

Review

Religion and Scientific Naturalism: Overcoming the Conflicts. By DAVID RAY GRIFFIN. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2000. xvii + 345 pages. \$25.95 (paper).

In 1640 John Wilkins defended the thesis “That ’tis probable our Earth is one of the *Planets*” against supposedly biblically based objectors by suggesting that “the Holy Ghost, in many places of Scripture, do’s plainly conforme his expressions unto the errors of our conceits, and do’s not speak of divers things as they are in themselves, but as they appeare unto us” (Wilkins, *A Discourse concerning a New Planet* [London, 1640], title page and p. 48). Although his argument that “divers learned men have fallen into great absurdities, whilst they have looked for the grounds of Philosophy from the words of Scripture” (p. 76) makes a point that (regrettably) may still have to be made, the implied novelty of Wilkins’s thesis about the earth now appears quaint. Its quaintness is a reminder that the attempt to reconcile religious beliefs with scientific findings seems to be a never-ending struggle to relate faith to rapidly developing ways of understanding. It is, however, a reconciliation that is critical if the beliefs informing faith are to be accepted as a credible way of understanding the fundamental nature of reality and not merely as the prejudices of an out-of-date intellectual ghetto.

The key to the needed reconciliation, according to David Griffin’s *Religion and Scientific Naturalism: Overcoming the Conflicts*, is to be found through an application of his naturalistic interpretation of the Whiteheadian worldview to produce what for many will involve a radical revision of the common self-understanding of both the natural sciences and theistic belief. In a well-written study that takes account (often a highly critical account) of many works published in the last couple of decades, Griffin locates the basic problem with scientific understanding in an implicit, and often explicit, assumption of a naturalism that is characterized by “sensationism” (which holds that there is “no mode of perception except sensory perception”), “mechanism, materialism, reductionism, and atheism.” Although some of its exponents may attempt to deny or qualify its implications, it is a naturalism that produces a determinist, relativist, and nihilist understanding of reality (p. 14). The unsatisfactoriness of this naturalism is explored with particular reference to its inability to produce a satisfactory grasp of the relationship between the mind and the brain. The basic problem is that if talk about the former is not to be reduced to materialist talk about the latter, it seems to many to be possible to preserve it only by adopting some form of dualism, although this solution leaves the interaction between mind and brain, and even

the basic status of the former, so obscure that it is questionable whether it should be regarded as a significant, let alone a credible, solution to the problem.

The basic problem with the common understanding of theistic belief, according to Griffin, is that it conceives the activity of God in relationship to the world (and so the evidence for and the significance of the reality of God) primarily in supernaturalistic terms. Divine agency is considered to take place in situations in which God intervenes in the affairs of the world by interrupting the normal course of events. The result is an understanding of the divine that by its essential nature cannot be reconciled with scientific understanding of the natural processes of reality but must, from the perspective of scientific naturalism, be seen as absurd. Griffin notes, however, that this is a judgment that has in the past been happily entertained by some theologians, since they considered that the attribution of a mechanistic character to natural processes underpins their claim that the Christian miracles (about whose occurrence there was supposed to be no dispute) have a "truly supernatural character" (p. 126). It is, however, a view of God's relationship to the world that excludes the divine from active involvement in the vast majority of events (i.e., "natural" events) and hence is fundamentally at odds with authentic theistic faith.

In discussing these issues, Griffin goes over ground that should be familiar to many who are aware of the literature about the nature of science, the problem of what is meant by the "mind," and the relationship between science and religion. Since he presents the issues clearly, this part of the work provides a useful introduction to and commentary on some fundamental problems treated in this literature. What to many will appear much more controversial, however, is what Griffin identifies as the key to the solution of the problems that he has highlighted, a solution that he has already essayed in previous publications. This key lies in what he calls a panexperientialist understanding of reality, panexperientialism being a term that he generally prefers to what some others call panpsychism (cf. p. 150 n. 4) and which might be better termed panprehensionism (since the unusualness of this neologism should warn users and readers against uncritically drawing conclusions from the notion that trade on unwarranted, and unacknowledged, inferences from what is found in human conscious experience). As Griffin notes, panexperientialism has two basic elements. The first is that "all actualities have experience"—and hence have a temporal aspect that is essential to them. The second is that "actualities at one level can give rise to higher-level actualities" (p. 101). For example, the cells composing a brain give rise to the numerically distinct compound individual that is known as a mind. Underlying these points is an interpretation of "Whiteheadian philosophy" that "(1) regards the human being as a microcosm, therefore not as different in kind from the rest of the universe; (2) regards each natural unit as self-moving; (3) attributes to each natural unit the capacity to exert influence at a distance; (4) affirms the reality of a nonsensory mode of perception; (5) regards the world as present in a divine reality, which is the soul of the universe; and (6) regards this divine reality as naturally present and active in the world" (p. 133). The result is a way of understanding that overcomes the mind-brain problem by holding that there is mentality of some order in everything, although only in higher-level compound individuals does it develop into consciousness. It also offers a solution to the problem of God's relationship to the world by suggesting that the divine agency is to be con-

ceived as an appropriately luring influence that affects (but does not totally control) the self-determination of each actual event, not as supernatural interventions that occasionally break into the natural order and coerce events by exercising irresistible might.

If the basic key to the solution is coherent and credible, Griffin has good reason to be excited about the scientific and religious naturalism that he derives from Whitehead's ideas. It seems to offer a way of dealing with basic problems in science and religion (cf. pp. 315f.), in particular the mind-body problem (pp. 137–78) and the problem of finding a significant role for God in a scientifically credible understanding of creation and evolution (pp. 241–310)—albeit, it may be noted, apparently not a very effective role in view of the blind alleys and dysteleology that are found in the development and operation of the natural order. It would be a pity, furthermore, if this key were to be laughed out of court because Griffin uses it in a long chapter (pp. 178–240) to defend the significance of parapsychological claims about psychokinesis and about telepathy, clairvoyance, and other forms of extrasensory perception.

Griffin himself has no doubts about the importance of parapsychological findings. He writes, for instance, that “Thanks to the evidence provided by parapsychology, we can have a theology that, while fully naturalistic in worldview and liberal in method, is as robust religiously as any supernaturalistic, authoritarian theology. Whereas modern liberal theologies have achieved a reconciliation of science with *theology* at the expense of its religious content, parapsychology is crucial for a form of liberal theology that effects a reconciliation of science with *religion*” (p. 183). Such a declaration not only arguably maligns some “modern” liberal theology; it also seeks to justify theistic understanding by reference to claims whose credibility may be considered to be even more problematic than that of theism itself. As Griffin reports, on once inspecting some sixty issues of *Zygon* he turned up only one reference to parapsychology—and that described it as “a pseudo-science” (p. 194)! In spite of the evidence that is claimed to warrant the scientific credentials of parapsychology, the significance of that evidence is at least still an open question. In his discussion, Griffin mentions the views of C. D. Broad (who seems to me on inspecting the text to list nine, not thirteen, “basic limiting principles”—cf. p. 206). I heard Broad discuss these issues in Trinity College, Cambridge, in the mid-1950s: his conclusion then was that the nature of the evidence that he had been able to examine was not such that any confident claims could be made about what it might signify. Until those convinced of the value of parapsychological phenomena do not have to answer doubters by referring to what Griffin describes as the “elusive nature” of the data (cf. pp. 214ff.) but can show that parapsychological effects can be observed and applied in reliable ways (say, by providing spies with secure ways of sending messages, or by giving students access to texts missing from the library), they are likely to find difficulty in persuading the unconvinced. Is this an unfair test? After all, it is by showing that their theories can be reliably applied that other sciences have established their scientific status.

As mentioned earlier, the crucial issue on which Griffin's solution stands or falls is whether its basic key, namely, panexperientialism, is a coherent and credible way of making sense of the fundamental character of reality. It is a position that he defends by very briefly outlining six arguments (pp. 170–73). In a review

such as this it is possible only to respond to them even more briefly, but it is important that something should be said, because Griffin's thesis collapses if panexperientialism is not rationally justified.

1. His first argument is that "evidently it [panexperientialism] alone" offers the only way "within a naturalistic, realistic framework" to explain "how conscious experience and our bodies interact." But is it the only way? Although it may be the most satisfactory way that Griffin has been able to imagine, this does not justify the "alone."

2. Since "our conscious experience appears to be as much a part of 'nature' as anything else," it is suggested that "we should generalize what we know about our experience to all other events" (admittedly "with less sophisticated experiences being attributed . . . to less complex types of individuals"). But is it evident that the more complex (e.g., human consciousness, let alone self-consciousness) is a significant clue to the nature of much simpler actual entities (e.g., of cells or atoms, let alone of neutrinos and quarks)? There is arguably a critical and essential difference between the responsiveness of actual entities to forces in their environment (as with objects in a gravitational field) and reactions of persons arising from their consciousness of their environment.

3. If we accept that "our direct experience of our own bodies . . . provides our most direct observation of nature," we are led according to Whitehead to hold that "our primal relation to our body and thereby to what we call the physical world . . . is emotional," since (quoting Whitehead) "among our fundamental experiences . . . is the direct feeling of the derivation of emotion from our body." From this it is held to follow that "our bodily members . . . must themselves have feelings of their own." It is not self-evident, however, that the derivation of feelings from the body shows that the components of the body have similar feelings (e.g., the fact that I feel elated because the sun is shining or that I feel giggly when I have drunk a couple of glasses of good claret does not seem to me to imply that the neurons in my brain, let alone any cells that are transmitting the events mentioned to those neurons, are to be regarded as feeling elated or giggly). What Griffin states seems to pose the problem of panexperientialism rather than to warrant it.

4. Science is held to be "finding evidence for experience lower and lower down the phylogenetic scale," in that "bacteria and other prokaryotic cells give evidence of making decisions on the basis of memories." The problem here is that it is not clear how far the use of terms like *experience*, *decision*, and *memory* is to be regarded as providing more or less literally significant descriptions from which inferences can be drawn as in the case of panexperientialism, rather than metaphorical ones from which such inferences are not warranted. I know what it is to experience, to make a decision, and to have memories, but when a compass needle moves when I pass a magnet beside it, it does not seem to me self-evident that it is more than probably misleading metaphorical language to attribute experience and decision to the components of that needle.

5. Quantum indeterminacy and "the fundamental nature of temporality" affirmed by modern physics is held to "provide reason to attribute experience all the way down." It is at least open to question, however, whether what is meant by *indeterminacy* in particle physics, even when—or perhaps *especially when*—it is interpreted "realistically," is justifiably to be regarded as "suggestive of an element

of spontaneity, or self-determination, at the quantum level," and this "spontaneity" as "suggestive of experience." These may be happy metaphors for indicating what happens, and it clearly is one way of interpreting the significance of quantum theory (for Griffin so interprets it), but it is at least a controversial way and so cannot be regarded as providing strong support for the panexperientialist view of reality.

6. The final argument outlined is based on the paradoxes that arise if time is assumed to have arisen "at some time in the evolutionary process." It is claimed that these paradoxes are avoided if pantemporalism is affirmed, and pantemporalism is then held to make sense "only by assuming panexperientialism." The grounds for the latter claim are not laid out, but readers are referred to two other publications by Griffin, one of which is listed as "forthcoming." There may be an argument here, but it seems to be an argument that makes sense only on the basis of a panexperientialist position. Not all circular arguments are vicious, of course, especially in fundamental matters, but they offer at best only debatable rebuttals of a charge of *petitio principii*.

Perhaps the strongest justification for panexperientialism is contained at the end of Griffin's fourth argument where he suggests that those who are willing to accept that cells and even neurons have experience but who are unwilling to attribute it to subatomic particles are faced with having to solve the "mystery" of "how the jump was made from insentient particles to sentient cells." In reply, however, it may be pointed out that it is not clear that the problems that arise from failing to accept panexperientialism are greater than those that come from seeking to show that it makes sense (and what sense it makes) to conceive of a quark (or, if they are not to be found as single individuals, the minimum possible bundle of them) or a neutrino as having experiences. I am not clear that such talk is wrong; I just do not know what it means—and if it does mean something, how it could be justified (at any rate by more than imaginative speculation).

These are only very brief queries about six very briefly outlined points, but they indicate that Griffin's thesis rests on claims that are not as obviously valid as he apparently deems them to be. Overall, the strength of this work lies in its criticism of other positions. The inadequacy and problems of materialism and dualism are made clear. If, then, it could be known that the *only conceivably possible* options were materialism, dualism, and panexperientialism, the criticisms of the first two would give a convincing case for the third (provided, of course, that the third possibility can be coherently and significantly conceived)—for the only other conclusion that could be drawn is that reality is absurd so far as understanding its basic character is concerned. The problem is that it is not known that these three are the only possible conceptual options. They may be the only three that are currently conceivable, but, as Griffin recognizes, someone in the future may "come up with . . . an even more satisfactory basis" for understanding the character of reality (p. 314). What seem to me to be the problems with making sense of, let alone of justifying, panexperientialism force me to wait in hope for that future enlightenment. If Griffin finds this response depressing, he may take comfort that in 1638 Wilkins pointed out that "the strangeness of" an "opinion is no sufficient reason why it should be rejected, because other certaine truths have beene formerly esteemed ridiculous, and great absurdities entertained by common consent" (*The Discovery of a New World*, third impression [London, 1640],

p. 1). Griffin may consider that this is an old lesson that I (and others who share my doubts about panexperientialism) should take to heart. On the other hand, because Wilkins was presenting "A Discourse tending to prove, that 'tis probable that there may be another habitable World in the Moone" (ibid., t.p.), the comfort may not be strong. Americans have been to the moon and found no one there.

It may be, however, that Griffin does not read reviews of his work. If he does not, that would explain why he repeats a claim that he made in *Unsnarling the World-Knot* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), namely, that Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (B428; Norman Kemp Smith's translation, p. 381) suggests a panexperiential solution to the mind-body problem (*Unsnarling the World-Knot*, p. 83; *Religion and Scientific Naturalism*, p. 169). As was pointed out in a review of Griffin's earlier book in *Religious Studies* for September 1998, Kant goes on to state that his readers should appreciate that this matter lies "outside the field of all human knowledge"—a toned-down comment in view of his remarks in the first edition, where he states that the mind-body problem is one that "no man can possibly answer" (A393; Kemp Smith, p. 359), and that we should carefully observe the limits of understanding if we are to avoid the "dogmatic delusion, which though the lure of imagined felicity keeps so many in bondage to theories and systems," and not to find ourselves "upon a shoreless ocean which, after alluring us with ever-deceptive prospects, compels us in the end to abandon as hopeless all this vexatious and tedious endeavour" (A395f.; Kemp Smith, p. 361). Kant may be pessimistic, but it is important to recognize the difference between an attractive tale that suggests a way of reconciling science and theistic faith, a tale not yet discerned that identifies what is actually the case, a state of affairs for which no coherent tale can be told because it is intrinsically absurd, and a state of affairs that is essentially beyond the limits of human understanding. That a tale that fits the first description has been imagined does not of itself show that it is correct and that the other three possibilities must be ruled out.

DAVID A. PAILIN
 Emeritus Professor of the Philosophy of Religion
 University of Manchester
 1, Horsham Avenue
 Hazel Grove, Stockport SK7 5HW
 Cheshire, England
davida@pailin.fsnet.co.uk