

A Fundamentally Interactive World
A Reflection Paper for Butler University's Philosophy Club

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I'm trying to sketch a worldview¹ in terms that can be followed by people who have not already given their hearts completely to this or that philosophical movement. (As a theologian I can afford to flirt with several philosophical movements at once, which, I admit, sounds a bit promiscuous.) To more specialized thinkers, this is going to look way too sloppy, but that's always the risk when you want to open up a conversation. How we fundamentally view the world we inhabit is, I believe, too important a topic to be left to any specialists, secular or religious. We are all trying to sort out how our lives can fit well with a whole variety of others engaged with us in a shared context, and we can benefit from welcoming as many others as possible to our conversations.

Here's a sort of thought experiment: **Let's presume that we live in a world that is fundamentally interactive, never static or closed, where originality and stability are two sides of the same interactive coin.**² (A bit more technically: To interact is to be mutually influential. To influence is to make some difference, but not every difference, to whatever is influenced. Every influence is relatively original, influenced yet distinctly influential. "Relative originality" roughly matches what Whitehead called "creativity," and I'll say a little more about that in an "Afterward" if anybody wants to check.)

A fundamentally interactive world would be variously interactive in all its parts and interactive as a whole. (The world as a whole, however, would not be a fixed totality, but always open-ended.) There would be all sorts of repeatable, stable patterns, but these would be relatively abstract ways of characterizing more original, concrete interactions.

There would be a kind of open-ended spectrum of interactivity: from the barely interactive to the rather interactive (e.g., you and me) to the wholly interactive. Because the spectrum is open-ended, it wouldn't have to fix or confine any interactions it would help to identify.

Here endeth the lesson, or thought experiment. So far we've only been presuming, trying to imagine what a fundamentally interactive world would need to be like to count as a world and to

¹ I call this a worldview instead of an "ontology" or a "metaphysic" because these terms often suggests a demonstrably precise, coherent theory of what and how everything is or can be. I'm not sure that's even attainable. But we do live by more vaguely envisioned worldviews or stances. If you say, with David Hume, that all we can know is a bunch of disconnected sense "impressions," you're still living by a worldview, though a rather silly one.

² This worldview counts as a version of process philosophy, but I am not concerned with whether it would get a blessing from either Alfred North Whitehead or Charles Hartshorne (the two best known process philosophers). It's not an exact match with either of them. They're just not vague enough for me. For a helpful discussion of process philosophy as a more general tendency in philosophy, see Nicholas Rescher's article at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-philosophy/>.

count as fundamentally interactive. I haven't provided any evidence yet. You don't have to do that as long as it's just a thought experiment.

But now it's time to ask: Is this the world we actually do occupy? Do we live in a fundamentally interactive world?

I'm convinced that we do. And the evidence for that has to be everything you've ever known or experienced. So here's my challenge: Show me anything you have found in this world, and I'll show you how easily a fundamentally interactive world makes room for it, much more easily than, say, the fundamentally inert world of deterministic atomism.

Solid objects? We've already learned to think of solidity as a complex pattern of recurring interactions.

Enduring objects? Properties? Generalizations? Ditto.

Experiencing subjects? Minds? Consciousness? Selves? Souls? Choices? Values? In a fundamentally inert world these look like opaque mysteries, "hard problems" (as analytic philosophers call them): they seem to appear inexplicably in a tiny portion of a universe that seems otherwise utterly unlike them. So we're tempted either to accept some form of dualism or to explain them away. In a fundamentally interactive world, however, their happening is no great surprise. They're variations on the relative originality that all interactions exhibit in some way. Puzzles remain, of course, especially for those who want to pin everything down—but when we fail at that, as we always do, we might be less surprised.

Laws of nature, explanatory mechanisms? They're abstractions. Like maps, they "represent only certain aspects of the region that is mapped. Hence, there can be different maps of the same terrain, with each map bearing similarity relations to the terrain only in certain degrees and respects" [Stuart Glennan, "Modeling Mechanisms," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biomedical Science* 36.2 (2005):8]. The most exact of these "maps" work best in rigidly controlled conditions but can be flexibly applied elsewhere. In a fundamentally interactive world there are still no uninfluenced influences, and sufficiently similar circumstances will still exemplify sufficiently similar patterns that could be selectively "characterized by direct, invariant, change-relating generalizations" (Glennan, 3). So you can still say, "If A, then B, other things being equal," as long as you recognize that there's no reason to assume that other things are ever exactly equal or that even A and B ever reoccur in exactly the same way. In other words, there's nothing more natural than an exception to a natural law. Humanly speaking, of course, there's also nothing more natural than to look for further laws to account for those exceptions, but there will be exceptions to those laws too as well as alternative ways of "mapping." In any case, no matter how many abstractions we eventually devise, they will still be selective, and for that very reason they cannot count against the ubiquity of relative originality in every concrete circumstance. (I'm indebted to Stephen E. Toulmin for this view of laws of nature, but I find further support for it in the work of Nancy Cartwright, e.g.,

“Natural Laws and the Closure of Physics,” accessible at: <http://personal.lse.ac.uk/cartwrig/PapersGeneral/Natural%20laws%20and%20the%20closure%20April%2018%202008.pdf>.)

Differance? (Deconstructionism’s intentional misspelling.) It’s an artsy way of showing us that the world is irrepressibly interactive with how we signify it. But we don’t always have to engage in clever wordplay to make that point. (I hope I’m not doing too much of that right now.)

Natural selection? It’s how relatively repeatable interactions continue (or not), by fitting well (or not) with accompanying interactions. It’s itself a relatively repeatable interaction that does not require any particular goals in order to operate, though it can be fruitfully debated whether or not the interaction itself exhibits an overall, goal-like tendency. Not only is natural selection consistent with the idea of a fundamentally interactive world, but in at least some respects it’s a requirement. In a world where relatively repeatable interactions are also relatively original, it’s the only conceivable way that increasing complexity and cooperation can emerge and be sustained.

God? “God” is how some of us name the wholly interactive. You can say “Nature” if you insist. Or “the Tao” or “Sunyata” or “Brahman.” Or “the wholly interactive” (that too is how only some of us speak). The wholly interactive is not an exact match with any popular concept of ultimate reality, whether religious or secular, so there will be plenty of room for debate here. (There’s an afterward about that too.)

God (etc.) aside, right now I’m making a brief case for a fundamentally interactive **world**. It’s not a puzzle-free worldview—mutual influence and relative originality are not puzzle-free concepts. But I’ve never found a puzzle-free worldview, and this one seems to reframe most of the familiar puzzles in a way that seems promising. It’s consistent with many interpretations of physics, chemistry, other natural sciences and most human sciences. People who view the world as fundamentally inert might argue that their worldview is more economical than this one, but I wonder about that. A worldview that discounts a great deal of what we seem to experience moment by moment strikes me as incredibly wasteful. I’m not sure how we can judge which is more economical without arguing in a circle. A fundamentally interactive world does look more permissive, and if permissiveness sounds threatening, you may prefer something more restrictive.

Afterward I: What Is Relative Originality?

I can’t define “relative originality” precisely, and for some people that will be enough to discredit the idea from the outset. But let me start with what seems an inescapable example.

There’s something relatively original about the present moment. It’s like other moments in more ways than I know how to describe (otherwise it wouldn’t even be “a” moment, and I wouldn’t be able to say anything else about it). It’s also unlike any other moment in more ways than I know how to describe. It’s somewhat unique, despite stuffy grammarians’ insistence that there are no degrees of uniqueness. It seems to arrive unbidden. My interaction with it seems more lively than my interaction with whatever occurred yesterday, and more concrete than what I imagine doing tomorrow. It clearly influences what I may do next and what I may notice. My subjectivity (whatever that is)

seems to be involved with it, but so do all the objects that engage me at the time. So I wouldn't call it exclusively subjective or objective. It's whatever it is—an influential, lively occurrence both like and unlike other occurrences in more ways than I know how to describe. It's relatively original.

Alfred North Whitehead's term for relative originality was "creativity," "the production of novel togetherness" (*Process and Reality* [New York: Macmillan, 1978], p. 21). He believed it could only be described through examples and metaphors, because we're too involved with it when we attempt to describe it. It's ubiquitous. Nobody owns it exclusively, not even God, if there be a God. Whitehead said quite a bit more about creativity that apparently made sense to him and his fans—and to hardly anybody else.

Like Whitehead, I find considerable appeal in viewing relative originality as in some sense ultimate, ubiquitous and never exclusively owned. But I'm going to call it relative originality, not creativity, because I don't want to defend everything Whitehead said.

It takes a great deal of audacity to make relative originality an ultimate principle. In our culture it's often assumed that what is most real is whatever physicists can repeatably detect, quantify and measure in an isolated system. But those procedures are set up from the outset to filter out a great deal of originality. So we can be easily persuaded that relative originality is just some sort of illusion that serious thinkers can easily afford to ignore. This is all very circular, however, and I am not persuaded.

Instead it seems to me that what physicists work with are mostly abstractions—definitely real, but still abstractions. We get away with talking about isolated systems by simply ignoring how they are not isolated. We get away with isolating the parts and regularities that make up those systems by further ignoring how parts and regularities are no more isolated than the systems they make up. We ignore the differences among similar occurrences in favor of what we can view as exactly the same. (Again, see Cartwright, mentioned earlier.)

We learn a great deal by doing all that. It's indispensable to understanding our world and ourselves. I don't believe any subject is off-limits to that sort of analysis (that would be trying to isolate something). But concretely speaking it obscures as much as it uncovers.

Physics, first and foremost, is what physicists do in interpersonal settings that are not isolated systems and that cannot be repeated in every respect. And narrating what a physicist did in such a relatively original setting—whether devising a theory or testing it—is as essential to the pursuit of physics as any fictitiously isolated particle or regularity or mechanism. We have no reason to doubt that physicists are telling us about aspects of reality that are really there, but physicists and their interpersonal settings are really there too. Physics is still, principally, what physicists do among their neighbors, not the universe speaking to us on its own.

If some people want to imagine a world where physicists and the stories they tell are irrelevant to what's really there, they may fail to notice that this would also be a world in which physics itself is irrelevant. Concretely speaking, physics as we know or can even imagine it offers no challenge to relative originality but actually illustrates it.

Relative originality never exists apart from relatively repeatable parts and patterns, nor vice versa. Every influence is itself influenced, yet also influential in its own right—different from its influences, but not isolated or separate from them. There are no gaps here and no dualisms, just different aspects of a common, ever-changing reality present to us in every moment of experience.

Afterward II: Why Call the Wholly Interactive "God"?

In a fundamentally interactive world, the wholly interactive would, by definition, be wholly yet mutually influential with everything else and, in that way, most influential yet most influenced, most original yet most recurring. (What "most influential" means in a given instance is open to further interpretation and debate, but if the world is fundamentally interactive, it cannot mean making every difference to anything else.)

To interact knowingly enough with the particularly interactive is to interact somewhat knowingly with the wholly interactive. The wholly interactive is indirectly known whenever anything else is known. People who notice this don't need arguments or proofs to recognize its reality; people who don't notice this are not likely to be swayed by arguments or proofs.

Many of us who notice this find it natural to call the wholly interactive “God.” (Others of us would disagree.)

“God” brings out analogies between us, who are rather interactive, and the wholly interactive. For us theists of this sort, interacting with the wholly interactive is more like an I-You interaction, not an I-It one. So personal pronouns are admissible.

With St. Augustine some of us fleetingly notice the wholly interactive as nearer to us than we are to ourselves (*Confessions*, 3.6.11).

With St. Paul some of us regard the wholly interactive as the one from whom, through whom and in whom all things are (Romans 11:36).

Also with St. Paul, some of us find the power of the wholly interactive perfectly embodied in a common life whose embrace outlives and undoes the most entrenched resistance, and we find that common life begun, in human terms, with the life of Jesus of Nazareth (Philippians 2:1-13).

We pay particular attention to "sacred texts" like these, not because they are flawless final words (they clearly are not), but because they are instructive examples of people like us struggling to convey their interactions with the wholly interactive. In fact, that seems to be how texts become sacred in a religious tradition: they are found over time to be instructive examples of this ongoing, culturally conditioned effort to communicate.

Those of us who speak of God here learn to pray unselfishly, not to shift responsibility, but to deepen the intimacy of our interaction (communion) with the wholly interactive, trusting that some good for the world always results from this.

We face death trusting that every past moment lives, partly in the continuing interactions of countless others, and wholly in the continuing interactions of the wholly interactive.

Our trust (or "faith") is not be a matter of clinging to anything, but of opening to the lasting good available here and now in our interactions with one another and with the wholly interactive.

With traditional theists we can say that the wholly interactive is, in a sense, “off the charts,” not confined by membership in a fixed series or spectrum. (But that’s true of any concrete interaction.)

With process theists we can say that the wholly interactive is nevertheless the “chief exemplification” of what a fundamentally interactive world would involve.

With process theists we also reinterpret the “omni” attributes of God in terms of being wholly interactive. If we wanted to keep the word “omnipotent,” for example (not everybody wants to keep it), it would mean, not the ability to make every difference (not even an option), but the ability to make the most wholesome difference to every single thing. This would be as unlimited a power as can even be conceived in a fundamentally interactive world.

When we presume power to be fundamentally interactive, the traditional problem of evil doesn’t even arise. Instead of asking, “Why isn’t the world better?” the question now becomes, “What can we do to make it better?” In a fundamentally interactive world, chaos and conflict simply are not preventable, and never were, not even by the wholly interactive. This was not a condition chosen by anybody: it just is. And the fact that it is lies behind why we even have words like “choice.” All interactions exceed their influences. So shit happens. It can be healed, but not erased. Wonder also happens, and beauty and joy. They can’t be erased either, though they can’t be isolated from all the shit that came with them. Is this a “best of all possible worlds” explanation? It’s not clear what “best” would mean here. It’s a world that can always be better, no matter what happens, and it’s a world where those who work at mending it are not alone.

A major objection to calling the wholly interactive “God” is that many people associate the word with an invisible guy, completely outside the world, who interferes with it on behalf of his favorite worshippers. (I use male pronouns here only because that’s part of the popular image.)

The wholly interactive may interact with everything else, but that’s not interfering, not when everything else is likewise fundamentally interactive. The wholly interactive may be beyond everything else, but that’s not completely

“outside” when the “beyond” and everything else are understood interactively. The wholly interactive may interact “sympathetically” with worshippers, but that applies to nonworshippers and everybody and everything else, without favoritism. Interactions that don’t fit well with those of the wholly interactive may, in time, give way to those that do (remember natural selection) but this is not favoritism either, just consistency.

Obviously, this is not the invisible magician of popular theism, though it helps explain why people interacting with the wholly interactive might resort to personal and interpersonal analogies. When we feel answerable to something beyond ourselves and our in-groups, we’re not just mistakenly seeing faces in the clouds. We’re actually engaged with an immeasurably greater reality that may be working for or against our favorite schemes, not magically, but interactively.

The most informed Jewish, Christian and Muslim theists always knew that God couldn’t quite be that invisible magician. What they said about God, often as not, is close enough to what I’m saying about the wholly interactive that I can claim to stand in continuity with them. We’re not in perfect agreement, but they were never in perfect agreement with one another.

Another objection to calling the wholly interactive “God,” is that we can’t even speak of the wholly interactive without presuming other interactions. The most informed Jewish, Christian and Muslim theists have almost always agreed that God created the world from nothing. They have thus insisted that we can speak of God without presuming other interactions. But Jewish and Christian sacred scriptures are not clearly insistent about this. (I don’t know the Qur’an well enough to comment on it here.) Genesis seems in fact to depict a world called into relative order from relative chaos. Also, the Christian idea of God as Triune seems to hint that God’s very being already includes other interactions of a sort. So again that objection may not be decisive.

Even if all this passes muster, some people would say that the word “God” is still too dangerous to keep. Just look at what people have done under this name.

But I believe that continuity with much past usage practically guarantees that the word will keep cropping up regardless of the risks involved, or of others’ efforts to suppress it, and that encouraging its use in naming the wholly interactive is among the best ways to wean people away from relying on an invisible magician. After all, it seems to be working that way for me.

And when it comes to what people have done under this name, people will always use an inspiring term to justify their favorite atrocities. It’s been done in the name of democracy, even in the name of reason itself. People reply with, Yeah, but it wasn’t in the name of true democracy or true reason. Fine. Theists will reply that other atrocities were not in the name of the truly divine, either. Inspiring words are always dangerous, simply because they are, indeed, inspiring. We can’t afford to drop them because of that. We just need to be more vigilant—together—about their misuse.