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RELATION:

Human and Divine

Over the past decades the terms "relation" and "relationality" have become buzzwords in many popular and academic discourses. All sorts of dynamics and structures have been associated with these terms. In most cases these terms were opposed to other forms of perceiving and thinking constellations of life (e.g., substance-oriented theories) and other attempts to organize forms of life (e.g., abstract individualism). Beyond the discoveries of deficiencies in other modes of orientation, however, they rarely provided sufficient conceptual clarity. Most dominant were conceptions of two different "points of reference" in the so-called "subject-object-relation", in which the subjective side was seen as active and privileged by a basic "self-relation", whereas the objective side was regarded as passive or even as constituted by the subject. Over against this subject-object-relation the intersubjective "I-Though relation" was praised and analysed on different levels of sophistication. Only few theories moved beyond reflections about the "relatedness" of two self-referential "points of reference". There were, of course, many protests against these simplistic philosophical and religious modes of thinking in one-to-one constellations. But the theoretically more complex and the empirically more realistic approaches toward "the subject" and "the object" and toward "intersubjective" processes of communication lost, as a rule, the clarity intended by the term "relation". The admission that the two "reference-points" were in themselves of a complex "relationality" or that they were at least imbedded in a complex relational setting was most often paid with a loss of control of thought in "relational thinking".

My contribution to the consultation will challenge the talking and thinking about such "reference points". It proposes to move beyond the popular philosophical and religious thinking connected with these assumptions--even in elementary education. In the *first* part I will start with the simple question: What is the minimum structure required to call a constellation between or in so-called "subjects" or "subjects and objects" "a relation"? Is the collision of two billiard balls already a relation? Is a vague feeling of external presence a relation? Is a fleeting inner intuition already a self-relation? In order to answer my basic question I will center on a qualified contact between a human mental system and an external

physical entity or a cluster of entities. What is the minimum required to call the classical conscious so-called "subject-object encounter" a relation? In the *second* part I will reflect on the dynamics of reciprocal, interactive personal relations. The *third* part offers some preliminary reflections on Divine-human relations.

1. The Inner Complexity of a "Relation"

One could assume that "relations" are the simplest "building blocks" or the most elementary "bridges" in natural and social forms of life. Starting from some observations and reflections by Alfred North Whitehead about the organization of thought and the emergence of science and some recent findings about mental development in early childhood, I would like to contest this view. I would like to argue that even the most basic constellations worthy to be called a "relation" (and not just a contact, an encounter without any continuity and any result) are of a breath-taking inner complexity.

"The Organisation of Thought" is the title of the Presidential Address that Whitehead gives to the British Association, Newcastle 1916. A book with collected essays of his published a year later bears the same title. (The Organisation of Thought 1917; the following numbers in the text refer to Whitehead's article, 105-133.) Whitehead starts with reflections on our authentic "experience of life" which is formed by a "flux of perceptions, sensations and emotions" (109). "The most obvious aspect of this field of actual experience is its disorderly character. It is for each person a *continuum*, fragmentary and with elements not clearly differentiated." Whitehead comments: "I insist on the radically untidy, ill-adjusted character of the fields of actual experience from which science starts. To grasp this truth is the first step in wisdom ..." (110) It is only through complex operations and abstractions that we create "the neat, trim, tidy, exact world which is the goal of scientific thought". We do, however, "imagine that we have immediate experience of a world of perfectly defined objects implicated in perfectly defined events which, as known to us by the direct deliverance of our senses, happen at exact instants of time, in a space formed by exact points ..." (110). But this imagination is a self-deception. It is not immediate experience, but an imagined continuum organized by thought which gives us these impressions.

Interesting experiments by the Harvard neuroscientist Charles Nelson with 6- and 9-month old babies can lead us into the first stages of the process of constructing the common-sense and later the scientific worlds which we confuse with real immediate experience. Nelson "showed a group of 6-month old babies a photo of a chimpanzee, and gave them time to stare at it until they lost interest. They were then shown another chimp. The babies perked up and stared at the new photo. The infants easily recognized each chimp as an individual—they were fascinated by each new face ... By 9 months, those kids had lost the ability to tell chimps apart; but at the same time they had increased their powers of observation when it came to human faces." (Wingert/Brant, *Studying the Baby's Brain*, 49). Quite obviously the babies had reduced one type of complexity of perception and had increased another one. In a superficial view and talk, they "related" with 6 months to each new chimp and lost this ability by 9 months. My argument is, that staring at a photo or a real face, even with some energy and intensity, is not yet "relating" to it. By 9 months, the babies had reached a higher perceptive level towards the ability to develop "relations".

Extremely complex grids and patterns of observation have to be built in order to "relate" a human mind to its environment or even small parts of it. A multitude of experienced rhythms, the experiences of interruption and discontinuity and recontinuation seem to be basic for the emergence of these patterns. Hunger, thirst and their satisfaction by nourishment, the experience of wetness, coldness and then of being clean and warm again, tiredness, sleep and the awakening--a multitude of experiences generates a complex bodily self-reference. In the early stages of life and experience, however, this complex self-reference is of the untidiness which Whitehead describes; only gradually will it be transformed into a set of self-relations. From the earliest, the intake of nourishment is accompanied by a multi-sensual perception: tactile perceptions, tasting, smelling, the first forms of seeing and hearing have to be endured, discerned and correlated. A very complex multi-sensual bodily self-perception and complex patterns of discerning contacts with the environment have to be coordinated. An overwhelming multitude of internal and external stimuli, reactions and activities has to be attuned, hierarchized and sequenced. Routines and rhythms are experienced and practised, particularly with the primary contact-persons, who provide nourishment, care and attention.

Despite the intensity of such connections and the necessity of their sustenance and renewal, it is not necessarily adequate to speak of a "relation" from the side of the infant. The constellation can still lack the *intrinsic continuity, clarity and definiteness that we connect*

with the term "relation". In principle, the cry of the infant could always be answered by new and different feeding persons, although this would probably be bad for the child's emotional development. Gradually the baby will have to sort out different worlds of sounds and noises, bodily and tactile feelings, smells, intensities of lights and colors. In a counter-intuitive way the tensions between this multiple complexity and the continued central needs of the child and their satisfaction will drive towards a reduction of the overpowering complexity of perception and experience. Typical correlations of multi-sensual experience create events and areas of familiarity and comfort. Gradually a "relational" experience of familiarity with oneself sets in. On the basis of research done by Martin Hoffmann, professor of psychology at New York University, who studied the experience of empathy in earliest childhood, "researchers played for infants tapes of other babies crying. As predicted, that was enough to start the tears flowing. But when researchers played babies recordings of their own cries, they rarely began crying themselves." (*Studying the Baby's Brain*, 47). Obviously, a familiarity with oneself emerges which allows to discern external and internal challenges to perception and emotion and will eventually evolve into a complex self-relation.

The development of a multitude of complex patterns of perception, their coordination and, finally, the abstraction from the uniqueness of each perception and the abstraction from elementary references and self-references open the possibility to establish external relations. A most simple deictic reidentification can have the potential for a relation and can help to illuminate it. A baby points to an object in her environment: she re-cognizes it: "This! There!" What has to happen so that this event can come about?

In the midst of a flux of perceptions, sensations and emotions, a constellation of colors and shapes somehow had to be identified visually. This external constellation had to be copied into latent memory and imagination (by processes which have to be further analysed by scientists, if possible). A visual awareness of this constellation repeated several times caused the--potentially repeatable--activation of its memory. The "againness" of the perception became striking. The seemingly simple deictic operation--"This! There!"--expresses the excitement at the successful attunement of the inner and outer worlds, the world of memories and imaginations and the world of material for externally conditioned experience.

However, even the complexity of such an operation which requires complex self-referential and perceptual operations and their attunement does not yet constitute a "relation." The

imagined operation "This! There!" could be a unique event. Only once did the infant point to the yellow fish on the wallpaper--then it lost the interest in this fish forever. It became part of the wallpaper, the complex environment. The infant did *not* develop a relation to this object. But what is required in order to reach this level?

In order to speak of a "relation" in a meaningful way, a constellation of two or more actual entities in the midst of complex patterns of perception, imagination and memory, has to be actualized in such a way that the perception is accompanied by *a certainty of identity and continuity*. This certainty of identity and continuity can be more internally conditioned so that the relation is more or less dominated by the self-relation, the cultivation of memory, imagination and experience. But a relation can also primarily derive its continuity- and identity-conditioning power from the object and its self-presentation in spacetime, thus conditioning a more reactive constellation on the mental side. In the first case the vividness of the self-referential experience of a reactivation of patterns of memory and imagination sustains the relation to external constellations, in the second case an impressive continuous or repeated constellation in spacetime elicits the relation by again and again activating patterns of memory and imagination. To be sure, both sides are necessary in any "simple relation" in terms of a conscious subject-object encounter.

On this basis we can refine Immanuel Kant's famous statement about the transcendental apperception, § 16 of his *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Das: Ich denke muß alle meine Vorstellungen begleiten können." (140b; "The: I think has to potentially accompany all my perceptions.") Kant makes it clear that the "I think" is not an entity that can be calmly imagined and perceived, but a potential dynamic self-awareness which can be activated in all perceptual activity. This is a deeply relational awareness of a relational activity connected with a continuum which we associate with the "inner self." This continuum is neither a mere "reference-point" nor a tabula rasa, an empty intellectual space. It is rather the host of a multitude of sensually conditioned grids and patterns which allow us to copy and to reconstruct the world in memories and imaginations. This emotionally loaded, highly active continuum, however, does much more than copying the world of experience into our memory and imagination. There is no such thing as a "neat, trim, tidy, exact world which is the goal of scientific thought" and which rests out there, just waiting for us to be copied. An enormous imaginative creativity, reduced and tamed again and again by mental activity and imposing impressions, has to deal with "radically untidy, ill-adjusted fields of actual experience." Its

creative potential allows it to rise far beyond the natural environments into realms of memory and imagination, either long gone by, or only in the making, or never to be incarnated in natural space-time at all. With a poor expression we usually speak of the "realms of possibilities" which invite the establishment of relations far beyond perceptual relations in the realm of nature.

2. Reciprocal, Interactive, Personal Relations

The "simple" deictic and not even the perceptual operation which we have imagined and considered on the way to understand the inner texture of "a relation" is not what most people have in mind when they use this term. With "relation" they usually associate a reciprocal, interactive person-to-person constellation, a more or less stable I-Though encounter. In addition, the term "relationality" is also used to represent not only one-on-one interpersonal constellations, but also (though most often vaguely) one-to-many and many-to-many configurations.

As soon as one is aware of the inner complexity of a "simple" perceptual relation the extremely potentiated complexity of a person-to-person encounter can easily discourage any effort to analyse it. An at least triadic complexity has to be handled even before any explicitly verbal communication sets in. We have to differentiate and to attune two realms of memory and imagination with the attempt to relate to a natural environment that we can regard as "common" in order to establish such a relation. Much higher complexities have to be considered when we include language and verbal communication.

It would be a worthwhile task to work on a typology of typical interpersonal relations with different levels of complexity. Since this task is far beyond the scope of this presentation, I will rather-in a kind of top-down approach-consider the question why the relation of "love" can be regarded as the prime example, if not the essence of perfect interpersonal reciprocal relations.

In order to do this it will not suffice to differentiate between *eros* and *agape* (Anders Nygren), differentiate a type of love that primarily seeks individual personal fulfillment from a type of love that primarily seeks to serve the needs of "the other." Even triadic

differentiations between *eros*, *agape* and a more reciprocally balanced *philia* (or *cupiditas*, *caritas*, *amicitia*) will not be sufficient to disclose the inner structure of this relation (cf. Welker, in: Polkinghorne; Welker, *Liebe*). It is the book of John in its description of the love between God the Father and the Son which can also open our eyes for the depth-dimension of human love. John 17:26 says: *I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them*. An equal manifestation of the Son and a "making home of Father and Son" among the believers is connected with the Divine love in which the believers participate (John 14:21ff).

Here love is depicted as a relation of (mutual) honoring, which seeks the honor of the beloved one beyond the own relation of honor to him or her. The loving thus opens the relation for others by praising and revealing the beloved to the fellow-creatures. Parental love which seeks the inclusion of the children in the love relation of the parents is a model for a fully developed love, which also reveals the deficiencies of a romantic or erotic relation or a relation of mercy. Alfred North Whitehead grasps this mature form of love in non-religious contexts when he speaks of the "love of self-devotion where the potentialities of the loved object are felt passionately as a claim that it find itself in a friendly universe. Such love is really an intense feeling as to how the harmony of the world should be realised in particular objects."(Adventures of Ideas, 289).» Love seeks the unfolding of the beloved one beyond one's own fixed conceptions of what would be best for him or her or for both. In the beloved one, the harmony of creation should realize itself beyond one's own preconception. In Whitehead's words the beloved one should concretize his or her relative, real world with all its potentials as well as he or she possibly can. And the loving relation will do everything so that the world concretizes itself favorably in the beloved one. All things and everybody should work together for good of the beloved one.

In the relation of love the own memories and imaginations try to serve the memories and expectations of the beloved one in a way that he or she can best unfold their creative potentials. The loving person also tries to create and support circumstances in the common and in the other's environment which serve him or her best. And he/she does not do this in the attempt to "treat" the beloved well, but to let her or him freely find "a friendly universe." Honoring, encouragement to unfold and the creative impact on the environment to support this self-unfolding are characteristic of this "relation", which becomes the perfect interpersonal relation in reciprocal co-enhancement.

Core elements of what is essential in a constellation termed "relation" here come to the fore. A "relation" is at least in search for its--not infinite but indefinite--continuity. In a complex and continuously changing world it thus requires the paradox of development and unfolding in order to grant relative stability. An ideal "relation" seeks the (revelatory, physical, emotional, cognitive ...) unfolding of both (or all) sides of a simple or complex correlation, therefore making "truth-seeking communities" a perfect example of flourishing "relational" configurations (cf. Polkinghorne/ Welker: Faith, esp. chapter 9). Here we argue that the process of co-enhancement of perceptual certainty and cognitive insight which continuously poses and challenges truth-claims in order to reach higher levels of conviction and insight is characteristic for those communities.

Although a relation is directional and clearly oriented, it seeks--at least on one side--in the case of true love, on both sides--dynamic freedom. In doing so it seeks creative continuity, permanence or even eternity.

3. The Relation of God to Human Creatures

How could God and human creatures ever "relate" in the sense of the term developed when mutual access to the other's memory and imagination and to a common environment are essential for this constellation? Different religions will give different answers, and some may even waive the claim that we can "relate" to God unless we accept much more one-sided or much more vague connections between God and creatures.

In the Christian perspective it is the incarnational and kenotic presence (Cf. Polkinghorne, in: Polkinghorne, *The Work of Love*, 90-106) of God--fully revealed in Jesus Christ and witnessed to by his post-Easterly body--which gives us the potential of truly relating to God. Through the Word of God--witnessed to in scripture and clearly concretized in the person and proclamation of pre- and post-Easter Jesus Christ--we have access to God's memory and imagination.¹ In the body of Christ, in the celebration of the sacraments, in proclamation and discipleship we can share an environment with the resurrected. Compared with many human

person-to-person relations, however, this relation is not symmetrical. Despite His incarnational and kenotic presence God encounters us with His eternal and salvific creativity in the Holy Spirit. God's potentials of sustenance, rescue and ennoblement in His loving relation to us are far beyond any idea of reciprocity. This does not question the anthropological "realism" of this relation, quite the contrary (cf. Welker, in: Jeeves, *From Cells to Souls*, 223-232; Welker, In: Soulen/Woodhead, *God*, 317-342). Our doxology and praise, intensive, powerful and beautiful as they might be, are all too poor and frail to rise to a level of reciprocity with God's creative relation to us. It is, however, in community with Christ and in the power of the Spirit that we become dignified to participate fully in the dynamics of the Divine love and life. The proclamatory, sacramental and diakonical mission of the church witnesses to this relating to, and participating in God's merciful and ennobling love (cf. Zizioulas, 123ff; Welker, *Communion*, 167ff; Schwöbel, 379ff).

It is the figure of the "pouring of the Spirit" and the notion of "Spirit baptism" which can open our eyes for the complexity of the *divine-human I-Though encounter*, which is not adequately grasped with an analogy to human person-to person encounters (cf. Martin's reflections on mobilisations and encounters, this volume; Dunn and Macchia, in: Welker, *The Workings of the Spirit*, 3ff and 109ff). On the one hand, the context-sensitivity and encounter-sensitivity of the Holy Spirits (Polkinghorne/Welker, chapter 5) guarantees the individuality and uniqueness of each creature "encountered" by God. On the other hand the "relation" of God to the individual creature is never a constellation of just a constellation of "two points of reference" (cf. the critique of reductionist trinitarian thinking by Lewis Ayres and Kallistos Ware, in this volume). God, as the triune God, with the rich divine creativity, the presence of the post-Ester and elevated Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit encounters each creature in its embeddedness in a rich creaturely context, beginning with its differentiated body (cf. Luther's splendid realism in his explication of the first article in his *Small and Large Catechisms*) and the rich creaturely community--past, present, and future--without which the individual creature would not be what it is (cf. Polkinghorne on the analogy between complex spiritual and scientific "relational" constellations, and Michael Heller on "noncommutative Spaces", in this volume).

1 For a discussion of the potentials and difficulties to access the mind of God through the exploration of nature, cf. Polkinghorne and Welker, *Faith in the Living God*, chapters 1 and 2 (see note 5).

Sum: I have argued that "relations" are not connections between two "points of reference". They are more or less successful attempts to connect two or more continua or segments of environments in a way that allows for clarity of impact (or, in higher forms: of insight) and continuity. On this basis we can differentiate immediate and cognitively modeled experience (only on the basis of the latter concepts of "relations" in terms of two-reference-points were constructed). On the basis of the insights so far developed, the creative functions and tasks of "relations" can be made visible. It can be shown why the "relation of love"--in many religious and philosophical traditions--was seen and esteemed to be the ideal connection between creatures. Finally, we can start contemplating on what is needed from the divine and human side in order to establish a "relation" between the realities formerly depicted as "the reference points God and man".

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