

SCIENCE, THEOLOGY, AND ETHICAL RELIGION

by Paul Arthur Schilpp

The papers by Brown, Northrop, Barbour, and Hayward I found both interesting and instructive; but that by Platt was fascinating.¹ (I'm afraid this judgment is largely due to the fact that I find myself in such very large agreement with Platt's position and point of view. Confession, you know, is said to be "good for the soul"; so I might as well begin with this confession.)

Brown's emphasis on "boundary conditions" can, I feel confident, be of significant value to theologians, *if* (and this is a very big *if*!) they are sufficiently at home in physical science and in the use made by physicists of "boundary conditions." It is always helpful to have one's limits called to one's attention and constantly to keep them in mind. Unfortunately, most so-called theologians are not that well versed either in the physical sciences or even in philosophy. But at this point I must also agree with Platt that the application of this methodology in theology does not seem to me to be nearly so valuable as Brown would seem to have us believe. The very etymological meaning of the word "*theology*" already forces the theologian to concern himself with a boundary situation (if these last two words are not in themselves already a self-contradiction). The contemporary "God is dead" school of theologians, I am sure, has something to say to us; but, again, it may not be as important as they themselves seem to think. For, obviously, God can be said to be "dead" only if formerly he was "alive." And there are some who may wish to question this (except in the sense of a "live—i.e., useful—hypothesis"). And a detailed and minute concern either with first beginnings (First Cause) or with ultimate (final) ends may, in theology, be as uninformative of significant answers as are similar ontological and cosmological considerations by the natural scientists. Since no man can stand outside of space or beyond time (in either direction), it is a bit futile to keep on speculating concerning the unknowable. By all means let's be *Hon-*

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est (as) to God and also as to man! But, in order to be the former, we may have to be satisfied with Herbert Spencer's "Unknowable"; and, as concerns the latter, namely *Man*, it is precisely his present, here-and-now position and situation that Platt is interested in and that he (and I too) feels should be the major concern of religion. We have a great many human sciences, but as yet not really a Science of Man. Anthropology, psychology, and all of the so-called social sciences are sciences of man, concerning themselves with various aspects of man. But man *qua man* is not the subject matter of any science (unless it be in philosophy). It may, of course, have to be granted that the study of man *qua man* is probably as impossible as is the study of nature *qua nature*. Just as in nature there have to be many natural sciences studying different aspects of nature, so probably in the study of man there too have to be many different types of the study of man. Yet in both cases the problem of a holistic approach remains.

The last three sentences in the fourth paragraph of Barbour's commentary, where he wrote, "There is also the breakdown of any simple separation between the observer and the observed, between the subject and object. *The observer disturbs the system*. You cannot deal with the atom-as-it-is-in-itself, apart from the experiment" (p. 29), reminded me forcefully and pointedly of a sentence Werner Heisenberg uttered in the midst of a lecture at Northwestern University on October 12, 1955, when he said: "The things which happen in nature depend upon the way in which we observe them." Quite frankly, I have never forgotten that simple, straightforward sentence. And I would not be too greatly surprised if many of Heisenberg's hearers (for most of them were graduate students in the various physical sciences) were greatly shocked by the remark. But Heisenberg himself obviously took what he was saying so much as a matter of course that he did not even stop to explain, elucidate, or defend the statement. Among the more theoretical scientists the recognition of that fact has, probably, become common property. But my acquaintance with both graduate and undergraduate students forces me to the conclusion that few among them have, as yet, discovered it. It is worthwhile, therefore, to be reminded of it.

But let me now turn to Platt's commentary. There are so many points he makes which arouse my enthusiastic response that I have difficulty limiting my observations to a discreet length. When, for example, he writes, "The healthiest change we could make today, scientifically and socially as well as theologically, would be to put back into the center the immediate and personal nature of awareness, of responsibility, choice, and action; to see that all our magnificent physics and

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technology are *derived from man and for man*, not man from physics" (p. 38; my italics), I must confess that I feel myself shouting: Hear, Hear! "For me," he continues,

the primary reality is this immediate present totality of experience. . . . The objective world of the physical sciences is only half a world. It contains nothing that is really and humanly important to us . . . no love, no vomiting, no thrills, no memories, no plans, no ideas, no human interaction and creation, and no death. . . .

The ultimate philosophical basis of physics cannot be understood without first understanding those perception-theory aspects of the totality that make such a remarkable phenomenon [as language-communication] possible. . . .

This is where the personal enters into mathematics and science. . . . The existential fact is that it is we who choose the problems and it is we who must be convinced by the proof. . . . It is at these crucial points of initiation and conclusion that intelligence, values, and purposes make their very personal entry into science and serve, or fail to serve, our larger human needs.

I do not see how the matter could have been said more clearly, more pointedly, or more succinctly. And I doubt that the consideration of boundary conditions could be of much help here.

What I am saying—and what it seems to me Platt is saying—is, first, that all the natural sciences (including physics) must become consciously and clearly aware of just exactly *what* they are doing as well as of the *nature of the methods* they employ. And every good scientist knows that methods of procedure change not merely from field of operation to field of operation but sometimes even within the same field. To insist, therefore, that every scientific method of procedure is, *ipso facto*, applicable also in and to theology is just plain bunk.

Second, we are saying that a real understanding of scientific methods and procedure leaves no room for finalities or absolutes. Man himself is a finite, limited, and relative being, and his science—as well as anything else he undertakes, thinks, imagines, or what not—inevitably shares in this finiteness, limitation, and relativity. The best that even the most nearly accurate science can do is to reach a very high degree of probability; it can never reach finality. And even all of its most nearly precise instruments which it uses to reach that high degree of probability are, every one of them, man-invented, man-constructed, and man-created tools. And the results gotten by the use of those tools still have to be read, digested, and understood by human beings with whatever knowledge-getting capacities that human beings can bring to the task. And the checking and approving of any results also has to be done by exactly the same kind of human beings. (There is one area in which absolute certainty can be had, namely, mathematics. The reason is that

mathematics is a "hypothetically deductive system," i.e., a man-invented game, in which—if the game itself is logically completely self-consistent and it is played completely according to the invented rules—you can have absolute certainty. But the moment you apply any of this game to any actual thing, fact, or event in the existing universe, that moment you are right back to mere degrees of probability: there we can no longer have absolute certainty.)

A third needed recognition, also pointed out by Platt, is that of the indeterminacies in both nature and man. There is no point in my repeating either his illuminating illustrations or his cogent argumentation here. It is enough to reiterate that, inasmuch as the "characteristically biological phenomena that come to light in these big sensory-motor decision networks that we call brains," "have no counterpart in the world of physics," it amounts to whistling in the dark to keep up your courage to imagine that, when you get into the human-personal-subjective choice- and decision-making realm, you can just simply apply the neatly worked-out tools and formulas of the physical sciences and thereby solve any actual human-personal and social problems.

Again, as Platt puts it so well: "When you get rid of the objectivist delusion, [you get] an immediacy, a sense of personal value and personal power, of awareness and action, that could reshape the world." It could, *if*—but this, too, is a very big *if*. The "objectivist delusion" appears so deeply ingrained in people—yes, even in many scientists and surely in most theologians—that it will almost be like pulling hens' teeth to get rid of it.

I have not forgotten the original major intent of the symposium, "Resources of the (Physical) Sciences for Theology." But I would, in conclusion, like to suggest that this was itself a mistaken subject. *There are no physical resources for Theos* (the Greek word for "God"). There are *no other* "resources" for Theos either. If there be a God (in the modern culture-accepted sense of the term), He would not stand in need of any of our resources. Whatever else He would be, He would be self-contained: even if such self-containment (in His case) were to include the entire (known as well as unknown) universes. Nor can I see that there are any physical resources for theology either. Theology—again etymologically speaking—is the Logos (science) about Theos (God). But this very combination of words is anomalous. There can be no "science" of God. God may be a claim of (more or less) reasonable faith; He may be a (more or less valid) metaphysical hypothesis (and all metaphysics is purely speculative); He may even be the answer to someone's "religious" need. But, in the very nature of the case (i.e., because He is

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thought of as infinite, whereas man and all man's knowledge are only finite), He cannot be the object of scientific analysis and investigation.

What this does—or should—mean in and for “theology,” I cannot here develop. It is a subject much too big and involved to be capable of being covered in a brief paper.

I could wish that the original scholarly confrontation, instead of allowing itself to bog down in an almost inevitably fruitless discussion with “theology,” had concentrated on the (actual or) possible impact of the natural sciences on ethical religion. Ethical religion is a subject which the (finite) mind of man can handle; whereas I feel reasonably confident that such a mind can not either intelligently and still less wisely handle “Theos.” Ethical religion is an almost (if not actually) universal datum of human experience.

Because it is a datum of human experience, ethical religion is a manageable concept. Elsewhere I have defined ethical religion as: “Commitment to the highest, noblest, sublimest and best that I can think, imagine, or understand; and a Way of Life commensurate with the greatness of that to which I have committed myself.”² As is readily seen, this definition takes the subject out of the realm of mathematical measurement and puts it where it belongs, namely, in that of what Platt calls personal choice and decision-making. Certainly, insight and understanding of the way in which the human mind, human emotions, and human decision-makings work can here be of untold value. Any “scientific” contributions made in these areas should be most helpful; and what the scholars who are working in these areas have learned from scientific procedure and methodology should be both meaningful and helpful. But, as Platt has so clearly pointed out, this entire area is still radically different from that of physics and therefore physics, *qua physics*, has little, if indeed anything, to contribute here.

NOTES

1. See Sanborn C. Brown, “Theological Resources from the Physical Sciences: Can Physics Contribute to Theology?” *Zygon*, I (March, 1966), 14–21, and “Commentaries on Resources from the Physical Sciences” (*ibid.*, pp. 22–42) by F. S. C. Northrop, Ian G. Barbour, John F. Hayward, and John R. Platt.

2. See my essay, “A Philosopher of Religion Ponders Science,” in Edwin P. Booth (ed.), *Religion Ponders Science* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1964); my “Philosophy,” in Ralph C. Raughley, Jr. (ed.), *New Frontiers of Christianity* (New York: Association Press, 1962); and my contribution to Stewart G. Cole (ed.), *This Is My Faith* (New York: Harper, 1956).