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.

Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
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
Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, trans. F.

(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,
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?

pp. 6-15, 26.

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.


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.


Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.6.

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


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.


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.
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).

(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.
Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, pp. 168–9;