



Philosophical Debates on Religion Vs. Science

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Abstract: Traditionally, the analytic philosophy of religion has focused almost solely on specifically philosophical questions about religion. These include the existence of God and divine attributes, religious language, and the justification of religious beliefs, just to mention a few. Recently, many scholars in the field have begun to engage more directly with scientific results. It is suggested that this is a promising direction for the philosophy of religion to take. Nevertheless, we want to warn the philosophy of religion against the excessive focus on the methodology that has preoccupied the "science and religion dialogue" in theology. Instead of attempting to formulate a general methodology for all possible engagements between philosophy of religion and the sciences, philosophers of religion would do well to focus on local and particular themes. Since there is no single method in philosophy and since scientific disciplines that have religious relevance vary in their methods as well, progress can be made only if philosophical tools are employed to analyze particular and clearly demarcated questions.

Key Words: Traditionally, analytic philosophy, specifically, philosophical, attributes, religious language.

Since the 1950s, the analytic philosophy of religion has focused almost solely on distinctly philosophical questions related to religion and theology. These include (but are not limited to) questions about religious language, arguments for the existence and non-existence of God, and the concept of God. In the 1980s, the philosophy of religion saw a renaissance when new and more diverse views of epistemology and metaphysics stirred up the field. Although some philosophers of religion have engaged with scientific results, usually either supporting or undermining theism, it is clear that the methods and the questions have been distinctly "philosophical" rather than scientific. In the meantime, analytic philosophy as a whole has been strongly shaped not only by methodological naturalism, where philosophy seeks to model itself after the sciences but also by the increasing motivation to take into account the results of the sciences in philosophical work. The scientific turn in the philosophy of mind and cognition is a good example of this. Following this general trend, philosophers of religion have begun to engage with the results of the sciences more and more. It is perhaps misleading to talk about "a scientific turn" in the philosophy of religion: methodologically

philosophy of religion has not become more scientific, nor are there many voices demanding that. Nevertheless, philosophers have begun to take scientific results into account in debates that have traditionally been conducted in philosophical terms only.

Generally speaking, one finds this turn towards increasing engagement with the sciences a positive one. Not only does it make the philosophy of religion more pluralistic and interdisciplinary, but it also injects the stale debates with new ideas and perspectives. One also wants to maintain the "philosophical" nature of the philosophy of religion: it cannot be turned or transformed into science to supplement or replace the scientific study of religion.

In this paper, two interconnected issues are addressed. The first has to do with the methods of engagement between the sciences and philosophy of religion. We will provide some methodological reflections on how this engagement with the sciences has been done and how it could be done better. By drawing lessons from theology, especially the "science and religion dialogue", we suggest that philosophers of religion should not commit themselves to one, single method of an engagement or enforce one methodological stance for all such



engagements. We refer here, especially to a number of scholars who have attempted to develop a post-foundationalist methodology for all such engagements. As far as we understand it, postfoundationalists have two goals. On the one hand, they seek to rehabilitate theology as an academic enterprise; on the other hand, they seek to resist scientific or reductionistic views of the sciences as a whole.

Although it has been suggested that lessons can be learned from "religion and science", one does not want to press the analogy too far. It is clear that the philosophy of religion and "science and religion" dialogue is not completely analogous. The scope of the analogy obviously depends on how we understand, among other things, the nature of "science" and to what extent theology or philosophy of religion might be understood as faith-based or apologetic enterprises. Nevertheless, there is enough similarity between the cases that warrant the analogy for our purposes. The second part of the article highlights some topics where philosophers of religion have, we suggest, successfully taken into account or responded to scientific work thus contributing to the interdisciplinary discussion. The paper may be concluded with reflections on future topics and questions, and some suggested modes of engagement.

Before going any further, one may note the following. It is not the aim to offer a programmatic discussion of the nature of the philosophy of religion as a whole, since this is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, one may outline a way of understanding how the engagements between science, philosophy, and religion could be conducted more efficiently; an apologia for a pluralistic methodological approach, one might say. Regarding the specific examples of some topics briefly mentioned along the way, we do not aim to break new ground.

Philosophers of religion have many different motives for engaging the sciences. The most salient one has, of course, been the impact that the sciences might have on the theism/atheism debate. We call this the "apologetic motive". On the atheist side, there are arguments suggesting that some large-

scale scientific results, say, from evolutionary biology and cosmology, undermine theism in some way or another. According to a very popular argument, Darwinist evolutionary biology undermines those arguments for the existence of God that are based on biological design. Some have even suggested that evolutionary biology undermines all aspects of theism. However, it is not only the results of the sciences that are relevant in this context. Rather, the progress and trustworthiness of the sciences have also raised epistemological challenges to the rationality of religious beliefs and commitments. The Dutch philosopher Herman Philipse is a good example of a philosopher who employs both strategies. First, he argues that the ways in which religious beliefs are formed (claims about revelations, testimony, etc.) are in fact much less reliable than scientific ones. For this reason, one should take scientific results as having superior authority over less reliably produced religious beliefs. Second, he argues that all arguments for the existence of God, gods, and supernatural beings fail, be they empirical or conceptual.

The theist side of the debate has attempted to defuse the scientific challenge to theism in different ways. One well-known response is to adopt scientific-style reasoning in defense of theism, as Richard Swinburne, has sought to do for decades. According to Swinburne, metaphysical claims, such as the existence of God, can be established with some probability by invoking a large spectrum of empirical evidence. These include the existence and general features of our world, certain historical events, and religious experiences. The theistic hypothesis, according to Swinburne, explains this evidence better than the naturalistic one. Another response comes from the so-called Reformed Epistemology which seeks to defuse the epistemic challenge from science by defending a different kind of epistemology altogether. But this is all familiar territory to those in the field of philosophy of religion.

Although it is somewhat narrow, one finds nothing wrong in principle with the apologetic motivation. One function of the philosophy of religion is to make the reasons behind and the structure inherent in religious and non-religious



worldviews as clear and transparent as possible. Moreover, it is a value for civic discourse to be based on views that are publicly and properly managed. In what follows, we, nevertheless, want to look beyond the apologetic motive and seek wider forms of engagement between the sciences and philosophy of religion. Now, the question is what these engagements could look like. Here we might take our cue from philosopher Alvin Goldman, who is known for his work at the boundary of epistemology and the cognitive sciences. According to Goldman, there are at least three separate ways in which philosophers have engaged with the cognitive sciences.

First, the traffic can be from philosophy to some other discipline. Cognitive science is a field where philosophers have made significant contributions to empirical work. Philosophical contributions to the field include theories, models, and hypotheses, but especially philosophical tools. As is well known, different systems of logic, probabilistic reasoning, and semantic theories of philosophy are now widely employed in cognitive linguistics and artificial intelligence studies, for instance. Philosophical theories concerning the mind-body problem and consciousness, for instance, now have a life of their own in different fields of the cognitive sciences. As far as we see it, philosophers of religion have had very little engagement of this kind with the sciences in the last century or so. Philosophers of religion very seldom contribute anything to the sciences themselves. However, we will suggest later that this does not necessarily need to be so. Perhaps philosophers of religion could contribute to the sciences by providing claims and perhaps even theories that could be tested and assessed in the scientific study of religion or even experimental philosophy.

In the second form of engagement, philosophers can bring insights from the philosophy of science, analyze background assumptions and metaphysical commitments of different theories. By assuming this role, the philosopher clarifies critical concepts thereby contributing to possible novel empirical questions and theoretical innovation in the target field. We think this kind of engagement could

also include the interpretation of scientific results: what kinds of conclusions can be drawn from them given their methodological assumptions? This, we suggest, can also include engaging with popular science material, since oftentimes the most important interpretations of scientific results appear in popularised works rather than in scientific papers themselves.

This form of engagement has been more popular among philosophers of religion. They have debated interpretations of the aforementioned evolutionary biology and physical cosmology, for instance. However, more positive contributions via methodological criticism and analysis have been surprisingly rare. We think that there could be multiple scientific fields where philosophers of religion could make a distinctive contribution. The authors of this paper have worked on the scientific study of religion, interdisciplinary models of human nature, and the psychology of disagreement just to mention a few.

The most natural domain for the philosophers of religion to engage in this way would be religious studies and the scientific study of religion. Various approaches in the study of religion have their own distinctive philosophical questions that have overlapped somewhat with the philosophy of religion. These include, among other things, the concept of "religion" itself. Questions have been raised about whether "religion" is a helpful scientific category at all; perhaps "tradition" or "practice" would be more accurate. Against this, one could maintain that "religion" still has pragmatic value in the study of religion: it is useful to have a general definition of religion but one must at the same time remember that it might not work in all cases.

Coming back to Goldman, there is a third way in which he sees the relationship between philosophy and the sciences playing out. Instead of contributing to the cognitive sciences, philosophers can apply the results and theories from this field to reformulate or answer philosophical problems. When philosophers of religion have engaged the sciences in this way, the motivation has mainly been apologetic, but it need not be so. Philosophers of religion should use a wide variety of scientific results



since their own interests span from moral and religious knowledge to metaphysics. This variety of interest beyond the apologetic motivation can be seen in a recently edited volume on scientific approaches to the philosophy of religion. Essays in the volume cover many different topics and seek to employ theories from the natural and behavioral sciences to problems in the philosophy of religion. There are essays on the psychology of counterfactual thinking, multiverse cosmology, the cognition of religious disagreement, as well as the psychology of character formation and responsibility.

In the philosophy of religion, there has been a long-standing debate on what role naturalistic explanations of religion have in the atheism vs. theism debate. It is clear that simply offering a naturalistic explanation of belief in God or gods does not show that these beliefs are false. Nevertheless, such explanations might cast doubt upon religious claims in some other way. In the current scene, these issues are discussed in the context of so-called debunking arguments of ethics, morality, and religion. The main issue here is whether the epistemic status of our value-beliefs, moral beliefs, and religious beliefs changes after we take into account evolutionary and cognitive explanations of these beliefs. We will return to this issue in more detail later.

The question is how exactly philosophers of religion should engage with the sciences. In what follows, we want to suggest that we need not enforce one single methodology for such engagements. Here we want to draw a specific lesson from theology, where the "science and religion dialogue" has been going on for some time now. It seems that many theological postfoundationalists have attempted to formulate an overarching methodology for theology and science engagements. Against this, we want to suggest that philosophers of religion can proceed successfully without strongly committing themselves to some overarching methodological stance. Philosophers of religion should be pluralists: engagements between philosophy and the sciences should be conducted more "locally" than "globally" and take into account the diverse interests of those actually involved in the engagement. Something similar is also acknowledged in general philosophical

methodology, so our argument does not constitute any kind of special pleading.

The best way to approach the "science and religion dialogue" is to look at its aims. The dialogue was originally an attempt to form a workable theological position between two extremes: science-inspired naturalism that rejects central theological claims (the existence of God and the possibility of revelation, for instance) and entails a large-scale conflict between science and theology, and creationism or various forms of intelligent design theory that reject the validity of large parts of contemporary science, especially biology. Furthermore, this view was supposed to be disseminated amongst both scientists and theologians: from now on, both could work together in solving the great mysteries of life and the cosmos.

Finally, the science and theology dialogue has had very little impact on the academia at large. It is surprising to note that there are very few critical assessments of the science and theology dialogue from the theological side. Most textbooks and handbooks only mention the rapid development of the field but do not provide a general assessment as to whether the field has achieved its goals. So far, many have turned to postfoundationalism as a methodological tool to achieve the original goals set for the debate. The underlying assumption was that if the right method were to be found, the dialogue would subsequently sort itself out.

However, it is clear that the science and religion dialogue has not achieved methodological unity or consensus. The fragmentation is most likely produced by the mutually exclusive philosophical assumptions and interests of the participants: most participants operate on the basis of their own (and mutually incompatible) religious (or non-religious) assumptions and, thus, understand the nature of science, religion, and theology differently than others. Some might be critical of the sciences and unwilling to modify their theologies, whereas others are willing to make large-scale theological revisions to accommodate even the most thoroughgoing versions of scientific naturalism. Another methodological issue is the analytic-continental divide: the area is torn between continental style



theology and postmodern philosophy in Europe and more analytically and science-oriented approaches in the English-speaking world.

Although one does not see much progress in the distinctly theological part of the dialogue, other parts of the discipline have progressed well. Here we have in mind the research conducted into the history of the relationship between religions and the sciences. Indeed, the work done here has successfully debunked the very popular conflict narrative or conflict myth of science and religion. Significant work has been done on the Galileo case, the birth of the scientific method in late medieval and renaissance Europe, as well as the 19th-century debates on Darwinism.

One can draw an important moral from this: when the science and religion dialogue has made progress, the progress has come about through scholars working on methods they know well (in this case historical ones) and focusing on specific claims (the conflict myth, for instance).

Conclusion- A modest methodological pluralism in the philosophy of religion when it engages the sciences. Since there is no single methodology in philosophy and there are various scientific methodologies depending on the subject matter, there cannot be just one monolithic method that could be used to solve the issues in the interface of science and philosophy. The methods and questions are determined ad hoc and based on the nature of the issue at hand. It is, of course, possible and even hoped for that philosopher of religion to provide contextual methodologies that define how philosophical tools are to be used in a specified context. One such example is the analytic theology project that investigates the reasonability of theological doctrines and attempts to find new ways to formulate them with analytic tools.

Meanwhile, it is proposed that the inquiry should pay attention to a broad range of epistemic virtues, such as transparency, honesty, and all the other virtues necessary for critical thinking, which

should guide the scholars as they go about thinking about these issues. We cannot see how meaningful public discussion about these matters could take place without the perspectives provided by philosophers of religion.

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