Open Dialogue: *Science, Religion and Spirituality: Moving towards a Post-Materialist Paradigm?*

Oxford University Catholic Chaplaincy, Saturday 27th June 2015

Professor Jeff Astley – Beyond Science and Nature? Beyond Belief?

Prof. Astley is an academic theologian with a long-established interest in the debate about the frontier between science and religion. His lecture was a critically supportive response to the Manifesto for a Post-Materialist Science, the outcome of an international summit in February 2014. The conclusions of that summit had been published in the Network Review (Summer 2014) and were distributed to the Oxford conference attenders.

Prof. Astley’s opening remarks addressed the meaning of his title and the generally difficult relationship between theologians and scientists. Like other prepositions, ‘beyond’ indicates direction rather than position. Other key words like ‘transcendence’ and even ‘supernatural’ are also often matters of degree. Theologians and scientists have different methods and theories, and theologians are now cautious about commenting on the work of scientists. But when scientists stray into the area of metaphysical beliefs, this sounds to theologians like a call to arms. The Manifesto for a Post-Materialist Science argues against the concept of nature as something merely material or physical and argues, like Christian theologians from their own perspective, for a place for mind – even if (in this world) it is not wholly distinct from matter.

Ian Ramsey, Professor of Philosophy of Religion in Oxford in the 1950s and 60s, wrote of the existence of a range of ‘Mores’ – in a pattern, a person, a moral imperative or God – that we may discern as transcending the medium through which they are revealed (a medium which provides the metaphors or models, from what we see ‘with our eyes of flesh’, for what cannot be literally seen or spoken of). Like para 16 of the Post-Materialist Manifesto, Ramsey insisted on acknowledging ‘the empirical’ and taking a view that is ‘inclusive of matter’, while finding room for mind and spirit as well as ‘part of the core fabric’ and ‘a basic constituent’ of the universe. This differs from the critiques of evolutionary theory from religious conservatives or sneering social scientists based on an unworthy contempt for the material and our ‘brute origins’. Such a viewpoint is equally out of place in scientific understanding as it is in the Abrahamic religions.

Our basic debate is between the ‘moreness of mind’ recognised by post-materialism and the ‘nothing buttery’ of a scientific materialism. Prof. Astley is firmly of the former persuasion: for him, mind matters; it is the most familiar and meaningful feature of our lives. Soul, Self and Mind all relate to subjective experience. The ‘hard problem of consciousness’ is ‘how does it feel like to be me?’ And how does that sense of being me relate to the grey jelly inside my skull?

Philosophers and theologians down the ages have tussled with the mind-body problem. In recent times, John Searle has argued for a ‘first person ontology’ that is not reducible to any third person ontology. But his biological naturalism equates the status of consciousness with other system-level emergent properties such as solidity or transparency: powers that are entirely caused by the physical elements of the system. The Christian philosophers and scientists Nancey Murphy, Warren Brown, Malcolm Jeeves and Arthur Peacocke embrace a similar ‘non-reductive physicalism’: a form of monism for which physical reality is the only substance. In their perspective, too, consciousness emerges through the organisation of parts of the body (brain) at higher levels of evolution, but it is essentially an organization of the physical.

Prof. Astley commented that some of these views lie close to the ‘double-aspect’ theory of Spinoza and what others call ‘neutral monism’ – a ‘duality without dualism’. It may even imply a pan-psychism (the view that all matter involves some sort of consciousness), although Thomas Nagel complains of this position’s ‘faintly sickening odour of something put together in a metaphysical laboratory’. Keith Ward has argued that in reductive physicalism, the physicalism ‘has in effect been given up’, and some sort of dualism ‘seems inescapable’. In any case, theists must allow for the possibility of at least one consciousness existing without a body, namely God. For Prof. Astley, it seems that substance dualism is still hanging on, ‘if only by theistic fingernails’.

Today, however, many theologians hope for the re-creation of the whole person in a different space-time universe, rather than the survival of a disembodies soul. This is despite the coherent conceptualisation given to the latter view by another Oxford philosopher, Henry Price, who argued that we may experience and act in an afterlife in ways analogous to our experiencing and acting in our dreams. In his *Evolution of the Soul*, Richard Swinburne defends a ‘soft dualism’, despite the high level of correlation between brain events and mental events in this life: ‘mere correlation does not explain’, he insists. Price suggested that the soul might work like a light bulb, which in life requires to be screwed into some external power source to function, but may be moved to another ‘socket’ (reincarnation, resurrection) or even be powered by God without any physical brain at all. Such ideas are consistent with the interactionist dualism supported by Karl Popper, John Eccles, Roger Penrose and others (some of whom argue for a mechanism for mind-brain interaction based on quantum mechanics). Dualism is still a live option, then, though a minority one.

Moving on to consider religious experience, Prof. Astley said that there was now an impressive body of evidence to support Alister Hardy’s sense that this is a significant aspect of ‘the natural history’ of human life. Although Hardy did not think that we should ever have ‘ a science of the inner essence of spirituality’, he would have rejected the current claims of a ‘neurotheology’ that identifies the causes of such experience entirely within the brain. But could the same argument not be made for our sense experience, with the conclusion that the world around us is unreal?

But the problem of the objectivity of religious experience is more difficult than it is for sense experience, as we cannot apply the same tests against illusion. Nevertheless, Swinburne, William Alston and others have convincingly argued the case for the rationality of beliefs based on religious experience. Prof. Astley listed four particular points of difference between sense experience and religious experience that should still give us pause.

1. Spiritual experience is not universal; perhaps because it may requires a special capacity in the receiver.
2. People may also have to be in a special ‘spiritual condition’ to have religious experiences, though this goes against much evidence from survey work – unless human need or distress may be regarded as a spiritual condition.
3. Agents are free to perform or withhold revelatory experiences, hence such experiences may not be repeatable or testable in laboratory conditions. For this reason, an exact science of the activity of the mind will probably never be possible.
4. Agent explanations are always incomplete: we ask *why* as well as *how* they happen. We expect to find personal intentions, purposes and motivations behind such experiences.

Prof. Astley pondered the application of the above to reductionism: as a *research strategy* that understands higher levels through knowledge of lower ones. He welcomed John Searle’s claim that there is no such thing as ‘the scientific world’; there is just a world that we must do our best to explain. Therefore ‘“science” does not name an ontological domain; it names rather a set of methods’. And science implies no metaphysics. Raymond Tallis thinks that philosophical positions such as behaviourism confuse a methodological decision – to make science easier or more fruitful or more scientific – and a discovered truth about the world’. Whatever can be caught by the scientific net cannot be God; yet positing a ‘God of the Gaps’ to explain explanatory puzzles in nature can lead to bad science and bad theology – as, for example, with Intelligent Design Theory.

Can science ‘do subjectivity’? This is not seen to be the job of science as currently constructed, and Prof. Astley still wonders whether it should be the task even of a reconstructed science. According to the theologian, John Haught, there may be no objection to ‘the fact that science itself cannot talk about subjectivity’ as long as we can make room for it with a ‘stereoscopic’ philosophical vision (such as was embraced by Whitehead, Teilhard de Chardin, Polanyi or Lonergan) that ‘embraces both the inside and the outside of things’. This wider empirical *approach* is one that would be more honest, objective and true to the facts. We want researchers to be open: observing effects, and even accounts of unusual causes, with an open mind. But we don’t want to endorse gullibility, but rather *critically* openness. For a window stuck open is as bad as one that is stuck closed.