PROLOGUE

This paper touches controversial issues, and some of the possibilities discussed will undoubtedly make some readers uncomfortable. This is because it takes seriously in a particular way both the historic Christian message and a modern scientific perspective, emphasizing their cognitive claims as I understand them from a Quaker perspective. The reader may not share this double commitment. Nevertheless the argument is logically and epistemologically sound; the unease is at a theological and/or metaphysical level. This issue will be discussed briefly in the last main section. However, a full treatment cannot be given here; an in-depth justification for the view taken has been given in other works.¹

For the moment I make the initial claims that: (1) there are other types of knowledge besides that given by the “hard” sciences, for example, that given by philosophy, theology, humanistic, and artistic disciplines—the task is to find a viewpoint that does justice to these issues as well as to hard science, in a compatible way; (2) the hypothetico-deductive method used to support the viewpoint presented here is essentially the same as that underlying our acceptance of modern science; and (3) the main themes proposed, controversial as they are, are supported by as much or indeed more evidence (admittedly of a more general form than that used by physics alone) than many of the themes of modern theoretical physics.

The requirement in order to approach the material fairly is an open mind in looking at the various logically possible options, rather than

simply selecting one particular metaphysical stance on an *a priori* basis. The important point is that we have to adopt some metaphysical position; we should do so here in a considered way.

1. *Introduction*

This paper is largely a response to Nancey Murphy’s contribution to this volume, “Divine Action in the Natural Order: Buridan’s Ass and Schrödinger’s Cat.” That paper is revolutionary because it represents a conservative interpretation of the Christian faith\(^2\) which, unlike most other such interpretations, takes the content of modern science seriously as part of the task of constructive theology. The viewpoint here will be to basically agree with Murphy’s paper, and comment on some specific issues raised by its thesis.

Accepting the main thesis of that paper, the themes I would like to discuss further are: (a) the issue of capricious action; (b) the issue of top-down causation through intention, and the particular causal nexus of the action; and (c) the issue of evidence for the position stated.

As regards (a), one of the main problems for the proposal is the charge of capriciousness in God’s action, in terms of God deciding now and then to act contrary to the regular patterns of events but often deciding not to do so. One would like to have articulated some kind of criterion of choice underlying such decisions, and then an analysis given of how that criterion might work out in practice. This has to take very seriously indeed the issue of evil, pain, and suffering as experienced in the present-day world, of God’s acceptance and allowance of horrors of all kinds, which one might *a priori* presume he/she could and would prevent if he/she so desired. If the usual Christian view is to make sense, there has to be a cast-iron reason why a merciful and loving God does not alleviate a lot more of the suffering in the world, if he/she has indeed the power to do so. This leads to the question of when divine action may be expected to take place, in either an “ordi-