

Space, Time, and the Spiritual Irrelevance of Scale

By George Adams

Human beings are often prone to well-meaning spiritual advice that encourages the cognitive maneuver of putting their existence into a broader perspective. More specifically, that maneuver often goes something like this: compared to the size of the universe, a human being (indeed the entire planet Earth) is an almost infinitesimally tiny particle, and of no significance in the larger scheme of the immensity of space. Or: when viewed from the perspective of a universe that is billions of years old, the length of the lifetime of a human being (indeed, of the entire human species) is an almost infinitesimally short moment, barely noticeable and of no significance in the scheme of the immensity of time.

Both observations are, from a certain perspective at least, and certainly in a *prima facie* sense, accurate, and both observations can be seen as spiritually edifying. The smallness of humanity in the context of the fullness of time and space can evoke a sense of humility and effectively counteract the embarrassing narcissistic tendency to take ourselves too seriously, to inflate the greatness of our achievements and the tragedy of our losses and failures. Such an insight regarding the insignificance of any single human being, or indeed the entire human species, including its entire history, has a sobering effect on our seemingly intractable tendency to overstate our importance.

And yet, somewhat paradoxically, while this “space/time perspective” (as we shall call it) is true and spiritually edifying in one sense, in another sense it can be seen as factually/objectively false, and as such, spiritually damaging in a rather profound way.

More specifically: The space-time perspective is dependent on a specific view of reality, a specific ontology. It presumes the primacy of a spatio-temporal universe. If indeed all of reality is embedded in space and time, then it makes sense to make spiritual value judgments based on the spatio-temporal status of that which is being evaluated.

However, it is not necessarily the case that all of reality is encompassed by the spatio-temporal universe. It is at least conceivable that there is something that exists in a dimension (although such a word probably doesn't even make sense in this context) outside of (again, in the context of the assertions we are about to make, "outside" might appear to be a rather problematic choice of words, and should be understood as an inadequate symbolic expression at best) the dimensions known by humans and designated by humans as space and time. In fact, if we divest traditional religious beliefs from their culturally and temporally bound elements, it is apparent that spiritual traditions almost universally assert the existence of something that transcends or exists outside of the space-time continuum, even though this assertion is rarely done in a manner that manages to avoid confusing and intermingling, in endless variations, that which is outside of the spatio-temporal realm with aspects of that very realm which it is outside of [and hence, for example, anthropomorphic gods and eschatologies rooted in beautiful heavens (space) which exist forever (time)].

Nonetheless, despite the lack of precision of expression, such an assertion of a non-spatio-temporal something is part of spiritual traditions. And for the sake of avoiding sectarian quibbling about the correct manner of designation of that non-spatio-temporal reality, we will simply refer to it as Spirit. More specifically, religions assert the existence of a Spirit that is outside the spatio-temporal realm, and that an element of that Spirit is present in human beings. In Western traditions, these two aspects of spiritual reality are typically referred to by the terms "God" and "soul." There is Spirit that in some sense transcends and exists outside the spatio-temporal realm that is more than humanity, and that something is designated as God. And there is Spirit that somehow is present in or connected to humanity, and that is designated as soul.

However, God and soul are terms that have such a heavy connection to specific religious traditions and all of the culturally and temporally conditioned beliefs, concepts, and symbols that are part of these

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