

METAPHYSICAL PRIORITY AND PHYSICALIST NATURALISM IN ROBERT CORRINGTON'S ORDINAL METAPHYSICS

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Robert Corrington's thought is best known for the prominence he gives to the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, nature naturing and nature natured. A great deal of his work concentrates on the relations between these two dimensions of nature. Corrington's thought has another equally important dimension, however. This is the "ordinal metaphysics" that he develops within nature natured. Derived from Justus Buchler, this dimension of Corrington's thought is important because here he claims that nature may be understood semiotically. Because the world of nature presents itself ordinally, it has a semiotic order such that its metaphysical comprehension requires semiotic analysis.

In this paper, I want to discuss some of the issues ontological physicalism presents for Corrington's conception. In such a short paper, I shall not take a substantive position but want to use Corrington's work to suggest issues with which every naturalist should be concerned.

Corrington's ordinal conception of metaphysics leads him to a position of "ontological parity" for all orders within nature natured. For Buchler and Corrington a natural complex is anything that can be "discriminated in any respect or in any degree."¹ Such complexes present themselves as orders and sub-orders of traits in infinite number and complexity. Here is Buchler's list of examples: "Relations, structures, processes, societies, human individuals, human products, physical bodies, words and bodies of discourse, ideas, qualities, contradictions, meanings, possibilities, myths, laws, duties, feelings, illusions, reasonings, dreams—all are natural complexes."² "Ontological parity" is simply the claim that no natural complex or order is more real than any other. Furthermore, Buchler argues that there is no coherent way to conceive a single order of orders. This undermines the way in

¹ Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, Edited by Kathleen Wallace and Armen Marsoobian, with Robert S. Corrington (Albany: State University of New York Press, Second, Expanded Edition), 1.

² *Ibid.*

which such notions as “Nature,” “World,” “The Universe,” or “The Most Real” have been used historically to identify an order or reality from which all other orders can be derived or that can be used to discriminate between what is real and unreal or otherwise to delimit degrees of being or reality.³

“Ontological parity” is a significant because it denies the “ontological priority” for some domain asserted by every metaphysics since Thales. In this paper, I want to examine how classical materialism (or physicalism) fares, or how it ought to fare, in Corrington’s approach to naturalism. I want to show that Corrington gives far less credit to physicalism than he ought, and that he is mistaken in the major way he interprets it. This issue is important because classical materialism has played a decisive role historically in defining naturalism, and it deserves this role because it is the best candidate for asserting the ontological implications of modern physics (i.e., what I call scientific realism). In the following, I shall refer to classical materialism as “physicalism,” since this is the contemporary nomenclature.

Corrington seems to take physicalism as necessarily asserting a foundationalist priority, but he is mistaken about this. By foundationalism, Corrington means a position “which would stipulate or propose a categorial ground or first principle for nature in its radical complexity,” and he asserts that “Buchler provides a framework which puts all forms of foundationalism into question.”⁴ The foundationalist asserts priority for some single identity for “whatever is, in whatever way,” and Corrington lists the following examples: substance, monad, Will-to-Power, pure experience, actual occasion, eternal entity, logical simple, Spirit.⁵ Oddly, he here omits matter or “physical entity” from this list, but it is evident from elsewhere that he regards physicalism also as foundationalist.

Corrington discusses physicalism briefly at the beginning of *Ecstatic Naturalism*, as an instance of what he calls “descriptive naturalism.” His overall point is to insist that “nature cannot be characterized by any single metaphor or conceptual scheme. Its

³ See, Justus Buchler, “On the Concept of ‘The World’,” Appendix III in *Ibid.*, 224-259.

⁴ Robert S. Corrington, “Justus Buchler’s Ordinal Metaphysics and the Collapse of Foundationalism,” in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XXV, No. 3 (September 1985), 289.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 289 f.

vastness and sheer multiplicity belie” any attempt to identify a single “ultimate essence or trait contour of nature.”⁶

Materialism, for example, is a conceptual framework that may or may not pertain to a larger naturalism. It is simply one framework within which certain desired discriminations can be made and secured. Insofar as materialism entails imposing an explanatory scheme on all orders of the world, it refuses to recognize differences and breaks within nature that negate the imperial claims of materialism.⁷

In effect, Corrington is saying that materialism is foundationalist. This leads him to distinguish “naturalism” from “materialism”: “naturalism is the enabling condition for any metaphysics of lesser scope. In certain orders of analysis materialism may be appropriate, while in others it may violate the unique features of the orders under study.”⁸ It is worth noting, as will be important below, that Corrington does recognize materialism’s validity in some sense so long as it limits itself to some domains only and does not make imperialistic claims “to reduce nature to one essence or genus.”⁹ He is extremely unclear, however, concerning how one *could* acknowledge materialism in this sense and yet keep it so limited. Stated alternatively, he fails entirely to explore what the implications of such a materialism would be for other domains. He seems to imply that one could recognize materialism as one order among others yet in such a way that the reach of this order into others would be limited. I will claim that this latter unclarity represents a major shortcoming in Corrington’s thought.

I conclude that Corrington fails to give more sustained attention to physicalism because he takes it to be foundationalist. This is the meaning of his reference to its “imperial” pretensions.¹⁰ Even when he recognizes that this might not be the case, he relegates it to one domain among literally an infinite number of others, and simply neglects to

⁶ Robert S. Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

examine the implications it, or the results of modern physics, might have for all other domains. In this respect, Corrington simply represents another of the many forms of pluralism that dominate contemporary philosophy. But this seems odd for a position that claims to be naturalistic.

Physicalism is often identified with foundationalism because it is taken to require reduction. "Reduction" means that all domains outside or above the basic physical level are nothing but physical and require articulation in nothing but physical terms (or else they are simply unreal or illusory). A consequence of this view is that physicalism must be eliminative, in the sense that it eliminates any domain outside or above the level of the basic physical entities, so that such things as sentience, consciousness, intentionality, culture, and so forth are eliminated because they cannot be articulated by (i.e., reduced to) *nothing other than* the basic physical entities.

But physicalism does not require reduction, and indeed there is near unanimous agreement that reduction simply cannot be made to work. In *The Faces of Existence*, John Post elegantly elaborates an alternative, non-reductive version of physicalism, and significantly, it is not foundationalist. In Post's language, it does not commit "monopoly," as is indicated in the very title of the book, *The Faces of Existence*.¹¹ It would be impossible for me to elaborate Post's highly technical argument here. I shall say just enough to identify his project and then bring the discussion back to Corrington.

Post replaces reduction with what he calls "determination" or a "relation of determination." Any version of physicalism can be stated by three minimal principles: (1) everything is physical; (2) no difference without a physical difference; (3) all truth is determined by physical truth.¹² The first slogan, everything is physical, makes a claim to comprehensiveness that any metaphysics must make. It says that everything, everywhere, everywhen, is some mathematical-physical entity or other. But this need not be monopolistic because we can easily recognize that few things (if any) are nothing but physical things or have their identity simply and solely as physical entities.¹³ The second principle, no difference without a physical difference, is where the

¹¹ John F. Post, *The Faces of Existence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), my emphasis.

¹² *Ibid.*, 161.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 205.

trouble lies since it seems to require reduction. Reduction states that if there is a distinction between x and y expressible by a non-physical domain, then there are terms solely from physics which express the same distinction. Taking this position lands one in monopoly because the terms from physics turn out to be exhaustive. In contrast, determination need say nothing about identity of terms, of domains of discourse, or of explanation. Rather it simply says that given any nonphysical difference, there must be some physical difference or other. Thus, for instance, a property can be non-physical in regard to domain status in the sense that every predicate that expresses it belongs to some domain other than physics. Among other things, this can mean that no predicate or set of predicates from physics could pick the property out or individuate it. It also means that such domains have explanatory autonomy. This is certainly true of consciousness, intentionality, and cultural realities. But it is also true of inanimate macroscopic phenomena such as shoes or ships.¹⁴ Determination in this sense is actually quite close to ordinary usage, “for to say one thing determines another, in ordinary parlance, is to say the first delimits or fixes how the second can be; or that given the first, there is one and only one way the second can be.”¹⁵ And the same is true for explanation, for “if we wonder why a certain thing is as it is, our question is answered when we learn that it had to be that way, given the way some other thing is.”¹⁶ But in neither of these senses does determination require identity of terms or domains. The third slogan, all truth is determined by physical truth, is close to determination. Indeed it is not an epistemological principle at all but an ontological or metaphysical one, and it is not monopolistic.¹⁷ A knowledge only of the physical truths would not permit us to read off or know the non-physical truths—among other reasons because the non-physical truths may be expressible only in a domain entirely different from a physical vocabulary. The “claim is not that the N-truths [the non-physical truths] can be *ascertained* from the physical but only that they are *determined* by the physical.”¹⁸

Let me now say a few words about why physicalism articulated as determination is not monopolistic. Two points need to be made. The

¹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 181 f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 186-87.

first is that based on physics, physicalism will formulate positions that are comprehensive in the sense that it will frame theories that are so general as to apply invariantly and objectively to everywhere and everywhen. But comprehensiveness in this sense is conditional. It is conditional, that is, on our interest in just the kind of generality that invariance and objectivity make possible. Monopoly occurs when to this comprehensiveness the further claim is attached that “discourse outside physics is false or meaningless unless it can be reduced to the vocabulary required for framing these ultrageneral physical theories.”¹⁹ Or it occurs when the conditionality qualification is removed and unconditional priority or importance is attributed to this domain and all other domains are thereby downgraded. Physicalism will attribute a kind of priority to physics, but this priority will be conditional. Again, to be about everything is not to claim that everything about it can be said with this discourse. This means, second, that phrases or statements that do claim unconditional or absolute priority should be avoided. Thus, physicalism should not claim to describe “the only real world,” or say that it is about “*the* world” or “*the* way things really are.” Nor should it say that it represents “the way things are *in themselves*” or “the ultimate nature of existence.” As Post shows in great detail, there simply is no one way the world is. There may be priorities aplenty, but as Buchler and Corrington will agree, such priorities are always in some respect that is conditional. Thus, in a given context there may be causal, evidential, semantic, identificational, ontological, predicational, observational, temporal, conceptual, definitional, logical, experiential, and many more priorities, but none need be claimed to be absolute or unconditional.

Let me illustrate the difference between a non-reductive physicalism and monopoly with three examples: objectivity, realism, and a correspondence theory of truth. Physicalism is often criticized as monopolistic because it makes a claim to objectivity. But properly conceived objectivity is not monopolistic. We attribute objectivity to whatever invariant provides the simplest and most complete explanation for the otherwise incompatible appearances of a thing.²⁰ A dime can be said to be really, objectively round because we find that a round thing would project exactly the sequence of shapes, the varying ellipses, we observe. The dime is not now round, now elliptical, now

¹⁹ Ibid., 205.

²⁰ Ibid., 288.

straight. This means that, as with other objective statements, it is round *period* and true *period* that it is round, and it means that such statements about it are eternal truths. But to assert such objectivity is not to claim monopoly: there need be no further assertion that such sentences enjoy unconditional priority because they express the ultimate nature of existence. The priority objectivity enjoys in physicalism is conditional. The physicalist is saying that “*if* we are interested in truth *period*, or in what there is that is invariant through the perspectives of time, place, culture, and so on, then we had better try to express ourselves by means of eternal sentences.”²¹ Furthermore, even though there are innumerable domains that may be inexpressible in objective discourse—for instance, any subjective phenomena that require having a point of view—“yet it can still be true that the objective phenomena—what there are that are invariant through the perspectives of species, times, places, cultures—determine” the subjective phenomena. Objective phenomena determine the subjective in the following senses. They determine (a) that there are such phenomena, (b) which ones there are, (c) what they are like (assuming that being subjective it is like something to be them), (d) what it would be like to experience them, and (e) what their other properties are.²²

Now let us take realism and correspondence. A monopolistic statement about realism is William Alston’s claim that “the primary goal of human thought . . . is to believe . . . what is true in the realistic sense,”²³ and this becomes blatantly monopolistic if we go on to say that “something is true if and only if it states the way things are in themselves.”²⁴ The problem here, of course, is the use of the phrases “the way” and “in themselves,” as though there is only one such way things can be in themselves and realism alone says it. But a realist notion of truth can be formulated innocently: “*x* is true if and only if the things *x* is about are the way *x* says they are.” Or, if the phrase “the way” here is not innocent enough, we can reformulate: “*x* says the things are a certain way, and that way is indeed one of the ways they are.”²⁵ Correspondence is often associated with monopoly because the metaphysician speaks of truth as correspondence with the way the

²¹ Ibid., 289.

²² Ibid., 245, 289.

²³ As quoted by Post, Ibid., 290.

²⁴ Ibid., 290.

²⁵ Ibid.

world is; there is one and only one way things are, so that a sentence x is true if and only if x expresses correspondence with that way. But again, correspondence can be formulated innocently and non-monopolistically: x says certain things are a certain way, and x is true if and only if that way corresponds with one of the ways those things indeed are.²⁶

I have tried to say something about how physicalism or materialism need not be foundationalist or monopolistic, or, in Corrington's word, imperialistic. I now want to bring the discussion back to Corrington. My purpose is to open Corrington's thought to these issues, not to resolve them.

I have said that Corrington tends to regard physicalism as foundationalist. This is not quite true since he does acknowledge that in some orders it may be an appropriate method of analysis.²⁷ But he does nothing with this. In particular, he fails to recognize that physicalism could be appropriate "in certain orders of analysis" only if it exercised some constraint on some, perhaps all, other orders of relevance. I want to mention two issues where a tighter association of his naturalism with physicalism might benefit Corrington.

Let us recognize first that Corrington has a real problem with the meaning of naturalism. As he says: "Nature cannot be characterized by any single metaphor or conceptual scheme."²⁸ It has no ultimate essence or trait contour. Oddly enough, then, for a position that claims so insistently to be naturalistic, the crucial concepts "nature" or "naturalism" cannot be discriminated, unlike all the orders within nature each of which is defined as a natural complex precisely by there being some discrimination. Consequently, we cannot say what Corrington's naturalism excludes *as a consequence of its being naturalistic*. Now, it needs to be said that looking at Corrington's work as a whole, there can be no doubt that his position is naturalistic because he does in fact exclude certain positions. For instance, he is harshly critical of both the "glottocentric" standpoint and the anthropocentric pluralism that pervades so much contemporary philosophy (including neo-pragmatism). Also, he rejects process philosophy for the imperial character of its panpsychism. But his reasons for these rejections have less to do with his naturalism as such

²⁶ My paraphrase of Ibid.

²⁷ Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 17.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

and more with his argument that some natural complexes can have a semiotic structure independent of language, consciousness, intentionality, or mentality.²⁹

The one positive contribution Corrington explicitly acknowledges from physicalism is its role historically in excluding supernaturalism. But oddly, physicalism could play this role only because it puts pressure on how all the orders of relevance in nature are recognized and articulated, and it is just this constraint or pressure that Corrington neglects. In other words, materialism could play this role only because it defines what we mean by “nature” by supplying a discrimination: what is real is not the world of nature and the supernatural order that interacts from outside nature from beyond, but just nature. One consequence of Corrington’s position is that in so far as “the supernatural” is a semiotic order, it and its “God” are brought within “nature” (as he vaguely uses this term) and express themselves as semiotic orders of relevance within “nature” (so that, for instance, Corrington can say they “represent a version of nature’s self-transcendence”).³⁰ In this context, Corrington says, “naturalism affirms that there is only one nature even if it obtains in innumerable orders. . . .”³¹ The problem is to know what this means and what warrants Corrington in asserting it, even as a stipulation. It makes no discrimination. Furthermore, just because the discriminations that make “nature” nature are neglected, discriminations that might be supplied, at least in part, by physicalism/materialism, Corrington actually has no sound reasons for opposing supernaturalism, except dogmatically and by fiat. I am not saying that Corrington’s problem with the content of his “naturalism” is caused solely by his neglect of physicalism, but I am saying that physicalism could be of real service to him with this issue.

My second point can be stated quite briefly. I have said that even when he acknowledges physicalism, Corrington fails to give its semiotic order(s) any role in pressuring, ordering, or constraining the other orders of nature. Anyone who reads Corrington extensively cannot help but be struck with the multitude of semiotic orders that populate his nature. The “ordinal phenomenology” which he has developed to analyze these orders is enormously rich and filled with

²⁹ See *Ibid.*, 32-42; this argument explains the significance of the subtitle of *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

³¹ *Ibid.*

wonderful insights. But one cannot avoid also being struck by a certain promiscuity in his proliferation of semiotic orders. Again, it seems to me that something like physicalism, which has played such a crucial role historically in the development of what we now mean by nature, could serve an invaluable role in disciplining this promiscuity.

The problem with this proposal, however, involves the other side of Corrington's thought, his distinction between *natura naturans* (nature naturing) and *natura naturata* (nature natured). "Nature naturing," for Corrington, is an ecstatic source of all natural orders (*natura naturata*) but is itself beyond semiotic determination; it is not itself an order. This ecstatic source gives Corrington's thought a distinctly "Romantic" cast which at least to some extent accounts for his lack of interest in materialism/physicalism and natural science and for the lack of constraining force from them. Physicalism necessarily lacks constraining power for Corrington because it is simply one among an infinite series of orders that themselves have their origin in a transcendent, ecstatic source that is utterly beyond comprehension (except in the claim that it is ecstatic).³² Yet, most of Corrington's potentially impressive "ordinal phenomenology" is devoted not to a reading of natural orders (including a reading of how these orders might be expressed and constrained by physical determination) but to giving an account of the ecstatic yet apophatic source of these orders. It is this focus on the pre-semiotic "ejects" of "nature naturing" that produces his promiscuous proliferation of semiotic orders. That is, this "ecstatic producing" *necessarily* could not be ordered by an ontological priority of any sort.

But surely there is something odd, and certainly philosophically undetermined, in Corrington's attempt to identify ecstasy with an ontological order beyond all "natural orders," to find "ecstasy" as the determining expression of the bedrock bottom of all things. A physicalist naturalism need not be hostile to the notion of ecstasy. The question concerns its ontological (and metaphysical) status. More plausible than Corrington's ungrounded assertion about its ontological status is to see it is an element of experience, or better, of *existence* (in the sense of Heidegger's analytic of existence). Ecstasy can be given a central role in something like Corrington's "ordinal phenomenology" by seeing it as playing a decisive role in the way the world is both

³² See, for instance, Robert S. Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 245.

received and taken in experience by human beings. Better yet, as with Heidegger, is to see it as determining in some crucial way the very structure of human receiving and taking as such. This is the significance of Heidegger's move from "experience" to "existence." In his sense, ecstasy expresses a temporal framework that, as an ontological (i.e., existential) structure, determines all human "experiencing." Though narrower than Corrington's usage, the ontological/existentialist character of such a conception of ecstasy is still quite broad (since it provides the transcendental background of all human experiencing) and is compatible already with a great deal of what Corrington has to say about human placement in the world (especially in its religious dimension). But ecstasy is not identified with the ontological order of things entire. The latter is a deeply problematic conception that remains ungrounded in Corrington's thought. I am claiming, then, that rethinking the status of ecstasy in his thought could bring Corrington's "naturalism" into alignment with a physicalistic naturalism and provide a way by which his promiscuous orders might be brought into some order.