

# THE CONCRETE FULNESS OF EXPERIENCE: o

## A COMMUNICATION

HENRY NELSON WIEMAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Professor Wieman wrote the following letter in response to the fall issue of The Iliff Review. Since he states his central thesis so succinctly, and in view of the considerable upsurge of interest in Wieman's philosophy in recent years, we believe his communication will be of interest to a number of our readers. Of particular importance is the idea that percepts as well as concepts are selective and by virtue of the receptive structure in which we experience them may be more or less narrow, as contrasted with "the fulness of concrete experience."*

Dear Professor Milligan:

I have read several times and studied with care your paper, "Guide to Contemporary Philosophy of Religion." You have brought into your survey such a large part of the complexity, diversity and confusion of religious thought in our time that the paper requires careful study.

One theme in particular runs through your discussion which is one of the most significant features of present day religious thought and which is also recognition of a feature of human experience not generally recognized in the past. It is the difference, even the contrast, between our concept and the fulness of concrete experience. You speak of the difference between concept and percept and also suggest it in what you call metaverbal expressionism. This is a distinction coming to the front in our time. Willard Quine who has spent his life clarifying logical concepts is also writing about this fulness of concrete reality which underlies all our experience. Our concepts and percepts are not found ready made in their concrete fulness but are constructed by our behavior, our perceptions and our concepts in order to enable us to make the distinctions and attain the goals on which our life depends and out of which our visions develop.

You make the distinction between concept and percept while I make it between the fulness of experience had by the total organism and the selective structure by which we guide conduct, thought and feeling with concept and percent. I do not mean to dispute the distinction between concept and percept. The percept certainly does involve more of the fulness of concrete experience than does the ab-

---

HENRY NELSON WIEMAN is Professor Emeritus, University of Chicago, and active in numerous programs having to do with the philosophy of creative interchange.

abstract concept. But I think percepts are also selective from the fulness of concrete experience, some percepts more narrowly selective and others more comprehensive. But no perception gives us the concrete fulness of experience involved in the total interaction of the organism with all that encompasses it and pervades it. Every perception is narrowly selective, the selection being determined first of all by the needs of the biological organism, secondly by our habits and by our concepts because our concepts shape our percepts and limit the scope of experience accepted as relevant to what is perceived.

I agree with your major point. I emphasize this point of contrast between structured experience and fulness of experience because I think it underlies your entire discussion of religious thought in our time. It is true that Plato insisted that the concepts alone give us ultimate reality while the confused fulness of experience is relatively insignificant and something from which we should try to escape into the pure domain of the concepts freed of all contamination of the sensuous and concrete. All of Western thought has in great part followed him in this. But today the concrete fulness of experience is coming more fully into recognition. The existentialists are among the leaders in this. But the problem has not been solved. The problem is to properly evaluate the concept, the percept and the fulness of possible experience in relation to one another as guides to the conduct of human living. This is what you say in your own words at the end of your essay.

I myself am convinced that the goal of human existence is determined by the nature of (1) the human organism, (2) the human use of symbols to develop structures of thought, feeling and action whereby ever more of the fulness of concrete reality can be brought within the reach of conscious experience in the form of plan and purpose, love and beauty, tragedy and triumph, and all forms of qualitative experience.

Many things you say in your essay I should like to discuss. May I summarize the destiny of man as I see it: To bring to conscious evaluation ever more of the fulness of being, both the good and the evil of it. These two evaluations, the good and the evil, are inseparable. Otherwise stated: The destiny of man is to render meaningful ever more of the fulness of being. That evolution of the biological organism which carries with it the evolution of the valuing consciousness is the destiny of man.

#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.