

Christian Scholarship: Nature

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Lecture Notes

Two kinds of Christian scholarship needed, corresponding to the two sorts of needs mentioned last time. Christians must become very serious about Christian scholarship.

I. Christian Cultural Criticism

First, we need consciousness raising, Christian cultural criticism.

E.g., re the examples given last time. In some cases straightforward; in others less so. E.g., the claim on the part of Simpson, Futuyma taking the 'random' in (e.g.,) random genetic mutation in such a way that it entails not supervised, orchestrated, caused, or planned by God.

empirical evidence for this claim? the ambiguity

how much of current scholarship in each of these areas (especially the human sciences) is driven by commitment to other *civitas*?

II. Positive Christian Scholarship (Augustinian Scholarship)

The great commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.

What is it to love the Lord your God with all your mind? in part, to learn about him and his

creation.

Scholarship, science, learning about God's creation, is one way of praising the Lord and loving the Lord; it is a matter of developing one part of the divine image in us.

Problem: Tertullian (160 AD):

From philosophy come those fables and endless genealogies and fruitless questionings, those "words that creep like as doth a canker". To hold us back from such things, the Apostle testifies expressly in his letter to the Colossians that we should beware of philosophy....He had been at Athens where he had come to grips with the human wisdom which attacks and perverts the truth, being itself divided up into its own swarm of heresies by

the variety of its mutually antagonistic sects. What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the gospel no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for we begin by believing that there is nothing else which we have to believe.

"After Jesus Christ, we have no need of speculation, after the gospel no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else, for we begin by believing that there is nothing else which we have to believe."

What he meant: we have no need to do research into the questions to which Christianity gives us the answer: e.g., is there such a person as God? Do human beings display sin? Is there a way of salvation for sinful human beings?

The next question: given that we *do* need these disciplines (as Christians), how, exactly, shall we pursue them? Shall we work at them in the same way as the rest of the academic world, or shall we pursue them in a way that is specifically Christian?

A. The Argument

The central argument here is simplicity itself: as Christians (as a Christian community) we need and want answers to the sorts of questions that arise in the theoretical and interpretative disciplines; in an enormous number of such cases, what we know as Christians is crucially relevant to coming to a proper understanding; therefore we Christians should pursue these disciplines from a specifically Christian perspective.

B. Examples

Could give quite a list from philosophy: thinking about the sorts of questions philosophers ask and answer from explicitly Christian perspective: abstract objects (numbers, sets, properties, propositions, possible worlds); how related to God and how related to human minds? How think about causality: what sort of necessity does it involve? How think about human *agency* and human *freedom*? How is our agency related to God's agency? How does our being created in God's image fit here? How shall we think about natural laws? Are they part of the nature of the things God has made? Do they have some kind of necessity? Are they just a record of how God ordinarily treats what he has made? How shall we think of human knowledge? What is knowledge and how is it related to the fact that we have been created? What is *warrant*? The givens: created, created by God and in his image; God is an actor; he acts for ends; and we resemble him in that respect. He is also a knower, the premier knower; being made in his image means that we resemble him in that respect too. (Of course action requires knowledge).

Cognitive faculties designed to enable us to achieve true beliefs with respect to a wide variety of propositions. These faculties work in such a way that under the appropriate circumstances we form the appropriate belief. More exactly, the appropriate belief is *formed in us*. Upon being appeared to in the familiar way, I find myself holding the belief that there is a large tree before me; upon being asked what I had for breakfast, I reflect for a moment and then find myself with the belief that what I had was eggs on toast.

And the basic, central idea: we have knowledge when these faculties are *working properly* in producing a belief in us--when everything is going according to plan--according to God's plan for us and our cognitive faculties.

Many others: ethics, determinism, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, counterfactuals, probability, political philosophy, etc. M. Beaty, *Christian Theism*

But philosophy just one of the areas in which this must be done: also, in particular, the human sciences: e.g., psychology, sociology (maybe thing that needs explanation is not that many people display serious religious commitment, but that some don't), economics, sociobiology, and the like. In biology and related sciences, must think re evolution from our own perspective, re its probability and its bearing on understanding human beings (and other creatures); must ask whether phenomena in this area can really be understood apart from teleology and design.

For example, in psychology and sociology: should think about the subject matter of these disciplines from the perspective of Christian thought about human beings: that we have been created, have been created in the image of God, have fallen into sin, and can have the opportunity for redemption and renewal. These the crucial facts about human beings: how could they fail to be relevant to a systematic study of them? altruism, aggression, morality, religion, humor, love, that whole list on the last handout.

won't try to explain religious impulse in terms of cognitive limitations.

in thinking about mind (cognitive science, science of mind, computer science, psychology) won't feel under any obligation to assume materialism here, or think that mindedness is essentially a property of material systems (God, other unembodied thinkers).

re biology: think about the likelihood of the whole evolutionary story from perspective of fundamental truth that God has created the world and all it contains and that God has created human beings in his image. Maybe much less likely from that perspective. Distinguish various parts of it.

So of course won't see evolution as implying that human beings are unplanned, or accidental.

in literary studies, music criticism, film studies, art history and criticism reject current and faddish claims that there is no such thing as truth (anti-realism with respect to truth),

that all there is, really, is power of various sorts of relations and the like. One basic kind of concern: to explore human creativity of a certain sort, or human capacity for making what is beautiful (in art, poetry, music, literature), and to see it as a reflection of divine.

But of course it is the relevant experts in these areas--people who are both serious about Christian scholarship and expert in these areas--that have to think about these things, not the philosophers. The first thing: to think seriously about the question in each of these areas; ask how the discipline and its main questions and concerns has developed, and how it might have developed differently under xn aegis; and how xn perspective relevant to the questions that are the main questions of the area in question; and whether these are the main questions from a xn perspective (e.g., science of mind, psychology and sociology of religion) and if not, what the main questions *are*. Extremely difficult.

C. Objections

(1) Academic Trespass?

Ernan McMullin ("Evolution and Special Creation," *Zygon*, 1993) points out that Augustinian science crosses contemporary academic boundaries; the theologian, the scientist and others may find themselves at loggerheads, bandying about charges of academic trespass. This seems correct: Augustinian science, at least at first, will certainly involve people's making pronouncements or claims outside their areas of special competence. uncomfortable

But as things presently stand, this kind of trespass is inevitable, at least if we propose to think about the broader involvements and significance of a theory like the Grand Evolutionary Story, or Darwinism, or TCA. Inevitably stray outside our areas of competence, as Futuyma, Gould and others do in claiming that contemporary evolutionary theory shows that human beings are not designed, or as G. G. Simpson does in declaring that nothing on the nature of man written before 1859 is worth reading. No way to address the important questions here without getting outside our areas of competence. Alternative: don't think about these matters--or if you do, don't speak or write about them. Dangerous as well as unduly diffident. The Christian community needs to know how to think about these matters. We must address them with all the care, insight and depth we can muster. Failing to do so will leave us likely to be misled, likely to think, e.g., that there really is something like a scientific quasi-demonstration that we are not designed by God, but are rather a product of chance or accident. It will leave us easily misled into thinking we really must understand what is most essential about us--love, morality, religion, altruism, art, literature, music, love of adventure, play, humor, intellectual curiosity, capacity for physics, philosophy and evolutionary biology--in broadly Darwinian terms. That way lies intellectual disaster for the Christian community.

Anyway; can I rationally refrain from using all that I know in assessing the probability of a theory like TCA, in trying to come to the proper doxastic attitude towards it? Is it worthy of belief? of disbelief? Or should we instead be agnostic about it? If the latter, how probable is it? Is it much more or much less probable than its denial? Or is it instead

approximately in the same neighborhood? answering these questions, how can I sensibly refrain from using all that I know, including what I know by faith?

(2) *Is 'Augustinian' Science really Science?*

(As opposed, e.g., to theology)

(a) Michael Ruse: No: by definition of the term 'science'

Furthermore, even if Scientific Creationism were totally successful in making its case as science, it would not yield a *scientific* explanation of origins. Rather, at most, it could prove that science shows that there can be *no* scientific explanation of origins. The Creationists believe that the world started miraculously. But miracles lie outside of science, which by definition deals only with the natural, the repeatable, that which is governed by law. *Darwinism Defended* p. 322 (my italics).

But

(i) big bang (repeatable?),

(ii) skepticism re natural laws (Bas van Fraassen): and

(iii) how can a serious question be settled by a definition? Even if Ruse is right, all that would follow is that one who espouses Augustinian Science is making a verbal mistake. (He should instead propose a new term: 'sience': 'sience' means the same as 'science' except that its definition doesn't include the clause according to which 'science' deals only with the natural.) What is really needed: an examination of the activity or project denoted by 'science' with an eye to seeing whether it precludes reference to God or other supernatural entities.

(b) science inevitably involves "methodological naturalism"

(i) McMullin again:

"Scientists *have* to proceed in this way: the methodology of natural science gives no purchase on the claim that a particular event or type of event is to be explained by invoking God's 'special' action or calling on the testimony of Scripture" (Op. Cit. 303).

But where does this embargo come from? Supported only by bad arguments of the type "God is not part of the universe; in science we can only refer to parts of the universe; therefore...."; or even "To refer to God in science is to treat God as an object, which is idolatry; therefore...." Why believe science has to proceed the way McMullin says it does?

Consider, for example, the question how life originated: theists know that God created it in one way or another, and now the question is: how did he do it? Did he do it by way of the ordinary regularities or laws of physics and chemistry? And if you conclude *not*, why

couldn't that be precisely as a scientist? Where is it written that such a conclusion can't be part of science? Why should we accept methodological naturalism?

the truth in the claim that science involves methodological naturalism: if you are trying to figure out how God's world works, why it works a certain way, it won't be useful to say just "That's the way God made it." (That wouldn't be loving the Lord your God with all your mind).

(ii) *Duhemian Science*

Pierre Duhem: an interesting answer (*The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory*) best answer I know: fundamentally, he says, because otherwise the disagreements that run riot in metaphysics will ingress into physics, so that the latter cannot be an activity we can all work at *together*, regardless of our metaphysical views:

Now to make physical theories depend on metaphysics is surely not the way to let them enjoy the privilege of universal consent....If theoretical physics is subordinated to metaphysics, the divisions separating the diverse metaphysical systems will extend into the domain of physics. A physical theory reputed to be satisfactory by the sectarians of one metaphysical school will be rejected by the partisans of another school.

...I have denied metaphysical doctrines the right to testify for or against any physical theory....Whatever I have said of the method by which physics proceeds, or the nature and scope that we must attribute to the theories it constructs, does not in any way prejudice either the metaphysical doctrines or religious beliefs of anyone who accepts my words. The believer and the non believer may both work in common accord for the progress of physical science such as I have tried to define it (p. 274-75).

important that we all--Christian, naturalist, agnostic, whoever--be able to work at physics and the other sciences together and cooperatively; therefore we shouldn't employ, in science, views, commitments and assumptions only some of us accept. But then we can't employ (in that way) such ideas as that the world and the things therein have been designed and created by God; that is a commitment that only some of us accept. Proper science, insofar as it is to be common to all of us, will have to eschew any dependence upon metaphysical naturalism. We do not, of course, have to be *metaphysical* naturalists in order to pursue Duhemian science; but if science is to be properly universal, it can't employ assumptions or commitments that are not universally shared, *public* science. There are vast stretches of our cognitive economy where these world-view considerations do indeed seem to be quite irrelevant.

Duhemian science, obviously enough, would involve methodological naturalism. But here is the crucially important point: from the Duhemian point of view, methodological naturalism will be just one small part of a much more inclusive constraint. Science, so

conceived, will not employ hypotheses about God, *but it also won't employ any hypotheses whose cogency involves or presupposes metaphysical naturalism*. Nor will it employ assumptions like those that seem to underlie much cognitive science. It couldn't, for example, properly assume that mind-body dualism is false, or that human beings are material objects, these being metaphysical assumptions that divide us. Nor could it employ the deterministic assumptions that seem to underlie much social science; these beliefs also relevantly divide us. Further, many assumptions about what constitutes proper function on the part of human beings and their faculties would have to be proscribed: for example, Simonian assumptions about what is and isn't rational, Piagetian claims about what a mature (and properly functioning) adult will believe, as well as the assumption that serious religious belief must be explained as a manifestation of pathology, stupidity or invincible ignorance. Further, Duhemian science would proscribe the idea that the Theory of Common Ancestry is certain, as well as the idea that randomness or chance involved in genetic variation is such as to preclude human beings' having been designed--by God or anyone else. It is important to see how *much* of what goes on under the title of science is not Duhemian.

But what about those who, like Simon, for example, think it is important also to do a sort of human science which starts, not merely from *methodological* naturalism, but from *metaphysical* naturalism? And what about Christians or theists, who propose to investigate human reality employing all that they know, including what they know as Christians or theists? So far as Duhem's claims go, there is nothing in the least improper about any of this. Nothing here to suggest that if it ain't Duhemian, it ain't science.

(iii) Science essentially a matter of *reason*: but then it can't involve elements that come from *faith*; so 'Augustinian science' isn't really science. We need to know how to think about human reality, e.g., from a Christian perspective; but that activity is not science, insofar as it involves an element of faith.

Is this really true? Why think that science--that human activity--can't involve elements that come from revelation or faith? But concede for the moment:

conditionalization: consider conditionals whose antecedents specify the propositions from faith relevant to the subject matter at hand, and whose consequents specify how to think about that subject matter, given the truth of the antecedent.

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figuring out these conditionals will be a matter of reason. If you assert the antecedent and detach the consequent, then you are doing theology; but in working out the conditional itself you are doing science.

One final question: how about areas (engineering, mathematics, physics, chemistry, most of biology, etc.) where the Christian perspective doesn't seem to be relevant?

(a) artificial to separate (e.g.) physics from its history and philosophy; and Christian perspective is (or may be) relevant to the latter. e.g., constructivism in mathematics, anti-realism and verificationism in physics.

(b) A public conversation going on about the relevance and bearing of scientific claims and discoveries for issues of broad human concern, including how we think about ourselves. Many or most of the contributors to the discussion are scientists: Richard Dawkins *The Blind Watchmaker*, Daniel Dennett *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Robert Wright *The Moral Animal*, Desmond Morris *The Naked Ape*, Steven Weinberg *Dreams of a Final Theory*, Stephen Gould *The Panda's Thumb*, Stephen Hawking *A Brief History of Time*. Dawkins, Dennett, Gould, Hawking, many others. This conversation cries out for Christian contribution; Christians in the sciences are ideally placed to join the conversation by writing, lecturing, teaching.

By way of conclusion, then; contemporary scholarship is an arena in which a fundamentally religious conflict is being played out: the struggle is between a theist perspective on the one hand, and perennial naturalism and creative anti-realism (along with the relativism and anti-commitment it spawns) on the other. These last dominate contemporary scholarship; furthermore they are deeply opposed to the Christian perspective. What the Christian and theistic community needs, therefore, is first, Christian cultural criticism, and second, Christian scholarship, Augustinian science.

For further details about Alvin Plantinga's views on the need and nature of Christian scholarship and for his views on what he describes as "two or more kinds of Scripture scholarship," see his books: *The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Calvin College and Seminary, 1990) and *Warranted Christian Belief* (forthcoming).

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