

Correspondence

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Presuppositionalism revisited: the necessity of a transcendent God for the intelligibility of science

Science occupies an esteemed place in our society. Its recognised value reflects the fact that it has driven the progress of our society through the employment of logic and observational evidence, rather than unfounded deductions from preconceived conclusions regarding the phenomena in our universe. The pre-eminent roles of logic and observational evidence in science lead many to view it as the supreme arbiter of whether or not propositions about the universe are true. While society at large shares this view of science, the intelligibility of science is taken for granted. That is, there are few who question whether it is sensible to utilise the scientific method and trust the descriptions (laws) and explanations (theories) of nature it yields. The irony of science is that it proceeds by relying on a basic belief about nature that is neither justified by logic nor observational evidence. Schumm¹ describes this basic belief as the ‘assumption that natural laws are permanent; that is, under the same conditions a given cause will always produce the same results’. It is precisely this belief in nature’s uniformity that facilitates the derivation of general explanations and descriptions of nature from specific observations through inductive reasoning. Without the employment of this belief, the observations of any study conducted by any scientist would remain fixed in time and space and unable to contribute to general conclusions that can be applied to unobserved times and places.² A belief in nature’s uniformity cannot be justified by logical necessity because it is not simply a conceptual idea, but rather a claim about the actual behaviour of nature.³ However, any attempt to justify a belief in nature’s uniformity using observational evidence falls short because it involves necessarily the use of inductive reasoning, which presupposes nature’s uniformity.⁴ Consequently, neither logic nor observational evidence can provide the justification needed to establish the intelligibility of science.

1 Schumm, S.A. *To Interpret the Earth: Ten ways to be wrong*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991), p.18.

2 Gould, S.J. ‘Is Uniformitarianism Necessary?’, *Am J Sci* (1965) 263, 226.

3 Ladyman, J. *Understanding Philosophy of Science*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge (2002), pp. 43-45.

4 Curd, M. & Cover, J.A. *Philosophy of Science*, New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., ed. 1 (1998), p. 499.

Ultimately, it is only the existence of a transcendent God that provides the justification that is necessary to establish the intelligibility of science. This truth has been elucidated profoundly by scholars engaged in presuppositional apologetics. The way in which Christianity provides the basis for the intelligibility of science is described well in Cornelius Van Til's *The Defense of the Faith*. According to Van Til,

the existence of the God of Christian theism and the conception of his counsel as controlling all things in the universe is the only presupposition which can account for the uniformity of nature which the scientist needs. But the best and only possible proof for the existence of such a God is that his existence is required for the uniformity of nature and for the coherence of all things in the world.⁵

Indeed, the bible conveys with certainty that it is the omnipotent, creator God who established, and maintains, nature's uniformity (Gen. 8:22; Col. 1:16-17). Consequently, only God's existence and regulation of nature justify a belief in nature's uniformity and provide an intelligible basis for inductive reasoning, which rests at the core of science.

Given the notoriety of science in our society, it is not surprising that many Christian apologists are quick to employ scientific findings to support their arguments for the existence of God. While this desire is understandable, using science in apologetic debates without an acknowledgement of God as the only basis for the intelligibility of science equates to viewing science as an ultimate, independent arbiter of truth. By necessity, such arguments for God's existence are not intelligible and are, therefore, self-undermining. The best solution to this problem in Christian apologetics is to shift the primary focus of the apologetic argument. Instead of focusing primarily on the scientific evidence for God's existence, which the atheist will counter with their own scientific evidence for God's non-existence, the apologist should concentrate on the fact that science depends on God's existence and sovereign control over nature to be intelligible. In addition to establishing the intelligibility of science, this approach is one that is actually consistent with the Christian worldview the apologist claims to be defending. This truth is described well by the late Christian philosopher Greg Bahnsen when he states that,

The obedient Christian does not lay aside the authority of Christ in the realm in order to argue on the basis of autonomous 'scholarship'. To do so would be to operate with a *lie* (namely, the Satanic lie that knowledge can be determined apart from God: Gen. 3:5; cf. Rom. 1:25) in order to defend the *truth*! The faithful witness to Christ will not

⁵ Van Til, C. *The Defense of the Faith*, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company (2008), 4th edn., pp. 125-126.

behave as an unbeliever (denying Christ's Lordship) in order to make him a believer.⁶

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6 Bahnsen, G.L. & Booth, R.R. (eds.) *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, p. 101.

ANDREW PINSENT

A response to Jonathan Hanes

Many would agree with Dr Hanes about the need to raise questions about the intelligibility of science, although for the sake of precision I would describe the issue in terms of the intelligibility of the world explored by scientific methods. This issue is one to which many philosophers and commentators have drawn attention from a wide variety of perspectives. For example, John Barrow has added the qualification that the world is not only intelligible, but that its intelligibility is set at an 'interesting' level, being neither too complex for many of its principles to be accessible to human understanding, nor so simple that its principles are trivial.¹ Given that theological narratives and commitments have a powerful influence on human understanding of first causes generally, it is unlikely that such contributions have played no part in shaping expectations regarding the accessible yet challenging intelligibility of the cosmos. Moreover, besides cognition, I would add that there are other possible dimensions to this connection, such as the human will and ethical commitments. As regards scientific practice, it is not just intelligibility but the desire for truth rather than merely being right, and to explore the cosmos beyond considerations of mere material benefit, that arguably bear the hallmarks of theological influence.

Yet caution is needed in drawing connections between the God of Christian theism, science and the presupposition of cosmic uniformity. The ancient Romans demonstrated great commitment to the uniformity of nature when constructing temples and aqueducts. Nevertheless, such commitments, at least prior to Constantine, were unsupported by faith in the God of Christian theism. Moreover, it is not clear that Christianity's principal contribution was to belief in cosmic uniformity, as opposed to divine creation and governance. Although Dr Hanes states that 'the Bible conveys

1 1 Barrow, J.D. *The World within the world*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1998), pp. 24-25

with certainty that it is the omnipotent, creator God who established, and maintains, nature's uniformity (Gen. 8:22; Col. 1:16-17)', neither Genesis 8:22 nor Colossians 1:16-17 actually mention uniformity, except indirectly in the sense that days and seasons shall not cease on earth. Some early Christian writings, like the first letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians (19:2 – 20:12), refer to the order and harmony of the cosmos, but the God of Christian theism seems to value exceptionalism, diversity and particularity as much as uniformity.

The contemporary world also paints a complex picture of the relationship of science and theology. For example, many societies continue to make progress in science, at least for the moment, even when they have mostly abandoned the practice of the Christian faith. If the counterargument is made that these cultures retain transposed Christian beliefs, then further questions arise. What are the aspects of Christian theism that are scientifically significant? How broadly are these beliefs shared in transposed forms? Why is the pattern of scientific achievements so varied in cultures that share these beliefs? For example, contemporary Judaism rejects some of the attributes of Christian theism, but this rejection has not prevented persons of Jewish origin achieving a disproportionate number of Nobel Prizes in science. By contrast, Islam accepts the position that Cornelius Van Til attributes to Christian theism, namely that God controls all things in the universe. Indeed, Islam generally upholds a more absolute view of divine sovereignty than most Christian theology, by the measure of the relative contributions attributed to divine and created causes. Nevertheless, the UN Arab Human Development Report of 2003 paints a picture of low and relatively declining scientific achievement in Islam's ancient heartlands. These observations are not intended to refute the existence of important connections between theism and scientific fruitfulness, but to serve as a reminder that there are complex patterns of causes at work.

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