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A Deeper Look at Grades of Actual Occasions

I have said that all actual occasions are identical in that they undergo the same essential process of actualization: feeling the world conformally, interpreting the world, and deciding about and enjoying the world. However, these elements of the process are experienced differently depending on the complexity, or grade, of the actual occasion in question—whether a low-grade *physical* occasion, a medium-grade *living* occasion, or a high-grade *mental* occasion. An atom does not experience the world the way an ape does. As we move along the evolutionary continuum, different grades of actual occasions experience the world with different emphasis (see Figure 1).

	Feeling	Interpretation	Decision/ Enjoyment
Low	X	x	x
Medium	X	X	x
High	X	X	X

Figure 1: Grades of Actual Occasions

Note that even though every actual occasion goes through the three stages of feeling, interpreting, and deciding, each differs in the emphasis given to the three phases depending on the complexity of its grade.

Although I have divided actual occasions into three grades, I want to be clear that these grades are not entirely distinct. In fact, there is a continuous variation in grade, from the lowest to the highest. The three-fold distinction

I am using is similar to our convention of dividing the color spectrum (which is continuous) into seven distinct colors. The three-fold distinction is convenient because it corresponds to our usual differentiation between inorganic, organic, and thinking beings. Yet, as we know, even that distinction represents a continuum. The fuzziness {158} of the distinction between inorganic and organic, for example, is often remarked upon.

Low-Grade

Low-grade occasions emphasize *feeling*, the first of the three stages in concrescence, or the process of actualization.

A low-grade actual occasion, such as a hydrogen atom, mostly just feels the world and interprets it in an abstract way. The interpretation is entirely lacking in nuance and does not disclose the vast richness of concrete actuality. Also, there is a bare minimum of exploration of the possibilities that are revealed. The atom, most of the time, just repeats what it did a moment ago.¹ It does not exercise elaborate decision-making. As an actual occasion, it is comparatively simple.

Medium-Grade

Medium-grade occasions emphasize the first and second stages of concrescence—*feeling* and *interpretation*.

A medium-grade actual occasion—for instance, the personality of a cell or an organ or an animal—feels the world but interprets it in a more elaborate way. We can easily observe that this is the case. A bacterium can identify a chemical gradient and follow it to food. However, these medium-grade, living occasions do not seem to spend much energy in deciding what to do. Plants, for example, experience a limited range of possibility for novelty; they follow the sun and grow this way or that. They just do it with minimal choice. Similarly, simpler animals (i.e., those without the complexity associated with a frontal cortex) simply follow their impulses or instincts.

¹ Of course sometimes it does do something different—as when, for example, it gets together with oxygen to become water. But it does this under external pressure, and in any case its behavioral repertoire is comparatively small.

Just to be clear: this is not intended as a biological treatise, so I am not concerned about consigning any particular species or phylum to a specific grade. Those kinds of details need to be worked out later by a science informed by this alternative metaphysics. I am simply noting that actual occasions do occur in different grades, and I'm indicating the kinds of entities and organisms that, in general, can be assigned to each grade. The important point is that understanding the differences {159} between grades will help us later when we come to discuss what kind of entity the human personality must be in order to survive the death of the body.

Keep in mind (as mentioned earlier and will be important later) that medium-grade occasions always prehend other medium grade occasions, and may or may not (depending on their own aims) prehend low-grade, inorganic occasions. In other words, medium-grade occasions can form a world of their own, not dependent on the physical world in any way.

High-Grade

High-grade occasions emphasize all three stages in the process of concrescence—*feeling, interpreting, and deciding*.

High-grade occasions, like ourselves, feel the world and interpret it in an elaborate way. In addition, we actually *think* about what we are going to do next. At many moments, we consciously evaluate possibilities and choose those that best suit our aims. We have an elaborate decision-making process; we go for the possibility that will yield the maximum value over sometimes considerable ranges of time and with many intervening steps. For example, we may decide to go to school and then realize we need to work to make the money for tuition, and then we prepare ourselves for a job that will accomplish this.

Again, high-grade occasions always prehend other high-grade occasions, but they need not (depending on their own aims) prehend occasions of medium or low grade.

The process of actualization or concrescence always involves these three stages, but the emphasis placed on each stage, along with its richness and depth, varies for different grades of occasions.

Here in our everyday lives we are in the waking world, where inorganic or low-grade occasions play a significant role; they make up the physical bodies of the objects that surround us: walls, roofs, furniture, tools, toys, and so forth. As societies of high- and medium-grade occasions, we are actualizing from moment to moment, in a rich way. Meanwhile, the atoms and molecules around and inside our bodies are low-grade occasions actualizing in their own, comparatively poorer way. When we study them, we are doing physics—which is the study of low-grade occasions by high-grade occasions.

Until the advent of quantum mechanics, physics didn't have any {160} place for high-grade occasions; they were irrelevant to the professional concerns of physicists. Consequently, because physicists concentrated on studying low-grade atoms and molecules, that's all they observed. And then, mistakenly, they many made a leap and declared, "That's all there is." Reality, they claimed, consists exclusively of low-grade inorganic occasions, and anything else is either a configuration of those inorganic occasions, an epiphenomenon, or an illusion. Hence the awkward metaphysical tangle we know today as "physicalism," which is the assumption that only what is physical (low-grade) is ultimately real.

Clearly, this is not satisfying philosophical reasoning. Good philosophy does not require us to explain away our own existence. The whole purpose of philosophy is to allow us to explain our own existence to ourselves.