

Problems for Personalists

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Personalism is not a closely defined philosophical discipline. Occasional attempts have been made to achieve a consensus among personalists as to what they believe. But their “platforms” have so far provided no precise index to the metaphysics of personalism. Hence any discussion, especially a critical exposition of personalism, is a difficult venture. The constant risk is that one should find himself dealing with a sport rather than the true vine. Yet it may be fairly said that the current phase of personalistic thought in America, exemplified in the philosophy departments of Boston University and the University of Southern California, owes its basic principles to the systematic work of Bowne.

I. THE PROBLEM OF METAPHYSICS

This paper undertakes to set forth three major areas in which personalism leaves searching questions unanswered, in metaphysics, in the philosophy of science, and in the theological area of the distinction between the natural and the supernatural.

Bowne constructed his metaphysics from two ideas and a conclusion. The two ideas were (1) that only that which acts exists and (2) that substance, since it is by definition non-active, is non-existent. His conclusion was longer. The problem of change and identity demands an abiding, enduring reference for the flux of continual becoming in order that, from the fading panoply, organization sufficient for experience be achieved. Were there no factor providing for permanence, no conscious experience would be possible. The uncomprehending coming and going of discrete, completely unrelated items would be the result. Only as there is an abiding something to bridge from one item to the next can there be the sort of cumulative acquisition which we term knowledge or experience. Bowne found this need met only in the fundamental nature of personal self-consciousness. Hence, though things are merely phenomenal, persons are real.

Now if it be true that the natural order is merely a system of qualities, how can certain vital metaphysical distinctions be maintained? How shall we achieve any of the distinctions proper to the various levels of nature? For example, how shall one differentiate

the living from the non-living? The barest distinction between the organic and inorganic requires that the organic sustain something of its past as it proceeds to its future. But this is what qualities cannot do. The issue attending a phenomenalist interpretation of experience is that, with the rejection of substance, there necessarily follows the denial of essence and causation. Bereft of these, nature is without dimension and can have no history, for there is nothing enduring. Thus, the minimal conceptual needs of biology cannot be met. The predisposition of a thing to develop or to be modified in one way rather than another and the capacity of a thing to yield present evidence of past influence are impossible notions for phenomenism. If the cosmos is but a rootless surface of qualities, then history is lost in its own making, it dies as it is born. History is possible only if there is something objectively enduring in nature. And the distinction between life and non-life is meaningful only as history is a material reality.

It was Bowne's conviction that the universe did not come to its full meaning except in the consciousness of persons. (How he could know that nature was thus wanting, since he knew nothing of things-in-themselves, is a mystery.) By this he meant that the objective order was not an order except as it was organized by personal self-consciousness. That is, the hierarchy of the sciences, with their supposed reference to the essential gradation of nature, is subjective. But, as was shown above, this will not do. Brightman noticed the problem as early as 1921.¹ Cranston has also shown that a major endeavor of contemporary personalism is to meet this inadequacy in one way or another.² The inherent weakness of personalism in treating of the metaphysical status and function of nature tends always to drive it to absolute idealism (panpsychism) or to realism (occasionalism). Phenomenism, to date, is not an adequate metaphysical basis for common experience. It ends in a version of positivism which has, in secular quarters, long since been given up.

The attempt to round out the phenomenalist account leads consistently away from the metaphysics implicit in evangelical theology. Thus, Bowne's students have defended much that he denied.

¹ Edgar S. Brightman, "The Tasks Confronting a Personalistic Philosophy," *Personalist*, Vol. II (October, 1921), pp. 257-258.

² Mildred Welch Cranston, "Tensions Within Personalism," *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. IV (Spring 1946), pp. 23-25.

Bertocci has frankly affirmed that "Personalism is pantheistic so far as the world is concerned, for it holds that Nature is God's energizing."³ After all if, as personalism claims, the only reality is personal then nature, if it has any metaphysical status whatever, must be personal. This is merely to go back, as Bowne should have more consistently done, to Berkeley's doctrine of "esse est percipi." Nothing in the phenomenalistic scheme can stand exempt from this rule. It matters not at all—and here is the difference between Berkeley's and Bowne's insight—that the realm of nature be considered objective to finite persons. Bowne insisted that he was in some sense a realist because he regarded the order of qualities as external. It was something found, not made. But this does not alleviate in any degree the threat of pantheism, for though nature be altogether objective to finite persons it is nevertheless a feature of some personal experience, if not ours, then God's. This is to say that if nature does not exist in its own right as a metaphysical reality it cannot exist, on personalistic grounds, except as it shares in the nature or experience of some person. Bowne's adherence to objectivism rules out the possibility of identifying nature with finite persons; hence, it must be identified with God.

II. THE PROBLEM OF A PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

Phenomenalism is a surface philosophy, satisfied that the nature of the thing-in-itself, if there be such, is beyond our grasp. Substance is an illegitimate notion of uncritical thought and the causal relation is not found in experience. This was Hume's famous discovery. Restricting experience by definition to our straightforward interplay with the external order of qualities removes any hope for realism. What happens to science in this context is adequately expressed in Humean skepticism and in the successive varieties of positivism which have stemmed from the phenomenalistic tradition. Moreover, though it is true that Bowne was in complete disagreement with Hume on certain issues, he is nevertheless implicated in much that Hume was able to show as resulting from his own denial of substance and causation.

What Hume found was that his doctrine necessitated the strictest uncertainty as to the future. After all, if one cannot get beneath the phenomenal thing to its fundamental nature, there is no know-

³ Peter A. Bertocci, *The Empirical Argument for God in Late British Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), pp. 115-116.

ing its necessary deportment. Indeed, there is no knowing whether it has a necessary line of behavior at all. If the essential nature of a thing cannot be grasped, there is no providing for it a limiting definition. This means that, if from our knowledge of the past we do not and cannot penetrate to the unambiguous, hard core of reality, we can never have certain knowledge regarding the future. Thus the strictest science ends in mere probability. Experience knows only that a thing is now colored, figured, textured, etc., and that these qualities, sometimes modified, sometimes not, successively appear through the intervals of perception. The modification or its opposite merely happens and there is no possibility of explaining these phenomena. Thus, one state of a thing, however exceptional, is as appropriate as any other. There is no arbitrating between conflicting states of qualities (e.g., mirage versus undistorted image) in order to learn which is expressive of the true nature of the thing. Qualities simply are what they are. They refer to nothing beyond themselves or, if they do, we cannot infer that reference. The conclusion is that the laws of science are not regulative in nature. Rather they are, in one way or another, conveniences or conventions of the mind in its handling of experience. (It is here that the most radical doctrines, e.g., positivism, pragmatism, operationalism, etc., appear.) Then, if there be no regulative scheme that we can discover in nature, there is no telling what the next moment might produce. Perhaps cuckoo eggs will stand forth and expound metaphysics. Any absurdity whatever is just as possible as the uniformity we have come to know.

Bowne, at this point, forsook the strict phenomenalism of British empiricism and for a very good reason. He realized that the qualities of things can never reveal their true nature.⁴ He was aware of the predicament of Humean phenomenalism and sought to avoid it. It is not that he differed in his doctrine of ontology from that of phenomenalism generally. He was committed to the notion that there is no existence of any kind underlying qualities. But he tried so to arrange his premises as to reach a different conclusion. What he suggested was that though we know only qualities we can nevertheless perceive a thing's true nature from the law of its activity.⁵ This was Bowne's philosophy of science.

⁴ Borden P. Bowne, *Metaphysics* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1882), pp. 61ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 59ff.

He believed science to be the passive Baconian discipline of cataloging data. One observes and records and this is science, the limit of our knowledge of nature. Seemingly this is adequate as a definition of science—is it not true that our only knowledge of a thing is gained by the empirical encounter, observation of a thing's activity through the various phases of its career until we have discovered the laws of its behavior?—yet actually its inadequacy is well known. No later than Galileo it was found that science is not a spectator discipline. Data, by themselves, do not constitute science. Data must be understood, intellectualized, if systematic advance beyond sheer fact is made possible. Every modification of nature proceeds upon discernment that the desired modification is within the possible range of a thing's nature. Otherwise science would be a blind swinging in the dark hoping to hit upon some fortunate combination of events so as to produce a desired end. Science is more than the recording of the states of a thing as it proceeds through its own history.

Bowne glimpsed the difficulty attending his definition. He realized that certainty, for this sort of science, is possible only in the presence of an exhaustive knowledge of a thing's actual and possible history.⁷ This is a manifest impossibility. Bowne should have further realized that it amounted to a total upset of his description of science. More especially he ought to have understood that if the law of a thing's activity is identical with its true nature or essence and that if this law or essence is found only in exhaustive knowledge of the thing then he had no basis for real knowledge of nature at all. He has not superseded Hume. Skepticism and probability are his inevitable companions.

III. THE PROBLEM OF THE NATURAL-SUPERNATURAL DISTINCTION

Phenomenalism—and personalism is merely a version of phenomenalism—is doomed in the area of metaphysics by its chosen limitations to the state in which Hume left it. Now a pertinent and crucial theological question must be raised. If experience yields nothing but qualities and if these have no necessary connection or require exhaustive knowledge in order to be known, then every successive or new state of a thing is as native to the thing as any other. No one state is more natural than any other. Each is to be

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

either accepted as a valid member of the passing parade (Hume) or subsumed, together with all other contributing data, under the unfinished history of the thing (Bowne). In either case there is no point in the development of science where one may stop and content himself with the assurance that he knows the real nature of the objects of experience. But if one cannot know their true nature, what is natural to them, neither can he know what is non-natural. He cannot know miracle!

Miracle is not merely a departure from the norm of a thing's behavior. It is not simply a radical sample. Miracle is the non-natural, a contradiction of nature which, without the back-drop of the causal relation, would be indistinguishable. It is no extravagance to claim that within the frame-work of phenomenalism, whether Bowne's variety or other, miracle is meaningless.

The very notion of miracle is peculiarly demanding in the realm of metaphysics. If it is to survive the systematic interpretation of experience then that interpretation must furnish certain minimal requirements. On the side of ontology there must be provided a real uniformity in nature. And that uniformity must be objectively real and necessary, not merely logical. The restrictive, limiting, necessary relations proper to the causal principle must be resident in the structure of things. On the side of epistemology there must be provision for such rapport between subject and object as to permit knowledge of the true nature of the object. And this knowledge must amount, in terms of scientific discipline with its finite limitations of time and place, to virtual prediction, not to mere possibility or probability. Only if these requirements are met can miracle have significance. Personalism does not furnish the designated minimum.

It is strange indeed that upon the very principles which provided the foundation for the most extreme forms of naturalism and skepticism should be erected a venture into Christian metaphysics. Bowne was a Christian. His tradition has been carried on by men of like conviction. But commendable as this is it does not eclipse the philosophical short-comings and, more, the theological perils of Bowne's formulation. Before the turn of the century, his work was under suspicion; discerning persons sensed the direction in which his system would lead. Since that time the implications of his thought have reached full flower. This unfolding has been in the form of a long display of the endemic radicalism of personalism.

This system has nevertheless been attractive to many who reject the liberalism which Bowne helped to shape. It has claimed the distinction of being the major contemporary protest against naturalism. This claim has yielded a measure of prestige which seems hardly justifiable, in view of the fact that the consistent trend of personalism has been *away* from Christian supernaturalism.