

08. The Transphysical Worlds

Up to this point, I have outlined a new metaphysical model for the physical world and its relationship to what I call “the waking world.” While I aimed to provide a rigorously logical alternative to the standard scientific-materialist view of reality (and I feel reasonably confident I have done just that), nevertheless, in some ways the first seven chapters are a prelude—laying foundation for what is probably the most radical departure in this new metaphysics.

Beyond the physical world, beyond even the waking world and the vital world, we need to expand our understanding of how the cosmos is structured and how it operates to include a *transphysical* dimension—a Transphysical World. Only then can we hope to have a comprehensive metaphysical cosmology that can account not only for the data of modern science and our own waking, daily lived experience, but also for the truly remarkable and “anomalous” data from parapsychological research—especially, the ostensible phenomena of survival of consciousness or personality after the death of the biological body.

As before, my approach is inspired and informed by *process* philosophy—in particular, the work of Alfred North Whitehead. However, in this chapter, I am taking process metaphysics far beyond where Whitehead explicitly took his philosophy, while always staying true to his profound metaphysical vision. Here, then, I will extend what we might call conventional process metaphysics to a broader or deeper *transphysical process metaphysics* (largely inspired by the work of the great Indian philosopher and sage Sri Aurobindo)¹. I believe this is a necessary move if we are to achieve our objective of developing a cosmology that can account for survival of personality after death.

¹ Transpersonal Process Metaphysics is also very much influenced by the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin, Jean Gebser, Ernst Cassirer Bertrand Russell and others.

In short, the transphysical process metaphysics I am proposing here is solidly grounded in Whitehead's process philosophy expanded and augmented by the multi-leveled continuum ontology of Sri Aurobindo.

Transphysical process metaphysics, like Whiteheadian metaphysics in general, describes all worlds as composed of causally interacting "drops of experience." It reveals the physical world as a society of low-grade actual occasions operating in a metrical time and a metrical space. It also reveals the waking world as the physical world pervaded by actual occasions of higher grade. These higher-grade actualities organize the world into the exquisitely beautiful and endlessly fascinating patterns of order that give it its grandeur. They bind the whole planet into webs of empathic and telepathic interactions that suggest whole new ways of imagining the evolutionary process.

This is in stark contrast to the modern scientific worldview, which insists that the ultimate constituents of actual things are nothing but vacuous physical matter. Many of us living today were raised to think that everything, including ourselves, is made of intrinsically dead or insentient "atoms." Everything that exists, and all their properties, we were told, could be reduced, ultimately, to interactions among atoms (and/or the physical forces operating between and governing their behavior). This reductionist project achieved a great deal of success when dealing exclusively with the physical world, but encountered serious difficulties when applied to an understanding of life. It is extremely hard to see how life, as we feel it in ourselves and in each other, could every be accounted for in terms of mere movements among insentient things, little atomic billiard balls, flows of insentient energy.

Of course, science has undergone a major revolution since then with the advent of quantum physics. The old mechanistic view of reality inherited from Newton and his successors has given way to a very different understanding of the nature of reality. Today, those quaint atoms have dissolved into patterns of events, and process metaphysics has resolved these events into conscious, purposeful actual occasions. With this move, the relationship between matter, life, and sentience can be approached in an entirely new light. No longer are we faced with the insoluble problem of how life and

sentience could emerge from dead matter. Instead, we now approach the issue in terms of the relationship between inorganic, low-grade occasions (the physical components of a body) and the higher grade, living occasions, which are embodied in and through them.

Transphysical process metaphysics resolves this question by its doctrine of embodiment, which I have already discussed. But there is a further, critical, issue: whether or not all complex entities must always rest on a foundation of low-grade, physical actualities? Even if we accept the idea that life is the embodiment of higher occasions in systems of lower grade occasions, is it necessarily the case that the higher grade, living, occasions depend for their very existence on the lower grade occasions in which they are embodied? This is a crucial question—because the answer we give will determine whether or not we can account for the the phenomenon of “personality survival” beyond the death of the body, and resolve the question at the heart of this book.

Unlike in scientific materialism, process metaphysics doesn’t start out with an assumption that, ultimately, all that exists is insentient matter. Rather, our starting assumptions are, first, that actuality ultimately exists as the consequence of an ongoing intrinsically experiential Creativity (the fact that many become one in a drop of experience, and that drop of experience becomes one of the many for all subsequent drops); and, second, an ordering factor (which Whitehead called “God”) that keeps a universe of free occasions from dissolving into mere chaos by the provision of coordinated aims for all new occasions. Given this metaphysical background, the occurrence of an actual occasion of some particular grade depends on just two factors: first, at aim at sufficient depth of value and, second, a sufficiently interesting actual world to allow the fulfillment of that aim.

The question of whether or not life and intelligence are dependent on physical matter for their existence now takes on a entirely new complexion. Clearly low-grade actual occasions can no more supply the aim for a higher grade actual occasion than they can supply their own aim. Yet, the presence of an aim is a precondition for concrescence. But is a higher grade occasion dependent on the presence of low-grade occasions to give it the kind of environment that it needs? As we will see in detail in this chapter, from the

perspective of transphysical process metaphysics, the answer is no. The final satisfaction of a living occasion is incomparably richer than the final satisfaction of an inorganic occasion. One living occasion, even at the level of a single cell, has an experience capable of unifying the prehensions from millions of molecules. Certainly such occasions, interacting with each other, could produce a much richer environment than anything constructed by the simple, habitual inertia of the low-grade occasions that constitute the physical world

By contrast, a system of actual occasions of higher grade, receiving their aims from the Primordial Ordering Factor² and providing for each other a rich and interesting environment *is* the “transphysical world.” Transphysical worlds, therefore, are not dependent on the physical world in any way, but exist in their own right as fully actual environments capable of supporting the adventure of personality. And it is this transphysical autonomy that makes possible the survival of personality after biological death.

In the next section, I will use transphysical process metaphysics to help us figure out what transphysical worlds are like.

The Nature of the Transphysical Worlds

As noted previously, grades of actual occasions vary on a continuum from low to high. Furthermore, grades are also relative, and categorizing them into low-, medium-, and high-grade occasions is somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless, we have good empirical grounds for assuming that the universe of human experience consists of three relatively distinct domains: the physical world, the vital world, and the mental world. Indeed, our usual divisions of evolutionary process support this idea of a tripartite metaphysical system. After all, standard evolutionary theory has little difficulty describing evolution in terms of three great stages: matter, life, and mind³. Also, as we will see in the next

² This, and also the “Ultimate Ordering Factor” are terms I like to use to describe what Whitehead calls “the Primordial Nature of God.”

³ This idea of a three-fold division of worlds is also found in the Upanishads and is picked up by the Theosophists. Both Michael Murphy and I independently noticed the fit of this three-fold division to our usual scientific way of describing the most major stages in evolution.

chapter, a consideration of the various geometries that hold sway in these different worlds also suggests a fairly clear-cut distinction among them. In this section, however, I will simply make the provisional assumption that there are three distinct worlds, with significant variations of grade within each. I have already discussed the physical world—of low-grade, inorganic actualities operating in metrical space and metrical time. Now it's time to turn to the living or vital world.

The Vital World

The vital world is a form of the transphysical world closest to the physical. We catch confused glimpses of the vital world in our dreams, and a much better sense of the vital world in lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, and near-death experiences. All of these reveal that the vital world, in many important respects, resembles the waking world—it contains distinct places, and various independent individuals other than ourselves who operate in accordance with their own autonomous wills. However, the vital world is different from the physical world because it lacks many of the restraints on what is possible that we encounter in our waking world; it is also much more responsive to our moods and thoughts, and it differs significantly, too, in how cause and effect relate to measurable distances.

Given the similarities and major differences between the vital, waking, and physical worlds how can we best understand the transphysical world in terms of our metaphysical ideas?

Let's begin by considering the physical world as we have come to know it through contemporary science. Modern research and theory tell us that the macrocosmic physical world is composed of 103 different atomic elements. When we assume that all other entities in the physical world are composed of these primary elements, we learn a great deal about the physical world. Now let's see what happens if we approach the vital world by examining its basic elements.

The first thing we note is that the simplest elements of the vital world are much more complex than the physical elements. The various types of atoms—each a personally

ordered society of low-grade actual occasions that endure through time and move (more or less⁴) continuously through space—form the lower border of the macrocosmic physical world. The upper boundary of the macrocosmic physical world consists of ultra-complex molecules, such as DNA, proteins, and viruses. If we assume a continuous variation in grades beyond the physical, then the lowest entities of the vital world have just that degree of complexity and intelligence that is reflected in simple biological cells. Several consequences follow from this:

- Because cells are so much more complex than atoms, they can be structured internally in many more ways, and so we can assume there is a vastly greater variety of simple vital elements than there are of simple physical elements.
- Because the simplest elements of the vital world are so much more complex (the final satisfaction of those simple entities entertains a much more complex eternal object through which it represents its past and strives to influence its future), the varieties of behavior vital elements are capable of is much greater than those possible for elements of the physical world.
- The greater complexity of the vital world elements is, in part, a function of the deeper aim at value intrinsic to those occasions when they begin their concrescences. This deeper aim is not only focused on the preservation of value (which is the aim characterizing the low-grade occasions studied by physics) but also on the active pursuit of satisfaction and the enjoyment of novelty. Thus, the occasions of the vital world are much more actively and imaginatively responsive than the occasions of the physical world.
- As discussed earlier, the final satisfaction of higher grade occasions have a subjective form that is emotional rather than merely sensory. Thus, as the higher grade occasions of the vital worldprehend each other, they are involved in empathic interactions. In a sense, the transphysical “inside” of our bodies is a kind of island of the vital world surrounded by an ocean of low-

⁴ Quantum mechanics leads us to expect some quantum discontinuities even in the movements of atoms.

grade, physical actualities. The way in which the various cellular and organic occasions in our bodies feel each other is very like the way all entities in the vital world feel each other.

- Causal interactions among actual occasions in the vital world are much more complex than in the physical world. While the final satisfactions of low-grade occasions are characterized by very simple eternal objects, held with a subjective form of unquestioned certainty, the final satisfactions of medium-grade occasions are complex eternal objects animated a play of emotional intensities. In the waking world, our bodies are more or less responsive to our feelings and thoughts, but the physical world around us is not. In the vital world, there is no stubborn, unimaginative and relatively unresponsive medium separating us one from another. Nonetheless, in the vital world, there is still a distinction between a personality and its body. If we consider the core of our personality to be the personally ordered society of high-grade, mental occasions that I call “me,” then that personality is embodied in the vital world though a vital body, and those two bodies (the mental body and the vital body) are then embodied in the physical world through a physical body.

In the vital world, the mental personality is still embodied in its vital body, but the experience of embodiment in the vital world is quite different from the experience of embodiment in the physical world.

- In the vital world, the boundaries of bodies are much more fluid than the boundaries of physical bodies, and every entity around us in the vital world is strongly affected by our moods and our intentions.
- Furthermore, any body in the vital world is free from the profound inertia of physical occasions. Thus, for example, my vital body is much more able to shape itself to my intentions than my physical body is.
- The rules of locomotion for vital bodies are different from the rules of locomotion for physical bodies. It seems that in the vital world, the location at

which we find ourselves is largely a matter of our moods and intentions. Not only our own bodies, but also other entities in the vital world are more or less responsive to our intentions. Levitating objects, for example, would be much easier in the vital world. Thus the world around us would respond to some extent as if it were our own body, making the body boundary rather difficult to establish.

- Finally, the personality in the vital world need not be confined to one position at a time. This reflects the experience that people often report in which they are not quite sure which person they were in a dream scene, or in which there is a sense of occupying a vital body in a dream while simultaneously being a disembodied witness to that same scene. In Whitehead's attempt to derive the metrical geometry of physics from the structure of experience itself, he was forced to make the assumption that the consciousness of the observer in the scene must define an unequivocal here and now throughout the duration of a given experience. He called this "cogredience." Cogredience does not apply in transphysical worlds.⁵

If we contemplate the vital world in terms of these characteristics, we can see that it corresponds closely to the worlds described in dreams, lucid dreams, out-of-body and near-death experiences. The vital world comprises every scene that is imaginable. In fact, Sri Aurobindo and many other Vedic and Theosophical teachers locate all of the heavens and hells described by the religions in the vital domain. Pleasure, pain, good and evil are all vividly expressed in the vital world, freed from the constraints imposed by physical bodies.

It seems logical to speculate that the physical world is a region of the vital world in which what is being lived out is a highly constrained set of behaviors. In other words, we could interpret the waking world as a very rigid dream.

⁵ Eric Weiss, *The Doctrine of the Subtle Worlds*, Proquest, 2003, pp. 155-158.

We now have a way of understanding both the vital aspects of waking life and the existence of the vital world itself.

The Mental World

The mental world is more difficult to describe. Nevertheless, we can say something meaningful about it:

- The variety and the complexity of the elemental occasions making up the mental world are even greater than those in the vital world.
- The mentality we experience in the waking world usually operates under the domination of the vital and physical entities in which it is embodied. Thus the mind usually operates in the service of habit and desire. But the aims of mental occasions are wider and deeper than those of lower grade occasions. While low-grade occasions are dominated by the aim at preserving value, and the aims of medium-grade occasions are dominated by the desire for novelty, high-grade mental occasions are dominated by the pursuit of harmony and coherence. Both for the personalities to which they belong and for the larger world their personalities inhabit, high-grade occasions, on their own, take into account as relevant to their aims, and, correspondingly, make decisions about, a much greater range of the future. Thus, they are able to operate in subtle harmonies far beyond those achieved in the waking world.
- While the subjective forms of physical occasions involve simple certainty, and those of vital occasions involve the full play of emotion, the subjective forms of high-grade mental occasions are concerned with something more akin to “meaning.” Meaning, here, is not simple denotation or arbitrary definition; rather, it is the kind of feeling we get when contemplating deep truths. Meaning here is not something less than emotion, but rather emotion sublimated and glorified by a wondrous generality of outlook. In religious and psychological terms, high-grade meaning is experienced, for instance, in numinous and synchronistic events.

- In the mental world, the normal mode of causal transmission is by means of telepathy. Actual occasions of high grade directly communicate profound meaning to one another, irrespective of physical distance—a quality common to many synchronistic experiences.

Given these attributes of high-grade occasions, it is not at all surprising that visualizing forms and events in the mental world is extremely difficult. Personalities in the mental realm are in telepathic contact, and therefore spatial distances so familiar to us in the waking world, and which allow us to perceive distinct boundaries between bodies, simply do not apply in the mental world.

Another aspect of the mental world as described here—a view generally held in many esoteric traditions— is that it is entirely beyond the distinctions we call good and evil. As a result, it is sometimes described as a kind of heaven.

It is logical to imagine that:

- the vital world is a limitation of the mental world, in which
 - meaning is limited to emotion, and
 - only possibilities expressible in terms of a spatial continuum are developed;
- and the physical world is a limitation of the vital world in which
 - emotions are limited, and sense certainty is the dominant mode of apprehension, and
 - the spatial continuum is limited to a metrical geometry.

Summary

We have now come a long way towards establishing the validity of the five fundamental propositions outlined in the first chapter. In this book, and in this chapter in particular, I am claiming that the results of modern and postmodern physics can be very fruitfully

explained in terms of process metaphysics (a number of theorists have worked this out in great detail.⁶) We now see that transpersonal process metaphysics can account not only for the results of science, but also can make fully intelligible the existence of transphysical worlds.

In light of what we have covered in this chapter, let's now revisit the five propositions.

Proposition I, which affirms the causal power of the personality, follows directly once we adopt the perspective of process metaphysics.

This chapter has established **Proposition II**, the existence of the transphysical worlds. I have shown that we can fruitfully interpret the waking world as a physical world pervaded by vital and mental personalities. In particular:

- Our physical body is the embodiment of a medium-grade vital personality, which is, itself, the embodiment of a high-grade mental personality. My personality, along with personalities in each of my organs and each of my cells, belongs to the vital and/or the mental world—causally prehending physical molecules, but not itself physical.
- A whole panorama of human experiences—visions, hallucinations, dreams, out-of-body experiences, lucid dreams, and near-death experiences—are all phenomena of the transphysical worlds, and life after death is existence in the transphysical worlds freed of embodiment in the physical world.
- Experiences of the vital and mental worlds are happening all the time. But while we are awake we shift them out of conscious awareness, and allow our attention to be monopolized largely by the objectifications of our various sense consciousnesses.

⁶ See, for example, Henry Stapp, *Mind, Matter and Quantum Mechanics*, Second Edition, Springer, 2009; Henry Stapp, *The Mindful Universe*, Springer 2007; Michael Epperson, *Quantum Mechanics and the Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, Fordham University Press, 2004.

- Our focus of attention, however, is variable. We might start in our normal waking state, then slip into a daydream, from which (should we fall asleep) we might drift into a dream, that dream might become lucid, and in that lucid dream we might find ourselves out of our bodies. Finally, in extreme circumstances, an out-of-body experience might transform into a near-death experience. Thus, we do experience transphysical worlds even while we are alive (**Proposition III**).
- Finally, because we already exist in the vital world, survival of bodily death becomes immediately plausible. If we already exist as a mental personality embodied in a vital body, then if the consciousness in our cells should lose interest in the macromolecules through which it prehends the physical world, it is quite reasonable to expect that the mental personality embodied in a vital body would continue its adventures, only now without a physical body. The difference between a dead body and a living body is that the dead body is no longer ordered by the aims higher grade occasions that had been embodied in it (**Proposition IV**).
- **Proposition V**, regarding reincarnation, will be discussed in Chapter 11.

Next, we turn attention to the nature of time and space in the waking world, and in the transphysical worlds.