the world, or perhaps several related parts over the course of their careers. Indeed, we must focus our attention only on discrete sections of the continuum of our experience in order to make sense of any of it—literally to make the flow sensible—but our choices and groupings are still contingent. This does not mean *false*, nor is the practice merely the imposition of order and relationship where none “actually” exists. Selections and recognitions are relational actions in which subjectivity intermingles with objectivity to produce meaning and greater understanding.

Take our experience and study of the sun’s light as an example: by sending light through a prism we are able to perceive different parts of the spectrum as an array of colors. We see their interconnection, the relationships and distinction, the beauty heretofore hidden within the sun’s “white” light in which we are blessedly bathed. But does that mean that when the sun falls upon us in all its radiance in a natural setting, and we are both nearly blinded and astounded at the clarity with which we can see what’s before us we stop and comment to each other, “Well, it’s *really* just the whole spectrum of the individual colors we’re seeing, not light that’s actually ‘white.’”? We do not. If we are of an analytic mindset we might think about the way all those distinctions result in a beautiful whole, and we might appreciate the complex relationship between the external phenomenon (the sun’s light), our physiological response and interpretation of it (the registration of the light on the various receptors in our eyes, then translated into color signals in our brain), and our intellectual, emotional and aesthetic experience of it all. But we do not (or ought not) discount the beauty and utility of the whole because we now have a better understanding of the parts.

By allowing ourselves to think that solitary, focused, analytic attention is by itself sufficient to get at the underlying truth of things, we also risk losing important personal—not just intellectual— aspects of our relationship to the world as a whole, including our necessary connections with others similarly enmeshed. The well-known fable of the five blind men arguing over the identity of an elephant is a flawed picture of the problem, but is a starting place for my slightly different sense of the way individual perspectives are insufficient. For despite the point of that story, that no one person possesses enough information to see the “entire beast” of truth, the elephant analogy nevertheless proposes to place the human perspective—human reason and intellect—as standing outside (or rather besides) the Cosmic Elephant, in a position to judge it, even though falsely. But we do *not* stand apart or outside of the cosmos anymore than we can make a purely detached critique of the culture in which we have been brought up. Rather, we are wholly within it, partaking of the very thing we study.

More succinctly, truth is not an object that we can “see all of” if only we are given enough distance away from it, but rather something (or Someone, actually) we live *with* and we live *out*. Thus we have no choice but to stay where we are, nor should we desire otherwise. In the first place, the witness of Scripture and the Church is that the creation of which we are a part is *good*, though now marred by human sin and rebellion. In the second place, the model of humanity given by Jesus is one of loving engagement between the physical and the spiritual aspects of reality, between the concrete and the abstract. Therefore, the key to a new perspective is not removal of the body or the mind *from* the world, but movement of the body and attention *through* the world—connecting and comparing notes with others as we go.

I say nothing, therefore, against approaching things on the small-scale or breaking problems down into smaller constituent parts, but suggest that we must also regularly lift our eyes from the small scale to remind ourselves that our specific studies (or disciplines of study) will never give the entire picture by themselves, and risk robbing us of the awe and beautiful confusion<sup>10</sup> that experiencing the whole by way of community should give. For it is when we begin to look collectively at the small parts that we also begin to make out the big picture—less by aggregating all our discrete studies into a larger encyclopedic collection than by seeing within and across them such similarities and patterns that we come to feel that the whole must likely exhibit on a much larger scale the qualities and characteristics of what we see repeated in each or many of the particulars. We have physical paradigms for this kind of relation of part to the whole in the fractal mathematics describing the arrangement of leaves on a stem and chambers of the nautilus, and it is extremely significant that we understand such relationships not just as interesting or quantifiable, but beautiful: our subjective sense helps us to recognize and give proper attention to significant objective relationships. As poet Luci Shaw recognizes, such attention to similarities, likenesses, and concrete metonymy has both enlightening and reconciling roles to play:

One of the symptoms of our age is its tunnel vision, by which we fragment the universe. Because of its extraordinary complexity, we cannot handle more than a few facets of existence at a time. The result is that we each do our own narrow little thing: politicians, farmers, house-wives, musicians, merchants, socialites, mechanics, neurosurgeons. Not even a Buckminster Fuller or an Isaac Asimov or a C. P. Snow can pull it all together. It is my hope that the creative Christian may, by means of his “baptized imagination,” help integrate the universe by widening and sharpening his focus, by “seeing through God’s eyes,” by observing man and his environment and saying, “Yes, I see. This is like that, and it is significant.” Here the artist and the analyst, the poet and the pragmatist can collaborate, joining reason with imagination.<sup>11</sup>

In this passage Shaw also points us in the direction of two other important aspects of the way we understand and relate to the world: first, that our faith in and intimacy with God is a singularly powerful resource for seeing likenesses and connections; and second, that part of that gifted insight is the recognition (or reassertion) that no one image or likeness or story is sufficient to encapsulate the whole, but rather it is often the unresolved tension between images and ideas that most rightly represents what is truly real. I have slipped here into more literary and explicitly artistic language as an entrée into my next point about the way that God has presented Himself and the narrative of his people through Scripture, but seeming contradiction and paradox are not just features of literature or history, to be taken as subtle evidence against the reliability or truthfulness of those testimonies.

On the contrary some of the most interesting and fruitful advances in our understanding of the physical cosmos have come with and even through attention to paradox. In the intertwined disciplines of cosmology, particle physics, and quantum mechanics especially, the last century or more of science has suggested that even the most “objective” and basic features of the universe are stubbornly (or beautifully) subjective: subatomic particles seem to pop in and out of existence or be “entangled” despite distances in time and space, and light shows itself to be either particle or wave, depending on how the observer chooses to look. In short, it seems that while the essence of the universe may be orderly and elegant, it is also mysterious and intractably resistant to being explained away.

And perhaps that last point is the most instructive to those of us who want to be faithful to the fullness of the way God chooses to reveal himself to us—the complicated, similarly-intractable interaction between the natural world, the written Word, and the work of the Spirit in contemporary lives and communities. Each of those sources has a call on our attention and commitment, and each of them involves more than a little mystery: not mystery in the sense of a riddle or temporary uncertainty, but mystery as a paradox—a “both/and” sense of the truth.<sup>12</sup> Harkening back to the discussion that began this essay, it should give us pause if both committed materialist atheists and committed evangelical Christians use precisely the same *unimaginative* argumentative techniques and methods to get at the truth (or falsehood, so say the atheists) of our relationship with God, even if they begin from different logical (or religious-legal) presuppositions. Method, *attitude*, is more telling, sometimes, than is purported message, revealing more about our disposition towards our Creator, His creation, and our fellow creatures than what we say we believe.

As journalist and cultural critic Ken Myers asked while framing an interview with writer Craig Holdrege, “What if we’ve been mistaken about the shape our knowing of the world should take? What if the great Modern error is to perceive of the world principally as a puzzle or a problem solved by essentially mathematical means, rather than a gift and an epiphany, apprehended by loving and reverent engagement?”<sup>13</sup> Going further, may it even be that the irresolvable nature of these tensions between different ways of approaching God and His creation is, itself, a gift that draws us ever closer to the Creator while prodding us to be in more loving relationship with those of our fellow creatures who seem so far from Him? To begin with the supposition that there are “answers” in Genesis and elsewhere in the Bible that allow us to codify and quantify away the complexity and mystery and paradox of God’s sovereignty and our freedom, our sin and God’s grace is not wrong, *per se*, but it does rather miss the intensely relational character of a God so beyond us that we must speak of Him as being Three in One, yet who nevertheless invites us to join Him at the table.

## Notes

1. Gould, Stephen Jay. "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," *Natural History* 106 (March 1997): 16-22.
2. A much-publicized account of the complex reasonableness of orthodox Christian belief from the not-necessarily-Christian camp came in British literary figure Terry Eagleton’s somewhat brutal critique of Richard Dawkins’ latest anti-Christian polemic (“Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching,” *London Review of Books*: Vol. 28 No. 20 · 19 October 2006, pp. 32-34.). Meanwhile, from a strongly Evangelical perspective, the apologetic work of Ravi Zacharias and his associates has for years carefully and powerfully focused on the logical consistency of faith, while not ignoring the mysterious, imaginative and interpersonal elements of belief that I’ll be discussing below.
3. Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*: New York: Routledge, 2004. p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Polanyi describes the limits of “arithmetical computation” in genuine scientific discovery, remarking that the “logical gap” that must be crossed in order to accomplish new insights even into the most elemental of physical sciences comes in a moment: “‘Illumination’ is then the leap by which the logical gap is crossed. It is the plunge by which we gain a foothold at another shore of reality. Of such plunges the scientist has to stake bit by bit his entire professional life.” Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Knowledge*. Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1958. p. 123.
6. Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning*. Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1975. pp. 64-65.
7. Arthur J. Stewart. *Science* 13 August 2010:Vol. 329. no. 5993, pp. 748 – 749.
8. Here again, Midgley is prescient when she notes that “historical methods are complex and are quite unlike those usually quoted as being essential to physical science [yet] are needed within science itself whenever a unique process is described—for instance in cosmology and in the study of evolution. . . Much of the time, we are exploring unknown or partially known

matters, and we use whatever forms of thought turn out to be needed for them. Often it is our powers of perception that are central to the work, rather than the consecutive reasoning that can be easily tested. And in any human situation we must call on special powers of social perception and imagination that are not really formulable at all.” Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*, p. 26.

9. Both Giddens and Bourdieu posit a dialectic between individual agency and the system of social constraints, the latter actively engaged by the former via an inculcated understanding of the cultural milieu. See Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
10. Both Giddens and Bourdieu posit a dialectic between individual agency and the system of social constraints, the latter actively engaged by the former via an inculcated understanding of the cultural milieu. See Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
11. Luci Shaw, “Imagination—that other avenue to truth.” *Christianity Today*. January 2, 1981. Perhaps the blind men in the story, had they taken this strategy to heart, might have at least noticed the commonality of their experiences and been moved to contemplate the beauty and importance of *wrinkles*.
12. See Kenton Sparks’ recent essay for the BioLogos Foundation (“After Inerrancy: Evangelicals and the Bible in a Postmodern Age”) for a more thorough discussion of the way several different perspectives and interpretive strategies are required to read the Bible in all its magnificent complexity.
13. Ken Myers, “Craig Holdrege on science and detached knowledge.” Mars Hill Audio Journal, Vol. 92:7: 3:30-3:51.