
REVIEWS

Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. Pp. ix+197. ISBN 0-415-21503-X. \$34.95, paper.

During a time when the divide between left and right, liberal and conservative, tolerant and dogmatic is on the increase, refreshing is a book that advances the *via media*, or middle way, as a method for theological reflection. Paul Avis relies on a variety of sources from philosophy of science, especially the thought of Michael Polanyi, the Romantic poets and thinkers, anthropology, and literary theory to develop his thesis that “the greatest truths can only be expressed in imaginative form—through images (metaphor, symbol and myth)” (8). In short, Avis draws an analogy between the incarnational and sacramental character of Christianity and personal knowledge. The material world, held imaginatively, is a gateway to Christian revelation.

Against the contemporary suspicion of figurative and imagistic thinking, Avis recognizes that the elements of myth in the Bible and Christian belief are not only compatible but essential to a full-blooded, orthodox faith. Without the balance of mythic realism, Christian theology strays into the inadequate thought of liberalism or conservatism. It is through myth that the deepest human experiences are reflected, and that the most personal is rendered universal.

Myths are informative but not definitive, descriptive but not veridical. This is a critically realist concept of myth; it entails that in our experience of the world (expressed partly in myths) we are in touch with reality; but it acknowledges that as subjects we play a part in constructing our perception of reality and that, therefore, perceptions have to be checked, the deliverances

of experience require to be scrutinized by all available means, interpreted, evaluated and criticized in the light of all our relevant knowledge (130).

The Spanish writer José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) described faith as the unquestioning acceptance of something to which the conscious mind often cannot assent. It is through imaginative apprehensions of truth that faith is derived, but is it subjected to, even challenged by, cognitive thought. Faith arises out of a continual cycle of doubt and belief, where our most cherished beliefs are shattered and refashioned over and over again by the conscious mind, before being once again put to rest as faith, but never for long. Faith and its cousin, belief, result from a creative act of the will, always being put to the test, each time running the risk of loss.

Another Spanish writer, Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) wrote “*la fé no es creer lo que no vimos, sino crear lo que no vemos*”, faith is not believing what we did not witness, but creating what we do not see. Playing with the verbs *creer* (to believe) and *crear* (to create), Unamuno succinctly summarizes the dynamic role the imagination plays in faith development. In his book, Avis goes one step further, and I believe, would adapt Unamuno’s words to state: faith is believing what we witnessed, but does so by creating what we do not see out of the fodder of what we do see. To use Avis, fact is interpreted in the context of meaning, indeed fact and interpretation are fused by our symbolizing capacity and imaginative grasp of the truth.

...there is a vital difference between a literal statement and a true statement...
[We have learned from] St. Augustine that God is a poet and from William Blake that God is an artist too. What do you have to do

to get on the wavelength of a poet or artist? You attune your spirit to beauty, you listen intently to the imagination, you reach out to form, you turn towards the radiance of the inspired word, you open your being to the aesthetic vision (157).

Faith and revelation, according to Avis, result from the creative interaction between imaginative vision, true-life experience, and the discipline of critical thought. But it is the imagination that is the matrix of faith, and unless we are alive to the symbolic language of revelation (myth), we will (and too often do) misunderstand its language. Instead of adopting an objective, rationalist approach to faith, or one that discards critical thought for subjective, unscientific ideals, Avis calls us to walk a third and wholly fiduciary path, the middle way: mundane, worldly, created realities are the vehicles and means of the divine presence and purpose when apprehended through the imagination.

Christian truth is both immanent in the world and transcendent of the world... The world is bound to God in ontological dependence, yet preserved at an epistemic distance that gives scope for human freedom, created contingency, and divine involvement in revelation and redemption (9).

Barbara Baumgarten
bdbaum@centurytel.net

Philip Clayton, *Mind & Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. viii + 236. ISBN: 0-19-927252-2. \$65, £35 hardcover.

I must admit my heart sank when I read the title. Not another book on how Quantum Mechanics can explain the mystery of consciousness! The second half of the title however is misleading. It is in fact

superfluous. Clayton has written a book, or more accurately an extended essay in five chapters, on mind and emergence. To be more specific, he is advocating an ontology that endorses the reality of minds. His prose is lucid and convincing. But then again I agree with the position that he is seeking to defend. Clayton asserts that it is widely believed that there are only two ways of comprehending mental events: physicalism, which asserts that all mental properties can be reduced to physical properties, and dualism, in which a mind is a non-physical entity. Clayton asserts that emergence undermines this dichotomy. It undermines both the sufficiency of physics and the attempt to cut mind off from nature. Within an emergence account, reality is made up of the same sort of stuff, but it has various distinct levels, structured by part-whole relations, each level of which generates new properties. Clayton admits this is not a new idea. The claim that reality is hierarchical is as old as Western philosophy, but for most of the last hundred years reductive physicalism has become the dominant account, and advocates of emergence have largely been ignored. In a reductive physicalist account we may believe that our thoughts have a causal impact in the world, but in reality all the real causality takes place at the physical level — i.e., all causation is ‘upward’. This undermines human agency.

In the account that Clayton seeks to defend, mental properties are dependent on physical properties, but our thoughts can exert a ‘downward’ causation upon the world. How can such a theory be said to be in accordance with the findings of modern science? It is pointed out that scientists have increasingly realised that in the development of complex physical systems, phenomena emerge that cannot be derived from laws of physics. Living organisms are systems that create and maintain order via energy inputs from their environment. Eventually living systems emerged that were capable of acting in accordance with conscious purposes. A strong supervenience theory of mind is a de facto epiphenomenal account in which mind has no effect in the world. In a strong emergence account persons are intentional and teleological — i.e., the universe generates conscious beings that possess mental

attributes, which can become motivated by rational and moral considerations. Classical philosophers speculated whether there could also be, beyond the level of mind, a level of spirit. When kings ruled the Earth, God was conceived as the King of Kings. In an age of deterministic physics, God was known as the Divine Watchmaker. Clayton suggests that our age tends to conceive God as a higher level principle. But if God does not exert any influence until organisms manifest mental causality, this is inconsistent with the assumption that it was God who created the universe within which that causality emerged.

These are big questions, and while this book is one the clearest discussions of these questions in the current literature, you cannot help feeling that their significance is left somewhat in the air. Personally, I found this book both exciting and disappointing. It is exciting because I believe his central claim is correct. It is disappointing because he is unlikely to persuade anybody who does not already share his assumptions. I feel that this could have been a brilliant book, indeed a classic, but it is merely very good. It would have been better if it would have been either shorter, for example three extended lectures, or much longer, supplying much more detailed accounts of both the intellectual background and contemporary work in science. Having said that, if you are interested in what Polanyi has to say about emergence, it is a must read. Like so much of Polanyi, his scandalous claim that reality is layered and emergent verges on orthodoxy in many circles these days, and Clayton acknowledges the contribution that Polanyi makes to this debate. I am going to put *Mind & Emergence* on my favourite books shelf, but more because it supplies us with an elegant introduction to a contemporary hot button issue – when, you may ask, were the questions it addresses not hot button issues! – than because it launches a devastating attack upon enemy territory. Clayton leaves too many questions unanswered and addresses too few of the objections. It serves however as a signpost showing us a way out of the bleak landscape of reductionism. The philosophical importance of such signposts cannot be underestimated.

C. P. Goodman
cpgoodman@lineone.net