

Reality is Not What It Seems

Matthew 17:1-9

I was intrigued by the news this week that astronomers have discovered what they believe is another solar system with seven Earth-sized planets rotating around a distant star. That they can even determine this in itself is quite amazing, given that what light or radiation they registered on their instruments would have reflected off the surfaces of those planets forty years ago. At 186,000 miles per second (which is the speed of light), it has taken all that time to finally appear in Earth's astronomical vision, indicating the distance between these two solar systems—235 trillion miles!

This, once again, illustrates the expanses of the known universe, which are virtually unfathomable when you attempt to grasp what all of this means. If there is intelligent life on one or more of those planets, does it then make their existence real to us, given that it's extremely unlikely we could ever know for certain? The same could be said in turn. Does human existence mean anything other than to us and our own experience with it? With worlds so far apart, it makes you wonder, just what is real and what is reality outside of our understanding and conscious awareness?

This discovery happens at a time when I'm finishing up a newly published book by Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli, *Reality is Not What It Seems*, where he takes the reader down through the ages of scientific discovery and thought to the present time. From Democritus to Copernicus, from Newton to Einstein, from classical physics to quantum gravity, Rovelli demonstrates how each stage of scientific certainty is invariably upset by new theories explaining phenomena not previously understood which revolutionize the prevailing paradigms of physics. Hence, what science at one point believes is true is altered by new thinking

and discovery; meaning, reality is not what it seems because what we think we know in this present moment will be corrected by some future discovery and theory. So much for absolute certainty.

One story Rovelli told I appreciated, in particular. It was about Fr. Georges Lemaître, a Belgian scientist and Jesuit priest who, in 1927, took the equations of Albert Einstein and tested them using the available astronomical data at the time. He concluded that the universe must be expanding—something old Albert didn't want to believe, despite his equations suggesting that possibility. For Einstein, reality was a fixed universe. Lemaître, however, embraced the possibility of an expanding universe and drew the logical conclusion: that the universe must have begun in the smallest possible state—what he referred to as “the primordial atom” (not Adam!). His assessment was later confirmed by American astronomers, Edwin Hubble and Henrietta Leavitt, who not only verified the rapid expanse but calculated its rate of expansion. Today, we call this the Big Bang theory. As Rovelli tells it:

...Einstein was skeptical about the expansion of the universe. He had grown up thinking that the universe was fixed and had not been able to accept the idea that this was not the case. Even the greatest make mistakes and are prey to preconceived ideas. Lemaître met Einstein and tried to dissuade him from his prejudicial view. Einstein resisted, going so far as to answer Lemaître: “Correct calculations, abominable physics.” Later Einstein was obliged to recognize that Lemaître was the one who was actually right. It doesn't fall to everyone to disprove Einstein. ¹

Lemaître also challenged another notable authority of this time, i.e., the pope. Pope Pius XII was enamored by the Belgian priest's theory of the Big Bang as proof for the divine act of creation, declaring it so in a public address in 1951. As a priest, Lemaître couldn't question the Holy Father, but as a scientist he would. Immediately, he urged the pope not to make

¹ Carlo Rovelli, *Reality is Not What it Seems*, Riverhead, 2017, pp. 203-4.

pronouncements about any such correlation between religion and science. It must have been a compelling argument, for the pope relented; no Vatican encyclical on the scientific basis for creation was forthcoming. As Rovelli adds, it's a good thing, too, since now even the Big Bang is being reconsidered by quantum theorists, who posit that the universe didn't begin *ex nihilo* 14 billion years ago, but arose out of a previously existing universe! Indeed, reality is not what it seems.

Throughout the book, Rovelli makes an impressive case for ambition and humility in scientific endeavors, arguing that nothing is absolutely certain even when it is believed to be true. He holds this about all pursuits of knowledge: reality is what we perceive it to be until we find new ways to comprehend it and provide order to what we know.

I believe that in order to understand reality, we have to keep in mind that reality is this network of relations, of reciprocal information, that weaves the world. We slice up the reality surrounding us into "objects." But reality is not made up of discrete objects. It is a variable flux. Think of an ocean wave. Where does a wave finish? Where does it begin?...

It's the same for every object, properly considered, including living organisms. This is why it makes little sense to ask whether a half-cut fingernail is still "me," or has become "not-me"; or if the hairs left on my sofa by my cat are still part of the cat, or not; or precisely when a child's life begins. A child begins to live on the day when a person dreams of her for the first time, long before her conception, or when she forms her first self-image, or when she breathes for the first time, or when she recognizes her name, or when we apply any number of other conventions: they are all useful, but arbitrary. They are ways to think, and to orient ourselves within the complexity of reality. ²

I find Rovelli's thesis quite intriguing—that reality is a set of relations which provide order and meaning to our existence and "knowledge is intrinsically relational; it depends just as much on its object as upon its

² Rovelli, pp. 254-55.

subject.”³ This may be a useful way to approach this story from Matthew and explore the meaning of the Transfiguration of Christ.

Why? Because, as I see it, this story is as much about relations as it is revelation—it’s just as much about the disciples as it is about Jesus—as it is about the figures of Moses and Elijah—as it is about the presence and purposes of God—all depending on the perspective of the observer.

In this story, we must ask, what is reality? What’s going on here? Whose perspective is the true one? It depends on who’s the subject in this story and who’s the object. Frankly, all of the characters in this story can serve as subject or object, depending on the point of observation or from the derived sense of what is real and meaningful. There well could be multiple realities embedded in an event that seems surreal.

Tradition naturally assumes this story is about Jesus—proclaiming him to be the Beloved Son of God. This is presented as a messianic moment, no doubt, and comes on the heels of another significant story, i.e., Peter’s confession—when Peter finally named Jesus as the Christ, or Messiah—the Anointed One of God. But even that story had multiple points of meaning—multiple realities perhaps—as what that role and identity of Messiah meant to the disciples clearly was not what Jesus viewed it to be (evident in Jesus’ harsh retort to Peter that he was being an agent of Satan!). Peter and the others didn’t get it, of course, but we can imagine, emotions were running quite high with perplexing confusion over what *was* the actual truth about Jesus? What is reality?

As the story unfolds, Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the summit of a mountain, where reality was suspended altogether—or at least became not what it seemed. First, Jesus appeared before them in a bright

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 253.

and glorified state, then was accompanied by the immortal figures of Moses and Elijah—the two great prophets of Israel. Into this company in the mist of a cloud, the voice of God broke through and issued a divine declaration of Jesus being the Beloved One of God. The disciples were to receive this as the divine imprimatur to listen to Jesus, as if they were receiving a direct communication from heaven.

From the vantage point of the disciples, what they experienced must have seemed unreal—yet, real enough to remember and agree among the three of them that this whole event occurred. Had it only been a single person's report, it wouldn't be as credible or have much authority behind it.

But, then, what was real? Jesus being transfigured into something or someone he previously was not? Is that even possible? Is that real? What did it mean? That Jesus kept company with spiritual giants? That his spiritual authority was superior to Elijah? even Moses? How could that be? What is true?

Yet, Jesus and the disciples weren't the only players in this drama. What would it mean for Moses and Elijah—real or otherwise? What did they represent and what did they symbolize in this setting? Mountaintop experiences had a mixed history for both of these great prophets. For Elijah, his dramatic victory on Mount Carmel when he, alone, stood for the God of Israel was one source of meaning. Was Jesus like Elijah facing down the false prophets of God? Or was Elijah representing his own disturbed spirit, cowering in a mountain cave escaping certain death because he defied Ahab's throne? Was Jesus' company with Elijah forecasting his own godforsaken state yet to come in Gethsemane and Calvary? Which was true and real?

And Moses? He scaled mountains time and time again, but not only to meet the divine Presence in a burning bush or in the cleft of the rock, he also climbed mountains in despair after the people chased after idols, as well as when he ended his human journey on the summit of Mt. Nebo overlooking the Promised Land. Those were memories of failure, or at least of not fulfilling what he thought was his destiny. What would it mean for both Moses and Elijah to share company with the One who would bring hope to the world, but die like a criminal on a Roman cross? Honor or shame? What is the intended meaning of this moment?

The presence of these two great prophets with Jesus raise many questions as to their place and meaning in this story. It speaks directly to the perplexing confusion of what was yet to transpire in Jesus' life and what it would come to mean to his followers. So many possibilities out of one not-so-simple to understand event.

Leaving the mountain, even more perplexing questions come to mind. Why does God bring such soulful despair upon those who are destined to deliver—to those called to embody truth? Why is reality not fixed and absolutely certain as humans want it to be? What is the reality of God to those who climb mountains in life? At what point is God real? At what point is God not? Does this mean that what's real at one point may give way to what becomes real at another? Is the reality that with God, even faithfulness may not deliver absolute certainty?

What this strange, surreal story does is remind me how, in every moment of time, in ways that are evidently real and ways that are not, everything is relational. Reality is relational; knowledge is relational. Subject or object, one never knows for certain which is which in our stories. What is me, and not me?

It's true, the reality of the Transfiguration can't be calculated in scientific terms, as if it could be empirically described in ways to satisfy a skeptic. Yet, it is deeply real and authentic in relational ones, where the intermingling between life and death, between spirit and body, between past and present, between cosmic distance and proximate intimacy, between divine breath and human life is very real, very genuine, and very meaningful. Reality is relational and always dynamic—continually reforming itself out of the mystery of endless possibility and perspectives.

We know that because this is our experience with life: in suffering, there is relief; in despair, there is hope; in joy, there is sadness; in ecstasy, there is desolation. Endemic to everything is everything else, since reality is relational. All living beings are in relation in every moment and in every reflection of existence. As in the story of the Transfiguration, it takes place in a cloud of unknowing, where we surrender the mind and ego to the realm of unknowing, which is when we can begin to glimpse the nature of God. This is reality. That is what becomes Truth.

“The universes which are amenable to the intellect can never satisfy the instincts of the heart,” so said the anonymous 14th century mystic, the author of the treasured contemplative work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Such words speak truth even to us today to reassure us that in the mysteries of life, in the vast unknowns of the universe itself, there is still more to discover and experience. What we know now will change, and we will change because of what we come to know and discover.

In the end, though, the instincts of the heart are what bring us into relationships and to experience love in all of its manifestations. And ultimately, love is more real and important to us in our experience with life than, at times, it even seems.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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