RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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SCIENCE, NATURE AND SOUL

C. John Sommerville

Around universities these days the view seems to be that human beings are just parts of a materialistic, naturalistic, deterministic universe. It may not be argued so much as assumed. But are we "just part of nature," as we often hear? Are the concepts of soul and spirit mythological? Are we really "human" in the sense of being free, purposeful, and rational, with values and goals? This is a pretty important question for those who have a religious perspective on life.

We will shortly be arguing that the existence of science is itself an excellent proof of the human difference, or of the soul, if you will. But first we need to be clear on the subjects of science and naturalism. Naturalism means accepting the regularity of nature. Scientists have to adopt a *methodological* naturalism in order to do their scientific work. They want to find the natural regularities in our universe. But it's common for them to go beyond this methodological assumption and adopt a "philosophical" or metaphysical naturalism as well. That is the view that everything without exception is part of a great web of causation. This would mean that there's no place for real freedom in the universe.

And yet professors write books in order to change the ways we think or act, as if we have freedom! They want to encourage good ends, or at least to promote truth. So they haven't left their human or humane values behind. Science has always had a hard time convincing us that we are determined or robotic. We ordinarily assume we have freedom and purpose.

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There are scientists who are hoping to explain how these "illusions" arise. Sociobiologists or evolutionary psychologists try to show that our "moral values" are really just survival strategies. They show that group solidarity is adaptive, or that peace is good for our species, or even that altruism is actually nature's way. But all this assumes that the survival of Homo sapiens is a good thing. That's something they learned from religion, not science. Naturalism doesn't care whether there is life in the universe.

Or you may have heard about the new study of consciousness. Journalists suggest that neuroscientists are about to find the points in the brain, and measure the impulses, that will explain all our higher mental activity. But important philosophers like Thomas Nagel and John Searle think the effort to show that consciousness is mechanistic is doomed. For reducing consciousness to objective description is contradictory. Objectivity means eliminating what things *seem* like, and consciousness is exactly that—what things seem like.

Oddly enough, in universities it is not just scientists who suspect that humans are not what they think they are. Some who teach "the humanities" are embarrassed by that title, since they're not sure that humans are in a special category. Some of them

would be willing to change the name to Cultural Studies. For they study "culture" as our species-specific behavior, like ethologists study other animals.

So we notice, in all of this, that professors live in the same confusion that the rest of us do. They are obviously conflicted between their naturalism and the moralizing, praising and blaming that goes on in universities. Naturalism and moralism don't mix. Criticizing people implies a freedom that is the precondition of any moral action. We can't blame people for what they couldn't help doing. Yet universities point out the mistakes of politicians, criticize religions, announce speech codes, and invite speakers who are critics of this or that. What sense does this make?

Take your basic naturalistic or materialistic argument. Say you're talking to a science major, and you get into some moral issue. And she says, "Well, after all humans are just animals, and animals are basically cells, and cells are merely hydrocarbons, and hydrocarbons are only molecules, which are just atoms, which are nothing but electrical charges. So where do morals come in? Doesn't it all boil down to electrical charges? Wherever ethics came from, it can't be real, can it? Because what's real is what's solid."

The conclusion of such a materialist argument is supposed to be that we can't have any more freedom than the atoms we're made of. To think of a person as having freedom, purposes, values, must be some kind of illusion. This is called a reductionist argument, since it reduces things at one level to some simpler level of being. Actually, it doesn't reduce "things," but reduces concepts at one level to concepts at a more basic level. For concepts are the elements of science, rather than the things being described.

These levels we're speaking of make up the (ontological) hierarchy of the sciences. You find that some concept in political science can be reduced to sociology, and then on to economics, to cultural anthropology, psychology, physiology, cell science, neuroscience, biochemistry, and finally to physics. You are descending toward the more basic.

But there are limits to this reductionism. We find that at each of the levels or sciences there are things unique to that level—concepts that can't be reduced any further. Political science talks about democracy, which can't be understood at the level of biochemistry. Yet political science can't get along without the concept of democracy. Even if there were no democracies in the world, the concept would still be a necessary element in political science.

Psychology talks about repression. This can't be reduced to cell science, even though all the patients suffering from repression are made up of cells. Biology talks about life. This hasn't been reduced to physics. Our knowledge of physics shows the necessary conditions of life, but not the efficient causes. So as you reduce things from one level to another, some elements will be left over. They are irreducible. That's why we recognize the different sciences, because they each have their own realities.

Philosophers tell us that this is what "real" means—irreducible. If something is conceptually irreducible, it is what we call real. In *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, 1989), philosopher Charles Taylor, puts it this way: "What is real is what you have to deal with, what won't go away just because it doesn't fit with your prejudices" (59). This applies not just to physical things but to cultural concepts too: "Your metaphysical picture of 'values' and their place in reality ought to be based on what you find real in this way." That is, if values are conceptually irreducible we should think of them as real. Values may be considered as real as galaxies, since real doesn't just mean materially solid. We and our values won't last as long as galaxies, but that doesn't matter to the issue of reality. The galaxies won't last forever either.

> The existence of science disproves determinism, because science is an expression of human values.

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Here's where we get to a major point. Science itself is real, even though it has no material basis. This is how science disproves materialism! The existence of science disproves determinism, because science is an expression of human values. Nobody has argued that science is an evolutionary product. Or that it is an emergent principle of matter. There is no science gene. If any of these were true, science would have arisen everywhere, spontaneously, and not just in cultures with certain values.

Science is a human project, not a natural one. It is a collection of purposes, goals, methods, plans, that show that humans have transcended nature. Scientists have risen above the nature they study. Science is a human creation, meant to free us from nature.

It is ironic that we think science proves that we're "just part of nature" when its very existence proves the opposite. Naturalism may not recognize values, but science is governed by values. It is governed by the rules of true research. Following rules is what we mean by having values.

You could say that science is something of a miracle. It is evidence that nature has become aware of itself. Part of nature has become self-conscious. Humans are the part of nature that has become aware of itself.

It doesn't matter how this happened. It doesn't matter whether humans arrived at this point by instantaneous creation or by some long drawn-out process. Creation versus evolution isn't the issue here. Half of us could have been created and half evolved; we're special either way, in transcending our material basis.

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So far, we've said that materialism fails to account for beings who have purpose, values and freedom, and the intellectual freedom we call rationality. We could drive that point home by looking at what must be Richard Dawkins's most famous quote: "The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference." It's a classic statement of scientific nihilism. Or as physicist Stephen Weinberg puts it, the universe is pointless.

We kind of know what they mean. They're thinking of atoms and of how uninteresting they must be. But what happens when Dawkins looks in a mirror? What he sees in the mirror is a part of the universe – himself – who has purposes, designs, maybe evil and good, and pity. All the things he just disclaimed. Dawkins would insist that the universe is all there is. So he is part of the universe, and so are all these things.

Dawkins acts like science has discovered that the universe is impersonal and indifferent. Actually, he began by *defining* it that way. He equated reality with atoms. And then discovered that they were indifferent to us. He forgot that he himself was real, in the philosophers' more adequate sense of being irreducible. Even if we say that values are man-made, that wouldn't make them unreal. They are real if we need these concepts to understand the universe.

***

And here's where we switch to the subject of the soul. First, we're going to use the philosopher's term, which is person. Later, we'll see how this relates to the more religious term, soul.

Philosophers are talking more about personhood these days. Charles Taylor, the important Canadian philosopher (who is Catholic) whom I quoted earlier, spent most of his career refuting deterministic treatments of human behavior. Near the end of his career he published his classic *Sources of the Self*. Taylor uses the word "self" for these human and personal terms we've been talking about—free, moral, rational beings. The great philosophers who have dealt with these issues are the ancient philosophers, up to the time of the Enlightenment in the 1700s. It was then that materialism began to be an issue. Philosophers had to start fending off things like Marxism, which saw humans as entirely determined by their social environment. And B. F. Skinner's behaviorism, which denied that there is anything to us except our behavior. In that view, any interior life we have is just a reflection of our behavior. We only imagine that we're free agents.

In reaction, there used to be philosophers who talked about Personalism. This philosophy actually began its analysis of everything with persons, and not with atoms, say. So this was the opposite of Naturalists like Dawkins, who would begin with physics. They took the view that the most interesting things in the universe were those things that can freely act. You might as well start with the most interesting things, and not something inert like atoms. Persons could actually be considered the most real things of all, in their view. Taylor doesn't resurrect that term for his philosophical position.

He wants to be in conversation with scientists and philosophers more generally.

Now, the Hebrew and Greek words for person are the words Bible translators always translate by the English word “soul.” Both languages had two words to use in this area. One is always translated as soul, the other as spirit. So the Hebrews and the Greeks made a distinction here.

The Hebrew and Greek words translated as soul (*nephesh* and *psyche*), in their most elementary use, meant possessing life. They were close to meaning breath or wind. They even spoke of animals’ souls. But the words came more to be used to mean the total person, the seat of the emotions, the will, the identity. They might locate soul in the heart or head, like we still say that “my heart wasn’t in it.” Greek made more of a distinction between body and soul than Hebrew, because Greek had a word for body that Hebrew didn’t have. And Greeks sometimes wrote of the soul’s shadowy half-life after the death of the body.

It’s probably unrealistic to think that the terms used in this area are going to be entirely consistent. There is a famous six-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans 1964-76) that shows that almost no two authors used these words exactly alike. The books of the Bible make slightly different use of the terms. But there was a consistent difference between the words for soul on one hand, and those for spirit (*ruach* and *pneuma*) on the other. Spirit means something more clearly supernatural. And it’s not usually seen as a *part* of the person. It seems to be something we share, something we participate in. Spirit is something we receive, a gift, and not intrinsic to us as individuals. We read of people being led by the spirit, born of the spirit, filled with the spirit, worshipping in the spirit, receiving the spirit, speaking by the spirit. Some are subject to evil spirits.

Clearly, spirit is a subject that belongs to religion and theology, not to psychology or philosophy. Universities could deal with it if they had theology departments, instead of just religious studies departments. Many of the European universities do have theology departments, sometimes along with religious studies departments, which study religion from the outside.

The early church’s rival, Gnosticism, had a different view of spirits. They thought that spirit was a substance, a different kind of substance from our flesh but imprisoned within our bodies. Salvation was when your spirit was liberated, to be united to the divine spirit. This happened by knowing certain secrets, and the Gnostics treated Christianity as a collection of these secrets, like the ones we find in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas.

St. Paul, in Romans chapter 6-8, argues against this view. The evil that drags us down is not just in our flesh, but in our whole selves. So in those chapters Paul uses flesh as a code word for selfish aims. He uses spirit as a code word for faith in God. Romans 8:6 sums it up: “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace.” So it’s the mind that’s at issue here. It can turn us toward the flesh or toward the spirit, toward death or toward life and peace. So the mind or soul is his main concern. By the end, Paul gives our bodies a compliment when he says they can be “instruments of righteousness.” After Paul’s time, some Christian theologians took up a Platonic philosophy that had some of that Gnostic’s dualism. That’s why Gnosticism doesn’t sound so strange to many Christians today, who think of the Gospel simply as a saving formula.

To sum up, the easiest way to answer a deterministic or naturalistic argument is by the existence of science. Not anything science has discovered, but just its existence as a structure of values. Values exist, however they appeared in the universe. The human difference exists, however we appeared in the universe. Second, the human person or soul is that which transcends nature. So it’s not only spirit that indicates a religious dimension. Personal freedom and responsibility (person or soul) give us a religious connection to reality. For as Reinhold Niebuhr used to say, we are part of nature and transcend nature, and from that tension comes religion. Even philosophy is coming back to the truth of our humanity, as seen by Taylor’s current reception by other philosophers. And all this is why religion ought to be on the university’s agenda, not just as a curiosity but at the core of it all.

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"A Hymn to God the Father"

John Donne

1

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run.
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

2

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two, but wallowed in a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

3

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done,
I have no more.

"Redemption"

George Herbert

Having been tenant long to a rich Lord,
Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,
And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancel th'old.

In heaven at his manor I him sought:
They told me there, that he was lately gone
About some land, which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possession.

I straight return'd, and knowing his great birth,
Sought him accordingly in great resorts;
In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts:
At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth

Of thieves and murderers: there I him espied,
Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, and died.

SEEKING GOD IN VERSE: JOHN DONNE AND GEORGE HERBERT

J. Stephen Addcox

This spring the Christian Study Center hosted a reading group on seventeenth-century poetry called "Seeking God in Verse." Our group met five times over the course of the semester to discuss the works of several British poets from the Penguin Classics collection, *Metaphysical Poetry* (Penguin Classics, 2006). The metaphysical poets were a disjointed group of writers during the seventeenth century, many of whom used their poetry to explore and wrestle with deep theological questions. As the introduction to *Metaphysical Poetry* points out, the term "metaphysical," is something of a misnomer, since it was originally conceived by the eighteenth-century critic Samuel Johnson as an insult to describe the at times outlandish metaphors in these poets' verse. Yet by the twentieth century T. S. Eliot and others recognized the value of this neglected poetry, leading to a resurgence of interest in these writers. Since then, many of these authors have remained standard entries in the English poetry curriculum, and their deep reflections on questions of faith and Christianity still resonate today. I would like to introduce you to two of the authors whose work generated our most fruitful discussions: John Donne (1572-1631) and George Herbert (1593-1633).

Both John Donne's and George Herbert's poetry was first published posthumously. While Donne's work was circulated in manuscript form, Herbert was not known as a poet until after his death, having kept his poems secret during his lifetime. This aspect of their publication histories offers a significant point of reflection for us as readers: neither Donne nor Herbert sought great publicity or exposure for their poetry. Indeed, Herbert, in a note to a friend, asked that his poems be burned if they weren't worthy of publication (fortunately the friend preserved them). For these two men, poetry was more about preserving an aesthetic of personal meditative thought in writing than it was about being published. As readers coming to these poems almost 400 years after they were first written, this seemingly small point of history can offer a humbling sense of the lifelong devotion to poetry, in the absence of public accolades.

John Donne wrote in two distinctly different genres; his earlier secular poetry praises unnamed mistresses and describes efforts to obtain sexual satisfaction from resistant partners (most famously in his poem "The Flea"), but his later poems shift to distinctly spiritual concerns, indicating a sincere experience of conversion. And yet the metaphysical style, which Donne is credited with initiating, is consistent across all his work and generates hyperbolical rhetoric through evocative imagery. In 1615, Donne was ordained as a deacon and priest in the Church of England, and he became the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, a highly prestigious appointment, in 1621. After his death, much praise was given to his sermons, more so than to his poetry, indicating that his reputation as a preacher exceeded that of his as a poet when he died.

In "Hymn to God the Father" (see pg. 5) Donne famously puns on his own name as way of describing his deep-seated desire for God's forgiveness from sin, longing for the day when God will be done with Donne. Channeling St. Paul's famous self-reproach, Donne laments the sin "through which I run. / And do run still, though still I do deplore" (lines 3-4). Yet even in the face of God's forgiveness, our humanness continually fails to reach the standards of eternity, and so "When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more" (5-6). While Donne lives, God is never "done" forgiving him. Connected to this recognition of the need for constant forgiveness is a "sin of fear" that death will be the absolute end, with no paradise waiting beyond. And so as the poem reaches its conclusion, Donne places his whole hope in the person of Christ, "thy son," who "shall shine as he shines now, […] / And, having done that, thou hast done, / I have no more" (15-18). Now at the imagined end, God has "done" both in that Donne's need of constant forgiveness ends with his death and in that God "has Donne" with him after death. Here we see Donne grappling with the problem of sin in his life while managing to maintain a faithful hope in the redemption of Christ and in his own eventual experience of God's presence.

George Herbert did not have the ecclesiastical good fortune of John Donne and after being ordained in 1624 spent the remainder of his life as the rector of Bemerton, a position in a rural corner in the south of England. His contemporaries said of Herbert that he lost himself to humility, and this quality is apparent in his poems as much as it was true of his life. Herbert was chronically ill throughout much of his life and died quite young at 39 years of age. The first volume of his poems, *The Temple*, went through 13 editions by 1709, making it a bestseller by 17th-century standards. In a bit of historical irony, both Charles I and Oliver Cromwell (the deposed and beheaded King of England and his puritan opponent) read *The Temple* for spiritual inspiration, which demonstrates the

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wide-ranging influence that Herbert's verse had among Christians of varying, and even hostile, theological persuasions.

Herbert's sonnet "Redemption" (see pg. 5) uses the rather common-place metaphor of a tenant seeking a new lease from his lord to illustrate the redemption of Christ's death. The poem's speaker begins by resolving to "be bold" and approach his "rich Lord" since his current lease has left him "not thriving" (1-2). Seeking his Lord in heaven, the speaker is surprised to find that "he was lately gone / About some land which he had dearly bought / Long since on earth, to take possession" (6-8). In this way, Herbert draws Christ's incarnation on earth into his metaphor, figuring it as a return of the original owner to his property. Yet the speaker misunderstands the nature of Christ's coming; imagining that his Lord's "great birth" will be reflected in material wealth, the speaker returns to earth to seek Christ "in great resorts, / In cities, theaters, gardens, parks, and courts" (9-11). Of course, his search is in vain, and it is not until he hears "a ragged noise […] / Of thieves and murderers," that he finds his Lord among the lowliest classes of people. The figure of Christ immediately grants the speaker's request and then dies. As such, the speaker receives his new lease through the death of his Lord. Throughout the poem the speaker is searching for God, but is looking in all the wrong places. For Christian readers, Herbert's poem resonates with a desire to seek Christ, while failing to look in the most humble of places.

While our experiences with the collection of poets that we encountered in the reading group were varied, John Donne and George Herbert seemed to provide the most poignant opportunities for deep reflection and conversation. In addition to *Metaphysical Poetry*, which provides a nice overview of poetry from the seventeenth century, readers might also want to pick up a volume solely devoted to Herbert or Donne. Penguin Classics also publishes Herbert's *The Complete English Poems* (2005), and Modern Library Classics publishes *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne* (2001). We hope that you will be able to enjoy, explore, and engage with these two poets as a way of understanding the complex and creative reflection that they reveal in their texts.

Sources: David Colclough, 'Donne, John (1572–1631)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2007; Helen Wilcox, 'Herbert, George (1593–1633)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004

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INSIDE THIS EDITION

Essay: "Science, Nature and Soul"
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Review: "Seeking God in Verse: John Donne and George Herbert"
by J. Stephen Addcox

This spring the Christian Study Center hosted a reading group on seventeenth-century poetry called "Seeking God in Verse." Many of these authors, collectively known as "metaphysical poets," used their poetry to explore and wrestle with deep theological questions, and their reflections on questions of faith and Christianity still resonate today. (See p. 6)

Poems of John Donne and George Herbert - "A Hymn to God the Father" and "Redemption"

We include these poems so that readers of our review essay can more easily follow the discussion. Also, for those who would consider reading more from Donne and Herbert, these two poems are offered as a representative sample of what readers can expect. (See p. 5)

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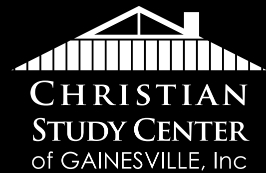

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