

# Philosophy, Science, and Christian Belief

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What follows are some thoughts concerning the relationship between philosophy, science, and Christian belief, relative to the Westar God Seminar. Though some of my thoughts are quite controversial, I have not presented detailed philosophical arguments to support them because this is not the venue for that endeavor. Philosophy, at present, is a complex, and not particularly stable, intellectual enterprise in which there is little agreement about which questions need to be asked and what counts as good answers to those questions. Hence, I present these thoughts simply as a sketch for your consideration of how we might proceed.

## Athens and Jerusalem

Tertullian's query, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" is an indication that early Christian thought was entangled with Greek philosophy. More or less sophisticated forms of ideas and themes associated with the philosophical schools of the ancient world were a part of the cultural mix of the era, and found their way into early Christian texts. I think there were two different, though related, motives at work in this process.

On the one hand, it was useful for apologetic purposes to explicate Christian beliefs in the more familiar terms of popular or sophisticated Greek philosophy for a Greco-Roman audience that often had few, if any, ties to Judaism. I want to leave this aspect of the Athens-Jerusalem axis to one side because it is primarily a historical issue. On the other hand, Christianity was a very self-reflective religious movement from the outset that attempted to define itself in terms of its relationship to both Judaism and the larger non-Jewish world. I would characterize this self-reflective quality as the attempt to achieve what John Rawls has called "reflective equilibrium." (Rawls, 48-51)

Rawls introduced this notion in *A Theory of Justice* where he used it to describe the process of trying to bring our first-order unreflective beliefs about justice into harmony with a theory that would explain and justify those first-order beliefs. For example, most of us believe that justice requires equality before the law, including equal rights. But, we also believe that it is just that outcomes should be based on merit. Bringing these two intuitions into a stable harmony on both a theoretical and practical level within liberal democracies has turned out to be a daunting task. For Rawls it was necessary to complete this task in a way that was both theoretically coherent and widely accepted, as no democracy can long survive if a significant proportion of its citizenry believe that it is fundamentally unjust.

The early Christians faced the task of bringing their own beliefs and practices into internal coherence theoretically and practically, while finding a way to live in some degree of harmony with the larger non-Christian world, without sacrificing their conviction of the absolute uniqueness of Christ. In some important respects the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle provided a model for doing this.

While Plato did not see himself as living in “end times,” he did think that Athens was in a state of moral and political crisis, as evidenced, above all, by the execution of Socrates. On his view, the Homeric virtues were both internally incoherent and politically dysfunctional in fifth century Athenian democracy. In addition, he also believed that the Sophist movement had destabilizing effect on the first-order beliefs of the “best and the brightest” of the young Athenian gentlemen (*kalos kai agathon*).

Plato’s response was to develop a complex and powerful moral psychology that was linked to a reinterpretation of traditional Greek virtues—courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom—which he located within a teleological cosmology. In effect, he provided a holistic theory of the universe that enclosed everything, including Plato, the philosopher, so that there was no gap between theoretician and theory. (Hence, there is no logical space for the current disputes between realists and anti-realists for a Platonist.) Aristotle did basically the same thing, though he had significant differences with Plato on questions of moral psychology, ethical and political theory, and cosmology.

I think it is evident that the claims made for Jesus Christ by Paul and the author of the *Gospel of John* do lead inevitably to a holistic worldview in which the believer understands herself as an integral part of a larger reality. What could be a better model for articulating this vision in the late second century of the Common Era than some form of Platonism or Aristotelianism or, perhaps, Stoicism?

However, ancient and medieval Christians never achieved anything close to a lasting reflective equilibrium through the use of the conceptual resources of ancient Greek philosophy. There were, for example, just too many tensions and conflicts between first-order beliefs about God, inspired by biblical images, on the one hand, and the concepts of the divine found in Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, on the other hand.

### **Kuhn and Science**

The attempts to use the conceptual resources of ancient Greek philosophy to explicate and justify Christian belief and practice came to an abrupt end with the co-emergence of what we now call modern science and modern philosophy. If we read the writings of Galileo, Descartes, and David Hume, for example, our distinction between science and philosophy is not yet in place. In Galileo’s *Dialogues* (1954), for example, what we would identify as the science part is intertwined with what we now call

philosophy. Similarly, Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1956), which is widely used in introductory classes on early modern philosophy, was presented by Descartes as an introduction to writings on optics and meteorology. Even Hume in the mid-eighteenth century saw himself as doing for the study of human nature what Newton had done for the study of mechanics.

Immanuel Kant was the pivotal figure at the end of the eighteenth century in drawing what many now regard as the obvious distinction between science and philosophy. Science, which Kant understood as Newtonian Physics, provides us with systematic and uniquely authoritative knowledge of the empirical world. The authority of science, according to Kant, derives from the fact scientific knowledge is based on both empirical observation and an a priori conceptual framework that is universally and necessarily true. All human beings necessarily perceive empirical phenomena as existing in Newtonian three-dimensional space and time, and as related to one another by laws of cause and effect. Kant also argued that we can have no knowledge of that which transcends the empirical world because human rational faculties are, by nature, limited to what exists in space and time and is governed by the principle of cause and effect.

From Kant's perspective, the philosophical theories of Plato and Aristotle are a mishmash of pre-scientific empirical claims conjoined with metaphysical speculations that attempt to reach beyond the grasp of human reason. Thus, they are unsuited to providing a reliable understanding of religious faith. In distinguishing between science and philosophy, he redefined the latter as the critical second-order discipline whose task is to elucidate the a priori principles governing scientific, moral, and aesthetic judgments. That is, it is through philosophical reasoning, not empirical observation, that we discover that scientific knowledge is based on a mix of empirical observation and an a priori conceptual scheme; and it is also through philosophical reasoning that we realize that the fundamental principles of morality are not based on empirical data.

Christianity, for Kant, is not the mix of empirical claims—"Jesus rose from the dead"—and metaphysical speculation—"In the beginning was the Word"—that one finds in popular Christianity. It is a matter of how one orients oneself to the world as a moral agent, and what can be hoped for given that orientation. Morality makes demands on us that we cannot fulfill in our lives, and implicitly promises that righteousness will be rewarded, which typically does not happen in the empirical world. Thus, religion is based on the hope, not the knowledge, that morality is not a sham.

Kant left a very influential, but ambiguous, legacy, as can be seen in his impact on the thinking of twentieth century analytic philosophers, such as, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap, Wilfred Sellars, Thomas Kuhn, Thomas Nagel, John

McDowell, and Ronald Dworkin.<sup>1</sup> As different as these philosophers are from one another they do share a Kantian heritage that can be summarized as follows.

1. Metaphysics understood as knowledge of a transcendent reality, such as God, has to be rejected because it is beyond the scope of human reason.
2. Modern science is authoritative in matters of empirical questions.
3. There is a sharp unbridgeable gap between causes and reasons, paralleled by an equally sharp distinction between descriptive, factual propositions, on the one hand, and normative propositions, on the other hand.

Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) accepted Kant's idea that scientific knowledge, or understanding, is a fusion of empirical data and an organizing conceptual framework (one of the things he meant by the term 'paradigm'), but he also recognized the possibility of alternative conceptual frameworks (111-135). His classic case of "paradigm shifts" was the transition in the seventeenth century from the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic geocentric model of the universe to the Copernican heliocentric model. The word 'model' is apt because Kuhn thought of paradigms as exemplars or models in terms of which one organizes data so as to solve problems. The Ptolemaic model had broken down because it could not solve the problem of explaining such phenomena as retrograde motion in a way that did not introduce more problems, while Kepler's modification of Copernicus' model provided mathematically elegant solutions to this and other astronomical problems (Kuhn 1957).

Kuhn always resisted the idea of describing a particular paradigm as true, because the function of a paradigm, on his view, is to enable scientists to solve problems, and not to develop "some one full, objective, true account of nature" (1970, 171). Science progresses in the sense of moving from one problem set to another, but this movement, like biological evolution, does not have a telos (172).

Kuhn was, and is, regularly castigated as an anti-realist who denied the objectivity of scientific knowledge and who emphasized the subjectivity and non-rational character of scientific reasoning. He did undoubtedly reject the Enlightenment ideology of scientific rationality that saw science as the uniquely objective and rational form of knowledge that is the norm for all forms of human thought and conduct. On my reading, Kuhn attempted to demythologize science by stripping it of its intellectual pretensions generated by flawed philosophical theories of knowledge, such as the idea that there can be a theory neutral language that describes reality as it is in itself.

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<sup>1</sup> The best discussion of Kant's influence on twentieth century thought can be found in Michael Friedman's work.

However, the recognition that any language of science carries theoretical baggage is a long way from Richard Rorty's view that science is just one of many different forms of discourse, all of which are more or less on the same footing when it comes to questions of intellectual adequacy. Nonetheless, it was Rorty's reading of Kuhn's neo-Kantian understanding of science that carried the day, particularly outside of academic philosophy. And this reading did much to inspire the idea that there is such a thing as religious discourse that has its own paradigms and internal logic.

Though Wittgenstein's posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) had appeared a few years before the first edition of Kuhn's *Structure* (1962), the two works were often read as mutually reinforcing one another. And this was not unjustified. Kuhn was strongly influenced by Wittgenstein through his friendship with Stanley Cavell when both were junior faculty at Berkeley. One result is that Kuhn's conception of paradigms has much in common with Wittgenstein's understanding of language learning and use, as exemplified by his concept of language-games. And, of course, Rorty has labeled Wittgenstein as an anti-realist.

As a result, we have a confluence of ideas about language that leads to the view, represented by Don Cupitt, that religious language and its associated beliefs and practices, are human constructions that constitute and regulate, in Kant's sense of those terms, our religious lives. Thus, the task of philosophical theology is to unpack the structure of these constructs, including Christianity. The unpacking of the concept, or concepts, of God will not vindicate those concepts; it will simply lay out for inspection what is there.

The deconstruction of religious beliefs and practices is deflationary for many, but it can also be liberating. What it cannot do is to provide any criteria for determining which, if any, first-order religious beliefs and practices are worthy of our allegiance. This is a normative question, and normativity itself, on this picture, has been relativized to specific forms of discourse. There is another way of understanding Kant's heritage that places his notion of norms front and center, and is best represented, I think, by the work of Thomas Nagel (Nagel).

### **Nagel and Dennett**

Thomas Nagel and Daniel Dennett have been disagreeing with one another for decades. I want to focus on one of their major disagreements that has direct relevance for our understanding of religious belief.

Daniel Dennett, who is one of the charter members of the New Atheists, has argued that the question of the existence of God has been settled by science. On his view, we live in a universe whose fundamental constituents are those forces and particles described in the Standard Model of contemporary particle physics. Everything

that exists, including human beings, are made up of those fundamental constituents. Thus, Dennett is committed to a form of reductive materialism that precludes the possibility of either God or immortal souls. (Dennett)

According to Dennett, the neo-Darwinian Theory of Evolution has confirmed the truth of reductive materialism. Random variation and natural selection, the two key elements of Darwin's theory, operate on the genetic level. Genetic mutations, which are the causes of the biological variations subject to natural selection, are the products of biochemical processes that, in turn, are explicable, in principle, in terms of the fundamental laws of physics.

Moving up the ladder of complexity, Dennett has also argued that certain beliefs and attitudes are "hard-wired" into human brains as the products of the process of evolution. In this respect, modern evolutionary theory cuts across the Cartesian divide between the mental and the physical, such that our beliefs about the world, including moral and religious beliefs, can be accounted for in purely naturalistic terms. Dennett's position on this issue is widely shared by scientists in areas, such as Cognitive Science and evolutionary psychology, which includes neurobiology.

On his view, there is no "God gene," but there are "hard-wired" beliefs, and associated responses, that in certain situations give rise to religious beliefs as epiphenomenal byproducts of human adaptation to the environment. For example, there is a natural human inclination to perceive changes in one's environment as the product of agency, as when one is awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of creaking stairs, in the belief that an intruder is coming up the stairway. Such a response is quite appropriate in certain environments. But, when no human or animal agent is present, Dennett claims that people often invent a "spiritual agency" as the cause of the changes. Thus, for Dennett, religious belief is to be "explained away," like the belief in ghosts or vampires.

The claim that religious beliefs are, in all cases, to be explained as epiphenomenal responses to real causes is plausible only to the extent that the belief in a strong form of scientific naturalism is justified. Naturalism is the view that everything that exists is in the natural world; there is no transcendent reality. Scientific naturalism is the view that science is the final authority on what does and does not exist in the natural world.

The concept of God as moral lawgiver is indigenous to the Abrahamic traditions. On the human side of the equation, sin is the deliberate disobedience of God's law. The conception of God as moral lawgiver and the reciprocal notion of human beings as subject to divine law have engendered a particular model of human moral agency.

The concept of disobedience implies an act of will; hence, we are responsible for our being in a state of sin. And this, in turn, implies that we have both free will and the capacity to know the moral law. Otherwise, various forms of compulsion or constraint

or justifiable ignorance would, as Aristotle recognized, be legitimate excuses for the failure to act lawfully. Among modern philosophers, Kant holds the copyright on this conception of moral agency, but it was already deeply embedded in Christian thought at least since Augustine.

For the sake of simplicity I shall call this the agent-centered conception of morality. Dennett's understanding of the role of evolution in shaping our moral and religious beliefs undercuts this conception of morality. Briefly put, on Dennett's view, at least some of our basic moral and religious beliefs are the causal consequences of factors over which we have no direct control, and there is no way in which we can transcend the constraints of our evolutionary history so as to correct these innate beliefs. They are a part of our make-up. It is worth noting that Dennett's reductionistic understanding of religious beliefs applies equally well to realist and anti-realist interpretations of religion.

Nagel addressed these issues head on in *Mind And Cosmos* (2012), whose subtitle, "Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False," tells the whole story. Nagel is not a theist; he believes that theism is a bad answer to a serious question. Nor is he a postmodern critic of scientism. In fact, he has a very traditional realist conception of science that has its origins in ancient Greek thought. In his words, "Science is driven by the assumption that the world is intelligible" (16). And this assumption leads to a search for a single, intelligible account of the universe that includes the mind and its characteristic activities. In short, Nagel shares many of the holistic assumptions that animated both Plato and Aristotle.

He opposes the reductionism present in Dennett's naturalism, and a great many contemporary scientific programs, on the grounds that it cannot possibly account for the role of the mind in our world. On his telling, the root of the present problems with contemporary reductionism go back to the emergence of modern science in the seventeenth century when the mind and its activities were excluded from the natural world by Descartes and most of those associated with the birth of the New Science. Mathematical physics flourished because, once the mind was excluded from natural science, it was possible to make sense of nature in terms of the quantifiable properties of physical objects (8).

In other words, one might say, with thinkers like Alfred North Whitehead, that what began as a heuristic decision to exclude those features of nature from natural science that did not lend themselves to mathematical analysis in order to simply research hardened into metaphysical dogma (1929). Like Whitehead, Nagel wants to revisit and revise the philosophical and scientific assumptions of early modern thought.

The bulk of *Mind and Cosmos* is taken up with Nagel's attempt to show that consciousness (thought, subjective awareness), cognition (knowledge of the universe) and value (moral beliefs and judgments) cannot be explained in materialist terms. Most

of this is a concise summary of technical philosophical arguments from over the past forty years, to which Nagel himself has made major contributions.

However, let me offer a fairly straightforward example of his claim from the first book of Plato's *Republic*. Polemarchus, one of those present at the discussion, says that justice is helping one's friends and harming one's enemies (322d). Arguably, this conception of justice has adaptive value in that it serves to preserve one's own community when it is in competition for survival with other, hostile, communities. And it could have become innate through the evolutionary process postulated by Dennett and others.

Socrates, through an involved discussion, convinces Polemarchus that it is never just to harm—i.e. make worse—another. Putting the merits of Socrates's arguments to one side, this example illustrates the way in which a person's moral convictions can be altered through discussion and reflection. As Ronald Dworkin insisted, the practice of reflecting on, analyzing, and altering our moral practices is itself a well-entrenched practice. One might want to argue that a capacity to reprogram our "hard-wired" beliefs is itself a product of our evolution. If so, then evolution has given us the capacity to transcend the constraints of evolution. For the explanation of Polemarchus' change of mind has to do with his being convinced, rightly or wrongly, by Socrates' arguments. Thus, the explanation is in terms of reasons, not material causes.

This example from Plato's *Republic* illustrates Nagel's concern with the place of normative rationality in our lives, which has its immediate source in Kant. For Kant, norms of rationality supervene on all forms of human thought and action, whether in science or morality or aesthetic judgments or in practical activities. Even in playing games there are moves that are "outside" the bounds of the game. From this perspective, the problem with the concept of God is that it illegitimately cuts off the role of normativity in our lives.

Nagel's general point is that it is not possible to explain the origins of normative rationality in terms of the natural world of sub-atomic particles and forces. Nor, on his view, will it do to attempt to explain it in terms of either Cartesian dualism or divine action. Both of these alternatives introduce a body of concepts and principles that, by definition, are not a part of nature. Hence, if we adopt either alternative we will not have a single coherent account of the universe, which is the goal of rational inquiry. Nagel's overall conclusion is that "a genuine alternative to the reductionist program would require an account of how mind and everything that goes with it is inherent in the universe" (15).

It should be evident that Nagel, and others, such as Ronald Dworkin, who share his views, endorse a strong form of realism in science and morality. The concept of God does not fall into the same category, because as Dworkin put it in his posthumously



published *Religion Without God*, “the conviction that a god underwrites value...presupposes a prior commitment to the independent reality of that value” (2013, 1-2). This is pure Kantianism.

### Conclusion

I want to conclude with a thought voiced by Wittgenstein.

It is, however, important as regards our considerations that one human being can be an enigma to another. One learns this when one comes into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even though one has mastered the country’s language. One does not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We can’t find our feet with them (2009, 235).

There is a difference between understanding the language used by a community and understanding the members of that community, and I suspect that making sense of the religious beliefs and practices of a community has much more to do with the latter than the former.

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