

## THE LEVITATIONAL PHYSICS OF ICONS AND THE GRAVITATIONAL THEOLOGY OF NEWTON

This paper is a comparative analysis of Newtonian and pre-Newtonian (iconographic) conceptions of "absolute reality" with a particular focus on the representation of "absolute" space. The purpose of this analysis is twofold: first, to show that Newton and the Enlightenment in general were wrong in assuming that pre-scientific humanity carried primitive and simple representations of the "Absolute," and secondly, to show that to give the concept of the Absolute both rational clarity and logical certainty by grounding it in a mathematical logic, Newton was led into dividing the "Absolute" from the "ordinary," the "true" from the "apparent", and the „theoretical“ from the "naive." More specifically, in order to rescue the concept of "Absolute" from its pictorial representation, to distinguish his "Absolute" from that of pre-scientific humanity, Newton ignored the foundational role of the lifeworld in the formation of the concept of "Absolute." Throughout I will rely on Edmund Husserl's and Martin Heidegger's concepts of lifeworld and its role in the formation of concepts of transcendental reality, as well as on Ludwig Wittgenstein's argument that "Absolute" has no axiomatic but rather a pre-logical foundation. The pre-scientific iconographic representation of the "Absolute," I argue, is more amenable to the phenomenological and Wittgensteinian analyses than to Newton's.

### Newton's "absolute space"

In order to achieve an ideal of logical certainty of typical what Foucault identifies as "classical episteme" (Foucault, 1994), Newton's scientific project, consistent with the model of "Galilean science," appropriated the phenomena of the lifeworld such as time, space, motion, and place, to laws of mathematics. Husserl (1970, p. 52) was one of the first to describe the consequences of such endeavor, among them to forget the given relationship between assumed lifeworld structures and scientific reasoning. He argues that the "great discoverer" Galileo, in order to do justice to scientists who preceded him, presents himself at once as a "discovering and a concealing genius" (Husserl, 1970, p. 52). Galileo discovers the "a priori form" of the "true" (idealized and mathematized) world according to which every occurrence in "nature" - idealized nature - must come under exact laws (Husserl, 1970, p. 53). What Galileo neglected and concealed, Husserl insists, is the lifeworld within whose structures one finds both a method and a logic of mathematical reasoning. Husserl asserts:

Mathematics and mathematical science, as a garb of ideas, or the garb of symbols of the symbolic mathematical theories, encompasses everything which, for scientists and the educated generally, *represents* the life-world, *dresses it up* as "objectively actual and true" nature. It is through the garb of ideas that we take for true *being* what is actually a *method* - a method which is designed for the purpose of progressively improving, *in infinitum*, through 'scientific' predictions, those rough predictions which are the only

ones originally possible within the sphere of what is actually experienced and experienceable in the life-world. (Husserl, 1970, pp. 51-52)

In its attempt to achieve the propositional certainty over non-propositional common-sense knowledge, Newton's physics can similarly be viewed as a continuation of the "concealment" inherited in the model of "Galilean science." By mathematizing the universe, Newton imposes a theoretical cut into the pre-theoretical world. He does so in accordance with Bacon's contrast of scientific theory and the "marketplace" biases. This radical stand repudiates use of any concept in science which has a practical rather than a theoretical origin. Scientists, in this way, sought to emancipate themselves from the lay person's fallacy of "idols." By rejecting empirical categories, they sought to establish absolute, i.e. mathematical, certainty in their claims. Correspondingly, Newton makes an epistemological cut between science and the lifeworld at the beginning of his *Principia* when he states:

I do not define time, space, place, and motion, as being well known to all. Only I must observe, that the common people conceive those quantities under no other notions but from the relation they bear to sensible objects. And thence arise certain prejudices, for the removing of which it will be convenient to distinguish them into absolute and relative, true and apparent, mathematical and common. (Newton, 1952, p. 8)

In making this dichotomy between mathematical and common reasoning, Newton's understanding conceals the fact that mathematical practices and concepts originate in ordinary life for ordinary purposes. While Newton's mathematical physics adopted the concepts of "absolute" and "true" from theology, theology itself is, according to Wittgensteinian theologians, grounded in the language of the lifeworld (Kerr, 1986; Holmer, 1978). For Newton and other scientists of his time, mathematical logic, in contrast to common-sense reasoning, nevertheless provides coherent and non-contradictory propositions, and so becomes a theory of the real world.

According to Husserl, it is the scientist's drive for perfection (the "praxis of perfecting," Husserl, 1970, p. 26) which constitutes the image of the *mathesis universalis* as absolutely coherent and logical. This in turn conceals the connection between the scientific world and its lifeworld. By resorting to a world of absolute, Newton is convinced he can postulate properties free from common sense prejudice. Absolute geometrical **space, time, place, and motion** are decontextualized and therefore "true" aspects of the "apparent" lifeworld. These decontextual constructs constitute for Newton a non-prejudicial ground for analysis. Subjecting the phenomena of the lifeworld to laws of mathematics in order to establish an analytic ground for natural philosophy, has, for Newton, the following consequences. First, the concepts of absolute **space, motion, place, and time** enable a perfect *accuracy* in mechanics by which many things can be produced according to new principles. Geometry is that part of universal mechanics which accurately proposes and demonstrates the art of measuring (Newton, 1952, p. 1). Secondly, the mathematical principles of natural philosophy provide an *axiomatic foundation* for the elementary phenomena, which in turn allow other elemental forces of nature to be investigated. By demonstrating these principles for a variety of phenomena, one arrives at general propositions for the physical world as a whole (Newton, 1952, p. 1). In other words, Newton was only advancing the newly formed *habit* of constructing scientific objectivity, objectivity understood by him as the non-contradictory logic of a rational system of science, and not, as he hoped, eliminating the pre-analytical

foundation of his theoretical concepts. The concept of the "Absolute," adopted for his system of mechanics from Protestant theology, appeared to him, naively though, to be already cleansed from the biases of the "marketplace," because of its rational and non-pictorial representation. In preferring this solution to his epistemological problems in mechanics, he created a logical problem based on his presupposition that the "Absolute" has a rational and theoretical rather than pictorial and pre-rational foundation.

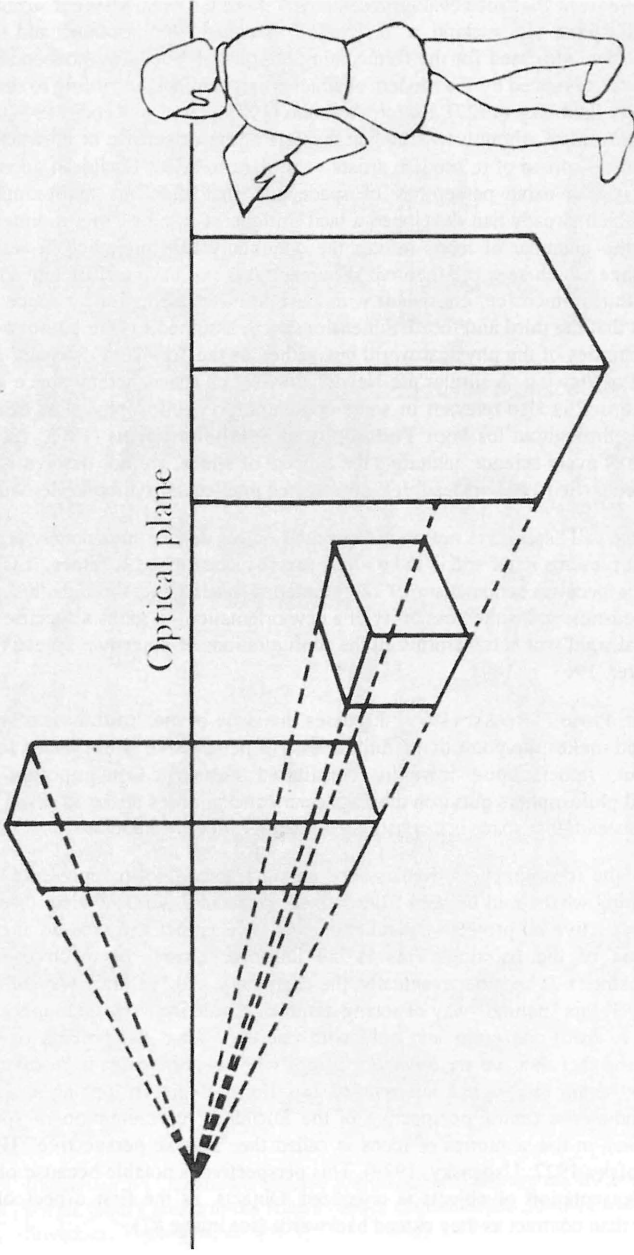
### **The iconographic "physics" of the lifeworld**

Medieval Byzantium is culturally distinct from the England of Newton not in the sense that the former did not have concepts of "absolute" **space**, but that the use of it never erased the lifeworld conditions of its formation. At the beginning of the 20th century, a series of studies were done in the field of the semiotics of Russian icons (Florenski, 1979; Uspensky, 1973, 1979) which reveal the awareness of lifeworld contingencies in the conceptualization of the categories of "Absolute." These studies will be utilized here as a resource for understanding the medieval, pre-Newtonian notion of the category **space**. Icons and frescos have been chosen because they appear to serve the same function for medieval Christians as mathematics did for Newton, i. e. as the language of the "Absolute." In this respect Uspensky remarks that *seeing* icons is a way of *reading* them:

According to the teachings of the church fathers, icons have the same function for illiterates as books for literates. (Uspensky, 1979, p. 253)<sup>1</sup>

The similarity between these two different representational methods, mathematical and iconic, is helpful for the purpose of comparison. Newton assumed that pre-theoretical reasoning lacks the capacity to conceptualize ideal properties of the physical world in a rational manner. In examining the practice of making icons, it becomes apparent, however, that, even though mathematics was not the logical foundation, icons were able to provide pictorially an understanding of the category "absolute" **space** for what Berkeley called the "bulk of illiterate mankind" (Berkeley, 1982, p. 7). As we will see, icons were designed mostly for illiterate recipients as a form of communicating the "Invisible" via the pictorial explication of a mutually shared visual rationality of the lifeworld, a rationality which is inconsistent with Euclidean laws of geometry and Newtonian laws of mechanics. Through pictorial representation, icons were able to create a special order of grammar in which the "Invisible" is presented as that which transcends the logical by analogy to the visible order of lifeworld - intersubjectively shared and known in common logic. If the logical is the order of the gravitational field of objects, represented by the theoretical and non-pictorial system of representation, than the non-logical is the order of the levitational field of the "Absolute," represented pictorially. What iconographers understood was that to communicate the meaning of the "Absolute," or "absolute" space, to illiterate recipients, they have first to visually display the familiar order of lifeworld, must reference to the common sense and profane logic of the lifeworld as that which is antithetical to the non-logical and sacred order of the "Absolute." By doing just this they unavoidably included the pre-rational order of the lifeworld for the pictorial formation of the concept "Absolute." Therefore, for them as for Wittgenstein, the pre-rational is the foundation of the "Absolute." Correspondingly, "absolute reality" can be "told" and "read" by virtue of the grammar of icons utilizing the pre-literates' knowledge of their lifeworld.

Diagram IX-3





Furthermore, we learn that medieval representations were far from having a simple and naive conception of **space**. In making a distinction between the profane and the sacred, iconographers planted a seed for the forthcoming critique of Euclidean conception of space. This critique was advanced by the modern abstract artists. In fact, according to the modern art historians Erwin Panofsky (1927), Rudolf Arnheim (1971), Gyorgy Kepes (1944) and Nelson Goodman (1968), all of whom were trying at the time of the emergence of abstract painting to justify the rise and spread of it, modern artists were right to reject Euclidean geometry on the grounds that it is a naive perception of space and that their art approximated closely iconography which already had developed a tacit critique of it, albeit in a rudimentary form.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the grammar of icons refutes the commonly held prejudice in respect of the concept of **space** which sees pre-theoretical humanity as not having sufficient knowledge to represent the third dimension, consistent with Euclidean representation of space. What is, in fact, known is that the third and fourth dimensions were assumed by the authors of icons not as passive properties of the physical world but, rather, as the "on-hand" viewers' achievement at the moment of viewing. A similar pre-Newtonian view on space, hereby space appears as a symbolic construct, is also relevant in some contemporary philosophy. For example, Ernst Cassirer argues throughout his book **Philosophy of Symbolic Forms** (1963, vol. 3) that the basic concepts of every science, including the concept of **space**, are not passive reflections on some given Being (Sein) but, instead, self-constructed intellectual symbols. He writes:

What we call "space" is not an independent object that is immediately represented to us, that presents itself and is to be recognized by certain signs; rather, it is a particular mode, a peculiar schematism of representation itself. And through this schematism, consciousness gains the possibility of a new orientation - it gains a specific direction of spiritual sight which transforms all the configurations of objective, objectivized reality. (Cassirer, 1963, p. 149)

In like fashion, Pavle Florenski (1979) discusses the issue of the "truthfulness" of the linear perspective and makes the point that "truthfulness" of perspective is not based upon external similarities but, rather, upon inwardly constituted meaning. Contemporary artists, art historians, and philosophers question the Euclidean conception of space as given or "natural" and suggest, instead, that space is a constructed category. Let me elaborate.

In contrast to the iconographers, Renaissance painters since Giotto represented the natural world by painting what could be seen from a fixed, monocular point of view (see image # 1). From this perspective all projective parallel lines of objects met and crossed at one point in the background of the painting. This is the linear or central perspective invented by Renaissance painters. It became, eventually, the customary and "natural" way of "seeing" the world. However, this "natural" way of seeing assumes something very unnatural, i.e., that we see a thing only from one point and only with one eye. What the process of representing "conceals" is the fact that we are *binocular* beings who see things not from *fixed points* but, rather, always within *motion* and interrelationship. For example, in looking at several icons, rather than finding the central perspective of the Euclidean representation of space we find something which in the semiotics of icons is called the "inverse perspective" (P. Florenski, 1979; B. Panofsky 1927; Uspensky, 1979). This perspective is notable because of the way in which the representation of objects is organized. Objects, as the first aspect of this order, enlarge rather than contract as they extend backwards (see image #2).



Illustration 1-3: Unknown Byzantine artist, Detail showing the *Birth of the Virgin* from a fresco in the King's Chapel, Church of Sts. Joachim and Ann., Studenica, Yugoslavia, c. 1310-15.

In the canonized representation of the Byzantine style of the fresco, one notices that the background architectural structures are portrayed as if seen simultaneously from above and below. Similarly, the cradle in which the infant Virgin rests is drawn with two presumably parallel ends in "reverse perspective", i.e., the rockers, normally perpendicular to the front side, diverge rather than converge. It is as if to imagine the viewing position of the artist to be in the background of the scene opposite the viewer. This way of seeing the world comes from the "inner point" of view. In other words, the author does not paint fragments of the world from a well known, fixed outside perspective, but as if in the midst of the space itself, seeing it from several different angles. The author imagines actually being in the world depicted, collecting all sides of this commonly as well as variously known and remembered world onto the painting surface itself. This collected, commonly shared experience becomes an analogical base for the painter's and the illiterate recipient's exchange of iconic meaning ("absolute space"). The concept of the "absolute" (represented by the **Bible**) is an achievement of this communication. As we see from image # 3, the way in which the book is painted is "unnatural." This is not to say that the view of the book is not an ordinary one but, rather, that it *becomes* "extraordinary," non-logical, only when *seen* in relationship to the roof. Because the book and the roof are seen from two different perspectives and yet incorporated into the same scene, the iconographer created physical *contradictions*, a means for seeing the non-logical physics of the ordinary. The view of the icon reassembles a cubistic view, i.e., a synthesized view of different locally seen and memorized points of seeing represented within two dimensional space.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to Newton's decontextualized and rationally coherent "absolute" space, here the common sense concept of "absolute" space speaks as sacred space, which involves the locality of the ordinary as its context. Space is always conceptualized in "somebody's" standpoint, or, as Heidegger calls this lifeworld contingency, "round-about-us" space. In this respect, Heidegger makes the following analysis of everyday life space as the interrelational space given at hand (*zuhanden*). This conception differs significantly from Newton's universalistic conception:

Such a place and such a multiplicity of places are not to be interpreted as the "where" of some random Being-present-at-hand of Things. In each case the place is the definite 'there' or 'yonder' ["Dort" und "Da"] of an item of equipment which *belongs somewhere*. ... The regional orientation of the multiplicity of places belonging to the ready-to-hand goes to make up the aroundness - the "round-about-us" [das Um-uns-herum] of those entities which we encounter as closest environmentally. A three-dimensional multiplicity of possible positions which gets filled up with Things present-at-hand is never proximally given. This dimensionality of space is still veiled in the spatiality of the ready-to-hand. The 'above' is what is 'on the ceiling'; the 'below' is what is 'on the floor'; the 'behind' is what is 'at the door'; all 'wheres' are discovered and circumspectively interpreted as we go our ways in everyday dealings; they are not ascertained and catalogued by the observational measurement of space. (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 136-137)

Cassirer (1963, vol. 3) also makes an important observation by seeing that pre-theoretical humanity always represents space, including absolute space, as locally perceived:

Space is not yet a homogeneous whole, within which the particular determinations are

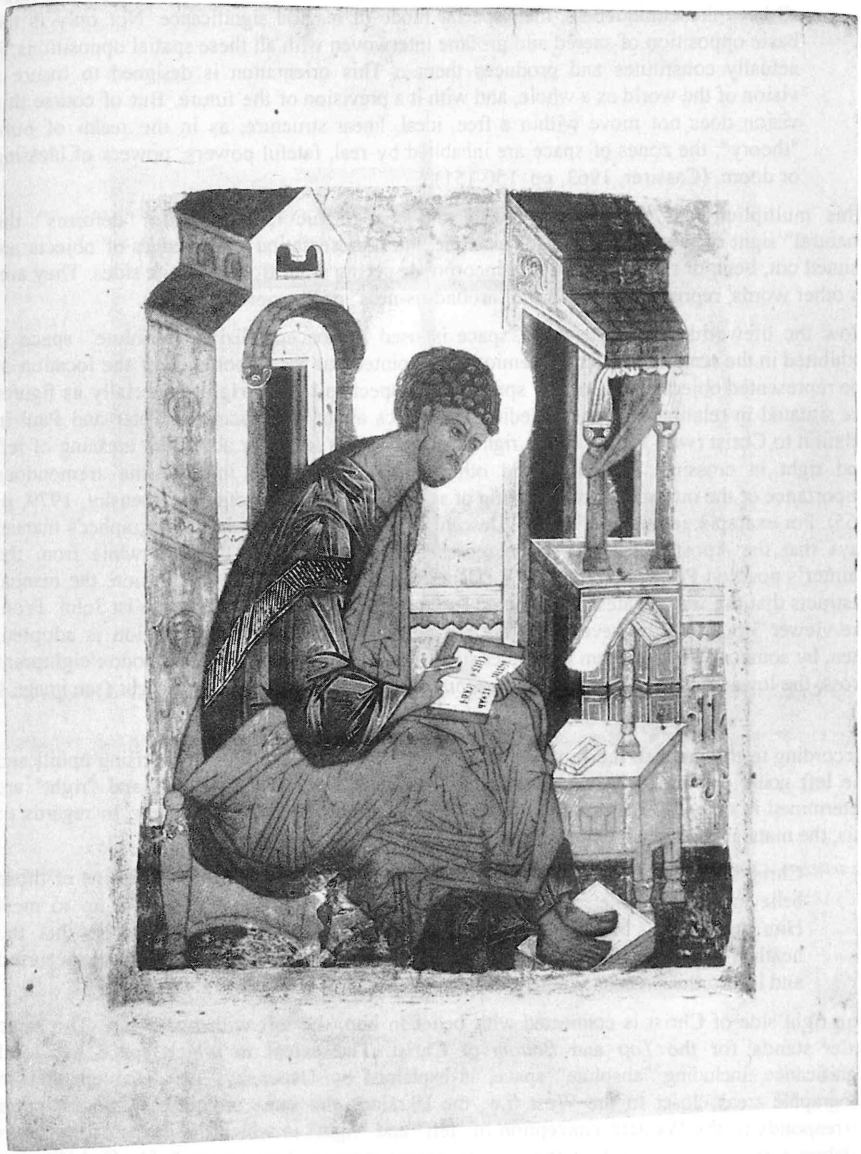


ILLUSTRATION N. 3

Space is not yet a homogeneous whole, within which the particular determinations are equivalent and interchangeable. The near and far, the high and low, the right and left - all have their uniqueness, their special mode of magical significance. Not only is the basic opposition of sacred and profane interwoven with all these spatial oppositions; it actually constitutes and produces them.... This orientation is designed to insure a vision of the world as a whole, and with it a prevision of the future. But of course this vision does not move within a free, ideal, linear structure, as in the realm of pure "theory"; the zones of space are inhabited by real, fateful powers, powers of blessing or doom. (Cassirer, 1963, pp. 150-151)

This multiplicity of ordinary experiences in iconographic representation "deforms" the "natural" sight of the objects. So, for example, the representation of the edges of objects are fanned out, bent, or twisted in order to incorporate seeing them from opposite sides. They are, in other words, represented within the "around-us-ness" of the viewer's space.

How the lifeworld "around-us-ness" space is used in conceptualizing "absolute" space is exhibited in the semiotics of icons. Semioticians pointed out the importance of the location of the represented object in "absolute" space with respect to **left** or **right**, especially as figures are situated in relation to Christ. Medieval polemics about the placing of Peter and Paul in relation to Christ (who stands to his right and who to his left?), or about the meaning of left and right in crossing, baptizing, and other religious activities, indicate the tremendous importance of the intersubjective meaning of space for religious practices (Uspensky, 1979, p. 265). For example, in the motif of the 'Descent of the Holy Spirit', the iconographer's manual says that the Apostle Peter is to be represented "on the RIGHT hand" while from the painter's position Peter is on the LEFT (Uspensky, 1975, p. 34). In like fashion, the manual instructs that the "royal gates" be depicted "on the RIGHT side" of the Evangelist John. From the viewer's position, however, they are represented on the left. This position is adopted, then, by someone looking from the "other side." (Ibid.). If we look at the orthodox eightpoint cross, the lower cross bar (the footbar) is represented as sloping from left to right (see image # 4).

According to the manual, the foot-bar should be represented with the "right rising uphill and the left going downhill." In this example, however, we notice how "left" and "right" are determined in respect to where the central figure, the crucified Christ, *stands*. In regards to this, the manual gives the following meaning to the sides:

Christ standing on the Cross ... lifted upwards His right foot so that the sins of those believing in His name might be lifted and at His Second Coming be taken up to meet Him in the air, - but he made heavy his left foot and pressed it down so that the heathen who do not believe in Him might be made heavy with their ignorance, accursed and losing their reason would go down into Hell. (in Uspensky, 1975, p. 35)

The right side of Christ is connected with belief in him, the left with non-belief. The same order stands for the *Top* and *Bottom* of Christ. The extent to which space has local significance, including "absolute" space, is explained by Uspensky. He discovers that in geographic areas closer to the West (i.e., the Ukraine), the same orthodox eightpoint cross corresponds to the Western conception of "left" and "right" in which the image of the cross exhibits a reverse placement of the Eastern sacred meaning (see image # 5) (Catholics, in contrast to the Orthodox, cross themselves from left to right).



ILLUSTRATION N. 4

## Logical error of the visual and the constitution of mystical perception

It appears to have been cultural for medieval Christianity to perceive space or time, absolute or relative, locally and in relation to the human body as the pre-rational axis around which they rotate (Saltykov, in Uspensky, 1975, p. 36). As an intersubjectively constituted category, the visual expression of iconic space provides a common ground for understanding the visual grammar of "absolute" space, in respect to what we know and can communicate about space in our lifeworld. In contrast to Newton's assumption, it is the tacitly shared logical awareness of the "marketplace" (what "we all know") which allows an understanding of the "absolute" properties of the transcendental. Newton "conceals" this ground, though he assumes it and upon it builds his axiomatic structure of analytic physics. He insists that an epistemological distinction between metaphysical and common sense concepts is crucial for the foundation of theoretical physics. Absoluteness, constituted in a non-sensuous relation to the universe, gives these concepts the theoretical power to construct the world as theoretical facticity and, according to Newton, serves as the precondition for the science of the physical world.

Consider in this respect image # 6, paying close attention to the "deformed" representation of the architectural order of objects. You will notice that the doors and windows are pierced in the wrong places and their sizes do not correspond to their functions. The foot of the incomprehensible structure above hangs over an equally incomprehensible opening in the ceiling (upper right figure). Also, the back of the chair on which the Virgin sits is simultaneously outside and inside the wall of the temple and portrayed in such a way that its corner hits the back of the Virgin directly. This creates the impression that the space of the scene is paradoxical, and non-logical. Leonid Ouspensky (1952) interprets this as the visual explication of the concept of absolute space:

The meaning of this phenomenon is that architecture is the only element in the icon with the help of which it is possible to show clearly that the action taking place before our eyes is outside the laws of human logic, outside the laws of earthly existence. (Ouspensky, 1952, p. 41)

Following this assumption and in contrast to Newton's view, pre-scientific humanity sees "absolute" space as having not a logical but a *non-logical* character. The visual expressions of absolute properties are constructed, for the iconographer, upon commonly shared interrelational experiences (seeing, memorizing) which, when synthesized, reflect the totality of the world as a non-logical "gestalt." This view of iconic presentation of the "Invisible" found, at the time of the historic dispute between early Middle Age Christian theologians over the visual representation of the "invisible" God, its defender in John of Damascus, a classical exponent of the "Iconodule" (pro-icon) position.<sup>4</sup> In his argument, he suggests that visible things are corporeal models which provide vague understandings of intangible things. He adds:

Anyone would say that our inability immediately to direct our thoughts to contemplation of higher things makes it necessary that familiar *everyday media* be utilized to give suitable form to what is formless, and make visible what cannot be depicted, so that we are able to construct understandable analogies. If, therefore, the Word of God, in providing for our every need, always presents to us what is intangible by clothing it with form, does it not accomplish this by making an image using what is



ILLUSTRATION N. 5



*common* to nature and so brings within our reach that for which we long but are unable to see? (John of Damascus, 1980, p. 20, emphasis added).

Iconographers were not naive in believing that the "invisible" God is contained within the visible picture, a view occasionally ascribed to medieval Christians by Newton, who saw them guilty of worshipping their own images.<sup>5</sup> The dogma in Christian theology is that idolatry, as a "bad imagination," is a sin, i.e., the reification of the *imago Dei*, the sin proclaimed by the Protestant theologians.

To press this point a bit further, Newton assumes that mathematical language is liberated from allegory and analogy, i.e., idolatry, because it does not invite imagining. In this respect, Newton complies with the pre-established doctrine of Protestant theology. Protestant theology is a historic product and the continuation of the friction between the Western and Eastern Christianity, a friction which was in part due to the unbridgeable differences between two opposing views in regards to the iconographic representation of God.<sup>6</sup> While Western theologians argued against the visual representation of the invisible God on the grounds that it leads to idolatry, Eastern fathers defended it. The Eastern position stressed the view that even though it seems paradoxical to represent visually the invisible God, iconography is still consistent with the idea of the "incarnation." According to this idea, by incarnating as blood and flesh, God "touched" the visible world with God's "invisible" presence. In this way, the paradox of God's incarnation is created - invisible in the visible, limitless in the limited. John of Damascus elaborates this paradox in the following way:

If we attempt to make an image of the invisible God, this would be sinful indeed. It is impossible to portray one who is without body: invisible, uncircumscribed, and without form. Again, if we made images of man and believed them to be gods, and adored them as if they were so, we would be truly impious. We do neither of these things. But we are not mistaken if we make the image of God incarnate, who was seen on earth in the flesh, associated with men, and in His unspeakable goodness assumed the nature, feeling, form and color of our flesh. For we yearn to see how He looked, as the apostle says, "Now we see through a glass darkly." Now the icon is also a dark glass, fashioned according to the limitations of our physical nature. Though the mind wears itself out with effort, it can never cast away its bodily nature. (John of Damascus, 1980, pp. 52-53)

It is the idea of the incarnation, abandoned by the West and emphasized by the East, which justifies the paradox of the visual representation of the "invisible" God. In conforming with the dogma of the Western Church, Newton sees no justification for the appropriate "everyday media" as the analogical base for the genuine *imago Dei*. Newton elaborates:

But, by way of allegory, God is said to see, to speak, to laugh, to love, to hate, to desire, to give, to receive, to rejoice, to be angry, to fight, to frame, to work, to build; for all our notions of God are taken from the ways of mankind by a certain similitude, which, though not perfect, has some likeness, however. And thus much concerning God, to discourse of whom from the appearances of things does certainly belong to natural philosophy. (Newton, in Thayer, 1974, p. 44)

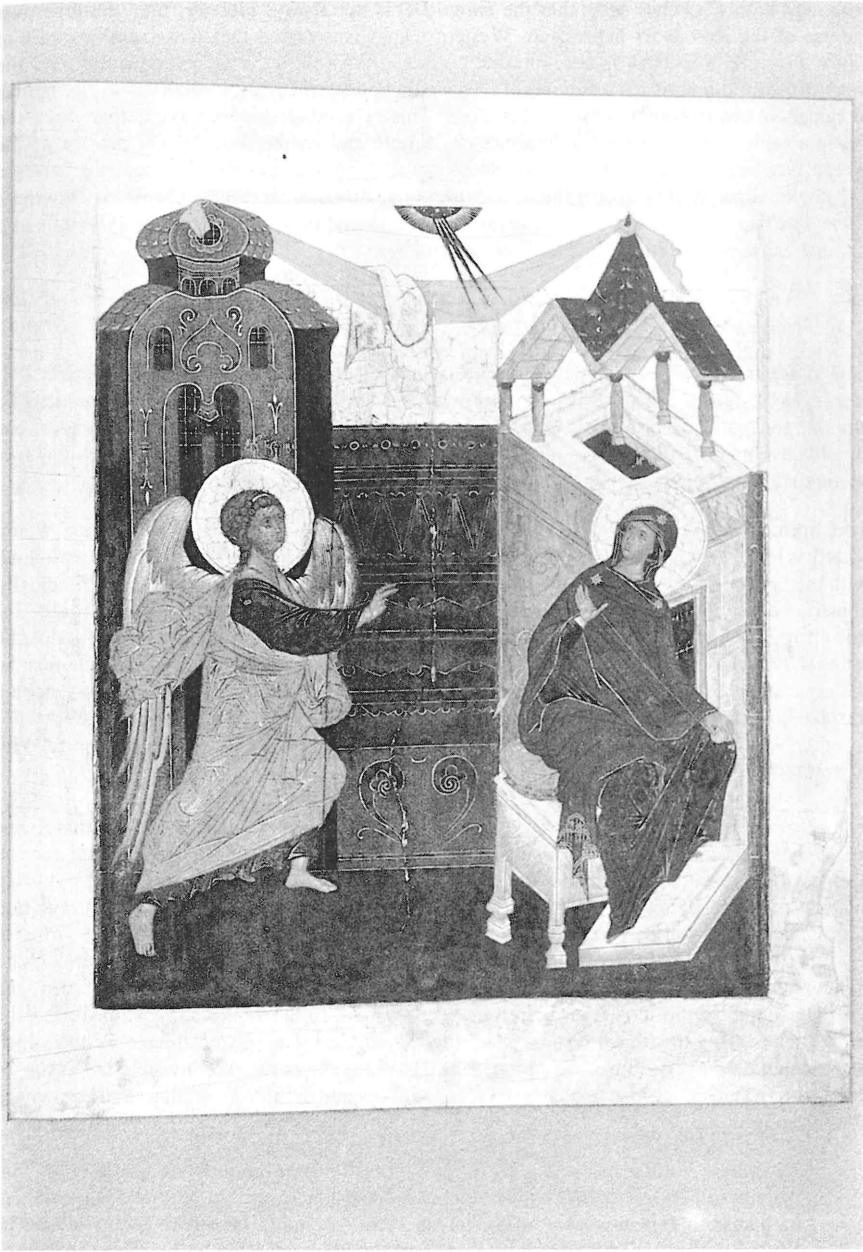


ILLUSTRATION N. 6

Although both Churches agree that the *imago Dei* is not always idolatry, they disagree over the use of the icon as its expression. Western theologians feared that if a visual portrait of God's absolute properties is appropriated according to common sense experiences, then the inconceivable and invisible attributes of God would be reified by the limitations of the human imagination and common sense explanations. This is another way of saying that once the unexplainable, unencompassable becomes explainable and encompassable, the picture of the *imago Dei* becomes *imago vulgaris*. Mathematical language, in apparent contrast, gives a decontextualized description of the "Absolute," one without its incarnate character. Newton's "Absolute" appears not as an incarnate image of the sacred into the order of profane, but as a rational cause of all things. Newton states:

We know him only by his most wise and excellent contrivances of things and final causes; we admire him for his perfection ... (in Thayer, p. 44)

God is admired when explanations are found, when God's perfection is "mathematized." It seems as if Newton's God is an outgrowth of the profane mathematical practices: a worshipped outcome or a mathematical result. As long as one is trained in mathematics, one should have no difficulties understanding God within the limits of this logic. For Newton, it is ratiocination, not belief, which stands for the "Absolute."

This attitude implies a different relationship to the non-logical, or to what Newton would regard as logical error. If we compare his **Principia**, a coherent rational system of reasoning, with the last icon (image # 7), we can observe that the latter is a non-logical "gestalt" actually constituted by a logical error of representation. Newton's physics has no 'logical space' for this error, whereas for iconography it is constitutively essential for marking the limits of the rational. Making a logical *error*, in other words, is a way of *explicating* the logical grammar of the concept "Absolute." One is reminded of Wittgenstein's point that "In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind." (Wittgenstein, 1969 # 156) In other words, "In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with Absolute."

The grammar of iconographic representation invented a visual paradox of the ordinary, one might argue, in order to use "conformity with mankind" as an appropriate medium for the analogical presentation of the "Absolute." This is done in such a way that error, by going against the boundaries of "ordinary physics," is the point at which representation communicates the paradoxical aspect of the idea of incarnation. Furthermore, it is by virtue of not ignoring but, rather, by referring to the assumed "limitations of our physical nature" (John of Damascus, 1980, p. 53) that the invisible, incomprehensible, etc., becomes seen and comprehended by the iconic surface itself. Iconographic representation thus transforms the ordinary by seeing it with a 'mystical gaze' (das Mystische). The 'mystical gaze' is one which by focusing on the "coastline" sees at once the island and the ocean, the invisible by means of the visible. Paul Engelman explains this type of seeing as anti-positivist, and known to Wittgenstein:

Positivism holds - and this is its essence - that what we can speak about is all that matters in life. Whereas Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about. When he nevertheless takes immense pains to delimit the unimportant (i.e. the scope and limits



ILLUSTRATION N. 7

of ordinary language), it is not the coastline of that island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean. (Engelman, *Letters from Wittgenstein*, quoted in Jenik, 1973, p. 93)<sup>6</sup>

The deliberate violation of the ordinary logic of the visible in iconic paintings evokes the 'mystical gaze' of seeing the invisible and non-logical as the "ocean" which ends at the coastline of rationality of "ordinary physics." To be able to do this reflectively, in the form of visual representation, the iconographer must have been aware that the meaning of the "Absolute" does not necessarily transcend the intersubjective ground of the lifeworld but is, rather, its pre-logical aspect. Because the logical is nothing more than "conformity with mankind," the explication of the "Absolute" requires a technique for problematizing the boundaries of this conformity in order to leave viewers there where the logical and non-logical part. Accordingly, the way of seeing and expressing the "Absolute" never departs from the ordinary view; it never makes the Baconian cut between common sense and theoretical reasoning but, rather, by synthesizing the ordinary view, explicates what remains invisible but nevertheless present. In this respect, iconographers are much closer to Wittgenstein<sup>7</sup> than to Newton in seeing that the meaning of "absolute" reality is, by being non-logical, not necessarily separate from the logic of the ordinary.

## Footnotes

- 1 John Calvin (1960), in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, expresses this view when he claims that "images are the books of the uneducated." (p. 105)
- 2 Roman Jacobson once told a story about Mathis visiting Moscow and meeting with a group of Russian artists who expressed interest in hearing what was new in modern art. On that occasion, Mathis told them if they wanted to know what was new in modern art they need only enter one of Moscow's many churches and view the icons (Novica Petkovic, Preface to *Uspensky*, 1979, p. LXI).
- 3 If intersubjective sequences of time are to be represented in the scene then they are shown simultaneously. For example, John the Baptist is painted with his head at once on his shoulders and cut off in front of him. This portrays two different time sequences synthesized into one scene: the cut-off head signifies external, "earthly" time; the head on the winged body, "absolute," or inner time (see image # 5).
- 4 In reference to this historic conflict within the Christian Church, David Anderson writes:

"The iconoclastic controversy begun in the eighth century by the Byzantine emperor Leo II (717-741) and continued by his successor Constantine V (741-775) cannot be considered in isolation from the Christological controversies of the preceding centuries. Just as earlier ecumenical councils had insisted that the incarnation of Jesus Christ united the second person of the Holy Trinity with human nature, thus making salvation possible by breaking down the wall of separation between God and man, so also the seventh council (787) upheld the doctrine of the veneration of images as an inevitable result of the incarnation. To say that God the Word assumed a human body and soul (and for Him to do so was the only means by which the reign of death and sin in the universe might be destroyed) is to say that the infinite consented to become circumscribed. Therefore, the material flesh of Jesus Christ became part of His divine person, the invisible was made visible, and henceforth it is a good and praiseworthy thing to depict Him as He is: God become man; God become matter." (from: *Introduction to John from Damascus' On the Divine Images*, 1980, p. 7)

In contrast to this view, Newton maintains a strictly Calvinistic attitude towards visual representation when he argues:

"God is utterly void of all body and bodily figure, and can therefore neither be seen nor heard nor touched; nor ought he to be worshipped under the representation of any corporeal thing." (in Thayer, 1974, p. 44)

5 The following are reflections by Newton on the religion of the "vulgars":

"As to Moses, I do not think his description of the creation either philosophical or feigned, but that he described realities in a language artificially adapted to the sense of the vulgar. Thus when he speaks of two great lights, I suppose he means their apparent, not real, greatness. So when he tells us God placed these lights in the firmament, he speaks I suppose of their apparent, not real, place, his business being, not to correct the vulgar notions in matters philosophical, but to adapt a description of the creation as handsomely as he could to the sense and capacity of the vulgar." (Newton, in Thayer, 1974, pp. 60-61)

"Moses here sets down their creation as if he had then lived and were now describing what he saw. Omit them he could not without rendering his description of the creation imperfect in the judgment of the vulgar. To describe them distinctly as they were themselves would have made the narration tedious and confused, amused the vulgar, and become a philosopher more than a prophet. He mentions them, therefore, only so far as the vulgar had a notion of them, that is, as they were phenomena in the firmament, and describes their making only so far and at such a time as they were made such phenomena. Consider, therefore, whether anyone who understood the process of the creation and designed to accommodate to the vulgar not an ideal or poetic but a true description of it, as succinctly and theologically as Moses has done, without omitting anything material which the vulgar have a notion of it, could mend that description which Moses has given us. If it be said that the expression of making and setting two great lights in the firmament is more poetical than natural, so also are some other expressions of Moses, as when he tells us the windows or floodgates of heaven were opened (Genesis 7) and afterward stopped again (Genesis 8), and yet the things signified by such figurative expressions are not ideal or moral but true. For Moses, accommodating his words to the gross conceptions of the vulgar, describes things much after the manner as one of the vulgar would have been inclined to do had lived and seen the whole series of what Moses describes." (Newton, in Thayer, 1974, pp. 63-64)

6 Newton stands in clear contrast to this view when he argues that:

"In bodies we see only their figures and colors, we hear only the sounds, we touch only their outward surfaces, we smell only the smells and taste the savors, but their inward substances are not to be known either by our senses or by any reflex act of our minds; much less, then, have we any idea of the substance of God." (in Thayer, 1974, p. 44)

7 Wittgenstein argues that the problem with founding the concept of "God" upon a rational ground is that it goes against its logical grammar. The concept "God" is learned in situations where its understanding transgresses the boundaries of logic, needs no explanation, is non-logical, and is accepted on belief (Wittgenstein, 1970, p. 59). It is here that we face the limitations of logic and, at the same time, deplete our grounds for explanations; it is, in other words, here where we discover both the meaning and the properties of the "Absolute".

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Lee Lichterloh  
**Komposition mit Schwarz**  
 1997  
 Öl auf Karton, 25 x 17 cm

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