

THE THINKING PROCESS: AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION

On April 22, 1996, Audrius V. Plioplys presented a lecture entitled "The Thinking Process: An Artistic Exploration". The lecture was a part of a program entitled "How Does One Begin To Think About Mind?" organized by the Chicago Center for Religion and Science (CCRS). This part was of the 32nd Annual Chicago Advanced Seminars in Religion and Science. It was presented at the Lutheran School of Theology, 1100 East 55 Street, Chicago.

Dr. Thomas L. Gilbert, of the CCRS, subsequently wrote his impressions of this lecture.

In the fifth seminar session on April 22, Audrius Plioplys introduced us to a radically different way of communicating thoughts about mind. He used pictures rather than written or spoken words as the means for transmitting information. In order to summarize his presentation in words, it must be translated and interpreted. This runs the risk of mistranslating and misinterpretation.

In the practice of science, we are trying to construct theories that will enable us to discern causal relations between observables (i.e.; between patterns in what we perceive and in what can be recorded by scientific instruments). In order to do this, we must define all of the words we use in terms of observables. This must be done with care and precision to minimize ambiguity, and includes a careful specification of the procedures used to identify patterns in what we perceive and how scientific instruments are constructed and used. Mathematics is the preferred language for the natural sciences (although there are many biological phenomena for which it cannot be used, so that one must resort to words and pictures) and is used where possible in the social sciences. Natural language (spoken and written words) must still be used for defining what the mathematical symbols mean. In all language use in science there is a strong emphasis on being as precise and unambiguous as possible.

Religion, although also concerned with causal relations (for which it must rely on science), is, in my understanding, primarily concerned with providing motivation for living and guidance for how we should live. The mental attitudes and concepts needed to accomplish this are conveyed to us by means of ritual, myths and doctrines. Natural language is used in all three, but precision of the kind required for science is necessary only for doctrines. In myth, our emotive response to the information conveyed becomes as or more important than our cognitive response, and in ritual, our emotive response is of primary importance. (It should be noted that our emotive response to theories is not unimportant, but we have to be very careful to ensure that this response does not affect the reliability of a theory for predicting causal relations.) As we move from doctrine to myth to ritual, the modality of the language we use shifts from precise statements constructed according to rules of grammar and logic to poetic language. For myths and, especially, ritual, use of aesthetic language, which includes visual art forms (and also music and dance), becomes important.

I view Audrius Plioplys' presentation as a reminder that theological thinking about mind must go beyond the kind of

thinking involved in the construction of scientific theories and theological doctrines. It must also encompass the language modalities of myth and ritual. In reflecting on the role art in religious myth and ritual, it appeared to me that one of the functions of art might be to create bonds of shared perspectives between the artist and viewer and between the different viewers. Art might be regarded as a means for reinforcing the bonds of common faith that are put in place by ritual and myth and which hold the community together.

Plioplys' presentation was also relevant for scientific thinking. Perhaps not for the specific photographs and paintings he showed, and not for the testing of hypotheses and theories, but as an illustration of how art can be relevant at the level of speculation. This is important because the level of speculation is the level "where the action is" -- where new scientific concepts and theories are incubated. At this level we make use of all kinds of mental images constructed by subconscious processes in which bits and pieces form records of past perceptions retrieved from our memories are brought into our conscious awareness and assembled in all sorts of ways that can defy rules of grammar, logic, and common sense -- but not the rules operative in poetry and other art forms. Visual images of the kind that Audrius Plioplys showed us are an example of this process. While the particular visual displays that Audrius showed did not mesh with my own speculative thinking, it reminded me that I also construct a variety of mental images and other symbol structures. They are more like Plioplys paintings than his photographs because, initially, they may bear little resemblance to reality. I have reason to believe that all scientists do this.

Regrettably, I do not have the artistic skill to translate my nonverbal, visual thoughts into art that can be communicated to others. The mental process involved may be the process that Dr. Plioplys explained to us in scientific language: a continual mental activity of which we become aware when sleeping and dreaming as a sequence of often bizarre mental images that are always present in our subconscious minds but are not available to our conscious awareness when we are awake because our consciousness is dominated by sense impressions.



Pictured from left: Dr. Sigutė Plioplys, Stanley Balzekas, Jr., Dr. Audrius Plioplys, and Carole Balzekas