

## PHILOSOPHY AS A CHRISTIAN VOCATION

Edward L. Schoen\*

"Why are you in philosophy, anyway?" has a peculiar sort of sting when asked by Christians in religious studies. Normally the question is intended innocently enough, a mere request for a brief autobiography. But I find that this innocent question sometimes stimulates deep and recurring currents of self-examination that, though I rarely speak of them, run something like the following: "If I really believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and if I really believe that these events have a direct and crucial bearing on the happiness and meaningfulness of human life, why is my academic life spent in philosophical speculation rather than in the clarification and promulgation of Christian doctrine?" This current of questioning stirs even deeper bubblings of concern when I reflect on the simple fact that, while claiming the redemptive work of Christ in my own life, I do not even center my academic interests in philosophy of religion or Christian apologetics. Rather, my time is dissipated in reflections on logic, foundations of mathematics, philosophy of science and set theory. Can I really justify such activities?

One line of response that has recently become rather fashionable among Christians in philosophy involves an appeal to a "broader view of man." Man as a creation in the image of God is stressed. The early chapters of Genesis are often cited in support of the conviction that man is given dominion over the earth, not merely to physically control it but to understand and interpret it as well. 1 Corinthians might be used to elaborate this theme. Not everyone is called to be a missionary or theologian. There are other gifts that may be exercised redemptively in this world. The use of one's mental powers in creative thought can be a true and valuable glorification of God. Indeed, one's whole personality in all of its aspects must be submitted to the task of worshipful glorification of God.

It seems to me that there is an important defect in this line of justification. The problem is not with the correctness of these points. Unlike many fashionable movements, this particular trend appears to be a healthy one, one that in the past has tended to receive too little attention. It can provide a broadening of perspective, a broadening that may point the way to a less rigid, less morbid and more accurate conception of the abundant Christian life.

The difficulty arises when this justification is offered to someone outside the philosophical community. To one not familiar with the issues and concerns of contemporary philosophy, this sort of response can engender a mistaken conception of the working philosopher. An image is aroused of the philosopher gaily playing at being an intellectual gourmet, furiously glorifying God with his castles of theoretical whipped cream. This image is particularly tragic when it allows the conclusion that philosophy, contemporary American philosophy, is not of direct and critical importance to those working in religious studies.

It is my intent, therefore, to sketch a second line of defense, one that I hope will indicate something of the deep relevance of contemporary philosophical

\*Edward Schoen is assistant professor of philosophy at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green.

activity to Christian concerns. Our attention will be drawn to the present state of philosophy in America. Due to the intricate complexity of our current intellectual scene, only one thread in the fabric of American philosophy can be touched: the thread of physicalism. Even here our discussion must be diluted with some measure of forced oversimplification. But a brief glimpse of this thread, while greatly condensed and so (unfortunately) somewhat distorted, may allow some picture of the intricate tangle of interests common to Christians in both philosophy and religion.

Physicalism, when considered sensitively and sensibly, is formulated as an hypothesis and not as a dogma. In rough approximation, this hypothesis amounts to the claim that the universe in all its diversity is explainable ultimately and completely by reference solely to the entities of physics. A more accurate and somewhat clearer picture of physicalism may be obtained by viewing this hypothesis as a natural outgrowth of reflection on the history of scientific progress.

If we explore the ancient Greek and Near Eastern view of celestial mechanics, we discover a curious mixture of religious doctrine and empirical reports. Spiritual forces and agents were invoked to account for the observed activities of heavenly bodies. Such explanations were mysterious and puzzling, tending to obscure rather than clarify. It was only with the painful purging of reference to spiritual or supernatural forces in the explanations of celestial movements that the baffling mystery of astrology could be replaced by a clear science of astronomy. Once interest in the supernatural was dropped, precise explanations of the heavens developed with surprising speed. In fact it was the birth of astronomy as a branch of physics, the physics of celestial bodies, that marked the beginning of rapid advance in this field.

If we scrutinize other areas of tremendous advance in human understanding we find the same course of events. Consider chemistry. Medieval alchemists were able to create a remarkable array of new substances from assorted potions mixed in various combinations. Yet they lacked any understanding of why these mixtures resulted in such substances. It was the grounding of chemistry in atomic physics and the subsequent provision of explanations of chemical phenomena in terms of the physical characteristics of atoms that allowed the incredible rate of recent advance in this field. Similarly, medicine was given a foothold when it turned from demonology to physical explanations in terms of the chemistry of the human organism. The life sciences, biology and botany, find increased success when attention is turned away from mysterious "vital forces" and is directed instead toward the physical structures of living organisms. The key to life itself seems locked in genetic structures, and genetic structures are physical structures. Even psychology is turning increasingly to physics. Neurophysiology is promising the key to success. Already the intensification of research into the physical structure of the central nervous system is yielding surprising results that are immediately applicable to the treatment of serious "mental" disorders, treatment that is addressed to the physical structure of the human patient.

The moral of this tale seems clear. Physics is central. Whenever a discipline can be reduced to a branch of physics, impressive and rapid advance in human understanding in that discipline is almost immediately forthcoming. Not only does the advance occur in fields concerned with inanimate objects, fields like astronomy and geology. Surprisingly, it seems to occur in fields like biology and even human psychology as well. One way of putting the hypothesis of physicalism

is to claim that this same pattern of advance will apply to all branches of human inquiry—that is, clear progress in human understanding is only obtained when explanations can be given that refer to the same entities as are referred to in the explanations of physics.

The main thrust of physicalism is quite simple. The history of scientific progress points in the direction of a powerful claim, a claim that appears more and more likely to be true. Contemporary physics is neither a complete theory nor even in its final stages of development. Yet in its main features it is the correct theory about all there is. Any realm of human inquiry, therefore, if it is to be a correct explanation of some body of phenomena must find its niche in some aspect of physics.

Present philosophical discussion in America can be organized in an illuminating way by taking this hypothesis of physicalism as a central focal point. If not all, then a major portion of present philosophical activity is concerned either with physicalism itself or with one of several related issues. For centuries philosophers have been obsessed with questions like "What is truth?", "What can be known?", "How can we know?", "What is this universe like?" It may be that the answers to such questions are finally within reach. Surely physics provides an actual example of human knowledge. Indeed, it seems to be the most uncontroversial case of true, systematic human understanding of the world, the type of knowledge for which man has eternally struggled. No longer must philosophers haggle over such vague and general questions as "What is truth?" Instead attention can be turned to physics, an exemplary case of human knowledge. It would seem that philosophers should be able to glean insights through a close scrutiny of this windfall, and Americans have wasted no time in undertaking the project.

The intense interest in physics is reflected in the activities of philosophers at most major universities. Courses in the philosophy of science abound. New journals and even whole series of books by major publishers emerge constantly. One of the most important results of this fury of interest has been the increasing awareness that physics is heavily dependent on mathematics. Without the language of mathematics, physics would be fatally crippled. Rather naturally, attention has turned to the nature of mathematics. Hence the abundance of courses in the foundations of mathematics and the arrival of new journals and series of books by philosophers on this topic. But the intensified interest in this area has borne fruit as well. It seems that mathematical languages can be generated from certain languages of logic when strengthened by the introduction of set theory. Once again a flurry of activity has been initiated. Journals of symbolic logic and treatises on set theory and the foundations of logic flourish.

About this time the Christian must be feeling a bit uneasy over the hypothesis of physicalism and all of the attention it seems to be drawing. After all, the traditional Christian wants to claim that supernatural forces are operating in this universe. Indeed, they are bound up in the very fabric of the world. They are particularly relevant to human life and happiness. Physicalism, on the other hand, claims that the universe and, more specifically, human life are ultimately explainable by reference to the entities of physics. Physics, in turn, seems to be moving farther and farther away from explanations dependent on supernatural entities of any kind. Thus the fate of the physicalist hypothesis appears to be of direct relevance to the truth of traditional versions of Christianity.

What, then, is the fate of the physicalist hypothesis? Unfortunately no one

knows. Nonetheless, areas of potential weakness in the thesis are being actively explored. One line of inquiry revolves about the fact that physics seems so heavily dependent on mathematics. Certainly mathematics does not study physical objects. Mathematics concerns numbers, and numbers are not touchable material things. If physics requires mathematics and if mathematics is about nonphysical entities of some sort, then physicalism cannot be true. Not all subject areas, when thoroughly and completely investigated, turn out to be some particular aspect of physics. Mathematics comprises a field of exact and precise human knowledge and, although necessary for the continued success of the physical sciences, is not itself reducible to a branch of physics.

As attractive as this line of advance against physicalism might appear, it begins to quiver upon closer inspection. Mathematics is not a science of irreducible, nonphysical entities called numbers. Instead it is a derived subject area. Elementary number theory can be generated from certain languages of logic when strengthened by a formal discipline concerned with the study of classes, the discipline of set theory. Therefore since elementary number theory must be considered a specific application of logic and set theory, any attempt to undercut physicalism through an investigation of mathematics must turn to logic and set theory instead. On this particular front several camps seem to be active, not all of which are sympathetic to the opponent of physicalism.

One of the oldest and most battered camps is that of the hard-nosed physicalists. Indeed, this camp is so tattered that it is difficult to find a clear champion for the cause, though inspiration might be taken from the writings of Nelson Goodman and, perhaps, from certain aspects of the works of Bertrand Russell. While hard-nosed physicalists staunchly maintain that the languages of logic necessary for mathematics do not require reference to any nonphysical traits or entities whatever, their numbers have been seriously depleted by a drift in allegiance toward a softer version of physicalism, that of Harvard professor W. V. Quine. Quineans maintain that elementary number theory has been reduced to set theory and logic. But set theory requires reference to certain entities, classes or collections of things that, as collections, are intangible and nonphysical.

While the Quinean camp admits that physics is impossible without mathematics and that mathematics requires set theory and thus the admission of nonphysical collections, it is still optimistic about the physicalist hypothesis. This optimism roughly divides along two lines. On the one hand, it may turn out that the hard-nosed physicalists are right after all. The barrier of set theory might turn out to be penetrable. Upon further research it may be discovered that elementary number theory does not really require the existence of nonphysical classes or collections. Perhaps set theory itself will someday be reduced to a branch of physics. On the other hand, with somewhat less enthusiasm Quineans are willing to embrace a softer version of physicalism. It may be that set theory is not farther reducible. We may be stuck with one type of nonphysical entity: classes. But this is all to which we must be resigned. No other nonphysical thing exists. Physicalism with this modification remains tremendously powerful.

A third camp has been hidden in the hills of Europe. Only in the last few years has it begun to assemble in any strength on the American front. The phenomenologists, fired by Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, are entering the conflict armed with the claim that symbolic logic as well as set theory is concerned with the intangible. Logic is the study of nonphysical relations like entailment,

inclusion, exclusion and mutual implication. Such relations obtain among non-physicals like ideal concepts, ideas and propositions. Since ideas, concepts, meanings and propositions as well as classes are central to logic and set theory, mathematics and so also physics are inextricably bound to the nonphysical.

One final interesting group has entered the fray spurred by the conviction that the symbolic logic and set theory necessary for elementary number theory are not adequate for physics. An additional and relatively young branch of logic concerned with such notions as necessity and possibility, modal logic, is also required if the physical sciences are to successfully advance. If this claim be true, if indeed modal logic is necessary for the development of physics, then the work of one modal logician, Alvin Plantinga of Calvin College, takes on a fascinating light of significance. Plantinga argues with a surprising degree of sophistication and plausibility that the existence of God can be shown with the aid of certain aspects of modal logic. If he is correct and, furthermore, if modal logic really is required for physics, then the hypothesis of physicalism seems doomed. The very basis of the physical sciences leads directly to the conclusion that God exists.

It is much too early to tell which camp will win the day. Although the Quineans are flourishing, the modal logicians and phenomenologists are so new to the battle that their ultimate powers are not easily assessed. One point is clear, however. The Christian philosopher cannot afford to be a disinterested bystander. Since results in the philosophy of science, mathematics, logic and set theory have direct bearing on the plausibility of the hypothesis of physicalism, they may also have a penetrating impact on questions centering about the interpretation and plausibility of traditional Christian doctrines.

The scope of contemporary research and the intensity of recent interest in the above topics may tend to blunt the felt importance of a second main area of concentrated activity, the sphere of philosophy of mind. No one doubts that people think. Most of human life is spent in reasoning, imagining, hoping, wanting, dreaming, doubting, wondering and countless other mental activities. The problem for the physicalist is obvious. Do not such activities, roughly grouped under the heading "mental activities," indicate the presence of some nonphysical entity of some sort, some mind or spirit or soul? The physicalist, of course, must reject any such intangibles.

The usual strategy of the physicalist is not to reject the mental aspects of human life but rather to adopt the identity thesis. In its most general form the identity thesis is merely the hypothesis of physicalism in its specific application to the study of human beings—that is, the mental activities of human beings, when finally understood, will be explained by reference to no entities other than those used in the explanations of physics. The mental component of each human being will turn out to be identical with some aspect of that person's physical make-up.

In his more philosophical reflections, Harvard psychologist B. F. Skinner seems to reveal a commitment to one of the older versions of the identity thesis. For Skinner the mental component of a person is identified with certain physical behaviors. In recent years, however, developments in neurophysiological research have led to an eclipsing of the more behavior-oriented identity theorists. Attention is being directed toward the possibility that the mental component of each human person is identical with part or all of that person's central nervous system. Of course there are also those willing to take a more mixed view, identifying some mental activities with overt, macroscopic physical behavior and other mental

activities with aspects of neurophysiology. Some of the more active proponents of the identity thesis in its various forms are the Australians D. M. Armstrong and J. J. C. Smart and the Americans David Lewis and Richard Rorty.

Because research is in its initial stages, versions of the identity thesis abound. Passionate controversy rages over the relative merits of alternative formulations. The strongest version has not yet clearly emerged. Nor have the more plausible formulations of the thesis been decisively criticized. Yet from this haze of confusion and indecision a single feature once again clearly steps forth: The Christian philosopher cannot assume the role of disinterested spectator.

There is one last bone of contention being picked in the scrap over physicalism. This is the bone of value theory. While increased interest is being taken in aesthetics, the usual focal point has been ethics. This century's hero against physicalism has been the British thinker G. E. Moore. In direct opposition to the physicalist, Moore maintains that good is an indefinable, nonnatural property. In short, ethics cannot be reduced to any branch of physics because the central ethical value, goodness, is a nonphysical property, a property not locatable in space or time.

Not surprisingly, the physicalist camp has mounted an intimidating and multifaceted response. R. B. Perry's *General Theory of Value* is but one example of the kind of powerful alternative to Moore that is available to the physicalist. Perry develops a theory of value that places the ultimate grounding of all value in the natural ability of conscious beings to take an interest in something. Other open alternatives include the noncognitivist and emotivist theories of W. H. F. Barnes, A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson as well as a host only glimpsed by a suggestion of the work of Richard Brandt or John Hospers or Philippa Foot. The list of resources at the disposal of the physicalist goes on and on only to be matched by an imposing list of opponents spearheaded by Moore and including such major thinkers as W. D. Ross and H. A. Prichard.

The welter of alternatives, strategies and issues involved in the scrap over value theory is intricately tangled and complex. Nonetheless, in the last several years some unity of effort has been directed toward an assessment of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. This book, a particularly insightful treatment of justice, is an attempt to provide a naturalistic basis for at least some commonly recognized values. While the debates over Rawls' book and, for that matter, the debates over value theory as a whole rage unsettled, the significance of the outcome of these debates for the Christian is less controversial.

The general picture of the relationship between physicalism and Christianity that has been sketched thus far is one of conflict, strife and mutual threat. Perhaps the most striking move that one might make at this juncture would be to point out that the supposed antagonism between physicalism and Christianity may be nothing more than illusion. In fact it is very likely that the two are actually quite compatible. That such a compatibility might be possible becomes more plausible with an awakened awareness of two changes. The first of these is a change in physics. Physics is no longer the push-pull mechanism of Descartes. The billiard-ball view of the universe in which every event is strictly compelled by the mechanical banging and ramming of inert bits of matter has been replaced by a physics that can unflinchingly countenance the interchangeability of matter and energy and perhaps even the creation of certain substances spontaneously out of nothing. The physical world, once so mechanically sterile and forbidding to

a Christian perspective, seems to be warming up a bit. Is contemporary physics still so hostile? Perhaps a second look is warranted. The very beginnings of reassessments along these lines have been discussed by Bruce Reichenbach over the last few years in *Christian Scholar's Review*. His interest is in the ramifications of physicalism on a Scriptural view of immortality. Of course the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* has devoted extensive space to the exploration of the relation of Scripture to theories of evolution. Much yet remains to be done in these and other areas.

The second change involves a drift away from the standard conception of physics. According to the standard view, physics, like any rigorous science, begins with a collection of observations. Under scrutiny this collection gives rise to hypotheses that are tested by experimental procedures. Successful experiments mean confirmation. Unsuccessful experiments require the junking of failed hypotheses in favor of new candidates. Acceptable scientific theories evolve from this simple procedure of empirical test. Theories that do not take the risk of this direct and simple relationship with experience are not to be condoned, and so religious theories, with their seemingly untestable hypotheses, interminable loopholes and excessive fudge factors are the worst possible offenders. Any legitimate theory will squarely and honestly face the harsh judgment of experience.

The standard view is presently under serious and sustained attack. Because Rudolf Carnap, Otto Neurath and others have wrestled brilliantly but unsuccessfully with certain problems faced by the standard view, a new conception of science has emerged and is growing increasingly in power and scope under the patient and very technical research of W. V. Quine. This new picture rejects the vision of individual hypotheses standing or falling in light of isolated experiments. Rather, a theory as a whole is confronted with experience and, if it runs amuck, any number of adjustments or rearrangements in any one or several parts of the theory can be made to patch what damage has been done. Only when a prolonged series of recalcitrant experiences consistently and extensively damage a theory beyond the point of even protracted salvage operations is that theory rejected in favor of a shiny and promising new model.

Such a quick glimpse of this new conception of science cannot even hint at its depths and fertility. But Thomas S. Kuhn has painted with simple and nontechnical strokes the most important features of this new picture in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. For the Christian who is not working in technical philosophy, one of the best ways to get a grasp of the tremendous promise for religious studies that lies latent in contemporary philosophy of science is to read Kuhn's book with a sympathetic and imaginative eye.

The extreme complexity of current activity on the American scene may be glimpsed through even so brief a tracing of the thread of physicalism as the one sketched here. This complexity might be perceived by the Christian as a forbidding omen. Sharp barbs of threat may lurk enmeshed in the intricacies of these issues. The most stolid of the physicalists claim that there is no room for the supernatural. Even the somewhat softer Quinean camp, though resigned to admit that physics cannot get along without nonphysical classes, is determined to hold the line against additional intrusions.

Nonetheless, to emphasize the potential threat to the Christian of certain forms of physicalism is to shroud the American scene in too bleak and dismal a cloak. There are bright new possibilities to explore. The phenomenologists are

burrowing into the foundations of logic and mathematics in an attempt to uncover strains and stresses in the battlements of the physicalists. Modal logicians are beginning to unveil tools and techniques that may yield powerful proofs of the existence of God. Perhaps research in the philosophy of mind or in value theory will reveal insurmountable barriers for the most hard-bitten of the physicalists.

Yet the most enticing avenues of possible response to the bristles of physicalism may not lie in various attempts to undercut the hypothesis. Rather, because of subtle changes in both physics and our conception of scientific theories, the most fruitful paths may stretch toward friendship. The Christian may find physicalism an exacting but fascinatingly supportive ally.

While the future course of the thread of physicalism may be unknown, there is a role for the Christian in the present. The appeals of the stronger forms of physicalism have proven so alluring that in many contemporary philosophical circles questions concerning the existence and nature of God as well as issues centered about man's role and destiny in the universe have lost their air of respectability. If such issues are to be returned to philosophic favor their redemption must be won on philosophic grounds. The philosopher facing the physicalist hypothesis with the intention of creatively retaining his Christian commitment cannot blindly assert his right to a perch. His stand must be won by a careful, close and sensitively critical response to present thought. Similarly the Christian in religious studies, if he hopes to effectively speak to the present intellectual scene, must approach his task with an understanding sufficient to allow the presentation of the Christian message in a manner illuminating to minds perplexed by contemporary problems.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank J. Julius Scott, Jr., William L. Lane, Ronald H. Nash, Larry D. Mayhew and James D. Spiceland for their useful criticisms of earlier versions of this paper.