

Physical Monism and the Religious Impulse

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1. Introduction

I will discuss a version of monism, *physicalistic degrees monism*, according to which the universe—the whole made out of all concrete objects—is both fundamentally physical and the only fully real thing. According to physicalistic degrees monism, the parts of the universe exist but are less real than the universe. My discussion will not focus on whether this metaphysics is true, but rather on whether this view might form the metaphysical basis for a religion.

I am interested in finding connections between metaphysical and normative issues, including those normative issues that are reasonably called “spiritual”. One set of questions concerns whether and what normative implications a given metaphysics might have. My focus will be on questions of this sort, where physicalistic degrees monism is the given metaphysics.

There are certain emotions and stances towards the world that are characteristic of a religious mindset. And in general, emotions and stances can be evaluated as correct or incorrect when they are directed towards objects that are not apt or fitting objects for them.

I will be exploring which if any emotions or stances are correct given physicalistic degrees monism, whether any of these emotions or stances are aptly thought of as religious, and whether it would be reasonable to develop a religious institution in which these attitudes could be expressed, cultivated, and maintained.

Why is this discussion so “touchy-feely” compared to most other contemporary discussions of monism?

Current philosophical culture encourages laser-like focus on detail in order to make progress on the issues.

Even if some religious attitudes directed towards the universe are correct given physicalistic degrees monism, it is not obvious what they are or that they are. It is also not obvious that physicalistic degrees monism is true. And so many of us are unlikely to have these attitudes directed towards the universe even if those attitudes are correct. You have to have an attitude in order to experience it as being correct.

Overview of talk

\$2. Bradley, Monisms, and Religion

\$3. Physicalistic Monisms

\$4. Naturalistic Pantheism: Is the Physical Universe God?

\$5. Fittingness and Practice

\$6. Religious Institutions

2. Bradley, Monisms, and Religion

F.H. Bradley's monism.

Degrees of truth and degrees of existence.

No proposition expressible by us is ever 100% true or 100% false.

Idealism: a description of reality as a whole as being purely mental in nature is more true than physicalistic or dualistic descriptions of it. The most true description expressible by us is that reality as a whole *is* experience.

Quasi-Theism: It is highly true that we exist, and that we are "finite centers of experience". It is also highly true that a God exists, and that it is a more encompassing center. But the most true description of the world as a whole is that it is experience rather than that it is God's experience.

Monism: It is highly true that there are experiences, but the most true description of the world as a whole is that it is experience rather than that it consists of experiences.

Personalistic versions of Monism, such as the view defended by Mary Calkins, differ in important ways from Bradley's version.

Bradley on Religion.

In *Appearance and Reality*, Bradley (1930: 388-389, footnote 1) characterizes religion in individualistic and psychological terms: religion is a fixed feeling of fear, resignation, admiration or approval of a certain intensity that is accompanied by reflection on the apparent cause of this feeling, which presumably is also its intentional object; the feeling is strong enough to invoke a feeling of comparative powerlessness or worthlessness of the subject of the feeling. Bradley doesn't clearly state whether what he calls "religion" is a complex attitude that contains some of fear, resignation, etc., as elements, or whether each of these simpler emotions is (or could be) be conjoined with the reflective attitude on its apparent cause and thereby be a religious feeling. It is also unclear whether the reflective attitude is one of belief; later, Bradley (1930: 392) explicitly denies that faith is belief, but says it is a sort of "making believing". And perhaps the reflective attitude that is a component of what he calls "religion" is faith rather than belief. In what follows, I will use the phrase "the religious attitude" to indicate the complex psychological state that Bradley calls "religion".

Any sort of object could be the object of this feeling, but "in the highest sense", it is devotion to a perfect object.

Bradley's view seems to be that reality as a whole is a more fitting object than God.

The religious attitude is also a practical attitude—it can be action guiding. And, for Bradley, it seems that it can guide action in contexts where more straightforwardly moral emotions do not. Religious attitudes portray the world as being a certain way, and the

view they provide surpasses the moral point view because the moral point of view is inherently contradictory, but the religious point of view is less inherently contradictory. (A comparison with Kierkegaard would be interesting here.)

Bradley's notion of religion is fundamentally psychological and individualistic in nature.

A thicker sense of "religion" in which religion is a social, institutional phenomenon. A religion in this thicker sense is something one *belongs to* rather than a psychological kind one instantiates. A religion is not merely a set of beliefs or attitudes. Rather, it is a social institution that regulates the beliefs and attitudes of its members. Religions encompass explicit and implicit norms that not only govern the behaviors of their members but also partly constitute what those behaviors mean; a religion provides an interpretative framework so that certain activities occurring in that framework count as expressing religious attitudes.

Schilbrack (2014: 116) defends a partially stipulative account of the meaning of "religion" on the basis of its theoretical usefulness for both philosophy and the empirical social sciences. Very roughly, on Schilbrack's (2014) account, religions are social institutions that play certain normative functional roles and that embody both a metaphysics that implies that there is a supersensible reality and the claim that this supersensible reality underwrites the appropriateness of the religion playing those normative functional roles. I am interested in whether monism could provide the metaphysical basis for a religion in this thicker sense.

3. Physicalistic Monisms

Existence monism: the doctrine that the mereological sum of every concrete object is in fact the only concrete object.

Priority monism: the doctrine that the mereological sum of every concrete object, i.e., the universe, is the *ground* of every other concrete object, but nonetheless the universe and its parts both exist and are equally real. Priority monism has a binary notion of existence but couples with it a notion of metaphysical priority that structures what exists.

Degrees monism: the doctrine that the universe exists and its parts exist, but the universe has more existence than its parts. Degrees monism, as the name suggests, trades in degrees of being.

The universe is *physical* if and only if it has no *irreducibly mental* part; a concrete object is *irreducibly mental* if and only if it has some mental property that does not supervene on any distribution of non-mental properties.

Some further controversial theses that will be assumed here although they are not constitutive of physical degrees monism per se:

First, less than fully real things cannot have fundamental properties or stand in fundamental relations to anything.

Second, non-fundamental properties and relations collectively supervene on the fundamental properties and relations.

Third, the universe is a necessary being: in every possible world, this universe exists and it alone exists to the fullest extent.

Given these three assumptions, the universe is the ground of all possibilities in this sense: the totality of possible worlds just is the totality of different combinations of possible intrinsic features that this universe can have.

Fourth, the universe is the *generator* of all things in this sense: given that the universe is in a certain state, there are metaphysical principles that articulate the mechanisms by which the less real is generated from the fully real.

Which religious attitudes are apt is not independent of which metaphysical theses are true.

If the universe is a *mere* mereological sum of what it contains, and nothing more—if the universe is just a heap of things—then the universe is not a fully real entity and no religious attitude directed towards it could be correct. A minimum condition of being a fitting object of a religious attitude is metaphysical: such an object must be at least as real as anything else. Monism ensures that the physical universe meets this condition, whereas physicalism alone does not.

4. Naturalistic Pantheism: Is the Physical Universe God?

Recall that the universe is the unique concrete object composed of all other concrete objects, and that, on the view under consideration, the universe is physical, where that means that the universe has no part that has an irreducible mental property. Given how I am understanding “physical”, that the universe is both physical and mental is consistent, but that the universe is physical and irreducibly mental is inconsistent. Maybe if the universe is conscious, then there is space to argue that it is God, even if God is not irreducibly mental.

Assume that the universe itself has no mental properties, even though it has parts that do. If the universe has no mental properties, it can’t be a person.

A summary of Leftow’s argument against “naturalistic pantheism”:

1. Something is God only if it an appropriate object of worship.
 2. Something is an appropriate object of worship only if it can hear and understand worship.
 3. But the physical universe can’t hear and understand worship.
- ∴ So the physical universe is not God.

A: “I make only two claims about what worship is, both obvious given actual religious practice. One is that worship is a form of address: when we worship, we *say things to* what we worship. We sing hymns *to* God; we pray *to* God; we declare *to* God our belief in Him. We do not intend this as some sort of psychological self-help, or for moral improvement. The point of the practice is for these words to be heard and understood.” Leftow (2016: 71)

B: “The other is that worship always involves praising, at some point. Practice makes this clear, but it’s even part of the word’s etymology: it is from the Anglo-Saxon worth-ship, the

proclaiming of worth. So if something is to deserve worship, it must deserve praise, at least in some respect. Nothing can deserve worship if trying to worship it cannot accomplish the point of worship. It cannot accomplish the point of worship to address something which cannot be aware of or understand what we say. Thus things which cannot be aware or understand are not conceptually appropriate objects of worship.” Leftow (2016: 71)

Two kinds of religious communities: vocal communities and silent communities.

In the vocal community, religious worshippers praise God “out loud”, through speech and singing.

In the silent community, religious worshippers praise God inwardly but never outwardly.

In the vocal community, there is no question of which acts the religious believers are engaging in—it is clear that each is signing praises—although there can be a question of who is engaging in these acts sincerely.

However, in the silent community, one must trust that one’s community members are engaging in mental acts of devotion rather than, e.g., thinking of clever philosophy memes, and that is because we are not privy to each other’s thoughts, even if God is.

Most religious people are not “professionally religious”. Religious institutions serve the function of keeping those who are religious but not professionally religious “in practice”.

Let’s distinguish between *the function* (or *functions*) of an activity and the conditions that make the performance of that activity *fitting* (or *correct*). As suggested above, the activity of worshipping can have many functions.

Compare with Schilbrack (2014: 40-46), who argues that one function of religious rituals is that they serve as “cognitive prosthetics” that, among other things, remind their participants of what to do.

Compare with Smart (1972: 5-7), who notes that there are conventional symbolic elements in rituals, which in turn require the existence of a community to give those elements their meanings.

If “the point of worship is to have one’s words heard and understood by God” means that *the function* of worshipping simply is to produce heard and understood words, then this sentence probably expresses something false rather than obviously true.

One function of worship is to express attitudes of devotion to the object one worships.

I’ll assume that an activity whose central function is to express an attitude is correct if and only if the attitude that it expresses is correct.

This assumption is not obvious. Perhaps instead the activity is correct if and only if it is a sincere expression of the attitude that it expresses.

It seems to me that the central question is not about the function of worship but rather whether and under what conditions the attitude that worship expresses is correct.

Is it true that an attitude of worship directed towards an object is correct only if that object can recognize that it is being worshipped? (That is, is premise 2 of the above argument true?)

Theistic worries about this. Gersonides: divine impassibility+libertarian freedom. (Probably also an issue for Kant's God.)

Relatedly, divine impassibility+a strong form of haeccectism might generate a similar problem.

But for me the most interesting question is not whether the universe would be God were physicalistic degrees monism to be true—this question might be settled negatively if such a universe is too different from our ordinary concept of God, regardless of whether the reconstruction of Leftow's argument above is successful.

The interesting question instead is whether and which any religious attitudes are correct given physicalistic degrees monism. And devotion needn't be the only religious attitude, and worship needn't be the only religious activity that expresses religious attitudes.

5. Fittingness and Practice

Leftow (2016:74-75) attributes to William Mander the claim that the universe is a fit object of awe, love, feeling of dependence, and valuing to the highest degree.

Dependence

Given degrees monism, we are dependent on the universe in several ways.

Awe

The universe is vast and varied and yet fundamentally one.

Valuing to the highest degree

Given degrees monism, only the universe has objectual intrinsic value in the strict sense.

Hence, with respect to that kind of value, it is at least as valuable as anything else.

Faith in the claim that it is positively intrinsically valuable is fitting.

Love

There are many kinds of love; perhaps the apt form is here is love of place.

Reverence

According to Woodruff's (2001) account, reverence is the capacity to have feelings of awe, respect, and shame when those are the right feelings to have (p. 8); these feelings are linked by a sense that something is larger than a human being, and are often expressed and reinforced by ceremony (p. 63); the [proper] objects of reverence are things that are not in our power to change or control, not be fully comprehended by human experts, not human products, and transcendent.

Sacred?

Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion, James Maffie, argues that something like a physicalistic monism can be found in Aztec philosophical tradition, and on that view, the universe is *sacred*.

Bradley stressed that the religious attitude presented its object as elevated in status while at the same time invoked a feeling of comparative powerlessness or worthlessness of the possessor of the attitude.

Comparative worthlessness

We do not have objectual intrinsic value in the strict sense.

Powerlessness

Given physicalistic degrees monism, all facts about myself are metaphysically determined by more fundamental facts about the universe. This includes facts about what I choose and how I act. It seems then that libertarian freedom is at least as threatened by degrees monism as it is by causal determinism. Given physicalistic degrees monism, I do not have the kind of power I might have antecedently believed or hoped that I did, and so there is a reason to revise all those attitudes that are correct only given that I have this power.

Even if these attitudes towards the universe are correct, and one were to have them, one would face pressures against expressing that one has them. Because of this fact, it will also be hard for one to sustain the having of these attitudes. There is no extant institution to assist in the cultivation, maintenance, and expression of these attitudes.

6. Religious Institutions

Two principles about correctness that I will assume without argument.

First, if one's attitude towards an object is correct, then there is a reason for one to bring it about that one has that attitude.

Second, if one's action of expressing an attitude is correct, then there is a reason for one to perform this action.

Both of these principles are driven by the thought that correctness isn't merely a static normative property that some attitude or action types have or lack, but rather is a status that properly motivates the presence or performance of token attitudes and actions.

Among the attitudes are religious attitudes, which are complexes of emotions and representations, and these religious attitudes are action-oriented in two respects: they tend to *motivate*, that is, cause action or affective change, and their correctness conditions in turn correlate with reasons to bring about that those conditions are satisfied.

The case of cold recognition of the value of beautiful art.

There are beautiful instances of visual art, such as statues, paintings, and buildings. And the correct response to these beautiful instances is to *appreciate* their beauty, which is not simply to *recognize* that they are beautiful. But by and large, visual art leaves me cold. I almost always merely recognize without appreciating the beauty of visual art objects. Let's assume that I am not irredeemably flawed, but rather this psychological disposition could be changed were I to take the appropriate art classes and surround myself with people who both appreciate their beauty and act so as to express their appreciation. Then the principles I have just articulated imply that I have a reason to take the appropriate art classes and to surround myself with appreciators. This reason is highly defeasible. It might be that given all the other things I have reason to do, my totality of reasons dictates against this course of action. But nonetheless the reason to so act is present.

The source of *this* reason is that it is correct to appreciate what is beautiful. The source of this reason is not that the beautiful benefits from being appreciated; the wellbeing of a painting, if it even makes sense to talk in these terms, cannot be affected by our appreciation of it, even if we express that appreciation out loud. It might be that appreciating beautiful visual art would also intrinsically benefit me, that is, it would increase my level of wellbeing. If so, I have a prudential reason as well to bring it about that I appreciate beautiful visual art. But this prudential reason is a *further* reason to appreciate visual art, and not the reason that stems from *fittingness*.

Moreover, if appreciating beautiful visual art would intrinsically benefit me, then it would intrinsically benefit other people as well, and so to the extent that my expressing my appreciation assists others to appreciate, then I have an other-regarding reason to express my appreciation. But this other-regarding reason to express my appreciation is not the reason I am focusing on. Rather, I have a reason to express my appreciation because expressing my appreciation is correct, in virtue of the correctness of the appreciation that it expresses.

If there is a God as classically conceived, then similar remarks apply. Consider the religious attitude expressed by an act of worship. I presume that if there is such a God, this religious attitude is correct, and hence so too is an act of worship that expresses it. And the correctness of the attitude is a reason for us to have it, and the correctness of the act of worship in turn provides us with a reason to worship. God does not benefit from our worshipping God; God as classically conceived cannot be made better off by anything we might do, for God as classically conceived cannot be made better off period. If God commands that we worship, God does not do this for God's own sake. Perhaps we benefit by virtue of our devotion or by our expressing it, but even if

so, that we benefit is a further reason to have a religious attitude and to express it, but it is not the reason that is grounded in the fittingness of our so doing.

And if physicalistic degrees monism is true, and there are fitting religious attitudes directed towards the universe, then similar remarks apply. The correctness of religious attitudes that take the universe as their object is a reason to have those attitudes and a reason to act so as to express them.

However, while there are a ton of traditional religious institutions, and there is “the art world”, there is no institutionalized practice of expressing religious attitudes towards the universe as construed by physicalistic degrees monism. This difference has several important consequences.

First, it is typically easier to do what you have a reason to do when you make a habit of so doing it. And by and large, it is easier to make and maintain a habit if you are held responsible for regularly displaying the actions that you wish to habituate.

Second, it is easier to feel what you have a reason to feel when you are surrounded by people who express those feelings.

In general, religious practice, religious belief, and religious attitudes are difficult for us to maintain and sustain in social isolation.

Maybe some religious attitudes are expressible only via ceremony and ritual that can be fully grounded only if they are embedded in a religious community.

So given physicalistic degrees monism, we might have a reason to build a religious apparatus with it as its metaphysical foundation. But it might not be reasonable to do so.

I suspect that good ways to offset institutional costs would have to involve instituting rituals that allow participants to express correct attitudes while also providing a good balance of satisfaction and effort. I don't know what these would be like; perhaps mindfulness activities led by a trained practitioner, followed by concentrated attention on the universe itself, and then followed by group activities focused on making the universe a better place.

There is also the interesting question of whether existing religious institutions should be maintained given physicalistic degrees monism.

No actual major religious institution has true metaphysical foundations if physicalistic degrees monism is true.

Religious attitudes such as devotion directed towards non-existent entities are incorrect, and so if correctness of attitude rather than sincerity of attitude is the criterion of correctness for expressions of attitudes, then then no expression of these religious attitudes is correct.

If so, there is no ground stemming from correctness for the maintaining of actual major religious institutions. But there may still be grounds for maintaining them if the costs of doing away with them are too high to be worth paying.

We can't assess these costs without also knowing how viable a religion based on physical degrees monism (or some other replacement metaphysic) would be.