

METAPHYSICS, REDUCTIVISM, AND SPIRITUAL DISCOURSE

by David Carr

Abstract. Although significant revival of talk of the spiritual and spirituality has been a striking feature of recent public debate about wider social and moral values in contemporary Western liberal-democratic polities, it seems worth asking whether there might be any substantial philosophical basis for such renewal. On the face of it, any meaningful discourse about spirituality seems caught between the rock of an antiquated mind-body dualism—now widely regarded (some notable contemporary pockets of resistance aside) as implausible—and the hard place of a scientific physicalism that offers little harbor for irreducible spiritual entities. The present essay explores two possibilities of escape from this dilemma in the shape of eliminative dualism and noneliminative monism and argues for the conceptual advantages of the second over the first of these possibilities.

Keywords: eliminative dualism; eliminative monism; metaphysics; noneliminative dualism; noneliminative monism; soul; spirituality.

It is difficult to see how a substantial conception of religious life might be sustained in the absence of some notion of the spiritual as a distinctive mode or level of religious experience, or of the soul as a vehicle of such experience—and indeed, talk of spirit and the soul has proved remarkably enduring even in an age of allegedly rampant secularism. Moreover, in a climate of moral panic in the United Kingdom following a number of highly publicized acts of anomic murder and mayhem,¹ talk of spirit and spirituality has, rightly or wrongly, undergone a certain revival at the officially exalted level of public policy formation; for example, the new British educational inspectorate has seriously proposed monitoring the spiritual development of young people in state schools (Office for Standards in

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Education 1994). I have elsewhere (Carr 1995; 1996a) criticized such proposals on the grounds that they fail to identify any meaningful conception of spiritual (as distinct from moral and aesthetic) education. In part 2 of this paper, I have more to say about the distinctive form and content of spiritual discourse. Regardless of the conceptual coherence or prospects of success of the British Inspectorate proposals, however, it is certain that the very possibility of continued meaningful use of spiritual language—particularly in a contemporary climate of secular evolutionary thinking about human nature—must inevitably turn on developing a satisfactory strategy for reconciling any discourse on soul or spirituality, religious or otherwise, with that reductive materialistic account of the world to which some natural and social science and much popular “scientistic” reflection is otherwise given.

To be sure, problems of reconciling the apparently conflicting or contradictory patterns of understanding and explanation variously exhibited in different forms of discourse and inquiry are the stock-in-trade of philosophers. For example, there is the familiar difficulty of reconciling traditional final causes with efficient-cause explanations (or, as a more particular case of this problem, agent causation with event causation), as well as that of squaring ordinary discourse about freedom and responsibility with discourse about physical determinism (Dennett 1984). But to whatever degree one may get by with some tender-minded or folk-psychological talk of free will, even of teleological explanation, how is it possible to uphold an archaic discourse of soul, spirit, or spiritual truth in the face of behavioral, neurophysiological, and other modern scientific inquiries, which are widely held to provide the most rationally authoritative and objectively grounded accounts of human nature and its place in nature?

In part 1 of this paper, I argue that any sustainable contemporary strategy for the metaphysical defense of a discourse of spirit, soul, and spirituality must avoid two basically unacceptable extremes of compatibilism and incompatibilism. I also maintain that rejection of these extremes leaves us with two principal and by no means consistent intermediate positions, which, all else apart, are worth exploring because they have arguably not been clearly separated in some recent influential work on issues close to those of present concern (Midgley 1994; for criticism, see Carr 1996b). In part 2, I argue that it is the generally less philosophically problematic of these two middle ways—neither of which is admittedly entirely free from conceptual difficulties—that holds out the best possible hope for any reasonable rehabilitation of spiritual discourse.

PART 1: METAPHYSICS AND REDUCTION

Eliminative Monism and Noneliminative Pluralism. Let us begin with the most basic of metaphysical attempts to dispense with the luxuries of

ontological diversity. Because they seek to reconcile the spiritual with the material by means of one form of uncompromising ontological and metaphysical reduction or other, however, these are not, strictly speaking, compatibilist strategies. There are, of course, different routes to this sort of reduction; phenomenologists and idealists, for example, are inclined to reduce the physical to the mental or the material to the spiritual rather than vice versa. But because idealism and phenomenism are not nowadays in widespread philosophical favor, it is more common for monism to proceed by reducing the psychological to the physical or behavioral, or mind and soul to matter. Indeed, from pre-Socratics onward, philosophers have been inclined to ask what the richly furnished world of medium-sized dry goods—shoes, ships, sealing wax, cabbages and kings—contains or is made of, and to return the surprising reply that, despite appearances, it contains not many things but only one.

Philosophers also have notoriously differed over the question of the precise form or constitution of the basic stuff of the world, and candidates have included fire, air, and water as well as the basic elements of ancient and modern atomic theory. In modern times, however, such stuff has been commonly comprehended under the catchall term *matter*, and those inclined to conceive the nature of things in terms of various modes of material organization have generally been known as materialists or physicalists. Regarding materialist versions of what we here call *eliminative monism*, moreover, the general fate of the diverse pretheoretical discourses of mind, soul, and spirit is doubtless too familiar to require much rehearsal. It would nowadays appear to be widely accepted, for example, that the evolutionary biology of Darwin constituted a major landmark in the general search for significant continuity between understanding and explanation in the human and social sciences and the natural sciences, and though there has long been widespread skepticism concerning modern empirical psychological ambitions to provide an eliminative account entirely in terms of conditioned reflexes (Peters 1958; Taylor 1964), it is still an article of faith in many quarters that more or less complete physicalist reduction is likely to be the inevitable outcome of empirical work, at the interface of cognitive psychology and neurophysiology, on the nature of artificial intelligence. (For radical eliminative physicalism, see Churchland 1979; 1984; 1988; for strong leanings in this direction, see Dennett 1991; Dretske 1997; and for a more popular presentation of this perspective, see Crick 1994).

All the same, problems of eliminative monism—especially in its materialist and physicalist versions—are legion. In this connection, the problem of the reducibility or otherwise of spiritual to other sorts of discourse may presently be seen as a special case of a more general difficulty with any attempt to expunge prescientific language of the mental or psychological from our descriptions and evaluations of human affairs and conduct. One

general conceptual difficulty follows the eliminativist claim that the natural-scientific language of brain states or conditioned responses is in some crucial sense more basic than the folk-psychological discourse of mental life. But one might here ask, basic for what? To use a well-worn example (Ryle 1949), while it is at one level true enough that a university is no more than a particular spatiotemporal construction of steel, bricks, and mortar, if we are trying to help an architect or civil engineer design a university, the pretheoretical language of aims, functions, and purposes is surely more to the point than talk of building materials as such, because how we choose materials must depend on what we want the building *for*. In turn, however, the prospects of any scientific psychology aspiring to understand human mental life in terms of individual physiology must be considerably diminished by recognition that the values and purposes by which human behavior is rendered intelligible are widely implicated in and indefinable apart from projects, ventures, and institutions of irreducibly interpersonal, cultural, or transpersonal nature. In general, then, far from a neurophysiological language of brain states offering some more empirically respectable way of characterizing psychological life (so that we might some day abandon folk-psychological discourse in its favor), it is difficult to see how we might continue to give much psychological significance to neural wiring and the like, having dispensed with the ordinary pretheoretical idioms of mental life (Haldane 1988; see also Haldane in Smart and Haldane 1996). Moreover, the work of modern philosophical emergentists and functionalists (Putnam 1960; Fodor 1968) suggests that psychological eliminativism is by no means necessary even for physicalism.

Assuming that such points seriously weaken any case for materialist reductive monism, what would constitute the clearest alternative to such eliminativism, and what might be the implications of any such alternative for psychological language in general and spiritual discourse in particular? In line with previous terminology, we may give the name *noneliminative pluralism* to the most obvious alternative to eliminative monism. Indeed, just as monists are prone to regard the apparently separate and discontinuous items of worldly furniture largely in terms of different qualities or modes of organization of the same basic stuff, so ontological pluralists are inclined to insist on irreconcilable differences and distinctions between things. At one extreme, this may well imply some sort of radical metaphysical monadology (G. W. Leibniz, in Loemker 1957). In general, however, pluralist claims have tended to be less extravagant and have more often been based on a particular distinction between material and immaterial modes of reality or existence; in short, metaphysical pluralists have mostly been dualists.

Although Plato and Descartes—the two most philosophically influential dualists—articulated their dualisms in somewhat different ways, the views of both are nevertheless of inestimable importance for the problem

of the reducibility or otherwise of spiritual discourse. Cartesian dualism seems from the outset more straightforwardly ontological. By virtue of certain intrinsic qualities of nonvisibility, indivisibility, and unextendedness, mind or soul has a different metaphysical nature from matter, and an unbridgeable gulf is forever fixed between them (Anscombe and Geach 1969). Plato's dualism, on the other hand, seems primarily epistemological and only secondarily ontological, depending as it does on a distinction between the intellectually accessible realm of conceptual abstractions and the world of sensibly apprehended particulars. But Plato nonetheless clearly regarded his dichotomy as having significant implications for the mind-body problem and questions about the soul's immortality (see especially *The Phaedo*, in Hamilton and Cairns 1961). At all events, both dualisms are as hospitable as one could wish to the idea of the irreducibility of the psychological to the physical or the spiritual to the material. On such views, the language of soul or spirit cannot simply be an indirect, shorthand, or disguised way of speaking of material or physical existence, because spiritual terms or expressions have not only different senses but different *references* from material object terms. Indeed, for Descartes, even those pronominal expressions that might be supposed to have primary employment for the sensible identification of persons as spatiotemporally located particulars now take on a radically new role as terms of spiritual reference. *I* and *she* no longer serve to individuate certain physically constituted sources of independent agency with whom I can readily interact in a diversity of quite practical ways and refer instead to *thinking things*—those real psychological sources of personhood only currently residing in sensibly apprehensible physical forms.

However, despite the immediate appeal of Plato's and Descartes's accounts for those wishing to make a case for the distinctive sense and integrity of spiritual discourse, it should again be clear that any form of irreducible metaphysical or ontological pluralism faces difficulties—also well rehearsed in the literature of religion and science (Pannenberg 1982; Barbour 1990; Teske 1996)—at both philosophical and empirical levels. First, there is the conceptual problem of explaining the evident interconnectedness of things—not least the evident causal interplay between the psychological and the physical in the realm of intelligent and responsible human agency; it seems counterintuitive or distortive of ordinary experience to suppose that the virtuoso performance of a concert pianist is the sum or product of separate mental and physical events (Ryle 1949), whether contiguous or concurrent, and we hardly know where to begin explaining how the pianist's knowledge of music, which presumably inheres in his soul but not his body, might intelligibly inform the skilled movements of his fingers. Moreover, at the empirical level, nonmaterial Platonic and Cartesian souls were invoked to account for a range of capacities (aspects of reason, language, and memory) for which we do now have at least partial neurophysiological

explanations—and there is much evidence to show that epistemic capacities can be inhibited or destroyed by scientifically identifiable brain damage and disease (Damasio 1994; Gazzaniga 1985; 1988; 1992; Sacks 1985). Thus, it would seem that if we are to avoid the elimination or depreciation of the language of spirituality and the soul characteristic of reductive monism, we need to look elsewhere than to noneliminative pluralism.

But where could there be any middle ground between monism and pluralism, reduction and irreducibility? Still in line with the taxonomical repertoire with which we have so far been operating, however, it might be asked whether there is any room for maneuver within the terms of an *eliminative pluralism* or *noneliminative monism*.

Eliminative Pluralism. What might be made of an eliminative pluralism? Indeed, is it not tantamount to a contradiction in terms to speak of a pluralism that is also eliminative, if this is held to be distinct from a reductive monism? However, there is an important family of philosophical positions that might fairly be said to answer to this description. Perhaps the best examples of these are what might broadly be called aspectual or perspectival theories. To begin with, Spinoza's dual-aspect theory, conceived as a direct response to Cartesian dualism, seems to fit the description of eliminative pluralism (Spinoza 1959). On this view, thought and matter, mind and body, are not separate or distinct but simply two different aspects or dimensions of one basic reality; roughly, the distinction between the psychological and the physical comes down to a difference between subjective and objective points of view. Again, it may be possible to extract a similar thesis from Kant's distinction—in terms of his metaphysics of noumena and phenomena—of pure from practical reason. Whereas theoretical reason conceives things in themselves in terms of the deterministic categories of objectivity and causality that govern our empirical perceptions (Kant 1968), rational practical experience offers a more internal or subjective insight into noumenal sources of indeterminism or freedom (Kant 1948). Thus, it is plausible to interpret Kant's convoluted and not notably pellucid metaphysics as an eliminative pluralism rather than in terms of such possible alternatives as a modified Cartesian dualism or some sort of idealist monism.

Indeed, Kant's pioneering exploration of the discourses of determinism and freedom in terms of differences of logical grammar—the idea that these apparently opposed notions perform different conceptual and practical roles in human affairs, the former as a condition of theoretical understanding, the latter as a presupposition of normative usage—can be seen as an anticipation of those perspectival versions of eliminative pluralism that have been so influential in twentieth-century philosophy. The essence of perspectival views seems well captured by those nonrealist or antirealist views associated with so-called use theories of meaning; Wittgenstein's idea

of language games (Wittgenstein 1953) and Austin's theory of speech acts (Austin 1962), whatever their primary intent, have invariably been pressed into the service of attempts to reconcile scientific discourse with moral or religious discourse, freedom with determinism, by the simple expedient of maintaining that different forms of usage are but diverse ways of making sense of the multiform nature of an otherwise continuous human personal, impersonal, and interpersonal reality.

From such a viewpoint it makes no sense to inquire of the diverse discourses of determinism and freedom, science and morality, which is more fundamental—a serious question for eliminative monists—any more than it might to ask carpenters which of their tools, the hammer or the saw, is more basic. There is also little point in asking which aspect of usage refers to basic reality, because each is concerned with articulating or expressing a sphere of human experience as real in its own way as any other; a proper grasp of familiar normative discourse serves to show that freedom of action is not at all incompatible with the causally ordered nature of those biologically constituted creatures who are the source of that freedom. Indeed, on many perspectival views it is well-nigh meaningless to speak of *reality* at all, if by this we mean some realm of independently existing things described by an objective language of science. Thus, on many postempiricist and neopragmatist accounts of science, even scientific discourse is concerned less (if at all) with describing the world than with offering highly speculative explanatory models of it—though at this point the question of exactly what the explanatory models are supposed to explain may take on rather an air of mystery.

The pluralism of perspectival views, then, is basically a matter of semantic ascent; it rests primarily on the premise that there are diverse forms of usage that are—since each has its own significant role to play in the overall economy of human experience—neither intertranslatable nor mutually reducible. However, the eliminability of perspectivalism is also a function of semantic ascent—of a nonrealist agnosticism or skepticism regarding the sense of any question concerning the nature of the world as it might be independent of our customary ways of talking about it. Thus, if to be is to be a potential object of discourse, no object can be accorded immediate ontological priority over another; if genuine sense can be given to talking of devils or unicorns in certain contexts, these may be counted for particular purposes as real as sticks and stones. Indeed, on some so-called post-modern perspectival accounts, everyday reality of the sort we normally take ourselves to experience in the forms of other people—the things they own, the activities and practices they engage in, the institutions they belong to, and so on—has a deeply disquieting tendency to ontological evaporation, leaving behind only so many texts or narratives from which philosophers (who are themselves only fictions) are free to construct what they will. Thus, on the face of it, the reducible pluralism of perspectival or

aspect theories preserves what is best in dualism without the same cumbersome conceptual baggage of dualist ontology. If one wishes to hold on to language of free agency despite the causally conditioned appearance of the physiological substrate of that agency, one can—on the assumption that moral and scientific discourses seek to capture different aspects of human experience—do so, as long as one does not mistake divergent usage for talk of different worlds of material and spiritual substance. The difference between mind or spirit and matter depends merely on the point of view.

There are, however, problems with perspectival and aspectival views—and, in general, what we have called eliminative pluralism seems to be a fairly unstable compromise between the more extreme basic positions. Aspect accounts, especially insofar as they depend on a contrast between subjective and objective ways of perceiving the world, may seem little more than oblique restatements of Cartesian dualism that do little to clarify the relationship of mind to action. Again, the semantic ascent involved in milder forms of modern and postmodern perspectivalism is prone to issue in a pluralism of diverse discourses, a pragmatic construal of the varieties of usage, which—by overstating discontinuities and neglecting evident interdependencies of aspects of experience—is every bit as vicious as noneliminative pluralism and just as incapable at crucial points of squaring moral freedom with scientific determinacy. In this connection, indeed, problems of conceptual “bilingualism” have again been well addressed in the literature of religion and science (Barbour 1990; Peters 1996). On extreme postmodern deconstructivist versions, on the other hand, perspectivalism seems well on the slippery slope to an idealist eliminative monism or, at worst, to radical phenomenalist or Cartesian solipsism.

Noneliminative Monism. What, then, might we make of a *noneliminative monism*? Again, one might reasonably ask whether this is not a contradiction in terms; after all, if a monist is someone who believes that all there is to be found in the world are various modifications or constructions of one basic stuff, how might a monism be anything other than eliminative? Still, it may seem reasonable to explain the way things are in terms of a certain natural history—denying any radical metaphysical or ontological separability of the mental or spiritual from the material or physical and affirming the continuity of the rational capacities and freedoms of such evolutionarily advanced species as humans with other aspects of their nature—while continuing to insist on the mutual irreducibility of different levels of description and explanation apparent in diverse modes of human discourse about experience (Barbour 1990; Teske 1996; Drees 1996). Thus, one might hold that, though biological science addresses certain problems concerning our understanding of what are effectively only higher forms of organization of that same matter with which physics deals, it nevertheless requires the employment of concepts, categories, and forms

of explanation—invoking, say, goal, function and purpose—that resist complete physicalistic reduction. One might then claim much the same for relationships between biology and other branches of inquiry, for example, denying full reduction to the explanatory categories of biology of those folk-psychological terms hardly avoidable even in experimental psychology.

Moreover, insofar as Aristotle is one major philosopher who comes readily to mind as having defended a view broadly along these lines, what we are here calling noneliminative monism may also lay claim to a respectable philosophical pedigree (see especially Aristotle's *De Anima*, in McKeon 1941). But forms of noneliminative monism are also discernible, unsurprisingly, in Thomist (Martin 1988; Kenny 1993) and other varieties of scholasticism directly influenced by Aristotle as well as in the work of those modern neo-Aristotelian and postanalytical philosophers sometimes referred to as "new teleologists" (Anscombe 1957; Geach 1957; Taylor 1964; MacIntyre 1981). Some debt to Aristotle is also evident in the work of modern philosophical behaviorists (Ryle 1949; possibly Peters 1958) and in the more recent nonreductive physicalism of representationalists and functionalists (Putnam 1960; Fodor 1968), though the inheritance here is more uncertain.² Generally, however, for Aristotle and many of his philosophical and scientific heirs, the world of common experience is one in which mind and soul may be understood as higher but nevertheless natural functions or operations of biologically conditioned life-forms rather than as occult Platonic or Cartesian interventions in the natural order. But though the substance by virtue of which reality is substantial is natural and not supernatural, it is also a complex unity of matter *and* form, so that it is meaningless to try to understand any individual substance—such as a man, a horse or a stone—in terms of interactive properties of uninformed matter. Dismissal of a materialist metaphysics as meaningless, of course, also entails rejection of the idea that those material entities beloved of ancient and modern atomists are ontologically and explanatorily basic. Instead, Aristotle and his heirs incline to an ontology of natural kinds and properties which, while to a degree explicable in terms of different levels of material organization, may nevertheless call for categorically distinct conceptual resources at different explanatory levels. Hence, though every substantially existing thing in the world has a physical nature, not every fact or truth about that thing will be a truth about that physical nature. Of course, Aristotle's metaphysical analyses turned crucially upon his rather premodern view that nature is susceptible of more than just one kind of explanation—explanation in terms of efficient causation being but one such kind. But even if, contra Aristotle, we no longer need to appeal to final-cause explanations to help us understand those features of the natural order which modern science explains adequately in terms of efficient causation, it may yet be true, as modern philosophers of the human and social sciences have

argued, that teleological thinking of a broadly Aristotelian order is fundamentally ineliminable from biology and psychology.

But does what we have called noneliminative monism help us steer a safe course through the straits of Cartesianism—or other ontological pluralisms—and reduction, and is it free of the kind of problems that beset eliminative pluralism? Clearly, it is by no means problem free. For a start, though it readily avoids the sort of implausibility that attaches to at least the radical forms of perspectivalism—those, for example, that throw out the baby of our knowledge of external reality with the bathwater of an overstated scientism—it may yet seem that noneliminative monism is nevertheless insecurely positioned between eliminative monism and eliminative pluralism. In this respect, it may seem to give rise to a dilemma: on the one hand, if there is but one stuff of reality, it is hard to see how explanation might be discontinuous between different levels of organization of that stuff; on the other, if explanation *is* discontinuous, it may be difficult to make sense of any claim that what is explained at one level is the same as what is explained at another. (How, for example, might the psychological sources of human agency be related to the physical underpinnings of action?) But while these are persistent philosophical problems for noneliminative monism, they may be somewhat less damaging than those that face an eliminative pluralism. Moreover, it may be that neither horn of the dilemma is unavoidable insofar as it is open to the noneliminative monist to deny that explanatory discontinuity entails ontological pluralism; it seems to be the error of dualists to assume that the former implies the latter, and of materialists to hold that denial of the latter must entail denial of the former, and a subsequent failure of perspectivalists, issuing in their skepticism and relativism concerning what is real, to question this common but dubious inference. For Aristotelian naturalists there is simply one nature with diverse properties, so that it is in virtue of the same biological constitution that human beings eat, walk, reproduce, and think, even though these diverse powers need to be explained in different ways. Arguably, then, noneliminative monism avoids collapse into the pluralism of aspectualists and perspectivalists by insisting that there is an objective multifaceted reality of which we can have objective knowledge, as well as evading materialist eliminative monism by denying that our explanations and truths concerning this reality need all be of the same logical type.

PART 2: LANGUAGE OF SPIRIT AND SOUL

Preserving Spirit and Saving Souls. In a modern or postmodern climate of scientific naturalist reflection upon the world that appears to rule out serious entertainment of soul-body dualisms, then, which of the two routes between the devil of reductivism and the deep blue sea of pluralism or dualism—namely, eliminative pluralism or noneliminative monism—holds

out the best hope of a coherent view of spiritual usage and of its significance for any full understanding of human affairs?

First, let us consider how the language of soul and spirituality is likely to fare on an eliminative pluralist account. On the face of it, it might seem that some aspectival or perspectival account could effectively accommodate spiritual discourse, insofar as such accounts commonly deny the logical priority of one form of discourse over another. Because no way of talking about the world is to be given privileged explanatory status over any other or to be taken as describing an order of reality that is somehow more real or basic than any other, the language of freedom is no less explanatorily significant than the language of determinism. Hence, on an aspectival view, we may want to contrast natural scientific discourse, as concerned with the phenomenology of “outer” sense, with the deliverances of “inner” experience to which we are privy on the basis of introspection, and to construe spiritual discourse as concerned with all or some aspects of a subjective or noumenal reality.

However, to the extent that this figurative language of inner and outer aspects of reality could be held to enshrine metaphysically dangerous dualist tendencies, we might try perspectivally, by means of the semantic ascent, to address the problem of the different concerns of the scientific and the spiritual in terms of differences of logical grammar between diverse realms of discourse. On this view, indeed, there is no need to conceive spiritual discourse as especially concerned with some inner world of experience. On the contrary, it may be regarded as concerned just as much with the outer or public realm as scientific language. The point would be more that such discourse serves a logical and practical purpose in our lives rather different from the language of scientific explanation. Thus, whereas scientific language is concerned with exploring causal relations between various items of sublunar furniture, the languages of free action, moral responsibility, and spirituality purport to conceptualize the normative and evaluative aspects of human association. If our perspectivalism is based on a use theory of meaning, moreover, we may well have the resources to distinguish between different forms of nondescriptive or atheoretical language concerning the higher reaches of human freedom and experience. Thus, for example, we may distinguish between moral and spiritual aspects of human experience and endeavor on the grounds that whereas the former are concerned mainly with the observance of certain social or interpersonal duties and responsibilities—as use theorists, to be sure, we might incline to a prescriptive or action-guiding analysis of moral discourse—the latter serve to express more personal feelings of relationship with the transcendent or divine, or some sense of deep detachment from worldly cares. To this extent, although there is no need to suppose that spiritual discourse is concerned with any private-language sense of “inner”—indeed, many people would rightly regard their spirituality as ultimately intelligible only

in terms of the public discourse of a particular faith—it might nevertheless be seen as the point of spiritual as opposed to moral discourse to celebrate or express some more personal vision of that which endures forever.

Notwithstanding that perspectival views do not preclude giving public sense to spiritual language, however, it may be that such sense is bought at the price of any claim to the literalness or objectivity of such discourse. In short, just as perspectival theories incline to prescriptivism or contractarianism in ethics—to ethical views that locate the sources of moral motivation in individual commitment or social utility rather than any idea of moral truth—so they incline to a certain fideism in the realms of religious and spiritual discourse. On such views, to ask whether a given religious or spiritual narrative or utterance is true or false is to fall into a simple category mistake about the logic of a discourse that is primarily concerned not to identify facts or truths but to express attitudes, values, or commitments. It should also be said that such demythologizing and deconstructivist fideism (Bultmann 1962; 1965; Robinson 1963) has, like moral prescriptivism, had an enormous influence on contemporary theorizing about moral and religious education. Just as broadly use-theoretical prescriptivist ideas seem to have led to noncognitivist constructivism in the theory of moral education, as exemplified in the work of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg (Piaget 1932; Kohlberg 1981), so a certain constructivism of “personal search” has overtaken contemporary religious education; on this account, the various narratives enshrined in the great world religions invite construal as so many quasi-aesthetic expressions of celebration, awe, and wonder concerning aspects of human experience and aspiration and should not be taken at face value as attempts to describe some objective spiritual reality.³ Hence, a New Age pick-and-mix attitude toward religious education that models religious and spiritual belief more on the pattern of artistic self-expression than rational inquiry is nowadays widely promoted as the only politically tolerant or correct stance in contemporary circumstances of cultural pluralism.

It is arguable, however, that the main difficulty with perspectival construals of spiritual and religious idioms in terms of aesthetic attitudes or postures is much the same as that which afflicts prescriptivist or noncognitive analyses of moral judgment, namely, that in dispensing with any substantive notion of objective or mind-independent spiritual or moral truth they are unable to make any real sense of moral or spiritual aspiration or endeavor. This problem is particularly acute, of course, in the realm of moral life and experience, for if moral inquiry is concerned with reflection upon the good (as it is reasonable to suppose), and noncognitivists define the good as a disposition to commend (Hare 1952), it becomes impossible to ground moral reason in anything other than an undertaking to be consistent in our otherwise ungrounded existential choices. But, of course, we do ordinarily take moral deliberation to have a rational point and pur-

pose—to be more than blind existential choice—precisely insofar as it can serve to ground our moral prescriptions and commitments in what might contribute to the effective achievement of what *is* actually good.

Unlike perspectivalists, however, who are inclined to be agnostic about the way the world is beyond this or that human discourse about it, noneliminative monists incline to a commonsense pretheoretical naturalism or realism about the world that can readily take it to contain the familiar objects of reference of common experience. Hence, the highly exotic discourse of theoretical physics, howsoever it may appear to conflict at certain points with ordinary pretheoretical talk of reality, is not to be construed as one among many alternative forms of conceptualization merely expressive of this or that subjective perspective on human experience; on the contrary, it is simply a special kind of explanation of certain familiar features of objective reality. It is not that whereas we once thought preatomistically that bricks were solid objects we now take them to be solid from one perspective but insubstantial from another, but that atomic theory is just a special kind of explanation of what it is for a brick to be solid. By the same token, noneliminative naturalism is able to avoid the error to which reductivists are prone—courtesy of the thought that physical explanations have a kind of priority by virtue of dealing with the basic building blocks of nature—that, far from being solid, a brick is *in reality* a fairly insubstantial or ethereal item. For noneliminative monists, explanations of theoretical physics are just particular kinds of explanation of familiar objects; it is merely a category mistake—a confusion of logical type—to suppose reductionistically that atomic theory makes empty space of bricks and mortar.

For nonreductive monists, then, there is but one natural reality apt for characterization and description in the various pretheoretical and theoretical discourses of natural and artificial human languages. However, given the evolutionarily advanced and culturally conditioned nature of human beings, numerous forms and types of explanation and truth claim will need to be brought to bear on understanding their lives. Because human beings have material natures, their anatomy and physiology require physical and chemical explanation; because they require nourishment to live and reproduction to persist, these aspects of their nature call for explanation in biological terms; insofar as they can also reason and such reason has its sources in social communication, psychology, sociology, and other social sciences have developed to explain such aspects of human nature; but because they also seem capable of some sort of moral, religious, or spiritual life and experience, moral and theological inquiry has also developed to try to account for these dimensions of human being. To the extent that noneliminativists are monists, of course, none of these different explanations should be assumed to refer to different orders of reality in any troublesome ontological sense, only to different aspects of the life or functioning

of one unified human nature. It is not, as for Cartesians, that the natural sciences explain the body, whereas the human or moral sciences account for some quite disconnected realm of the soul. But, insofar as any monism is nonreductive, it behooves us to observe, where necessary, important distinctions of logical type between different explanatory levels and to resist inappropriate reduction of one to another.

Prospects of Spiritual Truth. There can be no doubt, to be sure, that human inquiry uses different and distinct categories of explanation and truth claim; these are variously expressed in the claim of subatomic physics that particles exhibit quantum indeterminacy, in the biological claim that plants obtain nourishment by photosynthesis, in the psychological theory that perception organizes experience in terms of Gestalt principles, in the sociological thesis that societies above a certain level of economic complexity are prone to class divisions, and in the ethical claim that it is unjust to discriminate against people on grounds of race or color. It is to this extent a reductivist error to hold that, for example, truths of biological development are entirely translatable into principles governing interactions of inanimate matter, or that laws of social organization are reducible without remainder to those of individual psychology. But these are still, one might say, truths of relatively straightforward natural and social scientific kinds; what of the possibility of distinctive truths at the less evidently scientific levels of aesthetics, morality, and religion? Are not such levels of human experience irredeemably subjective, so that it is a contradiction in terms to speak of aesthetic, moral, religious, or spiritual truth? As far as moral truth goes, the noneliminative monist is likely to be, as elsewhere, a realist or a naturalist in ethics, and to reject the exclusive emotivist or prescriptivist construals of moral judgment characteristic of perspectivalism; in short, he or she would regard moral imperatives as grounded in considerations about what is or is not actually conducive to human flourishing rather than in subjective or personal commitments to act in this way rather than that. But might any sense be made of distinctive truths concerning the soul or the spirit over and above what is contained in moral realism or naturalism?

In fact, one might plausibly claim that spiritual truth and belief are not simply reducible—contrary to what some recent theorizing about religious education might suggest—to truths of ordinary secular morality (it is wrong to treat others unfairly) on the one hand, or to historical and cultural truths about particular religions (Mecca is the principal holy place of Islam) on the other. For example, spiritual truths for Christians must certainly include “blessed are the poor in spirit,” “man cannot serve both God and mammon,” “man does not live by bread alone,” and “what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”—and none

of these do appear to be so reducible (Carr 1994; 1995; 1996a). Indeed, it should first be clear (from Christ's encounter with and response to the rich young man, Matthew 19: 16–22) that a person might live by all the conventions and requirements of a secular morality yet fail to live a life that is faithful to any of these spiritual truths, and second (as we may learn from the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, Luke 18:9–14), that a person might fail miserably in terms of conventional morality but nevertheless succeed in developing spiritual qualities of humility and repentance.

This should also serve to remind us that human spiritual development is not measurable purely by the frequent occurrence of personal or private epiphanies or the adoption of particular spiritual attitudes or perspectives on experience; the publican's humility and repentance are quite externally recognizable as spiritually redeeming responses to an all-too-real attachment to world, flesh, and devil at the expense of such less-worldly virtues as love of God and neighbor. One irony of Christ's parable, of course, is that in obeying the moral law to the letter the Pharisee has become inflated with a fatal hubris that has in fact separated him from both God and neighbor. But the message is clear enough—and it is a message upon which it would not be hard to secure widespread agreement—that however well he might score in moral terms, the Pharisee is less spiritually advanced than the publican. Moreover, this poverty of soul is far from subjective; on the contrary, it is entirely objectively discernible in terms of the degree to which an individual has failed to acquire certain spiritual values or virtues or to take certain spiritual truths to heart.

It is precisely in view of such considerations that a noneliminative monism inclines to an account of spiritual life, aspiration, and inquiry quite different from any pluralism. To a significant degree, of course, a nonreductive monism is at one with a noneliminative pluralism in holding that spiritual discourse has a significant descriptive function in relation to spiritual life; it is thus literally appropriate to speak of spiritual life and of the existence, even the flourishing (or otherwise), of a human soul. But for the monist, unlike the dualist, this is to speak of a higher level of operations of naturally evolved and physically embodied creatures rather than of an immaterial something at a radical ontological remove from the material or physical. However, noneliminative monists differ from eliminative pluralists in holding that there is an objective level of spiritual truth and in denying that ostensible spiritual claims are entirely reducible to nondescriptive speech acts. Thus, just as the monist inclines to naturalism in moral matters, resisting any exclusively force-theoretical reduction of statements about moral goodness and badness to acts of commendation (or whatever), so she is wont to resist any analogous wholly demythological reconstruction of spiritual discourse as language expressive of, say, a given attitude toward trial or misfortune.

Indeed, familiar observations to the effect that a given misfortune is a *judgment* on a person may well be liable to different construals on naturalist and perspectivalist accounts. Whereas for perspectivalists it may be difficult to construe such observations as other than expressive of some personal or subjective response—a feeling, perhaps, that so-and-so really had it coming—it seems possible for naturalists to understand such responses in more substantial terms. Precisely, they may take them to describe actual events of spiritual significance: not necessarily, to be sure, in the superstitious belief that they represent acts of divine retribution, but more, perhaps, in recognition that while such misfortunes have their origins in actions or events of the victim's own making, they nevertheless offer opportunities, were they only recognized as such, for spiritual redemption and renewal. It might be objected that this rather comes down, in the realm of the spiritual, to a distinction without differences. Surely it is a matter of some indifference whether one adopts an attitudinal interpretation of spiritual language—electing to project spiritual significance on ordinary events—or actually claims to see certain events as having objective spiritual significance.

Despite difficulties, I believe there are several important reasons for upholding the idea that spiritual language has a core referential or descriptive function with respect to the identification and characterization of actual spiritual events—in which souls stand to be implicated at a spiritual level of operations—rather than an exclusively expressive function concerned to give subjective or quasi-poetic significance to mundane events. First, it seems rather more true to the nature of spiritual usage and to what users of spiritual language normally take themselves to be doing in using it. It is commonly complained of deconstructivist revisions of spiritual language that when ordinary religious believers speak of God, the soul, or immortality, they intend something more than the adoption of an emotional posture to life's slings and arrows. From this perspective, although we may well want as noneliminative monists to suggest that believers are mistaken about that to which their spiritual utterances refer, we are still able to resist the more radical logical and theological step of denying that they do nevertheless refer. On this view, then, it is still reasonable for an ordinary believer, who maintains that the soul is immortal or that in Christ God became human, to insist that these are literal claims about God and the soul that are true, but could be false, and to deny that they are nothing but oblique ways of celebrating the unique existential value of human experience. But second, and more crucially, what sense could we make of this last revisionary claim or of the expressive function of talk of soul and spirit, if we could make no *literal* sense of its employment? Failing any means of determining that our concern here is with spiritual life and experience rather than (or as well as) with some aesthetic response to experience, any such revision is liable to redundancy or vacuity.

Indeed, it seems to be a requirement of logic that, as has been claimed in the case of ethics, any substantial spiritual reflection must depend for its very possibility on some objective or relatively mind-independent conception of literal spiritual truth; just as a noncognitivist ethics courts collapse into a nonrational subjectivism, so a noncognitivist construal of spiritual discourse verges on collapse into some nonrational or even irrational fideism. For, just as we do not call things good because we are inclined to commend them but commend them because we find them good, so recognizing that it is bad to neglect our souls can make sense only if we have some independent reason for believing that it *is* bad to neglect our souls rather than because it seems a good idea to live as though we shouldn't. Hence, it may be doubted whether any deconstructivist claim that the discourse of spirituality is a language of spontaneous celebration *rather than* objective knowledge and truth, or a fideist claim that the life of the spirit is exclusively a life of faith *rather than* reason, is readily intelligible apart from certain covert nonexpressive, if not realist, assumptions about a distinctive order of spiritual life. In that event, if one is still disposed to give contemporary sense to ideas of soul and spirit, a nonreductive monism or naturalism may appear more promising than any perspectivalism.

NOTES

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1. These included the murder of a toddler by two young boys in Liverpool in 1993, the stabbing of a London headteacher by youths in 1995, and the appalling massacre of a class of Scottish children by an deranged gunman in 1996.

2. It is important here, especially for understanding the emphasis on Aristotle that follows, that noneliminative monism is not equated with nonreductive physicalism. We have already seen that there are idealist or "mentalistic" as well as reductive materialist forms of monism. But if we are faithful to an Aristotelian conception of substance as a *unity* of form and matter, it is not obvious why even a noneliminative monism has to be a *physicalism*. Thus, in a pioneering article on form in the philosophy of mind, John Haldane (1999) has drawn on Aristotelian and Thomist resources for the construction of a "hylomorphic" account of mind in terms of "substantial form," which nevertheless (as I understand it) may have no actuality apart from its physical substrates. Haldane characterizes this view as both nondualist and nonphysicalist.

3. Ideas of this sort are discernible in much recent official British educational documentation. (see National Curriculum Council 1993; Office for Standards in Education 1994; for use of the idea of personal search in religious education, see Scottish Office Education Department 1991).

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