NATURE AND NATURAL THEOLOGY

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THOSE who consider theology worth talking about, form perhaps a very small minority in the country; but at least, apart from Marxists, or humanists at our older Universities, very few of them would still maintain that it has finally been disposed of by science. Against the background threat of total destruction, modern efforts are preferably directed to integrating what has been inherited; so it is the relation rather than the conflict of science and religion which now provides the usual theme in public lectures on those subjects. Two recent publications may exemplify this contrast of styles between old and new.[1]

There is little to show that the greater part of Professor Price's Eddington memorial lecture was not written thirty or more years ago. Its argument begins with the claim that 'the materialistic conception of human personality . . . is accepted nowadays, almost as a matter of course, by the majority of Western educated people'. Though there is a disagreement as to the exact form materialism takes (Epiphenomenalism, Behaviourism, Marxism are suggested ways), it is at least certain, according to science, that 'mental processes are inseparable from bodily ones'. Since theism, our natural knowledge of God exclusive of particular revelation (though Professor Price's scope is wider, the essential point lies here), depends on some direct awareness of him, unmediated by the senses, it is thoroughly discredited in a scientific age. But a ray of hope shone through the general gloom on the day 'when the Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882 by a brilliant group of Cambridge men'. Experiments with telepathy and clairvoyance now give the theists evidence of the extra-sensory cognition which is needed for making good their claims.

This new evidence is admittedly both puzzling and interesting, but surely quite irrelevant to theism. St Thomas managed to be a theist of some distinction despite the hampering effect of his belief that all human knowledge derives from the senses. The world known to sense was for him the starting-point of an effort to

1 *Some aspects of the conflict between Science and Religion.* By H. H. Price (C.U.P.; 3/-). *Christianity in an Age of Science.* By C. A. Coulson (O.U.P.; 5/-).

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show that, since this world does not fully account for itself, it must be seen as the effect of a cause outside it. Then, too, the properties he attributed to (or rather denied of) the first cause were known only through knowledge of its effects (even, incidentally, where revelation was in question[2]); he was quite unaware of having any secret information not available to other men. Traditional theism in fact has no concern with the truth of a peculiar theory of knowledge; it is an argument from the objective data of sensible experience. As that argument occupies no more than two out of the fifty pages of Professor Price's lecture, an unusually high proportion of it would seem beside the point. And unfortunately it is scarcely profitable to discuss these two pages here, since the terms in which the argument is refuted are too vague (e.g. he tells us that the 'cosmological proof' fails because 'it cannot be shown that the conception of an unending series of finite causes is self-contradictory'. But the sentence remains meaningless until the senses of the term 'cause' in which it is obviously true have been distinguished from those in which it is possibly false).

Why is it so generally supposed that these traditional arguments are not to be taken seriously? No doubt the main cause is the general acceptance of scientific materialism, but this is effective for a very different reason from that proposed by Professor Price. Its real effect is to destroy the greater part of the physical world's intelligible content. It follows that hard thought about the current interpretations of science might prove a better remedy than appeal to 'the queer and disconcerting facts' of psychical research. We may, indeed, accept the description given in these lectures of the two usual forms which materialism exhibits; for one, 'mental events are unilaterally dependent upon physiological processes', while for the other they are 'merely a special sub-class of physical ones'. But common to these two, and quite unquestioned by most materialists, is a dualism of 'mental' and 'physical' events which cannot be accepted.

Undoubtedly the science of the last two centuries lent some plausibility to such a dualism; but after the severe treatment the notion has received in the last thirty years it is distinctly surprising still to find it being put forward uncritically in 1953. The conception of science that lies behind it was disposed of effectively, and,

2 *Summa Theologica* Ia, 1, 7 ad 1.

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one had hoped, finally, by the work of A. N. Whitehead. This conception leads, he maintains, to a vicious 'bifurcation of nature' into two distinct worlds, of which 'one is the conjecture and the other is the dream'.[3] One, the world of light-waves and nerve-impulses, is thought of as 'causal nature'; the other, of sights and sounds and colours, can then only be 'apparent nature'; and they are irrevocably separated by the mind, which receives the one and translates it into the other. The only justification for this division, argues Whitehead, would be the conviction that waves and nerve-impulses are postulated precisely as the sort of things which would make us see colours and hear sounds; which is obviously absurd. Nor is there any means of relating the two worlds; space and time, which ought to perform that function, belong only to 'apparent nature', and to extend them to 'causal nature' would be to assume a special privilege for the sense of touch, thereby transferring from 'apparent nature' the primary qualities which touch detects.

This refusal to admit a duality within nature is not of course the same thing as saying that nothing exists beyond nature; the argument has nothing to do with metaphysics. It claims that a division has been wrongly made, and with disastrous consequences; for when nature is reduced to 'causal nature' by loss of everything merely 'apparent', it becomes simply unintelligible. Knowledge is at once crippled at its source, and ingenuity is required to justify its very existence. Small wonder that natural theology fell under suspicion during the centuries of dualism, despite the efforts of a Descartes to recreate it from 'mental events' alone.

Modern theists remain, for all that, curiously indifferent to the physical science whose authority is usually claimed for the theories that have produced this confusion; they seem as unaware of the danger as of their rescue from it. The time has surely come to admit that science is a serious attempt to understand nature, and must be taken seriously by philosophers even though they intend to pass beyond it. That this is not always the case is shown by the growing popularity of a theory which dismisses science as 'purely conceptual'[4]. Since all knowledge is conceptual it is not

3 A. N. Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*. (1920.) p. 36.

4 Like so much of the best and worst in modern thought, it is Kantian in inspiration, but became known at the beginning of the century through the writings of Henri Poincaré. For its simplest form, cf. *Kant and Aquinas*, G. Ardley (1950).

easy to see how the scientific kind can be written off in this way as being somehow less 'real' than the philosophical. Scientific knowledge certainly differs in important ways from other kinds of knowledge[5], but it is odd that anyone with any feeling for the subject could suppose himself engaged in nothing more than a rather complicated game of make-believe. 'Do away with this elaborate machinery of a conceptual nature which consists of assertions about things which don't exist in order to convey truths about things which do exist', exclaims Whitehead[6]. In this theory he detects the bifurcation theory 'in its most attenuated form', which identifies all nature with 'apparent nature', and reduces science to triviality. But drawing the teeth of the scientific lion does not, in any case, seem to make it readier to lie down with the theistic lamb. Eliminating centuries of investigation into nature is not the best way to reach truth about what lies beyond nature, since only through nature can it be known.

But whatever philosophical reason there may be against holding either of these dualisms, they will perhaps not entirely be disposed of until it has been shown that the reason why they were ever thought plausible no longer exists. At this point we may turn to Professor Coulson's Riddell memorial lectures, whose emphasis is less on the content of knowledge than on the difference of methods used to acquire it. The privileged position which physical science used to hold among the other disciplines, and which enabled it to declare, in defiance of common sense, that nature was 'a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless: merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly', was its supposed complete objectivity. The scientist could think of nature as spread out before him, independent of him, passively waiting to be examined. There was so little doubt about the general rightness of this picture, that anything which might tend to spoil it had to be sacrificed; the 'subjective' elements were eliminated, and science stood in proud contrast to art and history, philosophy and theology. But even in this restricted field, the modern scientist is not so sure. He is now prepared to find analogies between his work and that of a creative artist, who constructs patterns to enable himself to make sense of experience. Science, says Professor Coulson, is now seen as deeply Kantian.

5 For a good account cf. E. F. Caldin's *Power and Limits of Science* (1949).
6 *op. cit.*, p. 45.

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'My science proceeds by the devising of new concepts, to add to the framework already available, for the better revealing of this pattern. A new concept is acceptable just in so far as it does enlarge the pattern by showing how experiences fit together, and at the same time suggests other types of experiment that we might make.' Yet the pattern which arises is not simply due to the scientist's creative powers; he is aware that it comes from outside him, for it is accompanied by an impression of being 'given'. This given-ness was of course obvious to the classical physicist, and it is a measure of the shift of view that it now needs to be stressed; to use Bragg's words, quoted in the second lecture, 'when one has sought long for the clue to a secret of nature, and is rewarded by grasping some part of the answer, it comes as a blinding flash of revelation . . . of something revealed, and not something imagined'.

Now so thorough-going a Kantianism as Professor Coulson's is, no doubt, questionable; throughout the lectures it is the subjective elements of knowledge which are taken as starting points, so that the truth of a concept is at first identified with its power to co-ordinate experience, and not until the third lecture is any attempt made to prove (what, good scientist that he is, Professor Coulson never of course doubts) that there is a reality which corresponds to these concepts. But the history of philosophy shows that it is impossible to 'deduce' a reality which is not accepted, in the fact of 'given-ness', from the beginning. Once this has been allowed, it may be admitted that the activity of the knower has also a part to play in that encounter with reality which leads to knowledge, inextricable mixture of contributions from object and subject[7]. We do not stand outside nature, spectators of her pageant; we are a part of nature, bound up with her. Reflection should always have shown this to be true; but the success of Cartesian dualism in the theories of classical physics obscured it, and it has only become clear again after their break-

7 Though knowledge for St Thomas meant the identity of knower and known, man (it is a measure of his distance from the angels) could only bring this about by activity (his *intellectus agens*).

8 Professor Coulson maintains that quantum mechanics supports this by showing the impossibility of distinguishing between the observer and what he observes. Despite the commonness of this opinion, it would seen that the principle of complementarity speaks simply of the logical impossibility of applying simultaneously two different descriptions of a particular system: it has nothing to do with the human observer. And to say, as he does on page 28, that this throws light on the doctrine of the Incarnation, is absurd.

down[8], and with the modern stress on evolution in nature. Our account of reality depends on the questions we put, on the language we use; we can no longer ask (as Newton could) what there *really* is.

The result of all this is to make the scientist's account of his activity (and rarely have scientists been so articulate as in the last few decades) very different from the crude realism that used to be put forward. Certainly the philosophy behind these accounts often continues to seem naïve enough to professional philosophers, but it is no longer impossible to take it seriously. Even if his own work did not suffice to show this, the evidence from other writers quoted by Professor Coulson would do so, amongst which special mention must be made of Professor Polanyi's earlier Riddell lectures, which have obviously inspired some of the present work. Professor Polanyi, it will be remembered, stresses the personal qualities that the scientist has to bring to this complex activity of finding a pattern in experience, a pattern dimly apprehended from the start of the research, and waiting to be brought to light by the activity of thought. Mechanical methods, he insists, could never produce scientific discoveries; the researcher must possess a moral integrity, a 'scientific conscience' that comes from years of training in a living tradition, if his judgments are to exhibit that high degree of personal responsibility they are required to bear.

Professor Coulson's central claim thus appears well-founded; science comes into line with history, poetry, philosophy, theism; all give valid but complementary descriptions of a single reality, much as a single mountain is correctly described in different ways, depending on one's point of view. The differences are never minimized; Professor Coulson would have no sympathy with Californian methods of reduction to vague (though perennial) identity. Indeed it would be difficult to say much more than he does, for despite Whitehead's pioneer work, we are still very far from any final evaluation of the relative status of scientific and other forms of knowledge. The value of these lectures lies in the quiet witness of a distinguished scientist to the possibility of finding a *modus vivendi* for such various ways of thought; his conclusion is not perhaps very spectacular, but it is in direct contradiction with that of Professor Price.

It is only fair to mention that these Riddell lectures have a

much greater concern with religion than has been indicated. Unfortunately it is here that the work is marred for the present reviewer by ambiguities arising from a failure to admit the distinction which Catholics require between natural and revealed religion. On the one hand, there seem to be jumps in the argument; the mountain, for instance, known in various ways, represents both reality and God. But while it is true that all knowledge is implicitly of God[9], the word 'implicit' here conceals many years of laborious thinking. On the other hand, by not realising that the saving knowledge of the Christian Gospel is something different from merely speculative knowledge, Professor Coulson nullifies the bitter struggle of the early Church with Greek gnosticism. The 'given-ness' which accompanies all knowledge is not, for example, a 'revelation' in the same sense as religion uses that term. There is, it is true, a profound analogy between natural and revealed religion (as Bishop Butler's classical work displays), but analogy is not identity. Failure to take account of this forms the weakness of an otherwise helpful discussion.

9 'Omnia cognoscentia cognoscunt implicite Deum in quolibet cognito'. *De Veritate*, 22. 2 ad 1.

NOTICE

The April issue of BLACKFRIARS will be a special number devoted to Television. Among the contributors will be Maurice Gorham, Freda Bruce Lockhart, Agnellus Andrew, O.F.M., J. A. V. Burke, David Lloyd James and Illtud Evans, O.P.