Information and the Nature of Reality
From Physics to Metaphysics

Edited by

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Many scientists, as the prime example of the prime examples of recent years, have been using information as the prime tool.

In this book, we have tried to understand various aspects of this theme. We have drawn on both physical and digital approaches to understanding information. We have included discussions of various aspects of the topic, including the role of physical and digital information in the natural sciences.

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16 What is the ‘spiritual body’?
On what may be regarded as ‘ultimate’ in the interrelation between God, matter, and information

Michael Welker

This chapter operates from a theological perspective - broadened, however, by information on the development of classical philosophy and metaphysics and some experience in the global science-and-theology discourse of the last 20 years. I ask the question: Can we imagine and penetrate the reality classical theology had in mind when it spoke of the ‘spiritual body’? And beyond that, can we convince non-theological mindsets that this concept not only makes sense in the orbit of religion, but that it has illuminating power beyond this realm because it is firmly rooted in a reality, and not just confined to one complex mode of discourse?

The preparation for this task requires a few sophisticated preliminary steps. First we have to differentiate ‘old-style’ and ‘new-style’ metaphysics as two possible frameworks for the approach. Second, we have to discern an understanding of creation in the light of Biblical creation accounts and in the light of ‘old-style’ metaphysics. Third, on the basis of the Biblical creation accounts, we see that the notion of a creator as a sustainer of the universe is spiritually not satisfying and salvific. Fourth, this will prepare us for an understanding of the role of the resurrection in divine creativity in general, and provide an understanding of the nature and the
importance of the 'spiritual body' of Jesus Christ in particular. Fifth, we will try to comprehend the transformative power of this spiritual body and the involvement of human beings and other creatures in it. On this basis we want to engage non-theological academic thinkers by asking them whether the sustaining, rescuing, and ennobling interaction between God, creation, and spiritual information can find analogies in their realms of experience, and whether it can challenge reductionistic concepts of matter. This question will be guided by a metaphysical approach in the 'new style'.

16.1 DIFFERENTIATING 'OLD-STYLE' AND 'NEW-STYLE' METAPHYSICS

My proposal to differentiate between 'old-style' and 'new-style' metaphysics does not imply that 'old-style' metaphysics is outdated and should be simply replaced by 'new-style' metaphysics. 'New-style' metaphysics is a constructive reaction to the lament that after Kant, metaphysics as the production of ultimate and closing thoughts about total reality is no longer possible. To be sure, philosophy has to face the dilemma that in late modern societies, in their academic as well as in their religious settings, a plurality of forms of life and rationalities has established itself, and can no longer be convincingly ordered in 'a hierarchy of the more or less valuable'. In this situation, 'old-style' metaphysics can be engaged in order to relativize the current epistemic setting at least in the academy in the West - to relativize it with world views and cognitive claims from past epochs. In a more modest and empirically argumentative way, 'new-style' metaphysics responds to this challenge by reducing the metaphysical claim to an exploration of two areas of discovery and research.

It was Alfred North Whitehead who in a most helpful way differentiated between old- and new-style metaphysics (without using these terms). On the one hand, he states in terms of 'old-style' metaphysics: 'By “metaphysics” I mean the science which seeks to discover the general ideas which are indispensably relevant to the analysis of everything that happens' (Whitehead, 1960, p. 82). On the other hand, in the mode of 'new-style' metaphysics, he speaks not of ‘the’, but of ‘a’ metaphysics and of a 'metaphysical description' that 'takes its origin from one select field of interest. It receives its confirmation by establishing itself as adequate and as exemplified in other fields of interest' (Whitehead, 1960, p. 86f). Whitehead makes it clear that 'a metaphysics' can emerge from different homelands: mathematics, a science, religion, common sense. As soon as a solid bridge theory can be established between at least two areas of interest by indicating that basic ideas, concepts, and intellectual operations can work in both areas, we are in the process of a 'metaphysical description' and on the way to 'a metaphysics' - which I call 'new-style' metaphysics.

It is the 'bottom-up' approach against the 'top-down' thinking that is characteristic of a 'new-style' metaphysics. Such a metaphysics tries to cultivate common sense, to challenge it, and move it to higher levels of insight by confronting it with specific 'fields of interest' that require specific modes of thinking in order to be adequately explored. The differences between common-sense thought and the thinking required to access at least one of these fields of interest, but also the differences between the cognitive explorations of at least two of these fields of interest (for example in science and theology), provide the impulses to develop a 'new-style' metaphysics.

16.2 CREATION ACCORDING TO 'OLD-STYLE' METAPHYSICS AND ACCORDING TO CLASSICAL BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS

Most theological and philosophical thinking about 'creation' has been dominated by the concepts of 'bringing forth' and 'dependence'. Creation as creatura was nature, the cosmos, or vaguely conceived totality as brought forth and dependent on one or several transcendent powers[1] or wills[2] or personal entities, mostly named God or gods. Creation as creatio was the activity or energy of bringing

As a representative voice, see Habermas (1987, p. 434).
forth, keeping in dependence or even in ‘ultimate’ dependence and at the same time sustaining nature, the cosmos, the totality (sometimes explicitly also referring to culture and history). Connected with this type of thinking, ideas and concepts of God such as ‘the all-determining reality’ (Bultmann, Pannenberg), the ‘ground of being’ (Tillich), the ‘ultimate point of reference’ (G. Kaufman), the ‘whither of absolute dependence’ (Schleiermacher) were highly en vogue.

In striking contrast, the classical Biblical Priestly creation account in Genesis 1 offers a much more subtle picture. Through the word of God, chaotic matter becomes enabled not only to win forms and shapes, energy, and life. The heavens, the stars, the earth, the waters, and the humans are to actively participate in God’s creative energy and power. The same verbs used for the divine process of creating are also used for the co-creativity of what and who are created. Against a widespread fear of a ‘synergistic’ confusion of God and creature in the case of co-creativity, it has to be recognized that the Biblical creation account does not think in one-to-one structures (God and creation, God and world, God and the human being). The account thinks in one-to-many structures in which selected creatures gain a graded share in the creative divine activity. In various ways selected creatures participate in the formation of creation. The heavens part, the stars govern the times and festive days, the earth brings forth creatures, and the humans are assigned the task to rule over creation and thereby reflect the image of God.

In this one-to-many relationship, no creature has the power to act in God’s stead, yet the power of the co-creative creatures is sizable. This power not only enables humans as well as other creatures to exercise their creaturely freedom and act independently, it also makes creatively self-endangerment and self-destruction possible. There are several indications in the creation account that support this realistic reading against all metaphysical ‘perfect-watchmaker’ illusions (which, as a rule, come with the theodicy question in the backpack). The co-creative creatures remain creatures. Despite their powers, they are no gods (as other ancient creation accounts would have it). Neither the heavens nor the sun, moon, and stars, nor the earth are divine powers. And the ‘slave-holder and conqueror’ language in the infamous ‘call to dominion’ indicates that a constant conflict between the humans and the animals in a common area of nourishment has to be regulated. The humans clearly become privileged, yet in all their self-interest and privileging of their own self-reproduction and spreading over the earth they have to mirror the image of God to the other creatures, and that means in ancient royal imagery: the exercise of justice and mercy towards the weak.

Whoever does not like this sober picture of creation that takes seriously the fact that life is finite, that it lives at the expense of other life, and that the co-creative power of the creatures brings the risks of self-endangerment, seems to find an argument against this understanding in the Priestly account itself, an argument impossible to beat. Doesn’t, after all, the Biblical creation account press us to embrace the speculative metaphysical view by the repeated assertion of the ‘goodness’ of creation? Repeatedly, the co-creative creatures entities and the areas of creation are seen by God as ‘good’ (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18). The works of creation viewed all together are even judged to be ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31): ‘God saw everything that He had made and lo, it was very good.’ ‘Good’ (toh in Hebrew) means ‘conducive to life.’ But a creaturely and even co-creative existence, even if it is highly conducive to life, has not yet reached the level of divine glory. The difference between God’s glory and the creation judged by God to be ‘good’ and ‘very good’ is still maintained. Creation is not paradise.

16.3 ‘CREATION’ ITSELF POINTS BEYOND GOD AS A MERE SUSTAINER OF THE UNIVERSE

It belongs to the rituals in the science-and-theology or science-and-religion discourses and their public radiations that some of the scientists connect their summarizing perspectives with religious awe and theological respect for the power and wisdom of a divine creator. The power of mathematics and rational thinking in illuminating hidden secrets of nature, observations of unquestionable beauty and
astounding rhythmic orders, the fecundity of life and its potential to generate 'higher forms' are named in order to support such views. Others, however, leave such discourses with the summary: 'The more I looked at the universe, the more I found it pointless.' Or they think along Whitehead's words: 'Life is robbery and requires justification.'

At this point, we become aware of the fact that any 'natural awareness of the divine' is connected with pressing problems - as Calvin showed so powerfully at the beginning of his Institutes of the Christian Religion in 1559. Any perspective on God as creator and sustainer of the world will never overcome the ambivalence and ultimate inconsolability of a 'natural' theology of creation. Calvin calls this 'sense of Deity' - which he sees beyond dispute - 'fleeting and vain' (Calvin, 1559, I, 3, 3).

If we do not overrule the realistic experience of creation with 'old-style' metaphysics, we have to acknowledge that a power merely sustaining the universe - impressive as it is - is ultimately not worth being called 'divine'. And the instantiation, the 'whither' of this power, is not worth being called 'God'. Confronted not only with the ultimate illusions of a 'natural' theology of creation, Calvin calls this 'sense of Deity' - which he sees beyond dispute - 'fleeting and vain' (Calvin, 1559, I, 3, 3).

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us. By contrast, the stories of the empty tomb show that a single moment of revelation alone, even if it is a spectacular one from heavenly messengers, is not in itself enough to cause belief. Instead, what remains after the empty grave are fear, amazement, and silence (Mark). Meanwhile, the belief that the corpse has been stolen is dismissed as ‘women’s chatter’.

The certainty that Christ is risen does not signify, however, that he is present in the way that the pre-Easter Jesus was. In fact, the complete fullness of his person and his life is now present ‘in Spirit and in faith’. This presence ‘in Spirit and faith’ is hard to comprehend, not only to naturalistic and scientific thought, which tends to fixate instead continually on the pros and cons of physical resuscitation. By contrast, the fullness of the person and life of Christ accentuates the community of witnesses in Spirit, faith, and canonical memory. In this way, the entirety of Jesus’ life, his charisma and his power, is present and efficacious in the resurrected and exulted one.

The presence of the resurrected one conveys the powers of love, forgiveness, healing, and his passion for children, the weak, the rejected, the sick, and those in misery. Further, the power to confront the so-called ‘powers and principalities’ begins to take shape in his presence: for example in conflict with political and religious institutions in the search for truth and demands for real justice. The person and life of Jesus Christ unleashes normative and cultural renewals and other creative impulses. The presence of the resurrected Christ is realized among the witnesses through many signs – including small ones – of love, healing, forgiveness, devotion, acceptance, and the passionate search for justice and truth. In this often inconspicuous way, Christ and the kingdom of God are ‘coming’.

Besides this emergent coming for which Christians pray in the Lord’s Prayer, the Biblical traditions also offer visions of the final coming of the Son of Man. They deal with eschatological visions, and these are necessarily visions because the resurrected and exulted one will not come only in a specific year or to a specific area of the world. The resurrected and exulted one comes in all times and to all areas of the world. He judges, as the Apostle’s Creed says, ‘the living and the dead’. This is a vision that necessarily transcends all merely natural and empirical conceptions. But it is this important and healing vision that opposes all explicit and implicit egoisms of particular cultures and eras.

If we only have a vision of the Son of Man coming from the heavens with his angels, ‘we are of all people most to be pitied’, to echo Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. The talk about the ‘coming’ Christ becomes comforting because the one who is ‘coming’ will not be revealed for the first time only at the end of all times and eras, but rather, he is already among us now as the crucified and resurrected one, and because the crucified and resurrected one is the one who, in the historical pre-Easter Jesus, has been revealed in his incarnational nearness of his human life and work. For this reason, we cannot separate the memory of the historical Jesus from the realization that the crucified and resurrected one is present and will ‘come again’ for his full parousia. The creating and saving God is present here, surrounding and carrying his creatures in his ‘Yes’ to life against the powers of sin and death. These powers are dramatically depicted at the cross of Christ.

At the cross of Christ, Jesus is condemned in the name of politics and in the name of religion. He is executed in the name of both Jewish and Roman law. Even public opinion is against him: ‘Then they cried out again, “Crucify him!”’ (Mark 15:13f. par.). Jews and Gentiles, Jews and Romans, natives and foreigners all agree. All principalities and powers work together, and the worldly ‘immunesystems’ collapse. The reciprocal checks and balances between religion, politics, law, and morality fail in the event of the cross. Conflicts between the occupiers and the occupied, the world superpower and an oppressed people, are simply glossed over. Even the disciples betray Jesus, abandoning him and fleeing, as the tradition
of the Last Supper, the Gethsemane story, and the 'night of betrayal' make all too clear.

The cross reveals, as the Biblical texts say, 'the world under the power of sin'. It reveals 'the night of godforsakenness', not only of Jesus himself but of the whole world. The cross reveals the presence of this dire need and misery, not only in Jesus' hour of death, but as a real and present danger in all times. The resurrection liberates from this night of godforsakenness. God's activity alone, not human initiative, brings salvation. The true saving power and vital necessity of the resurrection only become manifest against the background of the cross. That God, and God alone, brings salvation to humanity becomes recognizable in view of the harrowing possibility and reality that, despite the best intentions and the best systems, humanity alone is doomed. Even the 'good law' of God can become fully corrupt and be abused by humanity under the power of sin. Perversions of religion, law, politics, and public opinion then triumph. Therefore it is crucial to recognize that God has saved and saves humanity, which is completely lost without God. How God saves is also crucial: in a powerful yet emergent way without loud fanfare or drumbeats. As impressive as the Isenheim Altarpiece's portrayal of the resurrection may be, the witnesses of the resurrection in the Biblical traditions describe the reality of God's salvific work in quite a different way.

16.5 THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF THE SPIRITUAL BODY: SUSTENANCE, RESCUE, AND ENNOBLEMENT INTO ETERNAL LIFE

Although the experiences of the resurrected Christ both of the first witnesses and of contemporary witnesses do have the character of visions, memories, and anticipatory imaginations, they are not mere mental or psychic phenomena. They respond to the self-presentation of the resurrected and elevated Christ in his post-Easter body and they participate in his real life. The structured pluralism of the canonic witnesses, the structured pluralism of the ecumenical witnesses, the structured pluralism of a multidisciplinary theology, and the polyphony of the individual witnesses in truth-seeking communities work time and again against illusionary productions of Jesus-images, wishful Jesus-morals, and Jesus-ideologies. It is the faithful realistic response to his presence and his word that critiques and purifies the witness to Christ and to the workings of the Triune God, and thus saves it from being confused with all sorts of self-made religiosity.

In order to do so, it is crucial to respect both continuity and discontinuity between the life and body of the pre-Easter Jesus, of the resurrected and exulted Jesus Christ, and Christ as the ultimate Judge and Saviour of the world in his parousia. The amazing continuity between the pre-Easter and the post-Easter body is described by Paul with the imagery of the seed and the full-grown plant (I Corinthians 15:36–38, 44). Yet this amazing continuity is correlated with almost frightening discontinuities: 'the dying of the seed and an act of [new] creation by God' (15:38, my italics). Our whole perishable person will be transformed into a new and imperishable heavenly personality that will be qualitatively different from our first. It will be – thank God – much better!' (Lampe, 2002).

Both continuity and discontinuity are expressed in the term 'spiritual body'. As Paul differentiates between 'flesh' (sarx, as perishable matter) and 'body' (soma, as matter shaped by mind and Spirit into a living spiritual existence bearing information and giving information), he can perceive continuity and discontinuity in the following way: the body as flesh and as dominated by non-divine

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*It is crucial to differentiate clearly a context-sensitive multisystemic pluralism from a mere 'polyvocality' of individuals, groups, and their various goals and opinions. The first constellation challenges us to understand a complex structure and circulation of power; the second presents just a soft relativism. By comparison, see Welker (1999b, pp. 9–23, 2001a).
powers will decay and die, the body as the spiritual body will be recreated by God's grace in the resurrection. Although 'flesh' is definitely doomed to decay and death, it is full of energies and logics of self-sustenance and self-perpetuation. However, as these energies fall short of aiming at the existence of the 'spiritual body', they are bound to 'sin and death'.

There would be no substantial hope for our lives if there was not a continuity between our bodily existence on earth — undoubtedly also shaped by the flesh — and our spiritual body, shaped by the powers of faith, love, and hope. Paul challenges the Corinthians who want to connect Christ and the soul here and in eternity, but want to leave room for any behaviour in terms of sex and food, as the earthly body would die in any case. 'In Paul's holistic perspective ... the reality of salvation is not another reality apart from the outer everyday life, not just a religious reality for the inner life of a person. It grasps and embraces the whole of human existence, the entire personality ... For exactly this reason, Paul talks about "resurrection" and not of such things as "spiritual immortality" and "ascending souls."' (Lampe, 2002, pp. 104f).

Connected with this anthropological realism is an eschatological realism that sees any perspective on creation already in the light of the new creation. This eschatological realism affirms that the creative God is not a mere sustainer of the world, as this world is full of ambiguity and despair because of creaturely co-creative freedom and its potentials to misuse; it is full of ambiguity and despair because of the inert brutality and finitude of life in the flesh. The mere affirmation that the Triune God opens much richer perspectives for creation than its continuation until a timely or untimely death is not strong enough to sustain a viable faith and hope towards an eternal existence in a spiritual body. According to Paul, it is rather the presence of the resurrected Christ — in continuity and discontinuity with his pre-Easter life and body and the rich spiritual orientation and information given with this presence — that opens up a totally new perspective. Those who live in Christ as members of his body — consciously or unconsciously — are transformed into his likeness and are preserved towards the eternal life of God.

But it is not only the life of the believers and followers of Christ that gains a salvific perspective through its participation in this spiritual body. In the celebration of the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the 'elements' bread and wine participate in the edification of the spiritual body, too. The gifts of creation (not just gifts of nature, but gifts of the interaction between nature and culture and thus already richly blessed by the working of the Holy Spirit)! become gifts of 'new creation.' Bread and wine not only symbolically edify the natural bodies of the community assembled. As 'bread and wine from Heaven', as the body and blood of Christ, they edify the members of the body of Christ, the members of the 'new creation,' the bearers of the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Here the continuity between creation and new creation, between creation old and new becomes palpably present in the middle of the overwhelming discontinuity. It is the spiritual information — to call it thus in search of a more appropriate term — that operates on the material fleshly bodies and minds through the presence of Christ in word and sacrament, causing sometimes dramatic but most often only very calm emergent transformations. It remains to be discussed whether this process can mirror analogies in non-religious and even scientific areas of exploration and interest. With the help of 'new-style' metaphysics, we should try to explore such analogies in the interactions between 'God, matter, and information'.

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*It is most important not to associate 'flesh' with an understanding of matter in a Newtonian sense as 'solid, massy, hard, impermeable, moveable particles.' The notion of 'flesh' is not to be confused with 'material stuff' without any information.

See Welker (2000b).
or rather between 'God, earthly and fleshly creatures, and spiritual orientation'.

16.6 SOME LESSONS AND INSPIRATIONS FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUES ON THE TOPIC

In this respect, the anthropology of Paul can provide some clues, when we look at his description of the activities of the spirit. From both theological as well as anthropological perspectives, the Spirit enables co-presence, contact, and even interaction with those who are absent, respectively a presence in absence. Through his Spirit, the invisible God communicates with the human spirit and imparts to it creative impulses. But the communicative power of the spirit can also be vindicated in an anthropological bottom-up approach. According to Paul, even those who are absent can have authentic contact with others 'in the spirit', despite their different locations in space and time. By remembering his own visits, his teaching and preaching, and through his petitions before God, but also through the letters and messages of others, Paul is present to the community 'in the spirit'. This presence is not merely a figment of his imagination.

Paul sees himself becoming 'spiritually' present in the community. In 1 Corinthians 5, he describes this process of spiritual communication and co-action: 'For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgement in the name of the Lord Jesus ... When you are assembled ... my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus' (1 Corinthians 5:3-4). The name' and 'the power of our Lord', and certainly the Spirit of God (though not expressly mentioned in this passage), play an important role here in the connection of the community - even in a very general way: that is, with and without bodily co-presence. However, one does not need to make reference to the 'Holy Spirit' in order to understand the spiritual process of communication between Paul and the Corinthians. We can explain

basic functions of the human spirit without direct reference to theological realms.

Memory and imagination are not just 'mental constructs' in the 'inner subjectivities', which in a strange way happen to connect and intersect, thus allowing common understanding, consensus, and the guided common search for truth. As instances, which support individual certainty, communal consensus, and the oriented progress of truth-seeking communities,\(^8\) they certainly do have 'points of reference' in natural space-time and the matter correlated with it. But in the mediation from empirical experience to shared forms of memory\(^9\) and sustainable common imagination, there is a 'spiritual loadedness' of the experienced material reality and a transfiguration of it. In secular terms, this transformation and the mental participation in it has been beautifully expressed by Wordsworth in his famous poem 'Daffodils':

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Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance ... 
I gazed - and gazed - but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.
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\(^8\) The texture of truth-seeking communities is described in the last chapter of Polkinghorne and Welker (2001).
