

A Response to David Rutledge

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ABSTRACT: Key Words: articulation, God, determinism/predestination, embodiment, finitude, indeterminate freedom, general and special providence, panentheism, postmodernism, quantum events, tacit knowledge, tradition, Arthur Peacocke, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Mark C. Taylor, Zhenhua Yu. *This appreciative response to David Rutledge's review of my book, Radical Embodiment, deals with the nature of categorization/generalization with respect to and in light of postmodernism, with the issue of the articulation of tacit knowledge, with Mark C. Taylor's current a/theological stance regarding the concept of God, and finally with my model of divine embodiment that rejects special providence and revelation.*

I appreciate tremendously David Rutledge's attentive reading and thoughtful engagement with my book *Radical Embodiment*. I doubt that I could conjure up as felicitous a summary of my positions as he has accomplished. I can only hope that other readers make as serious an effort to indwell my text as has he. That he believes that I have succeeded in most of my goals for this project adds to my pleasure.

I now turn to particular points in his review calling for response, clarification, or elucidation. First off, I admit a certain irony in formulating generalizations and categories pertaining to postmodernism, given that one of my generalizations is suspicion of categories (at least when understood rigidly or absolutistically—see RE, 31)! Yet I would want to affirm both sides of the tension. Meaningful generalizations about groups of thinkers are indeed possible and sometimes insightful and productive. At the same time, such generalizations should never deny nor gloss over relevant differences in what Rutledge dubs “styles of thinking, sensibilities, disciplinary habits and heuristic efforts” (10). I probably should have issued a caveat that my categorizations do not intend to gainsay the great diversity among postmodern thinkers.

The second issue I will address concerns whether one can fully articulate tacit knowledge, in particular whether non-verbal tacit knowledge is amenable to complete articulation through action (even when not amenable to full verbal explicitization). At the outset, I will grant that at least some of the disagreement between myself and Yu may stem from a different understanding of “articulation” for a native Chinese versus a native English speaker (versus perhaps native Scandinavian speakers). The limited nature of all our knowledge—including our tacit knowledge—constitutes a fundamental premise for me. This premise accompanies our very embodiment in the world, so I think Rutledge is spot on in suggesting that the Scandinavian Wittgensteinians “have not gone far enough” from the perspective of radical embodiment, by failing to root “meaning-making deeply enough in the physical body and its environmental and social context.” In my book (RE, 108), I expressed doubts at Polanyi's claim that tacit knowledge may extend to “neural traces” in one's cortex (TD, 15—a somewhat vague phrase, I might add). While tacit knowledge indeed extends deep into our bodies, it always runs up against some limits. Our explicit knowledge forms only the tip of the iceberg holding our tacit knowledge—but that “iceberg” that is one's body has a base underlying our tacit knowledge. For example, I would find it absurd if someone claimed to have tacit knowledge of individual cortical neurons (each neuron does after all represent a whole composed of its own parts). To argue further, I would claim a kind of tacit knowledge of my heart beating and, in some circumstances, of the blood coursing through my arteries and veins. And I possessed such tacit knowledge even before I learned the English language or had

a science lesson. But I do not have such a tacit knowledge of the composition and structure of my heart and circulatory system. Compared to my tacit bodily knowledge, such scientific knowledge is third-person explicit knowledge. Thus, it seems to me that I cannot fully articulate my non-verbal tacit knowledge to myself through my own actions, let alone to another. As I suggested in my book, I do not believe I can make fully explicit to another my tacit knowledge involved in orienting and moving my body to ride a bike (RE, 78-79)—let alone the very tacit knowledge of my heart beating at that time. I agree with Rutledge that “displays” is a better word than “articulates” when it comes to tacit knowledge. Still I would not want to say that I can fully display my tacit knowledge in any particular act. My sense of this finally depends not only on a postmodern recognition of human finitude, but also on such recognition from my Judeo-Christian heritage. Our embodiment entails that our knowledge and control both of our external and internal environments, both of one’s world and one’s body, always has its limits.

Allow me to address a penultimate—even minor though still interesting—matter concerning the “status of God.” The earlier deconstructionist Mark C. Taylor could indeed be justly labelled an atheistic “atheologian.” In Taylor’s avowedly post-deconstructionist current phase, I do not find things so simple. The *After God* title of his latest book indicates that he certainly has not returned to a Western personalistic model of “God.” Yet he admits that the notion of divinity will not let him go. In some important respects, he develops a polar model of divinity more robust than minimalist Christian conceptions. It posits a structuring element and a destabilizing element within the divine—with the destabilizing one being more “fully divine,” I believe it is safe to say.

I will now tackle the ultimate issue of David Rutledge’s review: whether Nikkel goes too far in undermining divine intentionality and purpose relative to divine action, including revelatory action. First, let me clarify where and how I believe God is intentional and purposive. In traditional Christian theological terms, I affirm general providence (and revelation): the divine reality and purposes become manifest in and through God’s body, the world. In this connection I criticize McFague for her explicit refusal to speak of any intentionality in God’s embodiment (RE, 160-61). What I cannot affirm is special providence (or revelation), that God both intends and acts to cause particular events. By insisting that what happens in the world affects God, I do agree that God desires that certain events occur and further that some events are paradigmatic of God’s intentions for the world and human creatures. I admit that, relative to the whole of Christian tradition, my refusal to support special providence represents an aspect of “radical embodiment” that is radical indeed. However, my position has connections both with the history and logic of the concept of pantheism and with modern Christian theology.

In expounding upon the concept, which came out of German Romantic Idealism, I will draw on my entry article on “pantheism” in the *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*. Pantheism attempted to find a middle ground between deism and pantheism, taking what its developers considered the best of both models for the God-world relationship, while avoiding their respective pitfalls. What it liked about deism was that God refrains from actions that overturn nature. What it liked about pantheism was the on-going intimate connection between the divine and the world (in contrast to the externality of God to the world in deism as well as in classical theism). Contrary to a pantheistic model, panentheism professes indeterminate creaturely freedom.

To be sure, one could have a panentheism wherein God did engage in particular violations or supercessions of the laws of nature without committing a logical contradiction. But, as above, panentheism’s historical genesis was premised precisely on avoiding such a model. Furthermore, there is something about the nature of

embodiment—a metaphor often accompanying panentheism—which makes problematic the notion of divine interventions and supercessions. A body in the normal animal sense is something in and through which we attend to a more or less external world. A difficulty in applying the metaphor to God is that no environment finally stands external to the divine. It is true that we can sometimes intentionally influence what is happening within our human bodies by our thoughts alone; still, such cases where I would want to say that I have directly caused a change within my body are rare. As we engage with the external world, we and our bodies attempt to preserve a homeostasis that permits our organism to survive and hopefully thrive. In other words, what goes on within our bodies generally has little to nothing to do with specific intentions or direct causation regarding a particular bodily part. Thus, the homeostatic processes of our bodies analogize with divine general providence, with the total processes of nature which God has ordained. Of course, a qualification of the body analogy is that God does ordain these natural processes, while we contingent creatures do not ordain the homeostatic processes of our bodies. If the whole universe is the body of God and God does not move that body to deal with an external environment, a certain presumption may exist that God does not need to move a particular part of that body for internal purposes in order to fulfill God's intentions—especially given divine respect for creaturely freedom.

Finally, let me address modern Christian precedents for my non-interventionist position. The modern world led many Christian theologians, as well as German Romantic Idealists—who sometimes overlapped—to doubt biblical or traditional supernatural events, both because of a modern scientific worldview and because modern historical methods and research cast doubts upon the reliability of the accounts of such happenings. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, did uphold special revelation in Jesus Christ, who alone possessed a full God-consciousness, through natural processes—but at the cost of embracing predestination and rejecting indeterminate free will (and for this reason, some have identified his theism as a form of pantheism). In a sense, general and special providence collapse or at least become less easily distinguishable in his model. Interestingly, Arthur Peacocke, an avowed pantheist, has developed a notion of “top-down causation,” where divine action supposedly does cause specific events. This hypothesis presumes that, in setting the general laws and the initial conditions of the universe, God can guarantee certain events will happen. Given indeterminate freedom and chance interactions among creatures in their freedom (which Peacocke affirms) stretching over 13.7 billion years to this point, I find it utterly implausible on Peacocke's premises that God can guarantee certain events will happen in human history.

Liberal Protestant theologians after Schleiermacher endorsed indeterminate freedom and refrained from identifying particular events as God's acts. To my knowledge, so did the major Neo-Orthodox theologians with the notable exception of Karl Barth. It does then appear most difficult for modern Christians to identify particular events as directly caused by God—unless one either resorts to supernatural intervention or reverts to a determinism (whether directly or, as with Peacocke, implicitly). Process theology provides an alternative approach, whereby God is active in particular events or occasions—indeed in every event. God offers an initial aim to each (split-second) “unit occasion of experience” (the fundamental metaphysical reality for process thought). This initial aim is God's preference for how the creature should act on that occasion. Of course, in strongly asserting indeterminate creaturely freedom, process theology maintains that God never fully determines any occasion or event—creatures always play a part in the final outcome. But at least one could say that God is specifically involved in every event, as well as judge that God desired a particular religiously significant event to occur. The problem with the process position here is its totally speculative nature; we lack any empirical evidence for the existence of initial aims and likely always will.

Another alternative has been advanced by several figures in the science and religion dialogue (to which Peacocke has been so important), including Nancy Murphy, Robert Russell, and Thomas Tracy. Latching onto the quantum indeterminacy observed by physics, they attempt to purchase special providence and revelation by speculating that God determines the probabilistic quantum movements of subatomic particles, which in turn produce macro-effects resulting in particular events. This notion has the virtue of not contravening any natural regularities: the aggregate motions of particles fall into the invariable probabilistic distributions; however, “behind the scenes,” God manipulates which individual particles do what. Thus far, no empirical evidence exists that micro quantum events have macro effects. And if we do establish any such effects, to establish a causal connection between quantum events and a particular religiously significant event seems staggeringly improbable. Apparently, we would need to have some very sophisticated scientific instruments in place when and where we expect something revelatory to happen. Finally, even if we can prove that a particular configuration of sub-atomic activity produced a desired effect, whereas other possible configurations would not have yielded this effect, a huge problem remains. In principle, no scientific, no empirical method exists to show that God caused this particular configuration, rather than the naturalistic, random playing out of quantum mechanics. To believe that God causes particular events through quantum manipulations appears to be a form of blind faith. Moreover, this model, like supernatural interventionism and predestination, raises profound questions of theodicy and God’s control of events. In this particular model, did God manipulate certain quantum events that resulted in evil or fail to manipulate certain quantum events in a way that would have prevented evil?

I thank David Rutledge for spurring me to unpack the tacit knowledge informing my rejection of divine supernatural (or deterministic natural) causation of particular events. While I do refer to the “post-modern spirit” in support of my position, my understanding of tradition and its tacit roots is quite expansive. The postmodern spirit relies substantially upon the modern spirit and its various sub-traditions, including the tradition of modern science, even as it reacts against crucial elements of the same. In formulating my views on divine action, I have relied heavily not only on Western scientific traditions and traditions of panentheism and divine embodiment, but also on modern Christian theological traditions.

Selected Bibliography

Nikkel, David. “Panentheism,” Entry in *The Encyclopedia of Science and Religion* (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003).