Observation and Participation:
Wisdom, the World and the Triune God
Outline of Lecture and References

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1. Introduction: wisdom and the self

(1) There is a lament in our age for something that has been lost called 'wisdom'.
The desire to find it is characteristic of an age which has been critical of the project of the European Enlightenment, or the control of the world by the human mind.
(2) 'Wisdom' has become an all-purpose word to denote a way of living in the world which aims to transcend the self as a *merely* rational and so dominating subject.
(3) The Hebrew concept of *hokmah*, as fulfilled in the Christian concept of Trinity, offers a way of thinking *theologically* about the relation of the self to the world today.

T.S. Eliot, 'The Rock', I, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 147.

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 143–58, 355–67.
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 155–8, 254, 284, 295–7.

2. Uncertainty about the self in a postmodern age

Theology needs to grapple with contemporary anxiety about the ability of the self to cope with the world. Three sets of ideas have flowed into the 'postmodern' world-view which has created a crisis for the self/subject.

(1) *The immersion of the self into the world.*
Problem: the self seems to be constructed by social and linguistic signs, losing responsibility.
Theological challenge: God is often conceived as floating free from the signs of the world as a 'transcendental signified'.

Paul S. Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God. Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 40-53.

Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersetn (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983), pp. 214-15.

Jacques Derrida, Positions, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 19–20; cf. Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 49-50.

(2) *Critique of the 'Grand Narrative'.*
Problem: Can the self find an identity when large systems of thought and belief are seen as abusive, suppressing local narratives?
Theological challenge: Doesn't the Trinity present a metanarrative?

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, Part 1, paras. 1-9, Part 2, maxims and opinions, 5, 20, 32, 96, 182, 225, 318, in *Complete Works of Nietzsche*, ed. O. Levy, 18 Volumes (London: Allen & Unwin, 1909-1913), vols. 6-7. Cf. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, vol. 2:12, aphorism 481, in Levy (ed), *Complete Works*, vol.15.
Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 34.

(3) *Difference and an inexhaustible text.*
Problem: How can the self be present to itself and other objects and persons?
Theological challenge: Does a God of omni-presence represent a dominating subject and sanction control by human subjects?

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* transl. R. Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 116.

Derrida, 'Afterword' in *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 148.

Derrida, 'Différance', in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (New York: Harvester, 1982), pp. 6-15, 26.

Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 230.

Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 98; cf. Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), pp. 75-84.

In summary, 2 problems: (a) How shall we *locate* the self in the world? (b) How shall we identify the self when it has lost the security of dominating the world and other persons? The concept of *hokmah*, fulfilled in Trinity offers a wisdom of living in which the human person can flourish in face of this twofold uncertainty. It offers in response: (a) a wisdom of observation; (b) a wisdom of participation.

3. The uncertain self and the wisdom of observation

1. The 'Wise' in Ancient Israel are confident that they can cope with experience through careful observation and deduction. They note analogies and cause-effect patterns, to 'steer' their way through the maze of events.

2. But they also show a strong sense of caution and humility: they recognize an element of the unpredictable, due to the complexity and variety of the world order. The self is the final mystery.

3. In this context it becomes appropriate to talk about God. 'Fear of the Lord' is humility before God who has the perfect wisdom to operate successfully in *all* areas of a complex world in which the self is located.

Proverbs 30:29-31 (confidence); 16:18 (confidence); 30:18-19 (humility); 27:19 (humility); 20:5 16:1-2 (humility); 10:27; 14:27 ('fear of the Lord').

Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God*, chapter 4.

James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom. An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 20-4, 123-5, 189-90.

Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* trans. J. Martin (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 24-50, 74-82, 97-120.

W. Zimmerli, 'The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (1964), pp. 146-158

4. The Trinity and observing the world

1. Today semiotics (discipline of signs) makes us aware of the complexity of a world of 'differences', and science underlines this.

2. Talk about a complex God – i.e. Trinity - is appropriate in this context. We are located in a space made by relations, and we can only think of God in terms of our participation in rhythmic, triune movements of love and justice which make room for the world.

3. 'Persons' in the triune God are thus relations in which we participate; language of observation of God is replaced by participation.

4. Such participation undermines any concept of a 'transcendental signified' as opposed by Derrida. The triune God cannot stand *beyond* the signs in the world but is experienced in and through the multiple relations we find in the world, and which exist 'in' God.

5. The concept of Trinity begins from observing the patterns of relation in the life of the human Christ.

6. God is not an object to be observed, but engagement in God enables us to overcome alienation between subject and object in observing the world.

7. The triune God does not dominate the world, but gives it freedom to be self-creative, acting within it through influence, drawing created realities into the momentum ('dance') of divine relations.

Kees van Kooten Niekerk and Hans Buhl, *The Significance of Complexity: Approaching a Complex World through Science, Theology and the Humanities* (Aldershot; Ashgate, 2004).

Paul Colliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 34-55, 71-88.

David Cunningham, *These Three are One. The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 59-71.

Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.6.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.29.4.

Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. 14 Volumes (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936–77), p. 263.

Catherine M. LaCugna, *God For Us. The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 271;

Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is. The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp. 220-1.

John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (Yale: Yale Univesity Press, 1998, pp 62-4.

5. The uncertain self and the wisdom of participation

1. The figure of 'Lady Wisdom', walking through the world, expresses an observation of the world which is also participation.

2. The image holds out a promise of having a *relationship* with divine wisdom, to be in tune with the rhythms of wisdom that shape the world, and which Christians discern as the Trinity.

Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God*, chapter 6.

R.N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs* (London: SCM, 1965), pp. 76-104.

Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation. The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), pp. 77-100.

6. Theological wisdom and the self

Theological wisdom, combining the wisdom of observation and participation, offers an idea of God that stabilizes the self without espousing a whole narrative of domination. This idea is Trinity, responding to three causes of uncertainty about the self identified earlier (see 2.):

(1) *The triune God and immersion into the world.*
God as Trinity is always committed to a world of signs, emptying God's self into the world (*kenosis*) without ceasing to be God.
In Trinity God also interprets God's self in relation to the world.
Participating in currents of God's love, the human self retains its identity while being sacrificially embedded in the world, and develops its identity by interpreting the world.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, pp. 271-3.

Sergii Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. B. Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 213—28.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. 5 Volumes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988—98), vol. 2, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. G. Harrison, pp. 262—6; vol. 4, *The Action*, trans. G. Harrison, pp. 313–14,.

Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. 7 volumes (Edinburgh; T & T Clark, 1982-89), vol. 1, p. 432.

Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), p. 29.

Paul S. Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God*, pp. 284-90.

(2) *The 'Grand Narrative' of the Trinity*
The Trinity is a meta-narrative that is not dominating.
A narrative of cosmological mediation sanctions human control and oppression;
but Trinity offers instead a narrative of participation, as prefigured by the Hebrew 'Lady Wisdom'.
A triune God who is complex in relationships embraces a complex world, and gives it space to be creative itself in partnership with its Creator.

Justin Martyr, *First* Apology 60 (*ANF* 1, 183); *Dialogue with Trypho* 60-61 (*ANF* 1, 227-28).

Jacques Derrida, *Grammatology*, pp. 13-15.

(3) *Difference and the Trinity*
Trinity is not about a suffocating, absolute presence of God in the world but about relations of real difference in which human relations can flourish in all their otherness.
There is room in this trinitarian difference for openness of meaning and even for broken relations.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 30. 4.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. A. Nichols (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), p. ix.

Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 168—9;

Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 143—5.