

# Samuel Alexander's Space-Time God

Samuel Alexander (1859-1938) was an Australian-born British philosopher. He was the first Jewish fellow of an Oxbridge college. He gave the Gifford lectures in 1917 and 1918, which were published in 1920 as *Space, Time, and Deity*. The following is a quote from the book:

“God’s body, being the whole universe of Space-Time, is the source of the categories but not itself subject to them. Since his deity is realised in a portion only of the universe, it might be thought that deity at any rate, which is equivalent to some complex of mind, might be subject to the categories, and be a true individual substance. It is not however an individual, for an individual is the union of particular and universal. And realised deity is not universal, since, representing as it does the whole, it admits of no repetition, which is vital to a universal. We can only say that, like Space-Time itself, it is singular. Neither is it a substance, for the same reason. Representing the whole in the physiological sense, it admits no relation to other substances, but is the whole of Space-Time on a reduced scale. In this breakdown of the attempt to apply to it the categories (for the same considerations can be advanced in the case of the other categories as well) it betrays its merely ideal character of a picture and nothing more. The picture is not the less eminently worth drawing. Only nothing actual corresponds to it. We have an individual forecasted which is not a real individual. The actual reality which has deity is the world of empiricals filling up all Space-Time and tending towards a higher quality.

Two different questions may be asked as to the existence of deity, .

(1) The first is, do finite beings exist with an infinite

deity or are there finite gods ? The answer is we not know. If Time has by now actually brought them forth, they do exist ; if not, their existence belongs to the future. If they do exist (" millions of spirits walk the earth") they are not recognisable in any form of material existence known to us ; and material existence they must have ; **though conceivably there may be such material bodies, containing also life and mind as the basis of deity, in regions of the universe beyond our ken.**

(2) The other question admits an answer. Does infinite deity exist ? The answer is that the world in its infinity tends towards infinite deity, or is pregnant with it, but that infinite deity does not exist ; and we may now add that if it did, God—the actual world possessing infinite deity— would cease to be infinite God and break up into a multiplicity of finite gods, which would be merely a higher race of creatures than ourselves with a God beyond. Infinite deity then embodies the conception of the infinite world in its straining after deity. But the attainment of deity makes deity finite. Deity is an empirical quality like mind or life. Before there was mind the universe was straining towards infinite mind. **But there is no existent infinite mind, but only many finite minds.** Deity is subject to the same law as other empirical qualities, and is but the next member of the series. At first a presage, in the lapse of time the quality comes to actual existence, animates a new race of creatures, and is succeeded by a still higher quality. God as an actual existent is always becoming deity but never attains it. He is the ideal God in embryo. The ideal when fulfilled ceases to be God, and yet it gives shape and character to our conception of the actual God, and always tends to usurp its place in our fancy." (from "Space, time, and deity : the Gifford lectures at Glasgow, 1916-1918" by Samuel Alexander)

Emily Thomas, Assistant Professor in Philosophy at Durham University, England, has attempted to elucidate Samuel Alexander's philosophy.

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Thomas has written, "...Alexander is sometimes taken to be a 'panentheist'. If panentheism is taken to mean that the universe is 'in' God, then this characterization is straightforwardly incorrect; in fact, Alexander holds that deity is strictly contained 'in' the universe... Further, against the existing scholarship, I argue that Alexander's system is naturalist... Alexander's account of God is a serious attempt to mount a coherent theism from a naturalist perspective, and it should be recognized as the worthy rival that it is to contemporary emergentist theologies."

"... Alexander rejects the argument from design for God's existence, which he understands as positing a designer in the face of the wonderful adaptation of living forms to their surroundings. The problem is that we now know this adaptation to be the result of selection operating on variables, and that is why the world works out so as to produce a plan: 'Who does not see that sheep were not created for man, but that man survives because he is able to live on sheep?' (Alexander 1920, ii. 343-4). As we will see, Alexander utilizes Darwinian evolution throughout his work."

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"On Alexander's description of the world, the next quality that will emerge from space-time—following the highest quality that we know, mind or consciousness—is deity, and this emergence will happen in the future (Alexander 1920, ii. 345). Deity does not emerge from a single human mind, nor a collection of human minds, as human minds are finite and God is infinite (Alexander 1920, ii. 350-1). Instead, Alexander argues that deity emerges from the universe as a whole:

'[Deity] is an empirical quality the next in the series which the very nature of Time compels us to postulate, though we cannot tell what it is like. But besides assuring us of the

place of the divine quality in the world, speculation has also to ask wherein this quality resides. What is the being which possesses deity? . . . God is the whole world as possessing the quality of deity. Of such a being the whole world is the 'body' and deity is the 'mind'. But this possessor of deity is not actual but ideal. (Alexander 1920, ii. 352–3).'

In this difficult passage, I read Alexander as distinguishing between deity and God. I will explicate what he means by both concepts. For Alexander, 'deity' is an empirical quality that will emerge from the world, or the space-time system, as whole. In this passage, Alexander states that 'we cannot tell' what deity is like. This statement is grounded in Alexander's thesis that a being can only contemplate (i.e. know) the qualities sitting lower on the ontological hierarchy than itself (Alexander 1920, ii. 104). To illustrate, a human mind can contemplate life and matter but it cannot contemplate itself as a mind, nor qualities higher than mind. As such, we cannot know what deity—a quality higher than mind—will be like. We know only that it will be 'new', and 'different in kind' from mind (Alexander 1920, ii. 347–50). Alexander offers a new take on the traditional doctrine that God is unknowable...

By referring to the world as the 'body' of God, Alexander is drawing an analogy between the emergence of deity from space-time, and the emergence of mind from body...

However, a key difference between God–world emergence, and mind–body emergence, is that strictly speaking God does not yet exist."

"Alexander's divergence from traditional theism and pantheism is highlighted by his rejection of God as creator:

[A]s being the whole universe God is creative, but his distinctive character of deity is not creative but created. As embracing the whole of Space-Time he is creative; because Time is the moving principle that brings out the constant redistribution in the matrix which is equivalent to the birth of finite forms. Even then it is, properly speaking, Space-

Time itself which is creator and not God . . . God then, like all things in the universe—for Space-Time itself is not in the universe, whereas God, since his deity is a part of the universe, is in it—is in the strictest sense not a creator but a creature. (Alexander 1920, ii. 397–8)

God did not create the universe; rather, the universe will create and contain God...

.....it should now be clear that, given his subsumption of both panentheism and pantheism under the label 'pantheism', and his rejection of that label to his system, Alexander cannot happily be characterized as a panentheist or a pantheist. In fact, Alexander is offering us a theology for which there is as yet no label at all. Alexander does not hold that God contains the universe and is not exhausted by it. Rather, the universe contains God and is not exhausted by God."

In my view it is important to recognize that Samuel Alexander's philosophy was consistent with the astronomical knowledge available at the time (pre-1920). He would have had no inkling of the big bang theory or the fine-tuning of cosmological constants, two key bases which underpin the theory of pandeism.