Does Emergence Help in Defending Religious Belief?

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1. The concept of *emergence* has gained some popularity in the philosophy of mind and in metaphysico-epistemological explorations of our current scientific worldview. This concept is used to indicate that the "higher" levels of reality (e.g., mentality, normativity) cannot be reduced to the "lower" ones (particularly the physical or physico-chemical level, as studied by physics and other natural sciences). Emergent properties are properties of a complex system that cannot be deduced from (what is known about) the properties of the parts of the system. Roughly, the idea is to save such things as mentality (consciousness), normativity, and cultural entities from the threatening reduction or elimination dreamed of by more extreme physicalists.[1]

Some recent authors have suggested that the concept of emergence might be helpful in the epistemology of religious belief, rendering a theistic world-view scientifically acceptable. Given the generally naturalistic trend of contemporary scientific and philosophical thought, it is hardly surprising that theologians and other scholars examining religious phenomena have – even if they are theists – taken seriously the naturalistic lessons taught by science. Few people doubt the dependence of mentality or conscious experience on brain states and eventually on the physical world. While it has been suggested that a form of emergent dualism (though not Cartesian substance dualism) is defensible (Hasker 1999) and even, in the classical emergence discussion in the 1920s, that deity itself might be seen as the emergent evolutionary stage following consciousness (Alexander [1920]1979), several religiously inclined thinkers explore the epistemic credentials of theism in the framework of nonreductive physicalism or naturalism (Drees 1996, McGrath 1998), thus reviving a form of natural theology. Even the Christian doctrine of bodily survival after death can, it has been claimed, be combined with nonreductive physicalism, or at least antidualism (Stump 1995; Forrest 1996; Barbour 1999; Murphy 1999a, 1999b; Clayton 2000; Schouten 2001). This is partly because the dualistic picture of a disembodied mind is *not* Christian: the Bible urges us to believe in an embodied self, a total person (Barbour 1999, 363). Thus, a religious view of the self need not be dualistic; alternatively, one might attempt to develop a non-Cartesian dualism compatible with materialism.[2] Debates over these matters have been active in the interdisciplinary journal *Zygon*. The contributors' views differ in details, but the general thrust is that the dialogue between science and religion can be enhanced by taking due notice of the antireductionist, emergentist world-picture painted by the new sciences of complexity, and of nondualistic yet nonreductive theories of mind.

The purpose of this paper is to take a brief critical look at this discussion. It is not easy to see how theism could be established on an emergentist basis in a manner compatible with physicalism. I argue that appeals to the notion of emergence are hardly helpful in the epistemology of religious belief. I finally end up with Wittgensteinian considerations.

2. While emergence is a popular theoretical concept in the above-mentioned debates, some contributors believe that a mere supervenience physicalism (or emergence construed as mind-body supervenience) is sufficient for a naturalistically acceptable theism that avoids dualism (Murphy 1999a, Clayton 2000, Schouten 2001). Those who rely on the idea of emergence tend to leave the notion unspecified, simply referring to the level structure of reality and to the arising of "new" properties (Polkinghorne 1991). The following is a typical formulation: "Traditional materialistic thinking is replaced by an emergent, holistic approach in which the worldview of science is infused with a new subjectivity and with rich macroqualities." (Sperry 1991, 251.) "Downward causation" is, however, often mentioned as a key feature of emergentism (*ibid*., 245; Peterson 1999, 291; Murphy 1999a, 555; Clayton 2000, 633ff.): emergent properties have novel causal powers, influencing the parts of the system whose properties they are. Insofar as emergence *is* somehow defined, it is taken as obvious that it is real; according to Peacocke (1994, 643-644), "emergence" is "the entirely *neutral* name for that general feature of natural processes wherein complex structures, especially in living organisms, develop distinctively new capabilities and functions at levels of greater complexity". The term describes "the observed phenomenon of the appearance of new capabilities, functions, etc., at greater levels of complexity" (658). In the same vein, Barbour (1999, 385) says that "in evolutionary history and in the development of the individual organism there occur forms of order and levels of activity that are genuinely new and qualitatively different", adding that a stronger version of emergence claims that "events at higher levels are not determined by events at lower levels and are themselves causally effective". These authors typically employ a *diachronic* (evolutionary) version of emergentism (cf. Peacocke 1999, 706-707).[3]

From the perspective of the emergence discussion we find in philosophical literature (e.g., Stephan 1999), these formulations are unsatisfactory. Peacocke's characterization, for instance, fails to distinguish between truly emergent (irreducible) properties and other complex system properties. What is essential in his (and many others') views is just the level structure of reality and of the corresponding sciences, supposedly leaving room for the level(s) of soul, meaning, value, etc. The problem of downward causation, in particular – which several authors, including Kim (1998), take to be *the* problem with emergentism and nonreductive physicalism in general – has received no detailed discussion by thinkers interested in a reconciliation of science and religion *via* emergentism.

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[1] I cannot offer any general discussion of the concept of emergence or its problems here. For more detailed treatments, see Stephan (1999), El-Hani and Pihlström (2002), and Pihlström (forthcoming). (This paper is abstracted from an on-going research project on this notion, to be carried on partly in cooperation with Professor C.N. El-Hani.)

[2] Proposing the latter alternative, Stump (1995, 510ff.) reads Thomas Aquinas in an emergentist fashion: "soul" is the Aquinian (and Aristotelian) name for the substantial form of a living material object; while a human soul can temporarily exist after the material body has perished, this state is "unnatural" for it. (Resurrection means re-embodiment.) Mental properties – properties of the person, a totality of body and soul – are "dependent on the configuration and composition of the whole; they are not identical to the properties of the material parts of the whole, but they emerge from the properties and dynamic interactions of those parts" (519). Stump notes (525) that Samuel Alexander, in his classical theory, associated emergent properties (understood as configurational patterns) with the distinction between matter and form.

[3] On the distinction between diachronic and synchronic emergence, see Stephan (1999).

Do the "emergents", e.g. soul, do the causal work they are supposed to do *qua* emergents, and if so, is this view compatible with the physicalist conviction of a causal closure of the physical? Or are they epiphenomenal, after all, leaving genuine causal powers to their physical supervenience base? It is not necessary to solve this dilemma in order to speak about emergence, for many human capacities we take to "emerge" from lower levels of reality can be accounted for in noncausal terms (Pihlström forthcoming), but the problem should be recognized.

As Peterson (1999, 291-292) admits, emergentism may not, then, take seriously enough the questions of how, specifically, the levels interact; it provides only a general framework for the study of the mind as a natural phenomenon. It is only seldom that Kim-type worries about downward causation are raised in these discussions (see, however, Bielfeldt 1999, 622-623; Murphy 1999b, 637; Clayton 2000, 633). When these worries arise, they are set aside too easily (as Clayton does), relying on something like "emergentist supervenience" which allegedly saves mental causation and leaves room for a religious reality.[4]

One of the few recent contributions in which the combination of (emergentist or supervenientist) physicalism and theism is seriously challenged[5] is William Vallicella's (1998). He rejects eliminativism, type-type identity theory, supervenientism, emergentism, and "the constitution view" (i.e., the view that persons are materially constituted beings) as five "theologically useless physicalisms" (163ff.). The argument is largely based on Kim's criticism of nonreductive physicalism. Regarding emergentism (167-170), Vallicella points out that even if the human soul were seen as an emergent substance or as having emergent properties, problems would remain, as neither divine nor angelic consciousness can be understood as emerging from matter, upon any Christian construal: "It is analytic that emergence is emergence from a physical base, and in the case of God and angels classically conceived there is no physical base. Moreover, it is analytic that to emerge is to come into being, and God's consciousness does not come into being" (169). Vallicella (170) also argues against Stump's (1995) Aquinian suggestion of combining materialism and dualism (and the possibility of survival), insisting that an emergent property cannot continue to exist after the physical system whose property it is falls apart.

If a reconciliation of science and theism were possible through emergentism, this would constitute an intellectual breakthrough of enormous magnitude. No doubts about the cultural or generally human significance of the notion of emergence would remain. Unfortunately, the research program run by theistically inclined naturalists seems to me hopeless; as Vallicella (1998, 176) puts it, physicalism and theism are "competing *Weltanschauungen*". One problem with views seeking to reconcile them, and with the on-going discussion of emergence and theism in *Zygon* (and elsewhere), is – as in the systematically philosophical emergence literature we find elsewhere – an unargued commitment to strong *metaphysical realism*. It is presupposed that both scientific and religious language purport to refer to a fundamentally concept- and language-independent world and that, therefore, religion and science *must* be coherently fitted into one grand theory of the world, if we

want to retain both. Against this assumption, a more Wittgensteinian-oriented thinker may argue that religion and science are different human practices (or groups of practices) with their characteristic normative structures. Quite different "moves" are allowed in these different (families of) language-games; for example, the "soul" allegedly rendered "scientifically acceptable" in emergentism would hardly have a place in religious language-use.

Insofar as one abandons metaphysical realism in general philosophy, including the metaphysics and epistemology of emergence, one should abandon it in the philosophy of religion as well.[6] No ordinary theism will be defensible, if we choose this strategy (because theistic metaphysics in its common forms can hardly be maintained if we give up metaphysical realism), but nor do we have any desperate need for an epistemological reconciliation of religion and science (*via* emergence or other conceptual innovations). A pragmatic *pluralism* emerges.

3. The neglect of Wittgensteinian alternatives in the emergence debate parallels the eclipse of these possibilities in the metaphysical-realism-based mainstream analytic philosophy of religion.[7] From a Wittgensteinian point of view, the interesting way to promote the science–religion dialogue and to seek (inconclusively) possibilities for a reconciliation is through a pragmatic pluralism drawing attention to the fact that people act differently within different practices, having different goals and different methods for achieving their goals. Such variability is constitutive of human life as we know it. This general "pragmatist" idea is not too far from Wittgenstein's emphasis on the plurality of language-games which has had some influence in the philosophy of religion.[8] Science and religion serve different human purposes and may (if this un-Wittgensteinian formulation is allowed) be understood as establishing different ontologies that need not be unified into a single all-inclusive theory. Whether mutually irreconcilable ontological commitments can be endorsed by one and the same thinker is a difficult question inviting the problem of relativism; yet, epistemologists of religious belief should examine this question, instead of taking the reconciliatory task for granted and developing emergentist pseudo-solutions to it. Emergentist theists misleadingly hold that scientific and religious conceptualizations of human experience must refer to the same "world", reality in itself, construed in a metaphysical-realist fashion.

It is, then, metaphysical realism that leads both emergentism and the philosophy of religion astray (and impedes synthesizing the two). Both, and their potential dialogue, could be enriched by questioning the realistic premises that most parties to contemporary debates presuppose. Such criticism can be based upon Wittgensteinian considerations, though related anti-metaphysically-realist options, including pragmatism, are also available. Just as Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion have denied that religious belief could be evaluated on the epistemic principles of scientific theorizing, the metaphysical conceptions of the mind underlying emergence

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[4] Clayton's (2000) view is confused: he calls his position "emergentist monism" (arguing that the world should be conceived of as a single physical system) but nevertheless subscribes to both ontological and explanatory pluralism in his theory of levels (644).

[5] I am not implying that this combination is generally accepted; on the contrary, most philosophers hardly take it seriously. To "challenge" the idea is to deal with it explicitly and argue against it.

[6] This is not to give up *pragmatic* realism about religious issues (cf. Pihlström 1998). I should note that although I have relied on Vallicella's critique of theistically reinterpreted physicalism, he does not question the realistic assumptions of the discourse he criticizes.

[7] For an informative discussion of the ways in which Anglo-American philosophers of religion tend to endorse realistic theism, see Koistinen (2000). Also authors who (like some contributors to *Zygon*) wish to replace traditional theism by pan(en)theism are firmly committed to metaphysical realism.

[8] Barbour (1999, 385) describes his view as "ontological pluralism" but does not ground it in Wittgensteinian arguments. I see Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion as, broadly speaking, belonging to the pragmatist tradition, but this is not a topic I can pursue here.

theories (viz., nonreductive physicalism) may be subordinated to a Wittgensteinian critique. Today, typical philosophical treatments of consciousness and psychological concepts are scientistic, failing to take the Wittgensteinian perspective seriously (Schroeder 2001).

I cannot, of course, present any full-blown account of religion – or mind – in these scarce pages. I have only sketched why some recent nonreductive physicalists' attempts to epistemically "save" theism by referring to emergence are misguided. Nothing has been said against religious faith as such (nor in favor of such faith, for that matter). We may, by drawing attention to the complexities, variations and indeterminacies of our actual linguistic practices themselves, try to trace the true similarities and differences of (say) scientific and religious activities.[9] In this process, the possibility of offering a Wittgensteinian reconceptualization of emergentism should be explored. Accordingly, my message is not purely negative; I am not denying that there are interconnections between emergence theories and Wittgenstein's (1953) and his followers' picture of human beings as naturally language-using creatures. A form of *antireductionism*, in particular, is common to both: language is a rule-governed activity, something "more" than mere actual verbal behavior; yet, it undeniably emerges from factualities of that behavior. This emergence deserves philosophical scrutiny, whether we are interested in the peculiarities of our religious or mental vocabularies. But the philosopher's task is to examine the (pragmatic) preconditions of meaningfulness in these areas, not to engage in quasi-scientific speculations.

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[9] Arguing for any specific position in this regard cannot be my task here.