

In Answer to a Quasi-Ontological Argument: On Sheridan's "Toward an Eclectic Ontology of Presence" and Mantovani and Riva's "Building a Bridge between Different Scientific Communities"

I Introduction

Sheridan, in his "Toward an Eclectic Ontology of Presence" (Sheridan, 1999), approaches the semblance of an ontological argument with discussion of "divine presence" in relation to virtual reality communications media and the consequent effect of virtuality upon the mind/matter ensemble. Although he doesn't offer proof for God, Sheridan (and subsequently Mantovani and Riva, who accept Sheridan's initial ground of discussion) suggest a connection between the ontology of presence and the divine. This suggestion of a connection between the two frames of reference establishes a route that opens to argument fundamentally for existence of and proof of the existence of God. Indeed, Sheridan offers an "eclectic ontology" and states that his argument could provide "a framework for a rational discussion of God" (p. 558). In so doing, he reaches to say something very specific about the nature of being, making a claim that we can come to a rational understanding of divine presence. He describes coming to such an understanding as the "ultimate challenge of understanding perception of (estimation) of reality." In defining the ultimate challenge in terms of an "estimation paradigm," however, he seeks to answer this challenge through a rational formality.

Granted, the reductionist, formalist tradition founded on the rational underlies formal logic, mathematics, and science. But pure rationality with regards to "divine presence" flies in the face of the work of some of the most renowned thinkers in the history of thought. One of these thinkers, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* sought

to discover the very workings of rational thought, was Immanuel Kant. Another was one of the founding fathers of quantum theory, Wolfgang Pauli.

2 The Irrational Side of Reality

Immanuel Kant, known as the last philosopher, wrote that an understanding of God is problematic *per se* and not of the rational. Wolfgang Pauli spent many years examining and contemplating that which cannot be described with the aid of a logical theory but nevertheless constitutes a part of reality. Although recognizing that the Cartesian partition had penetrated deeply into the human psyche, Pauli left room for "irrational influences" (Laurikainen, 1985, p. 105).

Pauli's adoption of terminology related to some very old ideas in the history of philosophy. *Rational* implies, at least in principle, that it belongs to the framework of logically arranged, conceptual knowledge. "That which is unattainable even in principle through logically ordered knowledge is irrational." Laurikainen notes that, in Platonism as well as in Cartesian philosophy, "rational" is "that which truly exists." Pauli emphasized that, instead of considering reality rational and therefore attainable by logical thought, this concept of reality was itself wrong as it fundamentally ignores the irrationality

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that is always contained in observations where individual events “go through the meshes” of the net of statistical causality where “rational description concerns only statistical mean values and the strength of their scatter” (p. 106). The irrationality of reality finds expression in the indeterminism of individual events. The universe has a component that cannot be described by causal analysis yet nevertheless influences events of the physical world (p. 62).

The possibility of a rational description of the whole of reality is in principle limited. Heisenberg’s uncertainty relations express this conception of reality. Thus, the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory opens to an entirely new perspective in which the complementarity of the rational and the irrational cooperatively coexist.

3 The Ontological Argument

Sheridan’s and subsequently Mantovani and Riva’s embryonic beginnings of an ontological argument are undeniably not new. The history of the “ontological argument” goes back far, but perhaps did not attain its identity until Immanuel Kant bestowed the title *ontological argument* upon Anselm of Canterbury’s (1033–1109) attempt to prove the existence of God. Kant, Aquinas, and Hume rejected the ontological argument, whereas Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz accepted it. Contemporary philosophers stand on both sides.

Anselm claimed that the existence of God could be demonstrated simply by following the logical implications of a particular conceptualization. If you analyze your conception of God, then you have to concede that God exists. Only a fool would say there is no God. A fool doesn’t understand the nature of what he is denying (Anselm, in Cahn, 1995).

We are not saying that Sheridan, and subsequently Mantovani and Riva, make a purely ontological argument. What we are saying is that, in discussing presence in terms of divine presence, the authors are working perhaps not merely towards an ontology of presence but suggest, appropriately, the beginnings more of a philosophy of presence that ontologically incorporates the

divine at its core. We do not oppose such a metaphysical presupposition in terms of human relations to the origins of objects. We simply seek to point it out. (For a discussion *On the Origin of Objects* as well as on the concept of nonlocality related to the phenomenology of objects in terms of developing a philosophy of presence, see Cantwell Smith (1998).)

Anselm was criticized in his own times by a fellow who is not known elsewhere in the history of philosophy, a fellow named Gaunilo. Gaunilo speaks “on behalf of the fool.” Gaunilo objects to Anselm’s defense of his (Anselm’s) minor premise that God is “that than which no greater can be thought” and raises the fundamental point that whether existence of anything is a matter of the conception of it. Just because one can think of something under ideal conditions doesn’t mean it exists. Gaunilo uses the example of thinking of the most ideal islands. However, it doesn’t follow that these islands exist (Gaunilo, in Cahn 1995, pp. 394–397).

To be sure, within Anselm’s ontological argument, many of the most difficult problems in philosophy are present and intersect. “For example, how is it possible to deny the existence of something without presupposing the existence of the very thing whose existence is denied? Is existence a property of things? Are there genuinely different modes of existence, and if so, can the same thing exist in several modes—and so on” (Mann, in Cahn, 1995, p. 376).

Mantovani and Riva respond to Sheridan on his own ground, and therefore accept it. Both papers appear to posit the semblance of an ontological argument through the concept of presence and both suggest that their argument can perhaps bridge a gap between different perspectives. Sheridan says he introduces “the idea of estimation in the context of examining reality and presence . . . not to propose it as another alternative ontology, but rather to suggest that it draws upon key assumptions of both sides of the ontological conflict, and that, being self-consistent, it may provide some basis for a bridge (Sheridan, 1999, p. 551). Mantovani and Riva entitle their piece “Building a Bridge Between Different Scientific Communities” (Mantovani & Riva, 2001). However, both of their arguments would perhaps have more strength and provide a stronger bridge

between the traditions if they were recognized more as an epistemological and less as an ontological bridge. Indeed, we feel that they have proposed as much an epistemological as an ontological argument and discussion. We question the proffered perspectives as predominantly ontological.

Nevertheless, to qualify the subtle ontological argument inherent in both pieces, Kant's elaboration in his *Critique* is set forth here to clarify the difficulty in seeing both the social constructivism paradigm as well as the estimation paradigm as offering an ontological perspective, especially as regards "divine presence." Peripherally, as previously and briefly suggested, the implications of quantum theory support our proposition that we might look towards epistemology rather than to ontology when crafting any conceptual framework for a philosophy of presence that incorporates an ontology of presence unless it is to be admitted that the ground upon which one can build an ontology of presence is interdependent rather than mutually exclusive of the divine. (Note: one may use the concept of nonlocality in so doing, but this simply begs the question.) Now let us fill in the argument.

4 Noumena and Phenomena

Immanuel Kant's Copernican Revolution in philosophy was a new way of understanding the construction of knowledge, shifting the ground of perspective from that known to the conditions of the possibility of knowing anything. Perhaps without knowing it, Mantovani and Riva adopt a Kantian perspective and proceed on this path, yet ultimately fail to reach beyond cultural norms when they implicate culture in their proposal as the ontological imperative. They suggest that culture determines our sense of divine presence. "Culture is not the result of individual deliberations; on the contrary, it is the prerequisite for individual deliberations and actions . . ." (Mantovani & Riva, p. 541). This simply begs the question and situates the level of analysis not fundamentally at the ontological level, but at the socio/cultural/ecological level more appropriate

to an evolutionary discussion rather than to an ontological argument.

Sheridan, on the other hand, while suggesting a potential ontological perspective of presence, actually concedes the epistemological significance of his estimation theory when he suggests that whether the perception of that "ultimate challenge," namely understanding "that of divine presence," or God, as reality or as metaphor "obviously depends on what model one starts with, what actions one takes as a result of what one observes (the control law), and what assumptions one makes regarding the sensory and action filters" (Sheridan, 1999, p. 558). A different difficulty presented in Sheridan's argument, however, is that his "ultimate challenge of understanding perception (estimation of) reality, namely that of divine presence" (p. 557) takes place within a framework of formality and the rational. We believe that both the cultural perspective of Mantovani and Riva, as well as the formal, engineering perspective of Sheridan's present difficulties when it comes to understanding the essence of divine presence as well as when seeking to put in place a conceptual framework for a philosophy of presence. We assert, like Kant and Wolfgang Pauli, that the divine is not entirely of the rational and cannot be logically argued, at least not completely.

Kant's transcendental philosophy was an inquiry into our rational understanding that applies to objects in the material world. Yet, Kant introduced the concept of a noumenon to leave open the possibility of things other than phenomena. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he specifically recognized the failure of rationality to deal with those things that transcend ordinary human knowledge—like God, immortality, and the soul—things commonly believed to be apart, at least by Kant, from the ordinary, everyday world. But yet we know them. We have an understanding of them, but we are unable to comprehend these ideas totally.

Of these things outside the field of sensibility, we have an understanding that "*problematically* extends further" (Kant, 1787/1929, A255, emphasis original). But we have no intuition, not even the concept of a possible intuition through which the understanding can be used assertorically beyond the field of sensibility. The concept of noumenon is thus a limiting concept, the

function of which, according to Kant is “to curb the pretensions of sensibility” (p. B310).

Noumenon is a limiting concept in that the understanding limits sensibility by its very relation to it, that is, because it is applied to it. But the understanding in turn acquires something through this concept of noumena, which Kant calls a negative extension. This means that, although the understanding is not limited through sensibility, but instead sets limits to it, in applying the term *noumena* to “things in themselves (things not regarded as appearances) . . . it [the understanding] sets limits to itself, recognizing that it cannot know these noumena through any of the categories, and that it must therefore think them only under the title of an unknown something” (Kant, 1787/1929, B312).

Nevertheless, we do think them; that is, we have a problematic understanding of a realm other than the phenomenal realm. In this regard, Kant acknowledged that he had to limit reason to make room for faith.

For in order to arrive at such insight it [pure reason] must make use of principles which, in fact, extend only to objects of possible experience, and which, if also applied to what cannot be an object of experience, always really change this into an appearance, thus rendering all *practical extension* of pure reason impossible. I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith* (Kant, 1787/1929, p. BXXX, emphasis original).

The implications are that, although we can know the world as it appears, and thus can speak of what we perceive to know, we can never know its “ultimate character” as we have no faculty to determine such things.

5 Intentionality

Mantovani and Riva characterize Sheridan’s argument as making two moves. The first is to engage in a “lively discussion on the ontology of ‘presence’ (Sheridan, 1999, p. 551), the second is to define the alternative positions in conflict, which basically are two. The first is that what is real and what is virtual is quite distinguishable. The second basically revolves around the per-

spective that we can never know reality because our senses deceive us. Ambiguity describes reality so we basically are always in a virtual world. (Mantovani & Riva, 2001, p. 538). However, Mantovani and Riva note (without ever naming them) that authors who support this second of alternative ontological perspectives in conflict, that is, that “we cannot know reality,” (Sheridan, 1999, p. 551) “*do not* in fact assert that we cannot know reality,” but instead state “that what we know is reality, no less and no more” (Mantovani & Riva, 2001, p. 538). This proposition, Mantovani and Riva say, was known by medieval and modern philosophers under the name of “intentional.”

From our philosophical perspective, we concede the idea of intentionality. Indeed, we propose that virtual reality media are uniquely situated to make apparent the “teleology of media—to expand, to augment, to amplify intentionality,” and we propose a refinement of the understanding of media in light of advances in computational media and what we are learning in this realm (Lauria, 2000, p. 219). We also propose that “virtual objects are acts of volition, ‘minded information’ if you will that actualize intention” (p. 215). “Media are not mere extensions of our physical selves into the complex of our activity, nor is media the mere technological ground of effect [in McLuhanistic terms] . . . the suggestion is “that media be viewed as of manifest intentional character” (p. 218).

From our perspective we see a deeper meaning to reality, which does include the intentional, ambiguity, and the irrational. Thus, we must of necessity, therefore, disagree with Mantovani’s and Riva’s interpretation of what others really mean in supporting the second of what they (Mantovani and Riva) describe as Sheridan’s alternative positions in conflict, that being that we cannot know the ultimate nature of reality. Mantovani and Riva say those who support this position “*do not* in fact assert that we cannot know reality” but instead state “that what we know is reality, no more and no less.” We agree that “intentional,” in the sense that Mantovani and Riva use it, has ontological significance *if and only if* it is given in the Teilhardian sense of objective consciousness:

Looked at from *within*, as well as observed from *without*, the stuff of the universe thus tends likewise to be resolved backwardly into a dust of particles that are (i) perfectly alike among themselves (at least if they are observed from a great distance); (ii) each co-extensive with the whole of the cosmic realm; (iii) mysteriously connected among themselves, finally, by a global energy. In these depths the world's two aspects, external and internal, correspond point by point. So much is this so that one may pass from the one to the other on the sole condition that "mechanical interaction" in the definition of the partial centers of the universe given above is replaced by "consciousness" (Teilhard, 1965, p. 59).

We accept as valid Mantovani's and Riva's interpretation of the unnamed authors' views: "that what we know is reality, no less and no more" (p. 538) if and only if it is proposed on Teilhardian grounds. If proposed in any other light, the discussion shifts to the epistemological, which, we also believe, is what Sheridan intended when referring to our inability to actually know reality. We believe Sheridan referenced the Copenhagen Interpretation of the quantum theory in positing his suggestion. (See Lauria (1997, 2000) for a discussion of the epistemic environment of virtual reality media and its implications.) We also bring forth Kant's propositions related to reason to support our position against pure reason when discussing reality in the domain of the divine.

Such objects of pure understanding will always remain unknown to us; we can never even know whether such a transcendental or exceptional knowledge is possible under any conditions—at least not if it is to be the same kind of knowledge as that which stands under our ordinary categories. *Understanding* and *sensibility*, with us, can determine objects *only when they are employed in conjunction*. When we separate them, we have intuitions without concepts [thoughts], or concepts without intuitions—in both cases, representation which we are not in a position to apply to any determinate object (Kant, 1727/1929, p. B314, emphasis original).

Because rational understanding of noumenal reality lays beyond our conceptual structure, it can never wholly be the type of knowledge that Kant defined as related to pure reason and given through the faculties of understanding and sensibility. Nevertheless, we can and do think this noumenal quality, having thus, a problematic understanding of noumenon.

6 Spiritual Realities

That Sheridan proposes the estimation paradigm as a framework for "rational discussion" of God needs qualification. It is not only that relating the estimation discussion to the consideration of the divine is within an epistemological discussion, it is also that rational discourse cannot solely govern consideration of the ultimate. There may be some ontological relationship between our insight and "what is," but it is the necessary formality of the estimation paradigm and its exclusive reliance on pure reason to express the ontological that presents a problem.

Sheridan also supposes that "ontologically, God may be said to be a virtual reality (as contrasted to physical sensible reality), whose 'presence' is enhanced by suppression of disbelief through the above-mentioned participation [that of active participation in religious exercises] in the same way that immersion in a computer-graphic virtual environment is enhanced" (Sheridan, 1999, p. 553). To address this particular perspective, we share this personal communication from philosopher of science John Honner. (See Honner (1987) for a more thorough examination of Honner's work.)

I had a thought in the bath the other day . . . me and Archimedes . . . about virtual reality. Maybe this might help you clarify my problem, or help you with your work. I believe in a realm of physical reality.

. . . what we call atoms and molecules etc., right up to planets and bricks and mortar. And I believe in a

realm which I call spiritual reality, which is possibly even more fundamental to existence than the physical (as quantum theory even might suggest) and which we can only imagine metaphorically, though in meditation and the arts we are often drawn into an awareness of deeper reality. This is what Teilhard might call noosphere. Now, like Teilhard, I am not a dualist, I do not believe that physical and spiritual realities are totally separate. I think one manifests the other, though in the end the spiritual is less prone to suffering in time. But virtual reality I take to mean a kind of reality which, as I have said, is parasitic on physical reality, an *as if* reality constructed out of facets of existing physical reality. It thus has all the characteristics of a warped physical reality, but it operates as a kind of spiritual reality in so far as it has no actual concrete basis, being merely an electronic generating of images and information. Do you see my problem? The virtual reality in this sense can be confused with spiritual reality, but it should not be, because they are quite different (J. Honner, personal communication, February 6, 1996, emphasis added).

7 Conclusions

In summation, Mantovani's and Riva's proposal to Sheridan's call for an "eclectic ontology" can perhaps be seen as a version of the medium (culture) is the message. But their argument is incomplete because reality does not consist only of the messages of culture. Although it is helpful and is a different way of looking at how culture conditions our understanding, it still is not a complete answer.

By proposing a purely formal ontological argument for presence as a means to try to bridge the gap between the disciplines, as in the case of Sheridan, we run the risk of confusing our own "estimation of that which is" with that "which is." This very sensitive issue is in fact central to the conversation regarding the emerging 21st century perspective, which constitutes a growing potential for conflating illusion with reality. On the one hand, we cannot ultimately know, so even an act of faith could be considered perhaps an

estimation vis-à-vis Sheridan's perspective. However, if we carry either of the parties' arguments to their ultimate extension, both proposals run the risk of confusing an estimation of reality with the deeper ontological significance of the nature of divine presence. Such a direction lays open to the potential for arrogance and hubris, which we believe is not currently expressed in either argument, yet could become an abuse of a deeper reality if taken to its limit.

McLuhan said that the goal of science and the arts and education for the next generation must be to decipher the perceptual code, not the genetic code (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 230). As our new virtual reality communications media are deployed and employed, such an endeavor becomes increasingly necessary.

Inherently, computational communications media teleologically embrace an end of understanding the world of appearance to understand the life of mind. Recognizing this teleos is the first strategic step in navigating and sailing our cyber seas. Prudence guides our understanding in following McLuhan's recognition that "control over change would seem to consist in moving not with it but ahead of it" (McLuhan, 1965, p. 199).

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