

# God, Contemporary Science and Metaphysics: A Response to Philip D. Clayton

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**ABSTRACT** Key Words: P.D. Clayton, panentheism, science, supervenience, humanities.

*This paper is a response read at a joint session of the Polanyi Society and the Religion and Science Group at the AAR Annual Meeting in Denver, November 16, 2001. Though a paradigm example of the conversation between systematic theology and contemporary science, Philip Clayton's God and Contemporary Science is questioned for taking the natural sciences too seriously: it endangers the autonomy of theology and by implicitly advocating a grand metaphysics, it creates an unbridgeable gap with ordinary religious meaning, and in regard to some theological doctrines, with science as well.*

## **The Metaphysics**

Clayton's highly original version of panentheism appears to be moderate.<sup>1</sup> As he rightly points out, the lofty aspirations of metaphysical reason are *passé* (p.2) and, as becomes clear quickly, his panentheism lacks the abundant conceptuality of the Whiteheadian versions. Given the downfall of positivism and foundationalism, this means that Christian systematic theology now may begin at its very own beginnings without first having to make all sorts of apologetic moves (p.4). It also means that metaphysics cannot make the familiar absolutist claims anymore and has to be more modest.

However, we also read that metaphysical panentheism strives to offer the most adequate explanation of all the available evidence, of all that is. This striving is none other than the striving for “the final unification of knowledge” that lies at the heart of rational debate. Theological theory construction may greatly contribute to the endeavor, for it “may provide the most powerful explanations we possess of the world of our experience taken as a whole” (p.155).

There seems to be a puzzling discrepancy here between the modesty of Claytonian panentheism and its very ideal of a (future) unified knowledge. The former does, but the latter does not seem to fit well in our current postmodern, postfoundational context with its diversity, plurality, particularity, fragmentation, individualization and its turn to practice. It is a context in which, as Clayton rightly points out, the concept of God has become problematic and the question of God can only be treated in terms that are skeptical of all metaphysics. Seen in this light I would like to hear more about Clayton's reasons for his apparent optimism and confidence that there is still a place and an audience for the grand metaphysical ideal of total explanation and unified knowledge in the wider culture beyond the well-institutionalized context of the conversation between theology and the sciences.

## **Taking Science Seriously.**

Clayton takes science very seriously. At least the following meta-methodological rules govern his construal of the relation between science, theology, and metaphysics. First, the interdisciplinary conversation

between theology and science can only be pursued fruitfully within a larger metaphysical framework. Second, if an issue is truly trans-empirical (non-scientific) it may still be resolved in a rational debate between the metaphysical positions in question. Third, if an issue is to some extent empirically relevant, let current science largely determine the parameters for its resolution. Fourth, when science raises metaphysical questions, they can be answered from many different and differing philosophical angles: naturalism (scientism, determinism, materialism, ontological reductionism, physicalism) but also theism (deism, pantheism, panentheism) and, I would add, perhaps even humanistic atheism. I have no quarrel with these "isms", but I wonder whether science as the paradigm example of explanation is sometimes not taken too seriously.

First, in view of the emphasis on integrating systematic theology and natural science into a unifying metaphysics, I think there may be a legitimate worry about the autonomy of theology as a discipline. Assigning it the task to supplement science, for example, (p.260) may be nailing theology too tightly to the mast of the natural sciences.

Second, the emphasis on truth-claims and explanation sometimes leads to a puzzling characterization of religious contexts. Take the example of the camping incident where a boulder crashes down just next to the tent in which your children are sleeping (p.175; cf. also the example of surviving an automobile accident, p.246). One understands why he depicts the near accident in terms of causes and explanations: Is one allowed to claim, "God altered the course of the rock"? But what if we begin to depict the reaction to the incident in terms of gratitude: "Thank God!"? Rather than asking for an explanation of the alleged cause of this expression, a philosophical theologian may wish to enquire what it means to say seriously "Thank God!" in a situation where there is evidently no (normal) evidence of supernatural intervention. It seems to me that this theologian is nearer to religious practice, and doing something quite different, than Clayton's theologian. One wonders what the latter would say about the inquiries of his more contemplative and hermeneutically minded colleague.

## Divine Agency in the World

The question of how to conceive of divine agency in the world is central to the book. Theologically, there are only two possibilities: either (a) God does not intervene (because, as everything is perfect, there is no need to do so) or (b) God does intervene directly in the world (p.190). Alternative (a) is theologically inadequate because it leads to deism. Alternative (b) is inadequate as well because it seems to suggest a Divine Repairman who is trying to fix all sorts of errors in the created world. Clayton then goes on to distinguish three kinds of divine intervention: (1) general conservation or sustaining (not at odds with natural science, because trans-empirical), (2) psychological interventions (miracles) and (3) physical interventions in the natural world. The latter kind raises the toughest problem, for if we are to have a full theory, theology must give an account of "where the causal joint is at which God's action directly impacts on the world" (p.192). Without such a theory, theologians would fail to make sense of their own views. They would also fail in their apologetic task for on any strong naturalist reading divine agency in the world is physically impossible.

Clayton then goes on to argue that on certain interpretations of quantum physics and recent theories of chaos there might be a locus for direct activity by God without breaking any natural laws. Thus it is not the case that modern science forbids direct action of God. What to think of this?

I think that in some contexts of conversation, say, between theologians and ardent naturalists, purely scientific considerations might be brought up to suggest that divine agency is logically, or perhaps even

physically, not impossible. But I do not see that theology should have to do this in every context. If, as Clayton says, it is allowed to assert that God's grace will safeguard continued existence of the subject after death (p.262), I do not see why one could not assert with equal right that God as the creator and sustainer of the universe (including all its operational principles), will always relate to the world when, where, and in (often mysterious) ways it pleases God. Though there is no science here, surely this statement is not unintelligible!

## The Panentheist Analogy and Emergentist Supervenience

In his final chapter Clayton develops the so-called panentheist analogy between the relation of God's body and mind and that between a human person's body and mind. I think he is right in insisting that talk about divine agency must be analogous to the language of human agency. Some theists have criticized the analogy for being far too weak to bear the burden of providing "a guiding framework" for a doctrine of God (p.260). As Clayton himself points out, the analogy breaks down in at least two important respects: (1) whereas the human mind depends for its workings on the brain, the divine mind, as unique creator, is *independent* of the universe, (2) whereas the human body is not constructed by the human mind, the universe is created by the divine mind. The analogy is not meant to found anything but to enable us to talk about the human mind as dependent on the world in a different sense than the divine mind. Since Clayton explicates the difference (by appeal to the dipolarity of the divine nature) quite well, I think the analogy holds its own.

Underlying the analogy is a particular view of the body-mind relation, called *weak supervenience*, a view Clayton prefers to the many philosophical accounts of the body-mind relation on offer (substance dualism, epiphenomenalism, eliminative materialism, functionalism, the 'dual aspect theory'). Reinforcing it with the doctrine of emergence and with the notion of 'levels of emergence', the result is emergentist supervenience. Briefly, and normal physical causality aside, Clayton maintains that (1) mental states 'supervene' on physical states in the sense that, although the former emerge from, and thus depend on, the latter, mental states are not reducible to physical ones. (2) Mental states may cause other mental states and (3) mental states, events or processes may cause physical ones (by intentional causation). I have five points by way of comment.

Notice, first, that there are interesting similarities between Clayton's position and Polanyi's. For example, like Polanyi, Clayton posits the reality of consciousness, and, like Polanyi, advocates its ontological irreducibility to physics and chemistry (p.239) by appeal to the concepts of emergence, boundary conditions and the like.

Second, the similarities are not surprising because, as most of you will recall, Polanyi's philosophy of science and his epistemology influenced a number of authors in the field of science and religion from the sixties until at least the mid-eighties, notably Ian Barbour and especially Arthur Peacocke who clearly elaborated a number of Polanyian ideas further (e.g. the notion of hierarchical levels).

Third, Polanyi may even lend support to Clayton's account. For example, in regard to the crucial issue of irreducibility, Polanyi argues that in certain part-whole relations (or relations between consecutive levels of complexity), the laws governing the parts in themselves may explain a breakdown or malfunction of the whole, but cannot account for the successful operation of the organizing principles that govern the whole (cf. *The Tacit Dimension*, 1966, Ch.2: 'Emergence').

Fourth, what follows from emergentist supervenience regarding the ontological status of the mind? In what sense are the mind and consciousness 'real'? Would it not lead to a naturalist account of the human mind,

not unlike John Searle's (*The Rediscovery of the Mind*, 1992) that says, roughly, that the mind is an emergent higher-level feature of the brain and that both are part of the natural world?<sup>2</sup> Searle develops a devastating attack on materialism and argues forcefully for the ontological irreducibility of consciousness and subjectivity. Part of the natural world is subjective but current science cannot come to grips with it because it has stricken first person subjectivity out of the book of nature. He rejects the same philosophical mind-body accounts as Clayton. Do we have here a philosophical ally for a panentheism that is sensitive to the weaker varieties of naturalism?

Finally, supervenience seems to imply that due to its dependence on the body, the mind cannot continue to exist after death. According to Clayton, this need not imply that eternal life after death will be impossible for "one can assert that God by his grace preserves the existence of the subject after the death of her body for eternal fellowship with God" (p.262). Clearly, the doctrine of eternal life after death cannot be treated in the same way as the doctrine of divine agency. Apart from para-psychological data and reports of near-death experiences, the issue seems overwhelmingly trans-empirical. On Clayton's construal, should this not have consequences for the status of the doctrine of eternal life?

## **Knowledge, Judgment and the Fact-Value Dichotomy**

At some places Clayton suggests that Christian theology should resist the fact-value dichotomy that is so deeply entrenched in modern Western culture. If I take him correctly, the dichotomy is between the empirical sciences that give us a single picture of the material world and the humanities that offer at most meaningful but often quite different perspectives on the human life world. At this point, not only among Polanyians certain familiar worries may begin to crop up. Clayton's metaphysical system, aiming exclusively at the explication of truth-claims and the explanation of all the available evidence, seems to keep the dichotomy intact, even to sustain it. For it employs the concepts of knowledge and explanation as pertaining to the realm of the 'objective facts', to how things really are. In contrast, meaning, value, understanding and judgment are used in relation to the 'soft' domain of (some of) the social sciences, the humanities and beyond them to religious and secular life view traditions. Examples in case might be the remark that "Science works well as an explanatory agent, but functions poorly as a world-view that might guide moral decision making and the human quest for meaning" (p.155), as well as the normative distinctions between knowledge-based reasons, propositional type claims and law-like regularities of the natural sciences on the one hand, as distinct from mere judgment-based reasons and judgment-type claims of the human sciences on the other (pp.182ff.).

But these analytical points cannot be conclusive. If there is to be unity in our knowing and understanding of the world as a world that is also meaningful, should we not aim at recovering subjectivity and personhood as essential features of this world? This move, I believe, was also central to Polanyi's attempts to show that knowing cannot be had without being and that all knowledge is to some degree personal. If I'm not mistaken, Clayton's larger project, in its own way, is moving in a similar direction.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Philip D. Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*. Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J.R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, London 1992.