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Aspects of Experience and Their Role in Systematic Theology

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ABSTRACT

Experience plays an important role in contemporary theology, but the meaning of the term is often unclear. This article presents six different meanings of the term “experience” and how they are related, inspired by the grounded cognition model of the mind. This is then used to show how the four so-called theological sources (Scripture, tradition, experience and reason) are related in systematic theology. The main argument in the last part is that the four sources produce mental contents which all function simultaneously as conditions when we interpret what the content of Scripture, tradition, experience and reason are.

KEYWORDS

Experience; experience in systematic theology; grounded cognition model; the Wesleyan quadrilateral; mental content

Introduction

Experience plays an important role in contemporary theology.¹ According to Owen C. Thomas (writing in 1985), theologians often refer to experience, but with little clarity or precision.² This observation still seems to be to the point, with the result of experience sometimes becoming a “catch-all source of authority”.³ The famous Harvard theologian Harvey Cox writes that “virtually anyone can claim anything in the name of experience” illustrating it with how feminists, liberationists and pentecostals justify very different (or even contradictory) claims with appeal to experience.⁴ This might be due to the fact that experience can be called “one of the most obscure [concepts] we have” (Gadamer) and therefore “one of the most deceitful [words] in philosophy” (Whitehead) as well as in theology.⁵

Here are some everyday examples of how the term “experience” can be used with different meanings: “Experience” can be an *event* involving mind activity in space and time, as in the verb “to experience”. For example, a person seeing a lion could be said to experience a lion or having an experience of seeing a lion. “Experience” can also refer to the *conditions* by which a person gets mental content that may or may not be conscious, for example, a “sense-experience” of a lion as opposed to hallucinating a lion. “Experience” can refer to *mental content* that may or may not be conscious. In the example of the lion, the experience of the lion can refer to the lion as the mental content that the person is aware of and experiences. The content of the experience is a lion and not a tiger. “Experience” can be used with reference to *persons*, for example

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in expressions like the “experience of women” or “experience of young people”. “Experience” can refer to the *result* of an event of experiencing, for example that a person has gained knowledge about lions, which could be expressed in a book, or skills to handle lions, which could be demonstrated in particular situations. “Experience” can also be used in a very broad sense, referring to the whole world. This can be done either to make the point that when we talk about the world, it is always the world as it appears to/in our mind. Or it can be done to make the point of realism that there is a world outside of our mind which serves as a source of knowledge for us.

These six examples illustrate the six main uses of the term “experience” that we will disentangle in this article: “Experience” used to refer to (1) events, (2) conditions, (3) mental content, (4) persons, (5) results, and (6) the whole world. The article will offer a set of precise definitions of what is often expressed through the term “experience” and relate them systematically to each other. The goal is to suggest a nuanced and coherent conceptual framework for talking about experience, which can be used when analyzing or discussing experience and its relation to other concepts. The work will draw on different systematizations of the concept offered by others with the goal of combining them into a comprehensive and systematic whole.

To avoid confusion, in the rest of the article, we shall use the terms “to experience” or “experiencing” only for meaning number one: an event in space and time where a person has mental content (which could be conscious or possibly conscious)⁶ by virtue of certain conditions. This is a broad term which includes meanings number two (conditions), three (mental content), four (person), and five (result, since any event will have one result or another). The article will now present each of these five different meanings of the term “experience” before a short comment is made on meaning number six (the whole world as experience/source of knowledge). The article will end with an outlook on the relevance of this for systematic theology, with special regard to the relation between experience on the one hand and Scripture, tradition and reason on the other.

There are many ways of understanding mind and experience which cannot be discussed within the frames of an article. This article will present a particular understanding of the grounded cognition model for understanding the mind (to be presented below) and use it to systematize an understanding of experience and its relevance for systematic theology. This version of the grounded cognition model is thus just presupposed as the starting point, while discussing the plausibility of the grounded cognition model itself is beyond the scope of this article.

The Event of Experiencing

The event of experiencing is a broad category and can be described as something that takes place in space and time when a person has mental content, which again must have been made possible by certain conditions.

If the event of experiencing is unfinished, we use the term “process” to show that it is ongoing. The experience of meeting the queen yesterday was an event, while the experience of still being a teacher is a process. Thus, to experience something might be a finished event or an unfinished process in our terminology. In systematic theology, it is often worth reflecting upon whether and to what degree important experiences (like the experience of creation, revelation, salvation, or being church) are finished events or unfinished processes and what that means for how they are interpreted.

The event of experiencing consists of several events and processes in succession and in parallel. For example, the experience of meeting a lion can consist of seeing the lion first, then hearing it roar. Several experiences can happen in parallel when meeting a lion such as the experience of seeing or the experience of becoming afraid, and all of this can be part of the unfinished process of being a traveler.

How does one distinguish one event from another when they are intertwined like this? There is not an objectively correct answer to what constitutes *one* event of experiencing. Rather, we select parts of our mental content that have a relatively stable and unified structure and call these “one experience.”

An event of experiencing can be initiated by awareness of something. A flow of impressions can be perceived or invoked by memory or imagination. Many events of experiencing feel instantaneous, other times it can be a gradual discovery of what has happened. However, a phase in the event of experiencing, even in the so-called instantaneous ones, could be characterized as more unintentional by the person, who gradually begins to focus and becomes gradually more aware of the content of the experience through (unconscious and conscious) reflection.⁷

This mental content can appear to us as something constituted by being both present and absent. Even if we can perceive directly the sounds of a song, through hearing, when we listen to the song being played, we cannot hear the whole song all at once. Our memory and imagination come into play and influences what we perceive in the present moment. Therefore, “[a]ll experience involves a blend of presence and absence”.⁸

At some stage in the event of experiencing, the person might give more attention to his or her own reflection, reasoning and recognizing what is going on. When the person is focusing on the content, he or she is trying to better understand what he or she has experienced. It is in this phase that the person can try to describe the content and verbally articulate the state of affairs.

Another way of making a similar distinction is to distinguish between an occurring event of experiencing and a remembered event. The occurring experience is the event of experiencing when it occurs or is anticipated, while the remembered experience, is when that event is remembered or *re-lived* later. This is a useful distinction to make when discussing the role that experiences have later in life. The content of an experience will always be interpreted, also when it occurs, but as it is remembered it can go through many phases of interpretation with new and different interpretations. It is thus possible to discern between imagined events, anticipated ones, and remembered events.

As mentioned, an event of experiencing will include at least one person having mental content by virtue of certain conditions, and the event will also have a result. By looking further into these parts of the event, we will understand the event of experiencing better as well, and we start by looking more at the conditions that make it possible to experience something at all. Our interest is not in everything that exists which can be part of an event of experiencing, but the conditions that make it possible to have mental content.

The Conditions for Having Mental Content

There are different ways we can understand the conditions for having mental content, and this article will only present one of them. It is the grounded cognition model, mainly inspired by how it is presented by Antonio Damasio and Lawrence Barsalou,⁹

with some additional suggestions of our own. According to their model it was a great breakthrough in evolution when neurons evolved, which could change each other through activating each other (often called “firing”). Neurons could react to something in the body or in the world outside of the body and cause a reaction in the body. For example, they could register light and make the body move towards it, or register something poisonous in the mouth and cause it to be spat out, etc.¹⁰

Over time, this has become more specialized, and now our brains have many different kinds of feature-detecting neurons that respond to at least thirty different types of features, like angle, size, movement, contour, color, distance from the observer, etc.¹¹ These neurons in the brain can be activated by things and events in our body and in our brain, and combine into patterns that could be said to represent these things and events. “Represent” should here be taken in a minimal sense to mean only that the neural patterns and the states of affairs in the world are consistently related to each other.¹²

For example, seeing a lion, different kinds of neurons will fire for different kinds of features of the lion. When you have seen several lions, there is a neural pattern representing lion that is activated every time you see a lion and which can become the conscious mental content of a lion. Nobody knows how the brain causes conscious mental content, but there is plenty of evidence that different parts of the brain are responsible for causing different kinds of conscious mental content.

For example, every time you have a conscious sensation of seeing red, the same area of your brain is active. If that area is destroyed, you will not have the sensation of red anymore, and if that area is stimulated, you will have the sensation of seeing red even if there are no red objects in front of you.¹³ If it is destroyed you will even have problems imagining something red.¹⁴ Damage to an area of the brain called the fusiform gyrus of the temporal lobe causes face blindness, and stimulation of this same area causes people to see faces spontaneously.¹⁵

According to the grounded cognition theory, the concept of a lion is a combination of more basic features, and in the end all concepts are configurations of simple structures like this. That may sound strange, but the idea is that to understand a concept is to activate in mind a lot of things that you associate with the concept, even if not all of this becomes conscious to you.

Brain scanning shows that when you perceive or think of an object, the brain activates areas that represent the different things you associate with the concept: its shape and color (in the fusiform gyrus), the motion connected with such objects (in the middle and superior temporal lobe), and the actions that agents perform with such objects (pre-motor and parietal areas).¹⁶ As people learn new concepts, neuroscientists can spot the neural patterns in the brain representing them, so that they can know which concept they are thinking about, and they also see that similar concepts are more similar at the neuron level than more different concepts.¹⁷

This applies to abstract concepts as well. If you think of anger, the brain activates a lot of situations involving angry people and what is typical behavior in such situations. Barsalou argues that this applies also to very abstract concepts, of which we imagine states of affairs expressing the meaning. For example, the abstract concept of disjunction (as expressed in the word “or”) gets a basic meaning from an imagined state of affairs with an empty slot where two different candidates can be put—one *or* the other.¹⁸

This way of understanding the conditions for having mental content explains both how we can have mental content that represents the world external to the mental content¹⁹ and how new ideas can form that are not caused by the external world. In both cases, there is a configuration of parts in the brain which are in the end all configurations of simple structures. In the first case, the activation of the configuration is caused by something in the external world. This is what we often call an experience of the external world, but the mental content need not be very structurally similar to what caused it, although it often is. For example, a lion in the external world can activate the feature detecting neurons that activate the pattern for lion, and you have conscious experience of seeing a lion and thinking that you see a lion. But the same seeing and thinking could have been caused by a tiger in the external world or even something completely different.

In the second case, patterns in the brain can be activated and combined in numerous ways without being activated by something similar in the external world. We can form new ideas and think about everything possible and impossible. The conditions for having mental content are the same, and the difference is whether the mental content was activated by something similar in the external world or not.

If a person has mental content, the person undergoes an event of experiencing, but the mental content may be to a large extent caused by the external world or not. The first is typically called an experience of the external world while the second has many names (experience of the inner world, thinking, imagining, etc.). The authors of this article think of it and refer to it as mental content which is to a large extent caused by the external world or not, but sometimes we use the term “experience of the external world” for simplicity and contrast.

The major point to draw from this is that while we often think of perceptions and thoughts as very different things, they are in fact very closely related (assuming still that the grounded cognition model is on the right track). Both when we are thinking and when we are having an experience of the external world, the brain is combining simple structures into larger configurations. Sometimes these are to a large extent caused to be activated by something in the external world, which we think of as having an experience of the external world, and the mental content may be more or less structurally similar to that which caused it to be activated. Other times, the mental content is to a very little extent caused by something in the external world that it is similar to. (We use “to a large extent” and “to a little extent” since the external world is always causally relevant for having any experience, for example in providing oxygen.)

The picture that emerges from this is that what we, on the one hand, think of as perceptions or experiences of the external world and what we, on the other hand, think of as thoughts, beliefs, theories and understanding of text, tradition and fact are all configurations of the same building blocks, where the brain plays an active role, being more or less influenced by the external world. The mental content we think of as experiences of the external world are integrated parts of all concepts and images we have, which again means that theories are systematizations of such mental content. This is a detailed way of spelling out the close relation between experience of the external world on the one hand, and theory or interpretation or thinking on the other hand. We will say more about such systematization and interpretation in the next section.

Mental Content

Our brains work continuously to make coherent wholes out of its input and what is activated in the brain. We know this from plenty of examples where areas of the brain providing one type of input (for example different kinds of features or an area of the visual field) are destroyed and the brain creates a unified mental content of the rest.²⁰ This process of making our mental content coherent does not only apply to what we see, but to all of our thinking about what happens and who we are, etc. This has been shown by numerous experiments with split-brain patients, confabulation, and other kinds of experiments, and has made neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga speak of the interpreter in the brain.²¹

This understanding of how the brain works fits very well with our understanding of how to understand the very concept of understanding. To understand something is to relate it to something else, and the more you are able to relate it to other things, your understanding grows. If you cannot relate it to anything, you do not understand it at all. If you relate it to something to which it is not in fact related to (in that way), you *mis*-understand it.²²

Our minds are full of beliefs about how things are connected, and this is a continuous work in progress. We are constantly experiencing and have new thoughts all the time, which we integrate as best as we can with what we already believe. All of our understanding is continuously in motion and is an interpretive framework in all events of experiencing.

In order to understand anything as anything at all, it must be related to something. This can be a very minimalistic interpretation. Maybe you just experienced that something happened or that you noticed an object in the world without paying attention to it.

The interpretation within experiences is also a process of continuous reinterpretation. Maybe you experienced becoming healed from a disease, interpreting improved health as an answer to prayer and as a miracle, but which years later you interpret as an instance of the placebo effect or just a coincidence—and you may reinterpret it again in the future.

Your interpretation in the event of experiencing depends on how you relate it to the content of other experiences and thoughts stored in your mind, which is again the same as having a certain understanding of them or having certain beliefs about them. For example, you interpret something as a disease, something as a prayer, and something as a healing, and the whole event as a miracle or as an instant of the placebo effect.

The most important thing to take from this is that there is not a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, interpretation-free events of experiencing in the world as they objectively are in themselves and, on the other hand, theories and beliefs about what these events and experiences were. There are no theory-free experiences. Any experience is immediately placed at a certain place into the theoretical framework that is the mind of the person having the experience, and where it is placed determines what it is experienced to be. As Wayne Proudfoot puts it, we cannot circumvent “the Kantian insight that experience is informed and mediated by the cognitive concepts and judgments by which we structure the world”.²³

Mental content is essential in a discussion of what constitutes an experience.²⁴ In phenomenology, it is emphasized how experience is always an experience *of* something or someone very broadly understood. We cannot experience or be conscious of what

happens to us detached from the content of the experience. This is parallel with how a transitive verb always takes a direct object (e.g. a sentence is incomplete if we write “give” without reference to what is given). There are countless phenomena or states of affairs that can be content of experiences. The mental content could for instance be the chair in front of us or that we have a birthday tomorrow, etc. The content of experience is often referred to as the object of experience, which is what the person is conscious of (the so-called “intended object”). We prefer, however, the term “content” instead of “object” since a possible connotation of the word “object” is that it is something physical, but the something to which attention or feelings are directed at can be anything from a physical object, a sound, a smell, a mood, concept, fictional figure, etc.

How can the content of different experiences be sorted out in different categories? One example of how this can be done is the work of the philosopher Kai-Man Kwan at Hong Kong Baptist University. In his book *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust and God: A Defense of Holistic Empiricism*, he suggests that all of our experiences—not only sense-experiences—bears epistemic weight as sources of knowledge. Kwan divides all human experience into seven main categories which he calls “the rainbow of experiences”.²⁵ They should be understood more as coarse-grained categories, where both phenomenological and ontological criteria are used in order to classify experiences, although the latter criterion is given primacy.²⁶

Kwan’s “rainbow of experiences” is useful in trying to give an overview over the content of experiences. The first four experiences in Kwan’s system are called “basic experiences”, and the last three are so-called “experiences of the transcendentals”, goodness, beauty and truth.²⁷ We have chosen, for simplicity, to group experiences of “the transcendentals” as one category, with goodness, beauty and truth as sub-categories:

1. Experience of one’s self
2. Experience of the natural world
3. Experience of other selves/persons
4. Experience of the supernatural realm
5. Experience of “the transcendentals” (goodness, beauty and truth)

Kwan’s four “basic experiences” seem to correlate well with the four dimensions Jan-Olav Henriksen lays out in an article on revelation understood as a certain type of experience.²⁸ Henriksen argues that it is important that theology relates to every experiential dimension, dividing them into four main (and partly overlapping) dimensions, as well as emphasizing the cultural aspect of experience: (1) The natural/physical (2) The social/cultural (3) The “inner” world of the individual (4) The religious/“extraordinary”. Henriksen’s experiential dimensions illustrate how the content of experience is related to the mode of experience. The natural or physical dimension involves our five senses and might be experienced as “external”. The “inner” world is experienced in a non-sensory and “internal” way, involving emotions, affections and intuitions, etc., similar in some way with experiences of “the transcendentals”. The religious and social dimension could be viewed as a combination of sensory and non-sensory.

However, we agree with Kwan, who stresses that all of the experiences, including “the transcendentals”, can have “noetic” or “propositional contents about the world” and are

therefore “not just sensations or feelings”.²⁹ In other words, all experiences have different kinds of mental content.³⁰

Persons Having Experiences (The Experiencer)

We have already mentioned that an event of experiencing will include at least one person having mental content. But is it possible to speak of “people having the same experience”? In our view, people might have mental content caused by or referring to the same state of affairs in the external world, but the mental content a person has will always be uniquely influenced by that person’s brain and therefore vary between people (even if it will often be very similar).

In other words, even though people refer to the same thing (e.g. a lion in the external world), it will inevitably be *experienced* in different ways as mental content. Different feelings, emotions, senses, and so on can be involved, which means the mental content of the experience is influenced by the experiencing person. This is what phenomenologists call *identity in manifold*. An illustration of this could be Peter in the house of Cornelius as referred in Acts chapter 10.³¹

Those (e.g. Peter, Cornelius) who participated in the event experienced it in different ways. They also experienced it differently when they (Peter) remembered it (Chapter 11). Those who read the report (in Acts) will experience it in another way than the writer (Luke), and different readers across time will have different experiences of the event. Those who join in a sightseeing in Caesarea will have a different experience that those who watch a movie made about the event, etc.

The person who experiences something, often referred to as *the subject of experience*, clearly seems to influence what the content of the experience becomes. Sometimes people will say that they experience the same object in the world, and still they experience it differently and therefore provide different descriptions or interpretations of it. An example could be sickness in a family—some could claim an experience of it as a work of the devil, others as something God uses to teach something. There seems, in other words, to be epistemically subjective elements varying from person to person in how things appear to us, without excluding acknowledgement of intersubjective elements to experiences as well (e.g. that mental content can have the same external source and be interpreted by similar brains).³² Therefore, it is relevant to clarify whose experience we are investigating.

Speaking of the epistemically subjective elements in an event of experiencing, it is possible to make a distinction between, on the one hand, what can be called individual contribution of the person of experience, and, on the other hand, the contribution of the community or group that the person belongs to. The person’s individual body and personality, variables like DNA, the subject’s unique history and so on could be listed under the individual contribution. But, individuals have many things in common and can be categorized into groups with different characteristics, like common gender, nationality, religion, age and so on. The content of the experience of a person is influenced by being part of such groups, and there will be features that people in the same group have in common, even if there are many individual differences as well. This should thus not be thought of as a clear distinction, but rather as a continuum between individual and common.

The content of an experience is thus influenced both by what is unique to the subject who experiences and by the groups that the subject belongs to. It might be useful to distinguish between the contribution from the individual and from the community or tradition or group, but at the same time stress the continuity between them. The reason is that the content of the experience of an individual subject is influenced by the groups the subject is part of, but there are also individual differences among them. One should thus acknowledge the group influence, while not making it absolute. For example, between two women there can be a greater difference in how something is experienced than between a woman and a man. An important part of the influence from the subject on the experience is the language of the subject, which in turn is socially situated. The perspective of the subject somehow reflects his or her worldview or pre-knowledge, which also can be viewed as an expression of the tradition or the community that the subject belongs to. Thus, it seems reasonable to also posit sociological factors under the person of experience. It is important to recognize, though, that much of the activity in the brain is unconscious, making it difficult to discern between the person's unique contribution versus how the reasoning is affected by the tradition.

A lesson for systematic theology to draw from these reflections is that when appeal is made to experience, we should remember that different people experience things differently, to a large degree influenced by the individual having the experience, and in a way that changes over time. Nevertheless, there might be similarities enough in the experiences shared by a group to justify speaking of the experience of, for example, women or of men in a region in a period. When there are similar experiences had by more people over a larger area and over a larger period of time, it becomes more and more important to take into consideration.

The Outcome/Result of Experiencing

A common use of the term “experience” is with reference to the outcome or result of observation, occupation or acquaintance with something like *knowledge, skills, aptitudes, judgment, proof or a practical demonstration*.³³ These outcomes are somehow the consequences of the event of experiencing. It can be a verbal expression of our understanding as well as demonstrated skills. The outcome or result of experience is different from the mental content. It is a difference between thought and description. The latter can be public while the former is not. A text, speech, demonstration or proof are not identical with the mental content, which is unique to the person who experiences. It should be noted how our brain is always active in these processes as well. When for instance we say, “I have little experience with that car”, we may mean that we lack knowledge and are not able to tell about the specific car, brand, etc., or that we lack skills in connection with driving that big or small car, etc. Even though we may struggle to articulate our understanding of how to drive the car, our brain is still active. This might be called tacit knowledge. Many actions are first learnt consciously, like shaving, playing tennis, playing the piano, typing, driving, dancing, etc. But when they are learnt well, they can be demonstrated by you better when you do them non-consciously.³⁴

Two other important meanings of experience as result or outcome for systematic theology is when something can be said to be the outcome or result of experience of science or of the church. If something is established as a result of science, it is a plausible

fact to take into consideration when it is relevant for theology. For example, it is an established result of experience (empirical observation) in science that the earth must be old, which systematic theology needs to take into account.

If some experiences have been so similar for so many members of the church for so long a time that it is reasonable to call it an experience of the church, it is also important for systematic theology to take it into account. Of course, it will often be contested whether something is the experience of the church (and of which church and for which systematic theology), in which case one needs to go into detail of how widespread the experience is. Examples could be the relation of the church to slavery, indulgence, Nazism, divorce and remarriage, or female clergy.

The World as Experience

Kant famously distinguished between *das Ding an sich* and *das Ding für mich*—things as they are in themselves and things as they appear to us in our mind—and said that we have no access to the things in themselves. Many critics have later pointed out that even the distinction between things in themselves and things for us is also a distinction we make within our minds.³⁵ Sometimes the term “experience” (and also “phenomena”—appearances) is used to make the point that everything in the world is only accessible to us in our minds.

On the other hand, we have reason to believe that there is more to the world than merely mental content. There seems to be something external to our mind that influences the content of our mind. As many have pointed out, the success of scientific theories within the natural sciences are difficult to explain without any reference to an external reality.³⁶

One way of relating to the external world and the truth while acknowledging that we only have access to the external world through our minds is to try to make as coherent theories as possible systematizing as much experience as possible. This is a kind of critical realism which we support. There is no place in this article for this fundamental debate, but we mention it briefly to situate what else has been said.

Implications for the Relationship Between Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience in Systematic Theology

What are the implications of the theory of experience presented in this article for the relationship between the four so-called theological sources—Scripture, tradition, (religious) experience and reason (also called the Wesleyan quadrilateral)—in systematic theology?³⁷ Our analysis of the concept of experience suggests a more detailed way of understanding the relationships between the Bible, tradition, experience and reason describing the ways in which the sources are deeply interconnected. We believe that all of the so-called sources influence each other reciprocally, but how does this happen in more detail?

The four mentioned sources are expressed through concepts that have several meanings, where one meaning is a state of affairs in the world, one meaning is mental content, and one meaning the outcome of experience. The Bible is a text and a result of experience, containing narratives and testimonies. But we can also refer to “the Bible” and mean the message of the Bible, referring to the mental content that we take to be the message or meaning of the Bible. “The Christian tradition” refers to a group of people

who have identified themselves as Christian, but also to the mental content—the beliefs of these persons (and it can refer to their practices and more)—which is “handed down”, expressed either in writing or orally in books, letters, sermons, etc. Reason is a way the mind and brain work in making inferences, as well as a “way of reasoning” within a tradition, also called “tradition-based rationality” (MacIntyre). But the term “reason” can also refer to the mental content which is what people consider to be reasonable, and thus being a reference to (someone’s) experience of truth and rationality. And experience can be an event in the world, but also the mental content produced in this event which might result in a verbally articulated description.

The main reason why all the four sources influence each other in systematic-theological work is that all of them are at work at the same time and produce mental contents which function as conditions when we interpret what the content of Scripture, tradition, experience and reason are, as portrayed in [Figure 1](#):

The main reason why all the four sources influence each other in systematic-theological work is that all of them are somehow at work at the same time and produce mental contents which function as conditions when forming each kind of mental content. The mental contents produced by reading the Bible are conditions that influence what people in the Christian tradition interpret as Christian tradition, or reasonable, or as their experiences. The mental contents produced by being part of a Christian tradition are conditions that influence how one interprets the message of the Bible, or what is reasonable or what one experiences. The mental contents produced by one’s experiences are conditions that influence what one finds reasonable, and how one interprets the Bible and how one understands one’s own tradition. The mental contents of what one finds reasonable are conditions that influence how one interprets one’s experiences, the message of the Bible and the content of one’s own tradition.

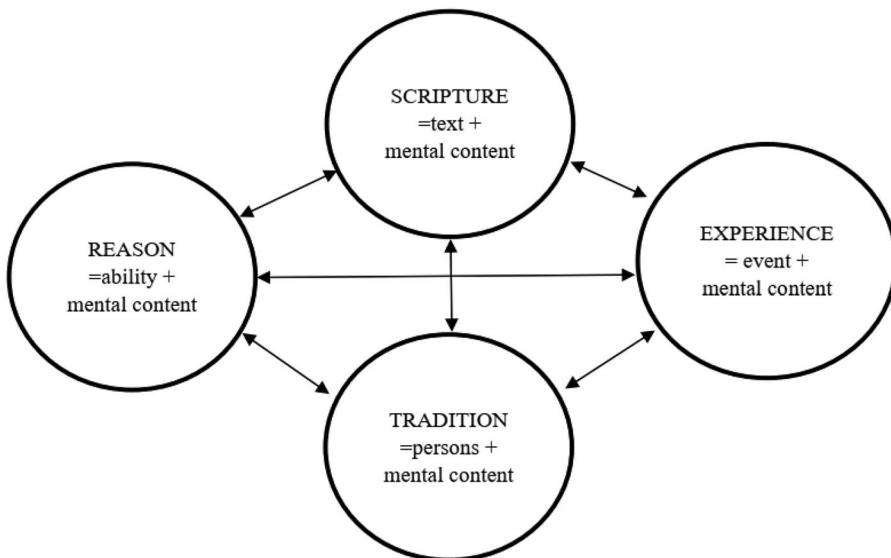


Figure 1. The four so-called theological sources are expressed through concepts. They produce mental contents which all function simultaneously as conditions when we interpret what the content of Scripture, tradition, experience and reason are.

All of the sources are concepts that can become mental content. But the four concepts can be analytically distinguished from each other by focusing on the different causal influences on the different kinds of mental content. The mental content the theologian has of the message of the Bible is causally influenced by the text of the Bible, the mental content the theologian has of the tradition is causally influenced by the people that constitute the tradition, the mental content is influenced by the event of experiencing that produces the mental content, and the mental content of what is understood as reasonable is understood by the reasoning mechanisms of the brain.

While the four sources are interconnected, some of them may play more important roles in specific situations. For example, is a change in a theologian's systematic theology primarily due to method (ways of reasoning, epistemological criteria, etc.), or a result of being influenced and drawing inspiration by other denominations or traditions (e.g. becoming more sacramental, inspired by Lutheran theology), or caused by certain kinds of experiences (e.g. empirical observations of the physical world, experience of pastoral care, religious experience of power-encounters, healings, etc.), or due to a new understanding of the message of Scripture (informed by exegetical arguments, linguistic insight or biblical criticism, etc.)?³⁸

Here is an illustration of how closely related the sources are: A theologian would often refer to the biblical texts, creeds and other texts, understood as the message or ideas within the books, which becomes mental contents. This is partly dependent on how he or she reads and interprets the texts—in other words, how the theologian is experiencing the different texts. In these events of experiencing, several things happen. He or she is perceiving the words of the text through sensory cognition, remembering and trying to make sense of the content in light of past events and previous things being heard and read, and using imagination at the same time. Systematic-theological work can both be a closed event or an ongoing process, but in any instance, there are both unconscious and conscious acts of the mind of the person where neurons in the brain are activated by the body, combining them into patterns which become representations of the mental content. This is the physical process where a person gradually begins to focus and becomes more intentional about the mental content through thinking and reflection, theorizing and verbally articulating the state of affairs, which is the outcome like a book in systematic theology expressing the theologian's knowledge of the matter.

This may sound very theoretical even though the event of experiencing is perceived as something instantaneous. Even if reasoning is happening in the brain, it also in another sense happens within different traditions. In order to understand something like a concept, the brain activates a lot of things that the person associates with the concept, even if not all of this becomes conscious to him or her. Here already existing worldviews and language will inevitably make both conscious and unconscious contributions, and thus there are also sociological factors in the event of experiencing, as well as unique contributions from the person who experiences.

The meaning of the term "experience" is often unclear. It is therefore important to clarify what kind of experience are we talking about—whose experience, how was it acquired, etc. What event, conditions, persons or kind of mental content are we referring to? What is the result or outcome? Are we just generally speaking of experience as a source of knowledge, or the whole world as experience? How the outcome of different experiences can or should be evaluated is an important question. This is far more

interesting than a general reference to experience. To conclude: “Experience” usually refers to some of the six different meanings in our article. It is vital to be clear what we are referring to when we speak about experience. In systematic theology, this could help us to better understand how experience relates to the Bible, the Christian tradition and reason.

Notes

1. Peter D. Neumann, *Pentecostal Experience: An Ecumenical Encounter* (Pickwick Publications, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012); Donald L. Gelpi, *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994); George P. Schner, “The Appeal to Experience,” *Theological Studies* 53:1 (March 1992), 40–59; Owen C. Thomas, “Theology and Experience,” *Harvard Theological Review* 78:1–2 (January 1985), 179–201. Examples of work of theologians where experience plays an important role: Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Life, Love, and Hope: God and Human Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On The Trinity”* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
2. Thomas, “Theology and Experience.”
3. Neumann, *Pentecostal Experience*, 2.
4. Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise Of Pentecostal Spirituality And The Reshaping of Religion in The 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 313.
5. Gadamer and Whitehead, quoted in Thomas, “Theology and Experience,” 179.
6. We use “mental content” not for anything that happens in the brain, but for brain processes that can become conscious, which means that these non-conscious brain processes and the conscious content they produce are covered by the term “mental content”.
7. For a phenomenological description of this process, see Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 89–91.
8. Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 18.
9. Antonio R. Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010); Lawrence W. Barsalou, “Perceptual Symbol Systems,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 22 (1999), 577–609; Lawrence W. Barsalou, “Grounded Cognition,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 59 (2008), 617–45.
10. Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 37–38, 50.
11. Michel Imbert, “Sehen ohne zu wissen,” *Spektrum der Wissenschaft (Spezial: Bewusstsein)*, 2004, 39.
12. This narrow definition is how for example Antonio Damasio defines representation (Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 320.)
13. Nouchine Hadjikhani et al., “Retinotopy and Color Sensitivity in Human Visual Cortical Area V8,” *Nature Neuroscience* 1:3 (1998), 235–241; Brian Wandell, “Colour Vision: Cortical Circuitry for Appearance,” *Current Biology* 18:6 (2008), 250–251.
14. Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Reprint edition (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 101.
15. Michel Shermer, “Aunt Millie’s Mind,” *Scientific American* 307:1 (2012), 84.
16. Barsalou, “Grounded Cognition,” 626; Lawrence W. Barsalou, “Can Cognition Be Reduced to Action?,” in *The Pragmatic Turn: Toward Action-Oriented Views in Cognitive Science*, ed. Andreas K. Engel, Karl J. Friston and Danica Kragic (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 84–85. For many other examples, see L. Kemmerer, *Cognitive Neuroscience of Language* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2014), 274–285.
17. Andrew James Bauer and Marcel Adam Just, “Monitoring the Growth of the Neural Representations of New Animal Concept,” *Human Brain Mapping* 36 (2015), 3213–3226.

18. Barsalou, "Grounded Cognition," 630, 634.
19. From now on we use "external world" to refer to the world external to the mental content.
20. Michael S. Gazzaniga, "The Interpreter (Gifford Lecture 3)," 2009, 50:08–51:55 and 1:00:40–1:01:40; Isabelle Viaud-Delmon and Roland Jouvent, "Zwischen Virtuell Und Real," *Spektrum Der Wissenschaft (Spezial: Bewusstsein)*, 2004, 73.
21. Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Brain* (New York: Dana Press, 2005); Petter Johansson et al., "Failure to Detect Mismatches between Intention and Outcome in a Simple Decision Task," *Science* 310 (2005), 116–119; Lars Hall et al., "How the Polls Can Be Both Spot on and Dead Wrong: Using Choice Blindness to Shift Political Attitudes and Voter Intentions," *PLOS ONE* April (2013).
22. Peder Gravem, "Meningserfaring og livstolkning," *Prismet* 47:6 (1996), 242–254; Lorenz B. Puntel, *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy*, trans. Alan White (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 249, 342.
23. Wayne L. Proudfoot, "Religious Experience, Emotion, and Belief," *Harvard Theological Review* 70:3–4 (July 1977), 367.
24. Wayne Proudfoot, "Experience," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, E-I (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).
25. Kai-man Kwan, *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God: A Defense of Holistic Empiricism*, Continuum Studies in Philosophy of Religion (New York: Continuum, 2011).
26. Kwan, *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God*, 49. The two criteria he suggests are (1) "what kind of sensations or feelings are involved in this kind of experience?" (2) "what kinds of thing, processes, or properties are typically supposed to be involved in the objects of experience?"
27. Kwan, *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God*, 9–10.
28. Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Åpenbaring, erfaring og teologi," *Teologisk Tidsskrift* 2:04 (2013), 379–393.
29. Kwan, *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God*, 10.
30. The first type of experience, experience of one's self, is about the person who experiences. This includes both self-discovery of "I" and of "self as the existential subject" in relation to human existential condition, like quest for meaning (p. 9, 50). In other words, the content of this experience may be experienced as something mind-internal.

Kwan writes that experience of the natural world, which Kwan also calls "Sense experience", is "the most clearly demarcated kind of experience". But without giving primacy to the ontological criterion – that all sense-experiences have "physical [things or events] as objects of experience", this would not be one type, but many, like auditory, visual, etc. (p. 49). But, then it would not be meaningful to speak of a person having (an) experience of a lion, but it would be many different experiences of a lion (e.g. hearing a lion and seeing a lion). In that case it would also be difficult not to include visions or ghosts as sense-experiences (p. 49).

Experiences of the natural world, other persons and the supernatural realm are all content which a person can experience as being mind-external. Even though experience of the natural world has physical things as content of experience and is mediated by our five senses, this type is not the only one. For instance, experiences of other selves/ persons, which Kwan calls "Interpersonal experience", are also mediated by our senses but belong to a different type of experience since the mental content of the experience is not "reducible [...] to physical objects" (e.g. love, hate, etc.) (p. 49).

Kwan includes a detailed elaboration of experience of the supernatural realm, or what theologians commonly refer to as religious experience. Experience of the supernatural realm, which Kwan calls "Religious experience", can, as mentioned, appear as an encounter of something mind-external. Here Kwan separates between "Theistic experience" and "Non-theistic experience", as well as providing a detailed list of different sub-categories. The Non-theistic experience is "experience of the supernatural that is not explicitly the personal God", whereas the former is "experience of a personal God" where the "intentional object is God, the personal and supremely perfect creator of the world" (p. 9). For another good typology,

see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press, 2004), 298–303. The experiences of “the transcendentals” – of things like values, moral, aesthetic beauty, reason, intellectual concepts, etc., are different than experiences of content that are about “the same kind of thing” like physical objects, God or other persons. The mental content of an experience of a concept like “size” is an experience that can be many things, but all of them can be described by “the same set of predicates” and these predicates can therefore be applied to different states of affairs (p. 50). For example, many different things can be called “beautiful” or “wrong” or “necessary”, etc. Kwan emphasizes that the experiences of “the transcendentals” are more than just feelings, and cites Eliseo Vivas, who writes that “the aesthetic experience is an experience of rapt attention which involves the intransitive apprehension of an object’s immanent meanings in their full presentational immediacy” (p. 227). The quote of Viva calls attention to the fact that experience is always an experience of something, and that it has mental content.

31. Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 28–29.
32. *Ibid.*, 19, 31–32.
33. Lesley Brown, ed., *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles: Volume 1: A–M*, Revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), s.v. Experience.
34. C. Koch and G. Tononi, “Christof Koch and Giulio Tononi on Consciousness at the FQXi Conference 2014 in Vieques”, 8:00–8:30.
35. For a thorough critique of Kant’s distinction, see Puntel, *Structure and Being*.
36. Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Reality*, First American Edition, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 123–125.
37. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 6th ed. (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 104. A classic example of how the quadrilateral is understood, which might suggest that the sources are somehow independent of each other, is how The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church expresses it: “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.” (Quoted in Ted A. Campbell et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, Reprint edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 9.) According to Campbell et al., the separation between the sources in Wesley’s theology should be considered a “modern Methodist myth” (p. 9). They argue that the quadrilateral should be understood as “the rule of Scripture within the trilateral hermeneutic of tradition, reason and experience” and that “this dialogical way of theologizing is in harmony with the teachings of John Wesley” (p. 142).
38. Notice that the answer to question of what is most important can be contested. For example, some could argue that it is due to experience, while others point to a certain ideology/tradition and a specific way of reasoning. Our main point here is that these matters need to be subject to an analytical discussion.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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