

Paradoxology

I Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

When the Perseid meteor showers take place every August, the little kid in me always gets excited about the potential for seeing shooting stars. I'm not one for getting up at 3 a.m. to watch them, so I depend on viewing the sights in the hours before bedtime. By then the dusk has settled into night and, as long as the urban glow or clouds don't obstruct the view, I will usually see a few streak across the heavens with glowing grace.

I'm told that on the best night for viewing, the rate is supposed to be a few hundred sightings per hour. Honestly, at best, I've only seen a half dozen or so, no matter how long I've laid out peering up into the midnight skies. Nevertheless, I'm thrilled every time I spy one seemingly appearing out of nowhere and racing across the outer atmosphere until it burns up into nothingness. I cannot explain the delight I sense, other than a child-like fascination with the cosmos.

Shooting stars, in many ways, illustrate the wonder and paradox of nature. As part of the Perseid showers, they are predictable in their arrival each year, but strikingly random in their appearance in the sky. No one knows of their individual existence (visually, anyway) until they light up the sky for a second or two. If you miss them, if you sleep through the display, they seemingly don't exist—they come and go without a trace. Even if you do see them, they normally cannot be found or grasped, because they are usually as small as a grain of sand or, if larger, they have fallen through the atmosphere and landed on earth in unknown locations. We know

cosmic dust exists; we're just unable to track or observe it beyond a few brief moments in time.

If no one observes them because of daylight, clouds, sleepy eyes, or ignorance, it reminds me of that great philosophical question: if a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Obviously, it's easy to assume that sound is a phenomenon onto itself, but does it really exist without the means to transmit it or to hear it? Without a medium through which sound waves pass, does it qualify as sound? In a similar way, if no one sees a shooting star, if there is no medium through which to observe it, does it really exist—or does it only exist because someone or something observes it? What does existence mean if observation or measurement is missing?

A sophisticated mind will immediately recognize that much of what exists does so without someone or something observing it. There's far more that is unseen than seen, which is exactly what scientists have been discovering through quantum mechanics in exploring the properties of subatomic particles and waves. It's much more difficult to be definitive about what actually occurs in the realm of subatomic particles of energy—electrons, protons, neutrons, photons, quarks and quanta. Not all matter is observable or measurable, and according to some theories, it's actually impossible to assess these particles without altering their properties by doing so. Thus, the question becomes, what exists in non-perceivable, indefinable, non-observable forms beyond human senses and calculation? In other words, how much of what exists lies beyond human comprehension and experience?

Physicists and cosmologists have been wrestling with these types of questions for some time, not only in reference to subatomic particles, but also to the vast expanses of the universe in an effort to understand phenomena billions of light-years away all the way to the origins of the universe. Over the last century, quantum physics has challenged conventional and classical notions of how the universe works. Newtonian laws of physics don't apply at every level of life. Quantum mechanics doesn't necessarily have all the answers, either, and it is still largely uncertain and mysterious, based more on probabilities than predetermined outcomes, but it offers insight to how much of the universe works, particularly on a subatomic or an astral level.

For our present generations, quantum mechanics have been the basis for much of human discovery from the imperceptible to the inconceivable; virtually everything in digital technology and communication since the invention of the transistor is dependent on quantum mechanics. It is a theory (or set of theories) that explain phenomena on most every level of human perception, without being fully grasped by even the scientists who employ it. Quantum reality, in itself, is a paradox.

What is paradox? According to Webster, paradox is “a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a possible truth.” One aspect of quantum reality suggests that matter exists in all of its possible forms simultaneously, with the dominant line of thinking believing that it only collapses into a particular form when observed. So, what we see as an object actually exists in alternative states (i.e., a wave or in a form that

would account for all of its behaviors or probable movement), though we lack the capacity to perceive it in those states in that moment of observation. This has led some theorists to propose that there are even multiple universes, or realms of existence, playing out all the probabilities conceivable for any being or object.

In effect, if you chose not to come to church today, that scenario would be played out in another realm simultaneously (sort of like the movie, *Groundhog Day*, or Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*—except you'd add in all the possible scenarios at once!). This is a little mind-bending, but it may explain certain properties of matter, energy, if not even elements of human consciousness. Granted, this is hard to grasp, which is why within quantum physics paradox is the norm, rather than the exception, and why mystery and uncertainty is acceptable even to empirical minds.

If this doesn't stretch your brain sufficiently, cosmologist Joel Primack adds another intriguing perspective on the cutting edge of astrophysics.

When astronomers say the universe is expanding, they mean that all distant galaxies are speeding away from our galaxy, and the farther away they are, the faster they are going. ...

Most people think of space as emptiness, or as a geographical location for things. But this is like thinking of skin as simply the geographical border of the body. Skin is a complex, living, sensual organ that happens to play the role of a border. Space, like skin, also plays the role of a border between things while having its own complex nature. According to relativity, space has an internal structure that is determined by the matter and energy at each point in it. In the solar system, almost all the contents of space are visible matter—the sun and the planets, moons, rings, asteroids, and comets. On the scale of the Galaxy and a little beyond, however, most of the contents is invisible dark matter. And on much larger scales...dark energy dominates [which causes space to repel space], and this drastically changes the character of space. ...

Then he continues describing time and space:

Light and other forms of information are already traveling toward Earth and will arrive in ten years, a hundred years, a million years from now. That information has been on its way for possibly billions of years. Much of our future already exists—it just hasn't gotten here yet.

The past exists, too—it's streaming away at the speed of light, and that's why we can't send it any information. But it's sending us plenty. We're reading the messages it wrote long ago that are arriving now. In some sense the past of the universe lies in our future, because more of the past will be found in the future as those ancient messages stream in, untouched and accurate after their long journeys. Imagine that a runner from ancient Greece were just arriving today, breathless, carrying the news of the defeat of the Persians, and we were the first to hear it from his lips. Runners are coming from all over the universe with news of their eras, in every form of radiation and the strangest languages anyone's ever heard; the cosmological revolution is human beings finally beginning to understand and put the whole story together. ¹

What this tells us is that there's more to life than meets the eye and, by inference, there's more to God than what can be contained in our traditional understanding and beliefs. Just as mystery and paradox are built into the nature of all that exists, from the imperceptible to the unfathomable, God is also known and unknown, principled and yet paradoxical—where opposites and contradictions are inherent to and embraced by the character, mind, and being of God.

This runs counter to the premise of systematic theology, which seeks to provide definition to the nature of God in linear and orderly (and Newtonian) ways. We commonly use and hear words like faithfulness, steadfastness, unchanging, immutable, and a host of other terms to describe God's character against the chaos and ever-changing elements of life and nature. But in applying these terms, what have we done to our sense of God? God, as presented by classic theology, comes across as the same in the past, present, and future—

¹ Joel R. Primack & Nancy Ellen Abrams, *The View from the Center of the Universe*, Riverhead Books, 2006, pp. 124, 125, 141.

meaning, a state of inertia, as if the entire expanse of earth's history is but the divine seventh day of rest (e.g., Deism is a caricature of this, portraying God as the One who wound up the proverbial "clock" and let it be).

But is this true? What if quantum reality disputes this? If what exists from the smallest particle on earth to the grandest phenomenon in the skies reflects the nature and creative force of God, then are we not ignoring what is actually going on in regard to the workings and presence of our Creator (much like sleeping through a meteor shower—if you don't observe it, it doesn't exist! It means nothing!)?

Instead, creation seems to be ongoing in time and space with an unbelievable dynamic and unpredictability that defies human logic. If God is the creative force behind all that exists, then clearly God is greater than our perceivable limits and operates well beyond our linear laws of order and principle. What seems to make sense on earth is not how matter and energy operate beyond our limitations.

If quantum reality offers any religious insight, it is that the classic paradigm we use to understand the nature of God is incomplete and faulty, for it eliminates (often purposely so) anything that speaks to the paradoxical nature of God. What is faulty about our belief is we have made God into our human image, within the limitations we have, as if God is merely superhuman. Yet, the moment we think we have God figured out in this way, then this creative force of God *by nature* will surprise us with a contrasting, if not contradictory, revelation. For us to know God, we must seek truth *beyond* belief!

Let me bring this back to this ancient story from I Kings, where Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem. What I find interesting is, even in his primitive appeal to a tribal deity for Israel, Solomon expressed a remarkable insight and an honest humility about the magnificence and mystery of an unlimited and still unknown God that would have defied the norms and purpose of most tribal religion of the time.

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; ...Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.

Solomon's humility before God was obvious, but what was remarkable was his sense of God here was quite unusual given that it extended beyond the tribal cult to include the entire known world—a stunning and paradoxical belief to hold in ancient times. His dedication prayer went on:

...when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel...

Again, this would have seemed absurd, if not contradictory, in a world of rival myths, cultures and competing tribal deities. The expected prayer would have been: "God protect us; defeat our enemies!" as it often was. But Solomon's prayer here was remarkably wise, inclusive, and unifying. This wasn't just an early affirmation of monotheism, it was conceiving universalism—believing that YHWH was the God of all people, not just Israel, including their *enemies*, to whom God

would be asked to show mercy, not punishment (i.e., an amazing paradox)!

What I see Solomon (and later Jesus) expressing was *paradoxology*—a term recognizing that the God we claim as our own is also found outside of our personal and collective worldview, expressed through our norms, customs, beliefs, ceremony, and self-interests. Paradoxology is not what supports tribal patriotism and ego-centric religion. Paradoxology generates humility before the creative omnipotent God of all things known and unknown.

“Paradoxology” is actually a term used by quantum physicists to describe the embracing of unconventional, non-classical, paradoxes in quantum mechanics. It’s an interesting use, since the term actually unites “paradox” and “doxology”—paradox and praise.

Miriam Teresa Winter, a Roman Catholic nun and professor at Hartford Seminary, has embraced this term in her uniting of spirituality and quantum reality, which is the subject of her course I will be auditing this fall. So let me close with M.T. Winter’s thoughts on what paradoxology means to Christian spirituality and faith:

It took a series of paradigm shifts in my religion and society to liberate my spirit so that I might publicly proclaim that paradoxology is praise of the Divine in a quantum universe, where paradox is paradigm.

Paradoxology permeates life with a unifying spirit, even where paradox interrupts, overturning our expectations, messing up our plans. It is our wave of community as we move in and out of a parallel universe created by our longings and filled with kindred spirits, where energy is interchanged in dynamic, chaotic ways. ...

Paradoxology is keeping faith when accused of being unfaithful; channeling hope for the hopeless teetering on the brink of despair; loving when love is in short supply and sure to be rejected. ...

Paradoxology means forgiving before one has been forgiven and remaining open to finding the appropriate way to reconcile.

Paradoxology means our heart is saturated with divinity, making us totally capable of inviting the whole chaotic world into its embrace. ...

Paradoxology is, above all, uninterrupted praise, the multifaceted energies of all God's creation—past, present, and still to come—echoing amen upon amen to all that is, just as it is, paradoxically. Holy, holy, holy: reverberating, interactive, intergalactic praise.

And so it is. Amen.

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