

## Mystical naturalism

LEONARD ANGEL

*Department of Philosophy, Douglas College, PO Box 2503, New Westminster BC,  
V3L 5B2, Canada*

**Abstract:** This paper suggests that an ontologically reductionist view of nature which also accepts the completeness of causality at the level of physics can support (1) the blissful transfiguration of the moral, (2) mystical release from standard ego-identification, and (3) psycho-physical transformation cultivated through meditative practice. This mystical naturalism provides the basis for a thicker, more vigorous institutional religious life, including religious life centred around meditation practices, personalist meanings, and the theology of incarnation, than current proposals for strongly naturalist religions allow.

Xenophanes said that if we were horses, we'd worship gods who whisk flies with their tails. His philoscience critique of the projection of anthropomorphic attributes on to the fundamental realities has continued apace. Since the sixteenth century, the study of change via the quantification of physical processes, and the philosophical conceptions to which this study has given rise, have undermined religious beliefs in extraordinary ways. And they are continuing to do so, particularly through work in biology and psychology.

In this paper I will defend a new synthesis: the appropriateness of a religious life grounded in what many would call 'the perennial philosophy', yet one which fully accepts the doctrine that causality is complete at the level of physics, and that all mental entities reduce to physical entities. Thus, we can call this approach 'mystical naturalism', while understanding that the form of naturalism intended is physicalism.

Further, the intention is to allow for a vigorous religious life compatible with even the strongest versions of physicalism. The strongest versions of physicalism accept at least the following theses: (a) the factors governing physical transitions are all physical (Papineau (1993), 16, 17, 29–32; Guttenplan (1994), 83); (b) epiphenomenalism and parallelism are incorrect: all (non-eliminable) mental states have physical effects (McLaughlin (1994), 283); from the conjunction of which it follows that (c) nothing in the realm of the mental falls outside the realm of the physical. So far this still permits neutral monism or even the reduction of the physical to the

mental. However, strong physicalism also accepts that (d) there are physical entities that have no inherent mental characteristics (e.g. boulders and drops of pure water); and that (e) all physical entities with mental characteristics gradually evolved from physical entities with no mental characteristics. From (a) through (e) it follows abductively that (f) the mental entirely reduces ontologically and nomologically, at least, (though not necessarily in an epistemically tractable way) to the physical. In what follows, 'naturalism' and 'physicalism,' refer to 'strong physicalism', that is, to any form of physicalism that includes (a) through (f).

In the first section of the paper I review the apparent inconsistency between physicalism and some key elements of religious life. Most people would hold that some of what is apparently eliminated by physicalism is essential for thriving forms of religious life. The second and third sections develop a new approach to the reconciliation of physicalism and religion. The new approach builds on the physicalist's commitment to the conventionality of demarcation of the bodies of persons as a means of demonstrating the (arguably) greater accuracy of mystical perspectives over those of standard ego-identification.

Such a physicalist defence for Buddhist mysticism has already been hinted at, though neither articulated nor developed by other authors. Here I will develop those hints in such a way that the general approach provides the basis not only for an integration of physicalism and Buddhist life, but also for physicalism and God-centred religious life, though of course the kind of God-centred perspective that is reconcilable with physicalism is not (and could not be) that of a standard immaterialist theism.

In any case, the supposed challenge to religious life of the physicalist worldview turns out to contain an ingredient (the conventionality of demarcations of persons' bodies) which provides the means of support for mystical naturalism even in God-centred religions (suitably revisioned), so that scientific physicalism, paradoxically, saves religion and religious institutional life. The surviving religious institutional life will be centred on the cultivation of mystical experience and the development of mystical understanding, together with moral practice and its transformation from a dry obligation to a locus of intrinsic joy.

### **Current religious naturalism is experientially weak**

Let us think of religious experiences as being placed along the following tripartite continuum. At what we'll call the 'left side of the continuum' we have: feelings of love for fellow creatures, feelings of awe, reverence, and mystery toward the natural world and its limit conditions, and feelings of dependence on higher powers or a higher power. In the centre of the continuum we have: feelings of being in the presence of a being or beings worthy of worship, or experiences of visions, or voices, or messages, or guidance, as though from an external paranormal or supernatural source or sources, typically, sources that are ultimately

spiritual (immaterial) in nature; experiences of events that seem miraculous, or of an apparently paranormal nature; experiences of apparently magical relations and influences; experiences of omens and numinous signs; experiences of being morally commanded, or judged, or protected by what seems to be a disembodied superior consciousness (God, gods, deities, angels, disembodied spirits); experiences as of prayers answered, or as of subtle karmic retribution or reward; experiences as of disembodied consciousness in near-death experiences, or astral travelling, or OBE 'out-of-body experiences'; experiences of closeness, or 'clinging' (Hebrew: *devekut*), or of 'almost union' (union without strict identity) with a being worthy of (complete) devotion. And at the right side of the religious-experience continuum we have: mystical experiences of absolute unity, or nothingness, or non-duality, or transcendent freedom, or egolessness, or full identification with the Divine, or full identification with the All, or merging with the Absolute; or experiences of awakening to the inner Light, or *ch'i*, or *prana*, or the experience of an ongoing bliss.

This continuum is meant to be inclusive of all main root types of religious experience, including those that are standardly included under the rubric of philosophical mysticism, and those excluded from that heading. To fulfil the task of inclusiveness, the list may need to be expanded, but even as it stands, it will be at least a good sampling for our purposes. The left and middle areas are not strong in philosophical mysticism. These are the non-mystical religious experiences, except for the last mentioned of the mid-range (union without strict identity with God), which is standardly included within philosophical mysticism. The experiences in the range of the right segment of the continuum also fall under the mystical as the term is usually used in the philosophical sense (e.g. James (1902), lectures 16 and 17; Stace (1960), 47–55; Smart (1958), 14–16, 55).

Now let us consider which of these religious experiences, when interpreted as veridical experiences, are challenged by physicalism. It has been standardly held, at least implicitly, that veridical readings of the experiences of both the middle range and the right range of the continuum are inconsistent with physicalism. And there are good *prima facie* reasons to hold that they are so challenged.

Veridical readings of the experiences of the middle range of the continuum directly presuppose the failure of physicalism. Magical relations, mind-out-of-body experiences, paranormal connections, voices actually coming from external sources without sensory mediation, and so on, require more than physicalism will allow. Nor will physicalism allow veridical readings of the most mystical of the mid-range experiences, namely the experience as of union (without strict identity) with God or a being worthy of worship, since this presupposes the existence of such an immaterial personal being.

And traditionally, the mysticism of the right area of the religious experience continuum is associated with either idealistic or dualistic metaphysics, and is, thus, inconsistent with physicalism. Recent and contemporary accounts of

mysticism, too, including those of Stace, Alston, Wainwright, Kokol, Loy, Wilber, Hick, Forman, and Griffin, presuppose some degree of denial of physicalism. Perceptual or quasi-perceptual accounts such as those of Stace, Wainwright, and Alston presuppose either dualism or idealism and implicitly reject the completeness of causality at the level of physics (despite the supposed naturalism of Stace, 22–29). Griffin supports paranormalism (1997, *passim*); Loy (1988, 89–95) denies that perceptual experience is the effect of physical causes; Hick (1999, 19, 243) denies physicalism; Wilber denies physicalism (1998, 56) and affirms dualist interactionism (1997, 272); Kokol (2000, 72) denies ultimate reducibility of mystical experiences; and Cupitt (1998) presupposes the failure of modernistic naturalism. Occasionally, a contemporary account of mysticism preserves a strictly phenomenological as opposed to metaphysical enquiry (as is the case with Jonathan Shear (1999)), but there is no investigation of the ultimate consistency of the vocabulary of the phenomenological descriptions and physicalism. Similarly, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) studiously avoid the key metaphysical questions such as whether causality is complete at the level of physics, thus rendering their position that cognition is embodied action incomplete. Consequently their emphasis on emergent properties, without a clarification as to whether this is mechanical or non-mechanical emergence, suggests a non-physicalist preference. Even James Austin (1998, 18, 19) endorses Sperry's advocacy of top-down causation, a view that on the face of it is incompatible with ontologically and nomologically reductionist physicalism.

Hence it has been taken, by and large, that physicalism is inconsistent with veridical readings of what we may refer to as two-thirds of the religious experience continuum. Both the middle range and the right-hand range of the continuum apparently make claims incompatible with physicalism.

Aside from the spectrum of distinctively religious experiences, there are also the experiences and belief associated with a strong form of human freedom, and a sense of intrinsic telic pull in the cosmos. These, too, are important underpinnings in many contemporary liberal interpretations of religion; and they, too, are apparently inconsistent with physicalism.

This is not to say that efforts have not been made to reconcile religious life with naturalism. Indeed, there are two primary ways naturalism currently attempts to accommodate religious feelings and aspirations: current religious naturalisms may direct religious feeling toward nature itself and processes in nature, such as we find in Burhoe (1981), or it may direct religious feeling and attitude toward what lies at the atemporal limits of the framework of nature, as we find in Drees (1995).

The strength of religious naturalism, in either of its two current sub-branches, (in the views of those who find it compelling) is its allowance for a full acceptance of the physicalist position. However, its weaknesses are its relative lack of a vehicle for vigorous forms of experiential cultivation, and its apparent lack of a vehicle through which to reinterpret the main content of the religious traditions, both

institutional and doctrinal, in such a way as to differentiate the surviving literal beliefs from those of secular humanists. Religious naturalism, as it has currently been articulated, then, is vulnerable to the charge that too much of traditional religious experience has been sacrificed in order to accommodate the current scientific paradigm. Not only is worship of a literally interpreted personal divine being eliminated, and all the experiences, understood literally, which associate with such a relationship, but also experiences issuing in such statements such as: 'I and the Father are One', 'That art Thou', 'I am the Real', 'There is only the One', 'All is Emptiness', have not been accommodated.

The primary religious feelings that are accommodated by religious naturalism as it has thus far been developed, are ones which are not much different from aesthetic emotions such as feelings of wondrous beauty, and moral experiences such as the cultivation of loving attitudes. And these are emotions and experiences that even the secular humanist can share (Kurtz (1991), 18–21). A religious life, which at the experiential level is barely distinguishable from that of the secular humanist, may seem to be too diluted of vigorous experiential content to count as anything other than a huge retreat for the religious sensibility.

There is one more approach that should be mentioned. Some interpreters of religion with naturalist leanings might try to preserve the cultivation of experiences even in the mid-range of the continuum by regarding the phenomenological descriptions as mere metaphors.

I had the experience of leaving my body, and floating upwards; I looked down and saw my house, floated upwards again, whereupon I met my departed ancestors who welcomed me, but advised me that my tasks were not yet done on earth, at which point I returned to my body,

says the religious experiencer. 'Yes', says the religious naturalist who wants to save the cultivation of such experiences by the metaphoric interpretive tack, 'though nothing of the kind literally happened, this experience can be taken as a metaphor by which you connect to your this-worldly values'. Similarly, the mystic devotee says, 'I experienced transcendent union', and the reinterpreter says, 'Metaphorically understood, the values you wish to affirm are ...'.

To assess this reinterpretive approach would take us well beyond the bounds of this essay. Whatever the results of such discussions, I think it should be agreed all around that the religious naturalist will exclude the cultivation of religious experiences, whether they be mystical or non-mystical, when such cultivation is meant to give us glimpses or understandings of reality through the literal interpretations of the naturally put descriptions of the experiences. In this essay, I will be confining the discussion to the task of determining to what extent religious naturalism is possible when religious experiences, as typically expressed, are taken to give a pretty direct 'read' of the nature of reality. And I take it as granted that the middle-range experiences of the continuum are experiences which, if taken as giving a

pretty direct 'read' of the nature of reality, will on the face of it be incompatible with naturalism.

Of course, if no better source of preservation of traditional religious sensibility can be found than the experiences of the left side of the continuum, then there would be no choice but to accept a much weakened religious institutional and practical life. The challenge, then, is to determine whether the current proposals for integrating naturalism and religious sensibility follow the most fruitful paths. I suggest that religious naturalists can go much farther than the current proposals do to maintain a religious life in which there is vigorous experiential cultivation and doctrinal insight produced, strengthened, or expressed in association with those experiences.

### **A new path to integrate science and religion**

The new path for the integration of religious life and the scientific (physicalistic) worldview is based on the following approach: instead of sacrificing two of the three main broad types of religious experience (the mid-range and the right-range), one can fully preserve two of the three (the left-range and the right-range).

By skipping over, and hence sacrificing, the middle realm of experiences insofar as they may be regarded as corresponding to the way reality is – for no reconciliation can be entirely painless – but retaining both the left end of the continuum (feelings of awe and mystery, love for fellow creatures, and sense of natural dependencies) and the right end of the continuum (full release from standard ego-identification and psychophysical transformation through awakening to the sense of inner light, *ch'i*, or *prana*, where these awakenings are conceived, roughly speaking, as experiences or sensations produced by appropriate meditations, and not as perceptions of objectively existing entities outside of the body) we can effect a reconciliation which entirely accepts current physicalism or strong naturalism and entirely accepts religious transformative practice. The position that results, then, is mystical physicalism or mystical naturalism.

Mystical naturalism, more particularly, rests on three key ideas. First, the most important features of religious life are (1) that it holds out the goal of personal transformation in the direction of joyous transfiguration of the moral (a notion adapted from Smart (1958), and whose content will be exposed, briefly, below); (2) that it holds out the goal of a gradual liberation from standard ego-identification, where 'standard ego-identification' is the experience of identity grounded in the judgement 'the world consists of many entities, and I am one of them, namely, this particular person associated with this human body'; and (3) that it holds out the goal of a psychophysical transformation through the cultivation of experience of circulation of 'inner light', *ch'i*, or *prana*.

Second, these three features, according to mystical naturalism, are connected. According to mystical naturalism, there is an empirically sustained virtuous circle

between meditations aimed at release from standard ego-identification, exercises aimed at cultivating the joyous transfiguration of the moral, and exercises aimed at cultivating experience of 'inner-light', *ch'i*, or *prana* circulation.

The third key idea underlying mystical naturalism is that the mystical and religiously transformative life at the right end of the spectrum is not itself in conflict with strong physicalism. Nor is the postulate of the empirical possibility of the cultivation of the joyous transfiguration of the moral in conflict with strong physicalism. This makes it possible to retain the most important features of religious life, and, with new interpretations, to sustain religious traditions and institutions, and yet adhere to a rigorously naturalistic, physicalistic metaphysics. Moreover, most, if not all, basic forms of mystical phenomenology of the right area of the continuum can be read literally by the physicalist as expressions of genuine metaphysical insight.

I'll now try to say a few words in favour of each of these three key points underlying this proposal for the integration of standard science or naturalist metaphysics and spiritual or religious life.

#### *In favour of the first point*

The first point states that the most important features of religious life are that it aims at personal transformation in the direction of joyous transfiguration of the moral; at a gradual or sudden liberation from standard ego-identified existence; and at cultivation of 'inner light', or *ch'i* or *prana* experience.

There is a lot of evaluative material packed into this statement. In effect, this thesis asserts that, so long as there is moral practice as a foundation, then, what is often called esoteric religion is, in some sense, more important than exoteric religion, the latter being the religious doctrines that arise when one takes more or less literally the descriptions of experiences in the middle range of the experiential continuum. That is, in the context of a morally grounded foundation, it is more important to understand and to cultivate states of mind such as the state of mind of Jesus (or, if scholarship so confirms, the anonymous author) who expressed the notion, 'I and the Father are One', or the state of mind of the Buddha, who stated that 'There is no *atman*, no self', or of Husain al Mansur (al Hallaj), who declared '*ana al-Haqq*', 'I am the Real', or of Patanjali who asserted that 'Suppressions of modifications of the mind result in a condition of liberation in which the Seer abides in its own self', or of Ch'an Master Lin Ch'i who said, 'First I take away the subject and leave the object, then I take away the object and leave the subject, then I take away both subject and object, then I neither take away the subject nor the object', than it is to worship the Creator of the universe in the hopes of an afterlife or in the conviction that one is fulfilling the will of one's maker.

In favour of this view it may be offered that even if a non-physicalist religious metaphysics is true, and many of the mid-range experiences can be read veridically, still, the cultivation of states similar to the religious founders' most exalted



states should be regarded as the most important goals of religious life, so long as the cultivation occurs within the moral context. The reason is that even in traditionally understood religions, generally speaking, the mid-range experiences are regarded as stages in a long term evolution of the soul and the society of souls in which the soul, and souls collectively, gradually come to have the capacity to experience blissful, loving release from standard ego-identified existence.

In any case, even if the full version of this claim is denied, it should be observed that all we need from the first point is the following less ambitious content: if cultivation of mystical re-identification is empirically possible, and reconcilable with physicalism, and so too, if joyous transfiguration of the moral, and ongoing experience of 'inner light' are possible, and reconcilable with physicalism, then enough of religious and (phenomenologically understood) 'spiritual' life has been saved to warrant the judgement that there is an adequate integration of conservative science and the heart of religious life.

*In favour of the second point*

The second point states that there is an empirical connection – a causal relationship – between liberation from conventional ego-identification, joyous transfiguration of the moral, and psychophysical transformation. In effect, it claims that there is a virtuous circle among all the main experiential or phenomenological features of the religious naturalism being advocated here: awe, wonder, sense of mystery, joy, natural interpersonal love, awakening of blissful 'energy' flows, experience of divine light, sense of ongoing overflowing love, and release from conventional ego-identification. For example, meditations aimed at release from ego-identification facilitate exercises aimed at cultivating the joyous transfiguration of the moral, and vice versa. These claims of mutual facilitation are entirely empirical, and, since they pertain to the phenomenological and psychological data, they do not threaten physicalism, nor are these claims in any way inconsistent with it.

Let us now, briefly, indicate something of what's meant by 'the blissful transfiguration of the moral'. Ninian Smart (1958, 60ff.) refers to the various achievements within the eightfold path of Buddhism: the achievement of moral mastery, the achievement of spiritual mastery, the attainment of mystical bliss, and the sustained maintenance of these attainments until the point of death. Good conduct initially may be something that seems dry, merely obligatory, not suffused with joy, something that one engages in because one is merely supposed to. However, after further spiritual attainments – so the claim goes – the experiences of bliss, joy, compassion, and love become so strong that there is no longer the sense of sacrifice or dry obligation. Even the moral has become suffused with the overflowing sense of bliss, joy, and love.

Now, there is nothing in this that need be confined to Buddhism. It is entirely consistent with the general structure of so-called 'spiritual cultivation' that moral



practices can be foundational, and then transfigured with joy as the ‘spiritual’ attainments are achieved. Moreover, it is the precise empirical thesis of the mystic that there are virtuous causal cycles in these areas of cultivation.

Centrally, according to the empirical psychological thesis of mystical naturalism, one can come to ‘see’ that the standard form of ego-identification – the one according to which ‘the world consists of many entities, and I am one of the many entities, namely this very person associated with this human body’ – is but one of many different ways of experiencing the world and the self, or the object world and the subject world. When one sees the subject and object world in a different way – for example, when it appears as vividly as can be that ‘I am the All’ – then, as an empirical consequence, one also is opened up to the joy of moral attitudes. For example, if one ‘sees’ that ‘every human being is a (proper) part of me’, then one’s attitude toward the standardly conceived first person need not be more loving than that toward other persons. Similarly, awakening to ‘inner light’ sensation, according to the empirical claim, is associated with a bliss (and satisfaction) deep enough to support the feelings of completeness which allow for ongoing attitudes of overflowing care and love for others.

It is easy to see how such connections linking experiences at the right end of the spectrum and experiences at the left end of the spectrum might occur. Whether or not they do is an empirical matter. But this still leaves the metaphysical issues to be considered.

#### *In favour of the third point*

Turning to metaphysical issues, it is not so easy to see how expressions such as ‘Through enlightenment you actually experience the universe as identical with yourself ...’ (Yasutani Roshi (1965), 151) or ‘That art Thou’, can be integrated with physicalism. As reviewed above, traditional and recent interpretations of mysticism tend to be dualist or idealist or to deny the completeness of causality in physics.

And there is another problem as well. If I am the All, shouldn’t paranormal knowledge follow naturally, and from that knowledge should not various phenomena in the middle range of the continuum also occur without delusional conviction? Shouldn’t there be mind over matter-external-to-the-standard-body powers, just as mind has power over the standard body? Yet belief in paranormal powers is inconsistent with physicalism. It would appear, at least on the face of it, that philosophical mysticism and physicalism are incompatible doctrines, and so a justification of the third key element underlying the reconciliation is crucial to the new approach.

How, then, can philosophical mysticism, which includes expressions of viewpoints according to which ‘There is no self’, and ‘I am the All’, be accommodated within a physicalist worldview? Masao Abe (1985, ch. 14), and following him, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991), have provided the

beginnings of an answer to this question. But I think we must go a good deal farther than either of these two sources goes; and we must attempt to remedy two distinct shortcomings in these accounts.

The two shortcomings are, first that they assume that a reconciliation of science and mysticism proceeds exclusively through impersonalism. This was the essential thesis of Masao Abe. Buddhist impersonalism, and its no-self doctrine, would be easier to reconcile with scientific mechanism than Christian and other non-Buddhist personalisms. Similarly, Varela, Thompson and Rosch do not envision a personalistic mysticism of the sort that could issue in interpretations of divine incarnationism, 'I am the Real' etc. In their inventory of phenomenological states they do not acknowledge the mysticism of the experience of divine incarnation or avatarhood. I propose that there can be a naturalistic mysticism which allows for literal interpretations of doctrines such as 'I and the Father (the Ultimate) are One', 'I am the All', and 'I am the person making all these events (the events of the whole universe) happen', in addition to impersonalist doctrines included in the no-self teachings of Buddhism.

The second defect is that both sources seek to go beyond the mechanist assumptions of standard science. Abe wants to do so, but does not see clearly how it is possible, other than to hint that the answer may lurk within the concept of the compassion of the *bodhisattva*. Varela, Thompson and Rosch also promote the importance of the notion of systemic emergence, though they too, like Barbour, it may be suggested, have not distinguished in a clear and explicit way between, on the one hand, (1) epistemic novelty and unpredictability, which are fully consistent with compositional reduction and causal completeness at the level of physics, and on the other hand, (2) ontological and nomological emergence, that is, the emergence of novel types of entities (irreducible mental substances somehow emerging from concatenations of merely physical substances), or novel laws either emerging or being triggered for the first time given the emergence of the appropriate configurational circumstances (reconfiguration laws, see McLaughlin (1992)). These latter would be the sorts of emergence that would be metaphysically relevant. Apparently, neither Abe nor the authors of *The Embodied Mind* accept the universal scope of mechanism. The mystical naturalist position is prepared to do so.

Let us return, then, to our question: how can a wide range of mystical states, both impersonalistic and personalistic, be accommodated within a mechanistic, ontologically and nomologically reductionist physicalism?

The answer, I think, is pleasantly elegant. It proceeds, first, by noting that, from the standpoint of the physicalist, any self-identification, even standard ego-identification, is a psychological construction. Then, whatever means the physicalist uses to accommodate the undeniable phenomenon of standard ego-identification, will also provide the basis for the physicalist's explanation or accommodation of the mystics' more extravagant, yet equally vivid, forms of

self-identification, or absence of self-identification, depending on the type of mystical experience involved.

Let's look at this at the first phase of enquiry: The physicalist commonly takes it that the brain is the seat of consciousness. What justifies this popular view among physicalists is the belief that in principle a brain could be placed in a vat, hooked up to a computer which interfaces beautifully with the afferent and efferent nerves at the border of the brain, and that in such a situation, if the impulses coming into the brain are of the right sort, the person could live a full virtual life, including virtually marrying, having (virtual) sex, a (virtual) family, etc. Even standard ego-identification of such a brain in a vat which might be identification with a virtual body, would occur, however deluded it would be. Yet it would be merely the brain making such an identification. On the other hand, take away the brain, and there will be no consciousness. Therefore, for the physicalist, given the laws of our world, the brain is both sufficient and necessary for consciousness, and so the brain is the seat of consciousness.

Further, as Edelman and Tononi (2000, ch. 14) point out, the brain structure has its 'ports out' and 'ports in', unlike any other nervous organizational unit in the body, and unlike the internal systems of the brain which are massively interconnected. Therefore it is empirically difficult to isolate parts of the brain as the seat of consciousness, or to include as necessary components in the seat of consciousness, systemic elements of the nervous or hormonal systems outside of the brain. The 'ports in' and 'ports out' structure of the brain strongly supports the identification of the brain as the seat of consciousness.

There is, to be sure, more to be said about this. Semantic externalists should see the matter differently, for example, and we will come back to this. But for the purposes of discussion at this stage let us hypothesize that the brain is the seat of consciousness.

Now the interesting thing is that when a standardly ego-identified person says 'The world consists of many entities, and I am one of them, namely this person', he or she is not saying, 'The world consists of many entities, and I am one of them, namely this brain'. That is, conventional self-identification is not meant to be identification of the first person with a particular brain. Rather, either it is identification with a putative immaterial mind, namely that mind which owns or associates uniquely with a particular body, or it is identification with a particular body, one larger than the brain, or it is identification of a person (an entity taking physical predicates and mental predicates as envisioned by P. F. Strawson (1959)). Therefore the standard physicalist psychologist, who accepts the brain as the seat of consciousness, asserts that the brain is capable of a postulate, if you like, of a self-identity whose extension is greater than, or allegedly different from, that of the brain itself. According to the physicalist, in the case of the self-identification in which the brain is of the physicalist persuasion and identifies itself with the full body of the person, or in the case of the brain that has been convinced by Strawson,

and identifies itself with the (Strawsonian) person, the physical extension of the self-identification is larger than the brain doing the representing. According to the physicalist, in the case of the self-identification in which the brain identifies itself with a putative immaterial soul, the brain is mistakenly claiming itself to be something that it is not at all. According to the physicalist for whom the brain is the seat of consciousness, the brain can make self-identifications that fail to correspond to the object making the representation.

Therefore, according to the physicalist who accepts the brain as the seat of consciousness, standard non-mystical self-identification of the sort accomplished by the brain is not an identification that satisfies the demands of logical identity, including substitutability in non-intentional contexts. For if self-representation in standard ego-identification were to satisfy logical identity relations, the brain would represent itself to be the brain, not the whole body in which the brain is a proper part, nor a person whose body is the whole body, nor an immaterial soul associated with that body through parallel correspondence or direct interactions. For example, if  $a = b$  and  $c$  is a part of  $b$  then  $c$  is a part of  $a$ . However when the brain  $a$  identifies itself as  $b$ , the body, say, and the hand,  $c$ , is part of the body,  $b$ , then, if the identification satisfies logical identity, the hand,  $c$ , would have to be part of the brain,  $a$ , which it is not.

Yet the notion of a self is not like the notion of a family, a coat, or a piece of property. When I say 'This is my family', and enumerate the members of my family, including myself in that enumeration, or when I say 'This is my coat', pointing to it, or when I say 'That is my property', there is no logical identity involved in the possession. My family includes me; my coat is entirely distinct from me, as is the piece of land, which is my property. But when I identify my self (or, equivalently, when I identify myself), logical identity does come into play. For example, when Descartes says 'What, then, am I? A thinking thing ... . But what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, that imagines also, and perceives ...' (*Meditations*, II, §7) he identifies himself with that which does the thinking, and his analysis leads him to believe that this is an immaterial substance. And if there is no immaterial substance, then his self-identification has failed. No physical entity, e.g. the hippocampus of René, is a part of the hypothesized irreducibly mental substance identified as the self by René. Yet, if the physicalist is right about physicalism, and the brain is the seat of consciousness, then the hippocampus must be a part both of the entity representing itself, and of the entity represented, if the identification is to be a correct identification.

Thus, the physicalist who accepts that the brain is the seat of consciousness will take it that there is a failure of self-identification in all standard ego-self-identifications, whether these persons (brains) be physicalists, dualists, neutral monists, idealists, or trope theorists.

Now let us look more closely at the hypothesis that exactly the brain is the seat

of consciousness. For although the sources of that belief are plausible, there is much that is questionable about it.

In particular, what constitutes the brain is determined merely conventionally. I think it will be agreed all around that the demarcation of the boundary of the brain, which must be the demarcation of the boundary of the brain as a functioning unit, is not metaphysically determinate, certainly not in any sharp way. Are the molecules in the meningeal fluid part of the brain? Is the blood coming into the brain part of the brain? The retina is sometimes included as part of the brain (Cairns-Smith (1996), 160), but is this a metaphysically specified inclusion? No. It is merely to highlight structural resemblances.

For strong physicalists, the brain is a complex functioning entity in, and integrated with, a complex functioning environment. The parts of the brain move and change in accordance with the physical dynamic equations. There are no configurational dynamic laws, and the atoms and sub-atomic particles behave the same way they would behave if they were not parts of living entities. Consequently there will be no metaphysically determinate boundaries distinguishing sharply between 'brain' and 'non-brain'. So the physicalist scientist is only speaking loosely and for the sake of convenience when she says, 'The brain is identifying the self as this body, or this person, or this soul'. Furthermore, a full counterfactual analysis of the functional units which would generate the same mental states, for the physicalist, and especially for the physicalist who accepts semantic externalism, will show a functional holism allowing for an identification of the physical system generating the mental state with the entire causally interconnected physical system to which references can be made by the mind.

Yet this opens the door to the physicalist mystic: the identification of the boundary of the physical entity properly associated with the self is metaphysically arbitrary, or else the physical entity is the entirety of the causally interconnected physical system. And it is a merely empirical question as to what sorts of experiences of vivid re- or de-identification are trainable in adulthood. If it is possible to expand self-identification through meditation training, then it is possible to come to see more clearly the holism of the physical system that is generating one's mental states.

The maturation of the child may well, and apparently, in fact, does include a phase, or phases of concept acquisition in which standard ego-identification is acquired (Legerstee (1999), 216–219). There may even be a psychological module whose task is to accomplish such a standard ego-identification. But the degree of plasticity in adult self-representation allowing for revision of that identification is a matter of empirical investigation.

The spiritual teachers of the world assert in no uncertain terms that standard ego-identification is not empirically fixed. As it happens, they also assert that doctrine in the context of a dualistic or idealistic metaphysics. This metaphysics is the part of traditional esoteric doctrine which, according to mystical naturalism,

must be abandoned along with the idealist or dualist metaphysics associated with exoteric religious doctrine.

But all that is required for the physicalist is the phenomenon of ongoing vivid experience of liberation from standard ego-identification, together with, and in a virtuous cycle with, joyous transfiguration of the moral, and awakening to 'the inner light' (the ongoing experience as of being flooded with 'light' – or 'energy' in the popular sense – and of an 'inner/outer' sensibility transformation or *satori*), in order to save the baby of religious life along with the twin baby of the mechanistic physicalistic worldview.

### **Applications to personalist god-centred religions**

The above observations open the door to the reconciliation of physicalism with a religious mysticism which abandons the notion of a fixed self. The religious system most strongly associated with abandonment of the fixed self is Buddhism, since the teachings of the Buddha centre on the *anatman* or 'no-self' doctrine. However, what I want to suggest here is that there is no need to restrict the states of release from standard ego-identification to those of impersonalism or no-selfhood as in Buddhism. In my (1994, ch. 4) I showed how phenomenological mysticism encompasses a full spectrum of expanded self-identifications and contracted self-identifications on one axis, and personal and impersonal identifications on another axis. One thereby obtains personalist and impersonalist no-self mysticisms, impersonalist universal-self mysticism, and also, most importantly for this discussion, personalist universal-self mysticism.

Impersonalist universal-self mysticism issues in a variety of phenomenological reports including reports of the form, 'I am the All, but I am not a person; each person is a proper part of me; I have no thoughts, beliefs, nor do I act; but I contain proper parts which are persons, each of which has thoughts, beliefs, desires, actions, etc.'

Personalist universal-self mysticism issues in a variety of phenomenological reports including those of the form,

I am the All, and I am a person; as such I contain millions, billions in fact, of human persons; yet I am also a particular person at whose centre is a particular human person with two eyes, a nose, a mouth, two arms, two legs, etc. However every human person including the one at the experiential centre of me, is only a proper part of the person that I am; the mass of my person is the mass of the whole universe; and at least in the way that standardly ego-identified people blink (make the eyes blink, albeit non-deliberatively and subconsciously), and digest their food (make the food become digested, albeit non-deliberatively and subconsciously), I am doing everything (making everything happen) that is happening in the whole universe.

How can such universal personalist mystical reports be understood within physicalism? The answer is, once again, by the same means that the physicalist understands any self-representation, and by the same means that the physicalist understands any folk-psychological state of intention, desire, or belief, say. The physicalist hopes to find a way to understand all personal meanings and all psychological representations in some form of reductionist account. This will not require a humanly expressible theoretical reduction of psychological terms by physical terms; and the specific form of ontological reduction is open for discussion.

Further, we need not suppose that this will involve an eliminationist account of *qualia*. It may be an account that holds qualitative experience to be mechanically emergent from certain physical states. However it works out for typical non-mystical states of mind, it can similarly work out for mystical states, including the personalistic universal self-phenomenological states. The devices, tools, and techniques whereby non-mystical states of mind can be understood by the ontologically and nomologically reductionist physicalist will be the same devices, tools, and techniques whereby mystical states of mind can be understood by the similarly reductionist physicalist.

Furthermore, the physicalist's understanding that the border of the brain is not metaphysically determinate aids the physicalist in accommodating the various forms of mystical identification, and in supporting the view that at least some of these identifications (including the ones above presented) give accurate readings of how things are. The ultimate direction of the analysis points to the view that at some important theoretical level, there is no metaphysically perspicuous difference, for the physicalist, between saying that (1) the entire (potentially causally interconnectable) universe is representing itself both as Leonard Angel, and also as the reader of this article, and, that (2) this particular brain is representing itself as Leonard A., while that brain over there is representing itself as the reader of the article. The differences, under the clear light of full counterfactual analyses of the functional structures (the structures which would have the same functional effects) are merely conventional.

In fact, the logical identity requirements of self-representation are, at least in a certain sense, more satisfied in the mystical universal-personalist self-representation than in standard ego-identification. In standard ego-identification, there is no good match between the self as represented and the representer. Even if there is a metaphysically determinate brain, the representer (the brain) identifies itself as a physical being larger than itself, or as an immaterial being, which it is not, or, in some other way, it identifies itself as something not identical to the brain. However, there will be at least some important level of identity analysis of the functional system according to which the whole functional system is the representer. And the whole functional system is the causally interconnected universe. Accordingly, the physicalist will judge that the mystic who identifies, personally,



with the whole of the (causally interconnected) universe makes a good match between what at some level of analysis is the metaphysically determinate representor, and the representee. Furthermore, the more semantic externalism is accepted in one's analysis of the identity of mental states, the more easily is this point established.

*Would such mysticism require paranormalism?*

What of the objection to this proposal, raised earlier, based on the appearance of internal inconsistency? Doesn't the personal universal-self mystic need to claim some sort of paranormal power in order to represent the self as the entire universe?

To show the internal consistency of mystical naturalism it is necessary to elaborate, briefly, a more detailed typology of ego-released states than I've so far given. The state of standard (non-mystical) ego-identification is the state that results when the basic ontological judgements can be summarized by the two judgements, 'The world consists of many things; and I am one of the many things, namely the person associated with this human body'. The mystic's state of mind results when either of these two judgements is denied. Hence we have the following basic types of mystical experience:

Mystical experiences based on denial of the judgement 'the world consists of many entities'. This denial of numerical pluralistic ontology, assuming an ontology representable in expressions of quantificational logic, leaves only two possibilities as to the number of objective entities:

- A1 The world is an absolutely simple (partless) unity.
- A2 The world is without objective entities. It is, at the object level, zero, nothingness.

(The indexically indicated mode of denial of a multiplicity of objective entities, e.g. the assertion that there exists 'thisness' only as in Zen, would, I think, when clarified fall under A2.)

Acceptance of numerical ontological pluralism, the idea that the world consists of many entities, while denying that 'I am one of the many entities' also allows for two possibilities:

- B1 There is no self, no I, no me, no subject; there are many entities. (This viewpoint is that of no-self pluralistic mysticism.)
- B2 I am not one of the many entities, because all the many entities are parts of me; I am the all. (This viewpoint is that of universal-self numerically pluralistic mysticism.)

For brevity's sake, we will concentrate on the B1 and B2 forms of mystical experience, interpreting the judgement expressions as expressions of phenomenalistic states rather than as expressions of metaphysical claims. (Jonathan

Shear (1999) so interprets 'subject without object' mystical states, which I would classify as one of the two main variants of A2 states. For more on the phenomenological versus metaphysical readings of these states, and the distinction between the self-concept and that of the first person, see my (1994 chs 4 and 5) and (1983, ch. 1.)

Now universal-self pluralistic mystical experience itself comes in a variety of forms. There are:

- B2a Personal universal-self pluralistic mysticism, issuing in expressions of phenomenal states of the form, 'I am the All, and I am a person', and also:
- B2b Impersonal universal-self pluralistic mysticism, issuing in expressions of phenomenal states of the form, 'I am the All, but I am not a person; rather, there are many parts of me which are persons, for example the many human beings who are severally parts of me'.

Note, again, that our concept of the self is distinct from the concept of the first person. For this reason we can have both no-self mysticism, and impersonal universal-self mysticism, as well as personal universal-self mysticism.

The non-mystic will find both B2a and B2b forms of mysticism difficult to vividly imagine; and this is not surprising. The ease of imagining these states is the ease of simulating them; and the simulation of a phenomenalist mystical state is the access to such a state. Yet, notwithstanding the difficulties for the non-mystic to imagine B2 mysticisms, and notwithstanding the fact that the phenomenologies of B2a and B2b mysticism have not typically been clearly distinguished from each other within mystical writings, the non-mystic and the non-physicalist mystic can conceive of B2a and B2b forms of mystical experience. Perhaps the reason B2a mysticism has not been clearly distinguished from B2b is that the ground for the distinction most clearly arises within a metaphysical pluralism according to which the expressions of the metaphysical truths can be made using the devices of quantificational logic. In my (1994) I suggested meditations that would facilitate the cultivation of B2a and B2b mysticisms, and here I happily testify to the empirical realities of B2a and B2b mystical phenomenologies. Yet even given a non-mystic's conception of B2 mysticisms, still another problem remains, one made particularly vivid in B2a (personalistic universal-self) mysticism. If one expresses the phenomenal experience, 'I am a person, and I am the all', one also must add, 'and there are many parts of me who are individual persons, including all the individual non-mystic persons who identify, severally, with particular parts of me'.

As soon as the personalistic universal-self mystic admits to self-identification as a person, the question will be raised as to the agency powers of this person. What actions does the personal universal-self mystic perform? Are they the actions of all persons, or only of the person who in some sense has a special central role

for the personal universal-self mystic, by functioning as the consistent mouthpiece and agent of that personal universal-self mystic?

Now we are ready to phrase the non-mystic or the anti-physicalist mystic's objection. It would seem that mystical naturalism is internally inconsistent because personal universal-self mysticism seemingly implies a paranormal awareness of all places in the universe, a godlike vision, which, surely, is inconsistent with strong naturalism. Similarly, it suggests a kind of agency superpotency which is equally inconsistent with strong naturalism.

The articulation of the objection helps bring out a clarification of the nature of universal-self mysticism. Let us further subdivide personal universal-self mysticism into the following subtypes.

**B2a-normal:** this is personal universal-self mysticism expressed by the experiential judgements,

The world consists in many entities, and I am the sum of all of them; and I am a person; I experience myself as perspectively centered on this one person through whom I speak; and all the activities of the universe are the subconscious doings of my extended body over which I have no conscious control. My relationship with what is going on in the far side of the planet is the same as the standard ego-identified person's relationship with the activities of the cells in the bones, namely events of which one is not conscious and over which one has no volitional control, but which are nonetheless events going on in one's body. Similarly, I identify the whole universe as my body, even though I am not conscious of the vast majority of events in it, nor do I have volitional control over them. And this experience of the universe as my body is as vivid to me as the experience of standard ego-identification is to the standard ego-identifier. I am a Divine incarnation, but all that this means is that I vividly experience the entire universe as my body. That is what is claimed in expressions such as 'I and the All are One'.

**B2a-paranormal:** This is the personal universal-self mysticism expressed in the experiential judgements,

The universe has many entities; and all the many entities are parts of me; and I am a person, and I can be conscious of the events at any place in the universe; and of the thoughts of any nonmystic person in the universe; and I can, if I so will, control goings on any place in the universe; I am a Divine incarnation, and the having of these powers is what it is to be a Divine incarnation.

(This claim can be made in many degrees of strength; only its strongest degree has been presented here.)

Now the B2a-normal mystic expresses judgements which token a phenomenological flexibility from which no controversial metaphysical claims need follow. It is only, basically, the vividness of the experience of the whole universe as the extension of the self which constitutes the experience of such mysticism. On the other hand, B2a-paranormal mystics are making claims that can be empirically tested as to their veracity, where veracity means more than sincerity and accuracy of phenomenological reportage. For the B2a-paranormal mystic says, for example, 'I can access the conscious thoughts of distant persons', and this can be tested. If the outcomes of the tests baffle even James Randi, and cause him to release his million dollar award to some paranormalist(s) who perform(s) to rigorous fraud proof and statistical standards, then strong naturalism will be incorrect, or apparently incorrect at the very least.

Of course it is possible that sincere people have represented their experiences in descriptions that entail some degree of B2a-paranormal mysticism; and that they have been wrong in the way they interpreted their experiences, thinking they had more paranormal awarenesses and agency powers than they in fact had. On the assumption of naturalism, self-deception and honest error with regard to paranormal powers has to be counted as one of the possible sources of belief in paranormal powers. Moreover, the mystical naturalist's support for the genuineness of B2a-normal re-identification of self, together with recognition of human tendencies to confirmation fallacy and such like fallacious reasoning gives good grounds to explain the tendency of mystics to make the fallacious B2a-paranormal reports.

All in all, then, while there may well be sincere B2a-paranormal mystics, their existence does not refute, nor pose any conceptual threat, to mystical naturalism. Mystical naturalism need only maintain that however subjectively exciting B2a-paranormal mysticism may be, it is objectively incorrect in its claims; and that the errors are self-deceptive, or sincerely mistaken, (or fraudulent). For these reasons, B2a-normal, B2a-paranormal, and B2b-impersonal universal-self mystical phenomenologies do not pose an internal inconsistency problem for the mystical naturalist.

As to the mutual consistency of B1 and B2 forms of mysticism, B1 mysticism denies the fixed self of standard ego-identification at the metaphysical level, a denial that is indeed consistent with B2 mystical expressions, read at the metaphysical level. And the B2a-normal and B2b phenomenologies do not entail inconsistent metaphysical claims.

### **Concluding remarks**

Mystical naturalism, then, fully accommodates mechanistic science; it also fully accommodates personalistic mysticism, and supports the view that the enterprise of finding religious personal meanings, and transformative love is the central

enterprise of life. Clearly, it goes far beyond the resources of religious naturalism as the exponents of these movements currently understand them.

Mystical naturalism permits Christians, for example, to have vigorous experiential correlates of contemporary physicalist interpretations of Trinitarian and divine-incarnation doctrines, and to engage in *imitatio Dei* practices intended to cultivate states of Christ consciousness or divine incarnation, issuing in reports, such as 'I and the Father (the Ultimate or the All) are One', where these reports are understood in as literal a way as the affirmation 'I am this person', is understood by the non-mystic, so long as these statements are not intended to make, additionally, B2a-paranormal mystical claims, and 'God' refers to the Greatest Actual Being.

It may well be that the author of the original claim 'I and the Father are One' interpreted the relation between the 'I' and the 'Father' in a way that required the existence of immaterial entities. Yet, even if this is so, it does not go against the claim that a strong form of Christian incarnationist mysticism, understood (in the Ebonite Christian way?) as in principle universally accessible, can be reconciled with contemporary physicalism. If Christian Trinitarianism was able to survive the logical infelicities of the Trinitarian doctrine, all the more so can a physicalist Christian mystic of today cope with what in the physicalist perspective is the logically well behaved notion that 'I am the Greatest Actual Reality,' and that 'I am God', where, of course, 'God' is not conceived as an immaterial being. Instead, for such a Christian mystic, the God that I am is the totality of the world. And, since under the B2a perspective, such a Christian mystic would say, 'I experience myself not only as the totality of what exists, but also I experience myself as a person', then it follows such a mystic will also be in a position to say 'I am God, and I am a person – though I have no paranormal powers'. Especially when such a perspective is conjoined with the cultivation of ongoing joy, bliss, 'inner light', and universal love, is it plausible to regard this perspective as 'old wine in new bottles'. Some may reject this wine on the grounds that the new bottles have adversely altered the taste. Others, perhaps those less used to the taste of the old wine in the old bottles, may find the old wine in the new bottles entirely palatable.

In most philosophical circles it is uncontroversial to suggest that religions progress in the way they come to reinterpret their basic myths and ancient teachings. For the longest time, unsurprisingly, Hindus believed in the historicity of the Ramayana events; Buddhists believed in the literal accuracy of the canonical reports of Sakyamuni's recollections of previous lives; (many) orthodox Jews today still believe in the literal accuracy of the Creation story and the miracle stories of the Hebrew Bible. Reinterpreting these stories is an entirely legitimate enterprise. As science progresses and as philosophy progresses, so does religion, both in the way it reinterprets the interface of its mythology and the world, and in the way it reinterprets its credos, its classically articulated doctrines, and the nature of the religious experiences generated through the practices.

Mystical naturalism provides a broad framework within which interpretations of religions can progress in a way appropriate for our times. This framework provides for a much closer integration of religious institutional and practical life and conservative scientific understanding of the cosmos than has hitherto been conceived as possible within naturalist religious movements. The possibility of living a religious life aimed at cultivating what might be called the religious founders' experiences of mystic unity, liberation from ego-identification, blissful awakening to the inner light, and joyous, loving transfiguration of the moral, is still possible within a strongly physicalist ontologically and nomologically reductionist scientific worldview.<sup>1</sup>

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### **Note**

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