

Mutual Enhancement between Science and Religion

with Fraser Watts, “Mutual Enhancement between Science and Religion: In the Footsteps of the Epiphany Philosophers”; William H. Beharrell, “Transformation and the Waking Body: A Return to Truth via Our Bodies”; Marius Dorobantu and Yorick Wilks, “Moral Ortheses: A New Approach to Human and Machine Ethics”; Galen Watts, “Religion, Science, and Disenchantment in Late Modernity”; and Rowan Williams, “Epiphany Philosophers: Afterword.”

EPIPHANY PHILOSOPHERS: AFTERWORD

by Rowan Williams

Abstract. Being a theist makes a difference, but not so much to what propositions we assent to, nor to an expanded ontology of spiritual entities. Rather, it is concerned with what commitments we enter into, and involves a participatory engagement with a broader reality than we might have supposed was possible. Embodied practices are a crucial part of the contemplative path, which draws on the wisdom of the body. This leads on to a “labor of culture.” Our present culture is not obviously as secular as supposed to be, but what has now become sacred is a strong sense of the individual ego, around which many ethical and political commitments are built, and which sits uneasily with our widely accepted mechanistic view of life. The crucial challenge to artificial intelligence is whether it can find ways of enhancing the mutual recognition that is crucial to the ethical life.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; body; contemplation; culture; individuality; knowing; participation; relating; secularization; spiritual practices

The Epiphany Philosophers (EPs) have always assumed that being a theist should make a difference. That runs through Margaret Masterman’s challenging series at the start of *Theoria to Theoria* on “Theism as a Scientific Hypothesis” (Masterman [1966] 1967). At first glance, it might seem that she is going to present a dry intellectual argument for theism, but the basic assumption is rather that Christianity generates a specific kind of consciousness. There is something that is identifiably a Christian form of

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consciousness, involving at-homeness or reconciliation to who we are. We can call it “passionistic immersion.”

The realization that this is possible answers the question, “If theism is true, what does that do?” It makes a difference, though people persist in asking “what difference?” When we know the difference, we can envision “communities of urgency,” communities that take contemplative practice as an urgent need, and look at what would happen if people practiced their contemplative lives with a need-to-know sort of urgency. What would such a community look like? What would such a church look like? There is something about the Christian vocabulary that suggests a certain urgency. Yet though the EPs were also urgently concerned about the scientific context of contemporary theism, they took the view that theism does not need to panic about science. There is much in Jacob Needleman’s *Lost Christianity* that is relevant here (Needleman 1980). The EPs have often come in at right angles to the conventional sterile polarities and dichotomies that have pervaded the modern period.

Central to Margaret Masterman’s thinking was the distinction between metaphysical and ideographic representation, which helped me to understand what metaphysical discussion is all about (Masterman 1957; Williams 2014). Various approaches to metaphysics were around in philosophical theology when the EPs were first flourishing, including scholasticism and process philosophy (and its rather bastard child, process theology) on the one hand, and positivism and the Wittgensteinian ordinary language philosophy of people such as D. Z. Phillips on the other. The EPs’ approach to metaphysics did not correspond to any of these: it was more a view of the metaphysics of information. The EPs also recognized the important place of partly baked ideas (PBIs) in metaphysical reconstruction, though they strenuously resisted retreats into imprecision or piety. They saw the value of PBIs in challenging the commonplace metaphysics of the world as a set of interacting lumps, and looked for a metaphysics that would promise to open up new horizons.

An Epiphany Philosophy asks the question, “Does being a theist make a difference to the *body* you are?” It is the sheer physicality of monastic practice that made it relevant to the EPs concerns, and gives urgency and immediacy to theism, and to the final dimension of our relationships with one another in a new monasticism. We need to recreate monasticism from the ground up, including the disciplined life that is part of its physicality. What you do to your flesh and blood, and the attention you give to them, is sheer physicality. It is making a difference to the body you are. There is a kind of mindfulness here, being present to the moment, but what is the silence making space for, if you do not have an intention, and something that fills it? Then it is filled by TV and electronics and all the rest. The “discipline of being” is a discipline onto which any number of doors might open. Its loss is the loss of skills essential to the monastic life.

KNOWING AND RELATING

One thing which I learned from Margaret Masterman was the danger of what you might call “intellectual get out of jail cards.” The relationship between science and religion is not about looking for, or bolstering, seemingly helpful arguments that will get you out of a tight corner. Her phrase “tight corner apophaticism” has stayed with me and haunted my dreams. It is no good simply picking up those aspects of contemporary intellectual life that say “it’s very difficult to be precise,” and go on to say, “that means we don’t have to try too hard in theology.” Tight-corner, get-out-of-jail stratagems may make your thinking less laborious, but they are not what is needed. Whatever science and religion can do for each other, it is not that.

Consider the data of contemplation. There are some kinds of argument from religious experience that boil down to a version of “how can I be wrong if I am so sincere?” or “this is a very intense experience, so it must be about something.” Whatever an appeal to contemplative data is about, it is not that. I want to distinguish some of those rather lazy appeals to religious experience from what I understand to be the legacy of the EPs, which is about how we can be taught by the fact of contemplative experience something about the way the mind is, and what is to be a subject.

Human intellectual activity (I am using “intellectual” here in the broadest possible sense) has about it an element that we can call “contemplative.” There is what we can call an “educated passivity” in aligning two things that cannot be instantly crystallized. If we allow that, we are saying something quite significant about what mind is. Contemplative experience leads us to recognize something about the mind as such. That seems to me where we can usefully go with this, rather than a different kind of argument about the content of religious experience as such. I want to make sure we have focused clearly on what we are *not* saying here.

That leads on to another point about metaphysics. This may seem to be in danger of collapsing back into what I have said we should not be doing, but I hope not. It could be said that the fact of the contemplative dimension of the human mind is, at the very least, strongly compatible with the notion that concepts of love and intelligence are fundamental to mental reality, and indeed other kinds of reality. What does the universe look like if we suppose love and intelligence to be fundamental, to be the ultimately generative realities with which we engage as knowing subjects? That is one of the ways in which a theological framework for scientific questions is suggested by the fact of contemplation.

I do not believe, any more than Fraser Watts does, that there are ways of turning this into a hypothesis, in the generally accepted sense. It would not become an argument for the existence of God in the usual mode. However, it does seem to be important that this particular understanding of how the human mind works strongly disposes us to see in a particular way

that with which the mind engages. To put it another way, understanding how the mind works shapes what we think the mind can know. If we are working with a model in which we suppose the mind to be in some sense fundamentally attuned to those agencies which we call love and intelligence, we may have a theological frame that may help us on our way.

I will also pick up a few things to do with the fundamental status of "relation." Quite clearly, the notion of a given, absolutely bounded, ego as the primitive reality is unsustainable and irrational. So, when we are talking about a whole range of things, from metaphysics through to ethics, one of the issues that run through is the question of what is an appropriate relationship, appropriate in the sense of harmonious, life-giving and rich? What is an appropriate relationship with what is given us, in our setting?

It may seem that pre-modern people were in relation with a wider range of powers than we are. However, my sense is that it was not that they thought that, as a matter of descriptive fact, there are a lot more things around than you might have expected. Rather, they thought that there was a great deal more into which we have to enter into relation than we can summarize in simple descriptive form. As so often, it seems that one of the ways in which we most deeply mischaracterize religion is to say that it is first and foremost a descriptive exercise from which we then go on to work out various things that we ought to do, rather than a participatory reality whose implications we laboriously try to crystalize.

This is not to say that religious language is subjective or relativist. There are truer and falser ways of representing our fundamental set of relations. The fact is that we are always engaging, or encountering, or are acted upon; we cannot say just whatever we like. To speak of "appropriate relation" we have to work out exactly what is going on, as best we can, so as to talk about it, so as to transmit, so as to train. That is why it is such rubbish to talk about religion being "soothing." Speaking about the soothing effects of believing in an imaginary other would have been really considerably surprising to a range of people from Martin Luther King to John of the Cross and Dante.

This view of relatedness connects with ethics, and with our sense of the ego. One of the ways in which it plays out in ethics is that, if there really is no absolutely given timeless bounded ego, then all those defensive mechanisms in our interactive life designed to protect that ego are about protecting a fiction; that has clear implications for how we think ethically.

I want to underscore the pain that arises from inappropriate relations, or relatedness, and the way in which this leads to a variety of displacement activities or dramatized activities, what in some psychiatric patients we might talk about in terms of "acting out." The difference between "acting" and "acting out" is one of the key distinctions we have to draw in thinking about human health. I would not say "mental health" because there is no such thing as "mental health," as opposed to other kinds of health; there is

just “health.” My key point here is about appropriate relatedness; I think that allows us to make sense of the diverse modes of cognition, in terms of appropriateness to context, time, and so forth.

One of the mistakes we sometimes make in thinking about how we know is that there is a set of timeless subjects and properties which, once we have seized them, are timelessly part of what we know. In fact, to understand a proposition we need some sense of how we got there, because it is only in the record of experimentation and discovery that we are able fully to fill out what we are talking about. That is where the complication comes in, because if our knowledge is timebound in that way, so are the properties of what we are talking about. Part of the fallacy in reductionism, as I see it, is the attempt to get to those fundamental static properties, items of the world, irrespective of the relations with one another that is a matter of fact they enter into in a temporal and changing world.

Coming out of that is a question to which I have no answer, but which I find absorbingly interesting: if we talk about two unrelated things that are discovered to be *one* in some sense, what is the unity we are talking about? What is identity? Once again there is a theological penumbrae to that question; as a Christian, I come at ultimate truth with a conviction that, whatever it is, it is not one “thing” that sits out there, contained within itself.

INTELLIGENT BODIES

We have already been led to redefine some central terms that we thought we understood. We have already problematized both “mind” and “identity.” William Beharrell has led us to problematize “sense.” How we sense our own bodies (the internal economy of our bodies) is not at all like sense experience, as commonly understood. The internal receptors that he refers to are not like the external ones. We are often encouraged to believe that sense experience (sense-based knowledge) is a straightforward information-gathering exercise. However, the information-gathering exercise that is interoception is evidently a form of knowledge, a form of coping successfully with the givenness of what we are and where we are. It therefore clearly and helpfully confuses all sorts of things we thought we knew about knowledge.

I am reminded of Oliver Sacks’s work on the neural imaging of our bodies, which brings sensation to amputated limbs (e.g., Sacks 2013). Our bodies, so far from being lots of “stuff,” are intelligent, in the sense that they structure and inhabit the frontier with the outside world. The habit that is bodily identity is something more than just fat and bone. Another analogue is the work of Ursula Fleming on pain control, to which Beharrell refers, and its connection with contemplation (Fleming 1990). Fleming was a prominent member of the Eckhart Society, with a very strong and literate

interest in contemplation. She was also a medical practitioner with a strong and lasting interest in pain control, and would speak about the meditative techniques that she had learned in one context spilling over into the other. That involved a modeling of the inner self as a pattern of energy flow, with a directedness of your out-breath toward the pain area in your mind. In conventional medicine this sounds like gibberish, but it actually seems to work as a form of knowledge-based action.

It is helpful to return here to the notion of “appropriate relatedness,” which happens in many ways, at many levels. In some Buddhist traditions (I am thinking particularly of Sattipathana meditation), there is an assumption that physical stillness and intelligent physical motion are equally ways of being physically intelligent. Sitting meditation, where you are listening to your heartbeat and observing your breath, and slowing your systems in silence (and the resistance to scratching your nose or biting your nails is all part of it) leads to stillness, which is one way of being bodily. In contrast, moving meditation (walking meditation), is on a separate continuum. When I have taken part in Sattipathana exercises there has always been that flow through a sequence, a movement in and out of stillness. All of that, in a sense, is part of what I call being an intelligent body, or sensing one’s body as intelligent.

That connects very closely with how we understand “happiness,” or “bliss,” or something like that. The trouble is that “bliss” is another rather cheapened word, and “how am I going to be happy?” is a rather sad question. A lot of the answers about what is thought these days to be required for happiness are rather sad as well. It seems that joy or bliss is the by-product of being in tune with something; hence happiness really is the fruit of gratitude, not the other way around.

The more self-conscious we are about our happiness, the more we treat it as a goal to be aspired to, the worse it gets. If you are constantly examining the object you are to yourself, all kinds of things become very strange. One thing that spiritual traditions have to bring to bear on this is the inescapable paradox that you arrive by not trying; that is why sheer physicality, or practice, is so important. The Fourth Book of the Yoga Sutras is relevant here: “You are perfectly safe in the Arctic as long as you don’t think about the polar bears.” If you are doing rock climbing and saying “Oh I must forget all about my worries; I’m going to be happier now. Am I really enjoying this?” you will probably fall off.

There is an ambiguity about our health and safety culture in the contemporary world. It is as if our intense, understandable anxiety about risk and physical fragility were increasingly making us less and less capable of existing within a physical world in a responsive, intelligent way. If your concern is always to avoid risk and protect yourself, you lose every imaginable physical skill, every imaginable variety of physical intelligence that actually equips you to be part of the world as it is. We return

again to “appropriate relatedness.” What might we want to say about the difference between the attunement or harmony that we feel as an individual doing something (such as in an extreme sport), as opposed to something collective such as singing in a choir or playing in an orchestra? Is there a difference, and what kind of difference is it? What difference does it make when there is a shared resonance when several people engage in a practice? We experience this shared resonance not only when singing in choirs, but also when we are meditating together, where there is a very profound shared resonance that one might say we enter into.

THE LABOR OF CULTURE

The issues that Yorick Wilks and Marius Dorobantu raise lead me to Hegel. As I understand it, the heart of Hegel’s thesis about ethics is that what will happen as consciousness becomes more itself is that we will all understand ourselves as ethical subjects, in such a way that we would not need the Prussian state, not even the Prussian state; we will know how to be with one another consciously. We will know that for me to understand who I am is absolutely inseparable from my understanding of everything that is going on around.

There is a sense that what we are moving toward on that evolutionary model is a deep kind of mutual recognition. That seems to me a very interesting ethical idea. One might suggest that we therefore ought to foster and support all those aspects of our cultural institutions that make that end point more possible, or likely. That seems to be the ethical question that we might want to put to artificial intelligence (AI) as it evolves. Is AI going to be one of the cultural institutions which will actually help us to see where we belong in this conscious network?

Turning to the legal side of things, it is interesting some theorists of punishment will say the ideal penal situation is where the person condemned understands and accepts their penalty. Many legal philosophers say that is the key to a just penal policy. But, of course, connectedness (the connectedness of the World Wide Web and all that goes with it) has two sides. This is where I can see the case for a qualified version of Steven Pinker’s view that life is getting better (e.g., Pinker 2018). We now know more immediately where things are going wrong, and have atrocities on our screens immediately; but, at the same time, we are working out of, and toward, an ideal situation which makes these things less likely as time goes on. That is the ethical tension about the impact of artificial intelligence.

My last point on AI goes back to the issue of opacity. Increasingly, we do not know how we work. AI systems do not know how they work; we do not know how they work; they just work. That is something that ought to give us intellectual pause before we buy into the myth that we are naturally transparent to ourselves. The default assumption of the human race is that

we know who we are at any one moment; that is our starting assumption. However, there is something actually quite liberating, quite positive, about the statement, “I don’t know who I am,” and in order to discover who I am I am going to need an awful lot of conversation. Possibly, I am going to need the electronic companions who will remember what I have forgotten about myself; we will need what I call the “labor of culture” to move us forward. There is a demythologizing element to all this, which can be very helpful.

Galen Watts in the final paper in this group presents a beautifully conceived and coherent argument that raises many issues. One primary point is that secularization is not the problem, not in the way we used to think it was. The neat distinction between the disenchantment of the outer world and a re-enchantment (or intensified enchantment) of the inner is a key point. It is not as if the sense of the sacred has evaporated, but sacredness has been attached to something different; it has become attached to the highly mythologized ego with its needs, its rights and so forth, that is enshrined in both legal culture and moral culture.

I mention legal and moral culture because politics and economics reflect this culture; our political and economic discourse is very often driven by a new version of the sacred. It is the “religion of the heart” that legitimizes certain kinds of economic modernity, just as you might say Catholic Christianity legitimated political orders in the Middle Ages. We should not pretend that there is anything particularly rational about those political orders.

Galen Watts also puts his finger on the fundamental paradox that surrounds us, which is the simultaneous affirmation of a highly mechanistic description of mental processes and organic identity, and a highly subjective and sacralized notion of freedom, consciousness, and individuality. That contradiction has been flagged up by a number of more interesting commentators over the last few years. I am not sure it comes out as clearly as I would like it to see it in Charles Taylor, but there are those who have pointed up this very odd tension in our cultural environment. It is there, for example, in John Gray’s work (2018), or in a lesser known but, to me, very impressive commentator, Raymond Tallis (2018).

We are fascinated by and, for many practical purposes, seduced and persuaded by the idea that being fundamentally mechanical allows us to say that, if we are fundamentally mechanical, we can at the same time claim an identity which has absolutely nothing to do with all of that and cannot be touched by it. That is the subjectivism of the religion of the heart. But it is an odd place to find ourselves, culturally and philosophically, and not a particularly coherent one. Its effect is to drive us in two different directions at the same time, and away from the central theme which has come up again and again in this set of papers of how we learn to be thinking bodies.

A thinking body is constantly in mental and material relationship, always already involved, never absolved from interaction. It is therefore always in negotiation, therefore always in language of one sort or another. Both the flights from understanding ourselves as thinking bodies are flights from what I might call the “labor of culture.” It seems to me that the idea of the labor of culture is one that we need to bring back into the middle of things. Negotiating all this can be quite hard work, but we cannot do it. We need some kind of spiritual practice that allows us to discern what is appropriate and what is not appropriate.

When traditional religions talk about their corporate identity, they are of course talking about a religious culture. And it is just that that is suspect in so many people’s eyes, because a religious culture is seen as a religious system of control. So, for those, like myself, who still want to inhabit corporate and material religious identity, the challenge is how we think through, and live through, that search for a culture that does not bind us into issues about power in a malign and destructive way. That is where Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor in miracle, mystery, and authority comes in (Williams 2010), but that is another story.

NOTE

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