BEYOND RELATIVISM AND FOUNDATIONALISM: A PROLEGOMENON TO FUTURE RESEARCH IN ETHICS

by J. W. Traphagan

Abstract. This article examines the similarities between notions about the nature of reality held by some Christian mystics (Thomas Merton and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*) and those proposed by physicists David Bohm and Henry Margenau. My aim is to consider how the implications of certain metaphysical *interpretations* of modern physics may: (1) hold similarities with Christian mystical notions about reality, and (2) be important for guiding future research in ethics. I further look into the traditional approaches to ethical theory that come out of the foundationalist, relativist, and skeptical realist camps and argue that while skeptical realists such as Timothy Jackson are moving in the right direction, further consideration of what is meant by reality is necessary if we are to traverse the gap between foundationalists and relativists. It is here that Christian ethicists in particular have the opportunity to pick up the metaphysical batons carried by physicists like Margenau and Bohm and mystics like Merton and the author of *The Cloud* and begin investigating the possibility that ethical theory can be approached from a nondualistic perspective.

Key words: Christian mysticism; ethics; foundationalism and relativism; metaphysics; modern physics.

Recently the fashion in the popular literature has been to propose connections between modern physics and mystical religions. Projects that compare ideas which result from different methods based on different assumptions about the scope of valid phenomena, however, encounter dangers at almost every turn. Nowhere is this more evident than in studies which look into scientific and mystical ideas about reality. As Robert Clifton and Marilyn Regehr point out (in

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an article aimed primarily at cutting down the correspondences between modern physics and Eastern mysticism proposed by Fritjof Capra in his book *The Tao of Physics*), in any consideration of science and mysticism it is particularly important to be cognizant that claims for the validation of mystical worldviews on the basis of modern physics are simplistic (Clifton and Regehr 1990, 90). The meaning of any mystical act or idea is open to considerable interpretation, and the metaphysical implications of physics are by no means beyond debate among scientists. In addition, it is all too easy to seek specific correspondences while unwittingly overextending the range of physical theory or reductionistically applying the terminologies and symbols of mysticism—scientists and mystics may at times use words like *infinite* or *interdependence,* but this does not necessarily mean that they are using them in the same way.

Keeping these caveats in mind, my aim in this essay is to consider how the implications of certain metaphysical *interpretations* of modern physics may hold similarities with Christian mystical notions about reality and be important for guiding future research in ethics. To accomplish this, we must tread a fairly wide territory, but with patience, I believe we will find that the consequences of such similarities bring into question the foundationalist/relativist, objective/subjective debate that continues to plague Western moral theory and point toward a direction for future research. Before moving on, however, I wish to set in place a definition for the term *ethics* as I will be using it throughout this paper. By ethics, I mean guides for moral action that set limits on what is considered to be in line with the good and the right within a particular cultural context—guides that help us to determine what we *ought* to do under all like conditions and function as social restrictions on our actions. My primary concern here, then, rests with normative ethics, rather than with metaethics, and the implications of scientific and mystical metaphysics for normative ethical theory.[1]

METAPHYSICAL IMPLICATIONS OF MODERN PHYSICS

Given that since the Enlightenment Western religious ethics has developed philosophically and theologically in a context largely shaped by an understanding of reality based on the Newtonian/Cartesian worldview, one that today constitutes only a part of the picture accepted by physicists, it will be instructive to begin by briefly examining how physicists approached reality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, in contrast, how they approach it today. As an illustration, suppose I wish to predict the motions of objects in the

macrocosm—the world of daily experience—such as a ball in a billiards game. I can use various measuring devices (ruler, stopwatch, etc.) to determine the position and momentum of objects and forces that will affect the movement of the ball. Having done this, I can then with reasonable certainty create a predictive theory (Newton's laws of motion) about ball motions that draws from information gained about the paths, positions, velocities, etc., of all the objects in the game (see Traphagan 1988a). Of course, the more variables about which I can obtain information, the more certain will be my predictions. Underlying this project are two basic assumptions about the nature of the world, assumptions that drove the machine of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century research in physics: that is, first, as an observer my mind is entirely independent of the thing observed, and second, the rules I establish about the motions of objects are general—there is one domain of reality to which all physical rules apply, not limited by time or location. Subject and object are *essentially* independent entities *related* to each other via the rules of classical mechanics. Any uncertainty in the validity of our data is the result of inefficiencies in measuring devices or failure to take into account a sufficient number of variables.

In contrast to this picture of reality, modern physicists generally view subject and object, at least within the domain of subatomic particles, as being far less distinct. The frequently used example to show this contrast is Thomas Young's two-slit system for showing the wave-particle nature of light (Davies 1983, 108). In this well-known experiment a light source is directed toward a screen with two holes in it, beyond which is a photographic plate that registers electrons directed toward the plate using an electron gun. Unless the observer interferes in such a way as to affect which hole the electron goes through, it appears as though individual electrons go through both holes simultaneously.[2] Therefore, as Feynman notes,

[i]f you have an apparatus which is capable of telling which hole the electron goes through . . ., then you can say that it either goes through one hole or the other. It does; it always is going through one hole or the other—when you look. But when you have no apparatus to determine through which hole the thing goes, then you cannot say that it either goes through one hole or the other. (Feynman 1986, 144)

The key phrase is "when you look." According to quantum theory, without "looking" it is not possible to know which of the two holes the electron went through, but the act of looking (the experimental apparatus used) disturbs the motion of the electron and influences its path. Therefore, "the act of observation itself changes the probability function discontinuously; it selects of all possible events the actual

one that has taken place . . . the transition from the 'possible' to the 'actual' takes place during the act of observation" (Heisenberg 1958, 54). Put another way, the observer is fundamentally involved in the nature of physical reality (Davies 1983, 110). The point is that unlike classical mechanics, in which the object of study is separated out from the rest of the world and can thus be described without reference to ourselves, in quantum mechanics, the act of observation itself is directly related to the knowledge gained from that observation.

Furthermore, the basic certainty assumed by nineteenth-century physicists concerning the predictability of events in the realm of everyday experience, while still useful in that domain, cannot be extended into the realm of subatomic events and interactions. The result of an observation in the subatomic realm

cannot generally be predicted with certainty; what can be predicted is the probability of a certain result of the observation, and this statement about the probability can be checked by repeating the experiment many times. The probability function does—unlike the common procedure in Newtonian mechanics—not describe a certain event but, at least during the process of observation, a whole ensemble of possible events. (Heisenberg 1958, 54)

That ensemble of possible events includes both objective and subjective elements. The objective elements are the statements of tendencies or probabilities of a particular result of an observation and do not rely on an observer. The subjective elements are those that pertain to the effects of observations upon the system—and it is "through our observation [that] our knowledge of the system [changes] discontinuously" (Heisenberg 1958, 54).

When we consider the history of physics we encounter two different attitudes about the nature of physical reality; one in which subject and object are clearly distinct and another in which they are not, one in which predictions can be assumed to be basically certain and another in which they cannot. How do we reconcile these two viewpoints? For the physicist, the answer is purely practical. Viewing the world in terms of discrete, objectively independent parts works well for building bridges, combustion engines, and pianos; it does not work well for understanding the interactions between subatomic particles. Physicists assume that theoretical frameworks used to describe the world are incomplete, and thus the range of phenomena for which such theories are considered valid is limited; they are not viewed as applying to all places at all times. The choice of a theoretical framework is related to the needs of a particular investigation—a physicist will use the assumptions about reality that obtain in classical mechanics for describing the motions of objects in the macrocosm, but will use a different set of assumptions for entities,

such as electrons, that do not respond to the Newtonian/Cartesian set of assumptions.[3]

But such practical resolutions seem far from answering the metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological questions of how to reconcile two seemingly contradictory attitudes about the relationship between subject and object; a point that has not gone unnoticed by physicists themselves. David Bohm, for example, in writing on the broad philosophical implications of modern physics, makes extensive use of the hologram as a metaphor for his theory of reality. He notes that if one cuts a holographic plate into parts, when light is shone through one of the parts, the entire image contained on the plate appears. It is not as sharp as it would be if the plate were intact, but it is whole.

For Bohm, reality consists of two levels he calls the explicate and implicate orders. The explicate order is the realm of ordinary experience that appears to us as an aggregate of separate parts—it is the reality shown by the holographic image as a representation of a discrete object in the world. The implicate order is a level of reality beyond normal experience, but exposed through the techniques of quantum mechanics—it is the reality concealed within the holographic image in which information about the entire object represented is stored throughout the plate.

At the explicate level of reality we define objects as discrete entities that can be understood objectively in the manner I described in my preceding billiards game example. At the implicate level, reality is understood as an infinite, undifferentiated whole in which the notion of independent parts loses meaning. Bohm draws this conclusion from the manner in which observer and observed interact in quantum theory. For Bohm terms like "observed object," "experimental apparatus," "observing instrument," and "experimental results" represent aspects of a single pattern that are identified by our "mode of description." Speaking about interactions between such aspects of the experimental context is meaningless because the point at which we draw lines between different elements in that context is arbitrary (Bohm [1980], 1983, 134; Traphagan and Traphagan 1986, 101). Bohm argues that in quantum theory the idea that we can analyze the world into essentially different parts, with unique selves that interact like the balls in a billiards game, each independent of the other interacting only inasmuch as one causally affects the position and momentum of the other, is an incomplete description of reality. For Bohm the entire context of the experiment represents an *"undivided whole, in which the observing instrument is not separate from what is observed"* (Bohm 1980, 134).

Bohm's ultimate goal in proposing this notion of reality is to mediate contradictions between physical theories. Relativity theory and classical mechanics are localized and require strict causality, quantum mechanics is nonlocal and rests upon probabilities. Bohm wants to develop a theory in which classical mechanics, relativity theory, and quantum mechanics operate as "limiting cases" of a general or complete theory of reality (Bohm [1980] 1983, 176).

Such realist metaphysical interpretations of modern physics have nonrealist counterparts, most notably, perhaps, in the work of Henry Margenau. Margenau's philosophical work is most closely akin to the neo-Kantian idealist perspective. The contents of immediate sensory experiences are not independent of the knower; rather, as Ian Barbour points out, Margenau "gives prominence to the *activity of the mind* in imposing a structure on . . . uninterpreted [sense] data" (Barbour 1966, 167). Margenau begins with the immediately given—that is, sense data. But the world of the immediately given inevitably eludes precise definition. For example, most of us have experienced the disappointment of buying a shirt on the basis of its attractive color only to find when we get home that the color we saw in the store seemed quite different. The reason for this is fairly simple: the color of light emitted by the fluorescent bulbs at the store is not the same as that emitted by the incandescent bulbs at home. Someone might argue that the yellow color of the incandescent lights distorts the *true* color of the shirt; if we can put it into a context of purely white light, we will be able to see the shirt's true color. Margenau rejects this line of reasoning on the grounds that there is no reason to think that one wavelength of light is any more objectively accurate an indicator of color than any other. Why not observe the shirt under infrared or X ray? But, then, what do we say about the actual color of the shirt? The answer rests in understanding the context of a specific observation. The property blue, for instance, is no doubt part of the shirt, but its precise definition is *latent* in the shirt's expressed existence. Rather than saying that the shirt is blue, we might better say that it has the potential for blueness; that potential does not collapse to certainty until the shirt enters into an interpretive context that includes the wavelength and intensity of light present (in a dark room the shirt may appear black), the physical characteristics of the observer's eyes, and the interpretive intervention of the observer's mind. Out of the interactions within that context the potential for blueness within the shirt becomes the reality of some shade of blue at the specific moment someone is looking at it.

Thus, we can see that Margenau walks a narrow path between the Berkelian idealistic notion that experience has no significance in and

of itself and the Kantian notion that it comes to us with some sort of built-in, a priori significance. Experience neither comes without significance nor with any predetermined significance; instead significance *arises* out of the interaction between observer and observed. In order to deal with the imprecision of experience and structure sensory perceptions, Margenau argues, we abstract from sense data rules of correspondence that epistemically correlate the theoretical and empirical components of an object of knowledge (Margenau 1977, 63). Margenau calls such objects of knowledge *constructs,* which are much more than "mere gleanings from the field of sensory perception . . . they come into their own through what are felt to be creative processes in our experience rather than through passive contemplation" (Margenau 1977, 70). Constructs are not simply concepts generated by human minds—the things from which we draw sense data are themselves constructs. The color blue (and the shirt as well) is a construct; it is the unitary experience of blueness that collapses to a determinate state only when it comes into contact with a mind. Margenau writes, "the tree [for our purposes we can substitute the color blue] is permanent [perhaps determinate would be a more accurate word] exactly to the extent to which permanence has been invested as a rational element in the construct. There is not a tree *and* my construct of it, nor a wavelength *and* my construct of it" (Margenau 1977, 70).

Barbour mistakenly asserts that Margenau believes things such as electrons (or the color blue) did not "exist" prior to their being "invented" (Barbour 1966, 168). It is not that they did not exist; instead it is that they lacked reality or reification. Things exist, but do not become real or determinate expressions of existence, until reified (invented) by a human mind. In other words, they are not *real* until human minds bring them out of a state of potentiality and construct them as having determinate properties—invention does not mean coming into existence, it means coming into reality.[4]

Although Margenau and Bohm differ significantly on the basic orientation of their physics, they do agree on one central metaphysical point: that in some way, at some level, reality is not simply an aggregate of discrete parts.[5] Differentiation is related to the human mind as it comes into contact with whatever is out there.

Both thinkers have attempted to extend their theories into the realm of religious thought: Bohm[6] ([1980] 1983) believes that his ideas mirror those of Eastern notions of a flowing, processive universe that at some level is a unified whole; Margenau has argued (1984) that, rather than a duality of mind and body, there is a plurality of physical and mental entities which form a single Universal

Mind that constructs the complete world, about which we as limited, finite manifestations of that Universal Mind can only get limited pictures. Both men find their ideas to be more in line with Eastern conceptions of some transcendent or unified quality to the universe, but do not go into any detail concerning possible similarities to Western religious thought. Thus, because I am interested here in determining whether such ideas have implications for Western ethical theory, I will now redirect our investigation to the following questions: First, do these ideas have anything in common with Christian notions of reality? And, second, if we accept the metaphysical interpretations of physics presented by either of these two thinkers, can we draw conclusions that have implications for ethical theory?

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

In a nutshell, the answer to both questions is a qualified yes. But for our purposes, metaphysical ideas such as those of Bohm and Margenau are not sufficient in themselves, because they do not attempt to arrive at conclusions about how individuals *should* act in response to such theories about the nature of reality.[7] It is not surprising that many physicists who have contemplated the implications of modern physics have been drawn to Eastern mysticism as a comfortable expression of the ultimate meaning of their ideas. Most Christian theology draws upon a worldview that holds a sharp distinction between subject and object, God and self. The relationship between the Christian god and individual selves is typically one-way dependence, not interdependence.

The framework provided by process theology, which rather than seeing the self as distinct from divine being views it as a part of divine becoming, represents one alternative to this viewpoint (Pulcini 1992). For process theologians, "no neat line can be drawn between the individual and its environment, since what is 'the environment' in one moment essentially enters into the individual in the next moment" (Cobb and Griffin 1976, 26). This processive concept of reality presents one mode of theological thought that points beyond the subject/object divide.

In another approach to this issue, Paul Tillich unites the divine and human in his notion of the divine as Being itself. Meaning, for Tillich, arises out of the act of being or existence. The meaning humans derive from their own being (actions) through the act of existence is meaning in the common sense. But the meaning derived from the actions of the divine (grace, providence) allow humans to go beyond a theistic god to see the divine as not a being, but Being

itself (Tillich 1952, 184). In Tillich's formulation the subject-object structure is overcome by universalizing the divine in terms of Being which encompasses all subjectivity and objectivity. It is important to recognize, nonetheless, that even with these significant contributions toward the idea of moving beyond dualistic approaches to reality, as Cobb and Griffin note, for Christians "the notion of 'independence' by and large still seems to evoke more religious passion than that of 'inter-dependence'" (Cobb and Griffin 1976, 21).

One less-explored Christian locale (at least among ethicists) where we find a unified, interdependent picture of reality is mysticism. In a recent article, Luis Dupré has given us a very clear summation of the mystic understanding of ontological reality as not being "'beyond' or 'outside the mind.'" According to Dupré, knower and known are "substantially united" (Dupré 1989, 5). Mystical union with God permits of no plus/minus dualistic distance between subject and object that characterizes ordinary epistemic deliberations. In the mystical union, the mind enters a different mode of seeing reality as a *being-with* rather than a *reflection of* or *relationship to* the infinite.

Considering both sixteenth-century Spanish mystics and earlier English mystics such as Julian of Norwich, Dupré concludes that the mystical union surmounts the distance between individual and God and, rather than negating the finite, elevates it to a level in which the infinite is reintegrated into the finite world (Dupré 1989, 9). Moreover, Dupré argues correctly that this type of view is completely opposed to the dominant Western metaphysics that establishes a division between being and becoming as that which is and which is yet to be, that is, that which places reality as an object to be confronted by the mind "rather than a totality of which the mind constitutes an integral, dynamic part" (Dupré 1989, 11). In support of these conclusions, Dupré cites some more daring mystics, such as Angelus Silesius (1624–77), who actually go to the extent of stating that there is a mutual constructing relationship between self and God. Writes Silesius:

> There are by you and I, and when we two are not
> The heavens will collapse, God will no more be God.

> God shelters me as much as I do shelter Him,
> His Being I sustain, sustained I am therein.[8]

This sort of interpenetrating notion of the relationship between finite and infinite, self and God, is not uncommon among Christian mystics. For example, as Ira Progoff notes in his introduction to the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* (fourteenth century), the primary goal of the work is to give the student the means by which to attain

union with God, not as a feeling but as a "fact of existence" (Progoff 1957, 37). This view does not postulate God as something we think of or imagine, but God *qua* God. It is memory that separates humans both from God and from their true selves, thus the "forgetting" of the dichotomies between things in the world and between God and human is the means through which to attain a true understanding of existence and reality. The author of *The Cloud* writes, "[t]hrough grace a man can have great knowledge of all other creatures and their works, and even of the works of God Himself, and he can think of them all; but of God Himself no man can think . . . ." (Progoff 1957, 72). What the author of this text wants us to see is that there are two different ways of experiencing God and world—as limited and unlimited. On the one hand, we can know God's works through the limiting properties of thought. To think about something is to limit it, to bring it into a form of reality, to give it structure, to give it boundaries relative to other things. But to make God *real* in this sense is to limit God. The only way to truly get at God as an infinite, absolute totality, not as something that exists in the world but as existence itself, is to give up thought *about* God—to cease using the mind to limit existence to a particular state of being. Looking at this using Margenau's terminology, one might say that for the author of *The Cloud* God as *object* of thought represents the construct God, or God as something that arises between human minds and some experience of, or belief in, an ultimate. The construct *is* God, but God is not simply the construct because the construct is God limited by a self constructed within reality. The author of *The Cloud* argues that to truly achieve the mystical union, we must transcend reality by overcoming dualistic thought. No *single* picture of the world is in itself sufficient to take in the whole; the only truly complete under-standing of existence comes from eliminating those feelings and thoughts that separate oneself from totality.

There are clear moral implications to be drawn from this belief. The moral imperative of the author of *The Cloud* is to find, out of the darkness of unknowing, a path to go toward God—that road, the road to mystical union, is selfless love. "[God] may be reached and held close by means of love, but by means of thought never" (Progoff 1957, 72). He argues that if we succeed in doing this we will not only transcend the limitation of God that results from thought, but also overcome limitation of the self. This will lead to the destruction of sin and the engendering of virtue, which the author defines as a definite directing of one's energies not to thoughts about God, but to God Himself (Progoff 1957, 90–91). In other words, the trans-cendence of the division between infinite and finite, a change in

attitude about the nature of reality, is the prerequisite for virtuous behavior—it is that which engenders the individual to meekness, charity, and compassion and overcomes evil.

Modern mystical theologians have also offered similar ideas, not simply as expressions of individual experience but also within the framework of community. For Thomas Merton, the goal of the monastic life is to "find Him Who is everywhere . . . Perhaps He will turn out to be, in some mysterious way, my own self. But then again, if He and I are one, then is there an 'I' that can rejoice in having found Him?" (Merton 1957, 1). We see here again the issue of limitations—on one level we understand God and self as two, but also there is a sense in which there is no separation and no meaning in talking about separate parts. Merton goes on to tell us that the mystical union can be found between individuals and God as well as between community and God. For Merton, the monastic community itself constitutes the most profound expression of union; for it symbolizes the mystical union with the infinite in what he calls the common bond of silence, charity, and prayer: the "union of all souls in a common effort" (Merton 1957, 39; also see Traphagan 1988a). As both the symbol and outward, concrete manifestation of these bonds, the monastic community expresses a hidden or implicit reality of unified "mystical organism" (Merton 1957, 52). From a Bohmian perspective, Merton's notion of submersion into the community through humility stands as the submersion of the explicate self into the implicit reality of the monastic community held together in the mystical union.

As with the author of *The Cloud,* there are for Merton moral implications to be derived from this line of thought. He writes of overcoming conflict, doubt, anxiety, and other "impurities" of the heart that come as the result of denying reality—that is, selfless unity with God (Merton 1957, 13). Merton uses the term *reality* differently than Margenau; Margenau sees the term as applying to the limited, Merton to the unlimited. But regardless of terminology, both would agree that there is some sense in which there is an ultimate totality of which we are all "parts" or manifestations. The moral imperative, Merton concludes, is to end the denial of the unity of all within the infinite. Truth is not sought as an object to be grabbed, but as an "actuality of life itself" (Merton 1957, 16). The distinction between "God" and "I" is blurred if God is everywhere, and as long as there is a division between God and I, the relationship is incomplete—the attainment of completeness, and thus certainty, is the aim of contemplative and moral action and arises only out of the elimination of dualistic thought, a return to a nondifferentiated existence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHICS

We see in mystical and physics-derived metaphysics three common ideas about our understanding of reality: (1) that our knowledge of discrete things in the world is limited, (2) that in some way that limitation is a function of thought, and (3) that at least at some level the world can be viewed as interdependent and interpenetrating rather than discrete. A caution should be added at this point, however. For, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the mere fact that both mystics and some philosophically inclined physicists use words like *interdependent* or *interpenetrating* does not necessarily mean that they are using them in precisely the same way. What we can say, though, is that the physicist/philosophers and mystics mentioned here do use the terms in similar ways inasmuch as they are all moving away from the idea of a radical subject/object distinction at least at some level of reality. Of course, the mystics add that such thought-limited reality should be transcended via a change in attitude achieved through such practices and commitments as meditation, prayer, humility, and unqualified love. And it is here that we can begin to make some sense of these ideas in relation to ethical theory.

In so doing, however, we squarely confront a debate that has raged throughout the communities of both theological and philosophical ethicists for the past twenty-five years much like the proverbial dog chasing its tail—the problem of moral truth as argued by foundationalists and relativists.[9] For example, foundationalist projects such as Alan Gewirth's *Reason and Morality* work from the presumption that guides for moral action can "be obtained through an analysis of certain considerations about reason and action" (Gewirth 1978, 21).[10] For Gewirth the only positive means to avoid arbitrariness and attain objectivity is through deduction and induction which "reflect what is empirically ineluctable" (Gewirth 1978, 22). Other foundationalist arguments rely on the primacy of something onto-logically or epistemologically self-evident such as being or divine command. Raymond Dennehy writes, "[i]n arguing . . . for the transcendentality of being as the ontological basis of our certain knowledge of reality, we [arrive] at two conclusions which are meta-physical presuppositions of realistic epistemology: (1) Being is the basis of intelligibility; (2) possible being presupposes actual being . . . it is absolutely certain that being is being and therefore that being is not non-being" (Dennehy 1986, 138, 148). In other words, all concepts can be reduced to the concept of being—first principles are pulled from this concept. When a self apprehends something, it makes the judgment that it exists either as an actuality or possibility

that admits a distinction between being and nonbeing, is and is-not. Theological ethicists such as Helmut Thielicke have argued that the foundations of ethical behavior come not from being or from natural law, both of which are open to interpretation, but from divine commandments (Thielicke 1966, 430–31). Regardless of the angle taken, foundationalists insist that there is something ineluctable "out there," independent of human selves, about which we can be objectively certain and upon which we can base moral behavior.

Relativists counter that there is no means by which we can justify beliefs and practices on *a priori* principles or self-evidence. Things in and of themselves have no intrinsic value that we can know with certainty; thus there is no point in talking about moral absolutes. While we may bump into being, all of our knowledge of it is contingent. Richard Rorty, for example, believes that truth cannot exist independent of human minds because language cannot exist independent of human minds (Rorty 1989, 5). Rorty wishes to convince "our society that loyalty to itself is morality enough, that such loyalty no longer needs an ahistorical backup" (Rorty 1983, 585). Rorty reinterprets the "moral self" not as "somebody who can distinguish her *self* from her talents and interests and views about the good, but as a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it—no substrate behind the attributes." (Rorty 1983, 585–86). He defines the self as an "ironist," who

thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence . . . [and who] worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness. So, the more she is driven to articulate her situation in philosophical terms, the more she reminds herself of her rootlessness by constantly using terms like "Weltenschaung," "perspective," . . . "vocabulary," and "irony." (Rorty 1989, 75)

Recently, a third option has been proffered by Timothy Jackson, with his notion of skeptical realism, in which he attempts to resolve the conflict by carving out a middle ground between relativism and foundationalism that argues for moral realism while maintaining epistemic "humility" or uncertainty. For Jackson a "critical, 'sceptical' realism seeks to preserve some relation between subject and object as the nature of truth while acknowledging both the absence of incorrigible beliefs and the presence of many different kinds of objects in the world." Relativists such as Rorty, according to Jackson, mistakenly collapse epistemology with alethiology (theory related to the nature of truth) and ontology (Jackson 1987, 279). While Jackson agrees with Rorty's assertions that we cannot

use correspondence to reality as a ground upon which to measure truth or knowledge claims—because we lack an unmediated grasp of reality—he does not believe that we must give up realist alethiology. He affirms that "the nature of truth is correspondence between our thoughts and the way the world is" and that there are real values and disvalues in the world, but he denies the foundationalist notion that we can test for truth infallibly or grasp reality without mediation (Jackson 1992, 7). What we can have is a realist morality that is not collapsed with the foundationalist requirement for certain justifications or unmediated intuitions. In Jackson's view, then, the means to eliminating "epistemic hubris" is through self-criticism or a recognition of one's own fallibility (Jackson 1992, 7). Jackson goes on to argue that love (in the agapic sense) is "beyond certainty in that its knowledge of others is premised on its free commitment to them rather than on incorrigible apprehensions or logically necessary deductions" and that charity (in the Christian sense) is beyond certainty, in that like Rorty's notion of irony it is beyond foundationalist claims to certitude and beyond morality "in that mercy is prior to, even the foundation of, a calculating justice" (Jackson 1992, 29).

Jackson is on the right track, but there remains an important problem in his approach which undermines his otherwise laudable goal of moving past the gap between the foundationalist and relativist camps. This problem rests in what I think might best be described as "naive realism." By this I mean that the realism which Jackson proffers is one in which the real values and disvalues as well as the real god he affirms are still seen as being "out there" in a very distant, objectified sense. Because Jackson's ultimate definition of reality remains unchanged from that of the foundationalists (although what he does with that definition is, indeed, quite different), he falls into something of a trap. While Jackson pulls apart the moral realists' tendency to "conflate their position with the foundationalist demand for incorrigible justifications or immediate intui-' tions" (Jackson 1992, 7), he remains a realist in terms of believing that the nature of truth lies in the correspondence between our thoughts and the world—despite skepticism about our ability to test for the truth of those thoughts. Thus, one is forced to ask: How, if we cannot get at epistemological certainty, can we be certain of the reality of those values and disvalues, or for that matter of any sort of god? If we wish to remain epistemically humble, how can we *know* that our thoughts *correspond* to a reality that is "out there?" If we maintain the sort of realism Jackson accepts, we cannot. Simply being skeptical about the degree to which our thoughts correspond to

reality is insufficient to extract us from the foundationalist/relativist bind. Instead we have to give more serious thought to what we mean by reality and in so doing consider the implications of alternative conceptions of the nature of reality itself.

Indeed, if we ponder the type of metaphysical arguments offered by Bohm and Margenau, the possibility of moving beyond the foundationalist/relativist debate becomes tenable without resort to the naive realism of foundationalists that continues to lurk in Jackson's formulation of skeptical realism. Both Margenau and Bohm ultimately wish to move beyond the kind of either/or thinking that fuels the debate over subjectivity and objectivity. As noted earlier, Margenau, for example, views reality as consisting of interacting and mutually constructing entities. If we follow an epistemology like Margenau's, the nature of truth becomes not a matter of correspondence between mind and reality, nor a simple reflection of mind, because reality is neither wholly independent nor wholly encompassed by mind. Reality is something that arises out of an interaction between minds and things, minds and minds. Values and disvalues from this perspective indeed do *exist*, perhaps as latent potentialities in human minds, but their reality only arises out of interactions between those minds.[11]

My point is simply that it is here that ethicists have the opportunity to pick up the metaphysical baton carried by physicists like Margenau and Bohm and begin investigating the possibility that ethical theory can be approached from a nondualistic perspective. When we factor in ideas of mystics such as Merton or the author of *The Cloud,* although we must be careful not to uncritically associate them with ideas of physicists, we are presented with important interpretations of the implications of nondualistic understandings of reality for ethical theory—interpretations that have held little sway within the community of ethicists. From the point of view of the mystics mentioned in this essay, the charity and *agape* for which Jackson argues does not come until we unshackle ourselves from the dualistic picture of reality that casts the Western image of the world and recognize that reality is interpenetrating and mutually self-defining.

According to thinkers like Merton and the author of *The Cloud,* such a realization clearly has implications for behavior: if dualistic thought limits, and the world is ultimately nondualistic, then to get at the unlimited, the infinite, we must surmount dualistic modes of thought. The way to get there is via a change in behavior in the form of meditation and prayer, which then gives us the attitude that allows us to submerge the self through normative actions expressed in

humility, unqualified or undifferentiated love, and so on. These form the tools and prerequisites upon which to build a moral, virtuous life. Whatever guides for moral action we might derive from Christian mysticism, then, center on the conviction that we must strive to become complete, or to achieve nondifferentiated mystical union— not to *encounter* or *correspond to* the world, but to become total with it, to achieve a situation where there is neither real nor unreal, existence nor nonexistence, being nor nonbeing—to eliminate the dualism that comes with the identification of a unique self or identity in anything.

In other words, Christian mysticism assumes a different starting point for our attitude about reality, one that holds many similarities with the metaphysical interpretations of modern physics previously discussed, and founds ethics on a being-with reality, an inter-mingling of self and other, finite and infinite. But the mystical atti-tude raises as many questions for ethical theorizing as it addresses: Can dualistic and nondualistic worldviews coexist in ethics as they have in science? Will ideas drawn from mysticism only work in monastically ordered communities, or is there some way to extend them to broader society?

Questions such as these are pointers toward a discourse, cognizant of conclusions found in both mysticism and some metaphysical inter-pretations of modern physics, that charts at least one course away from or perhaps beyond the subject/object debate. But more signifi-cant for our purposes here is that whether or not we agree with the moral implications assumed by the mystics, changes in our under-standing of reality proposed by modern physics-based metaphysi-cians (as well as similar conclusions held by some Christian mystics) present an enormously fertile field for the development of ethical theory. Moreover, the possibility of similarities between such ideas challenges us to look into our religious traditions to see if there is anything from which to make sense of such worldviews in terms of moral action. The conclusions that the mystics draw about how to respond in terms of action to these ideas are, perhaps, but a few among many. Clearly, given the above discussion, general research into the conclusions of Western mysticism can give us insight into how to deal with such a worldview from the perspective of moral action. Furthermore, investigation into Western mysticism can give us an opportunity to look at such conclusions in a more familiar con-text than those of Eastern mysticism—a context that, I believe, gives us the foundations upon which to begin a reconstruction of religious ethics that is not bounded by the argument between subjectivism and objectivism: one that presumes a very different attitude about the nature of reality.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank Henry Margenau and Willis Traphagan, both of whom freely gave many hours of valuable discussion on the ideas presented here.

1. To be sure, the discussion that will follow has implications for metaethics, by which I mean the analysis of the logic of ethical statements in relation to good and evil rather than the analysis of normative behavior, but, in part due to space, I wish to confine my discussion to implications for normative ethical theory.

2. For further discussion of this experiment see, Margenau (1977, 356–88); Heisenberg (1953, 44–58); Davies (1983, 108–11); Feynman (1986, 127–48).

3. A good example of how such ideas have affected other sciences (biology and chemistry) can be found in Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).

4. Margenau has confirmed this in personal conversation (October 1985 and March 1990).

5. Margenau and Bohm differ sharply on whether or not there is a need for a single, unified theory of reality in physics. Bohm believes that there are "hidden variables" which, when discovered, will unite the various limited scientific theories about reality (Bohm 1983, 65-110). Margenau feels that there is no need for such a conclusion, that the quest for an objective, complete theory of reality is unnecessary for conducting scientific inquiry. However, in his metaphysical ideas, he finds a unification of all statements about reality in what he calls "coherent degrees of existence." We have insights into that unity, but we can not get at the whole thing because we are limited manifestations of the whole. "Thus, to sum up the enigma of existence, only the Universal Mind, the cosmic consciousness, possesses existence in full unlimited measure. The Universal Mind confers existence on conscious beings in varying degrees, and these beings create, out of the minds bestowed on them and in accordance with principles imposed by the Universal Mind, everything else they call real or existing" (Margenau 1984, 128–29).

6. A book that deals directly with Bohm's ideas concerning religious and psychological implications of his ideas is J. Krishnamurti and David Bohm's *The Ending of Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

7. Margenau is, in fact, very concerned about the implications of his metaphysics for normative ethics. He has drawn conclusions for ethics from his epistemological ideas, but, while important, they do not deal with the issue of mysticism that I wish to pursue here (see Margenau 1979).

8. Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubinic Wanderer,* trans. by Maria Shrady, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 65, 43; quoted in Dupré 1989, 12.

9. Within the foundationalist/relativist argument lies, I believe, a further consideration, beyond that discussed within the main text of this essay—that the two points of view are mutually constructing. For, if we wish to argue for objective reality, somewhere lurking in our minds is the possibility that things lack objective reality, for we could not come up with a notion of objective reality without something against which to define and confirm the validity of the accepted view. One must be able to say that it is not the case that reality is subjective in order to say that it is objective; one must be able to say that it is not the case that reality is objective in order to say that it is subjective. Seen from the viewpoint of physics-derived metaphysics, we might say that the reality of subjectivity is latent in the reality of objectivity and the reality of objectivity is latent in the reality of subjectivity. The realities, or perhaps better, the potentialities of the relativist and foundationalist projects (constructs) are latent in each other—the two viewpoints are mutually interdependent and mutually self-constructing. Thus, there can be no definitive answer within the conceptual framework of either; the only option we have to prove the validity of one or the other is to claim intuitive recourse. In other words, to claim validation based on some outside system. The point of mystical nondualistic modes of thought is that the only completely valid thing is the whole thing itself—that is, the infinite or

unlimited. But that thing cannot be, itself, validated, because any attempt to validate it is to limit it.

10. See chapter 6 of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) for a very clear critique of Gewirth's work.

11. Unfortunately, space does not permit a more in-depth discussion of this important topic.

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