DISCIPLINING RELATIVISM AND TRUTH

by Philip Clayton

Abstract. Imre Lakatos's philosophy of science can provide helpful leads for theological methodology, but only when mediated by the disciplines that lie between the natural sciences and theology. The questions of relativism and truth are used as indices for comparing disciplines, and Lakatos's theory of natural science is taken as the starting point. Major modifications of Lakatos's work are demanded as one moves from the natural sciences, through economics, the interpretive social sciences, literary theory, and into theology. Although theology may consist of Lakatosian research programs, it also includes programs of interpretation and programs for living. This conclusion must influence our definition of theological truth and our assessment of theological relativism.

Keywords: Lakatos; philosophy of science, relativism; theology; truth.

Philosophers of science are wont to be epistemologists. As a result, we will tend to be relativists regarding a discipline if we cannot find normative standards for it, or if it does not meet generally accepted interdisciplinary standards. And we will generally treat statements in a discipline as true when they meet the relevant epistemic standards.

I see little difficulty in using *relativism* in this way as a sort of synonym for epistemological skepticism: it implies that standards of assessment are relative to a given epistemic community, and questions whether any external (inter-community) standards can be had. However, aside from the standard epistemic usage, the concept of *truth* has an additional, holistic function that is often insufficiently acknowledged. It is easy to discuss "the rationality of theology" or "the justification of religious assertions" while intending to refer only to a subset of the religious phenomenon as a whole. But to speak of the *truth* of religion is

Philip Clayton is assistant professor of philosophy, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Theology and Science Group during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, Illinois, 22 November 1988.

[*Zygon*, vol. 24, no. 3 (September 1989).]
 ISSN 0591-2385

to claim to capture what is crucial to religion. Likewise for theology: the truth of theology must be broad enough to encompass all the tasks that are essential to theological reflection. In this paper I will attempt some broad interdisciplinary comparisons among the sciences, humanities, and theology in order to assess the relativism and truth of theology. If justified, the comparisons provide some ground for determining what reflection aimed at theological truth must include, as well as the degree of relativism that we must ascribe to its product.

The methodology of the philosopher of science Imre Lakatos offers a fruitful starting point for this sort of interdisciplinary assessment.[1] However, I suggest that Lakatos's work on natural science must be modified before it is applied to religion; only when it is stretched to encompass the interpretive social sciences will we achieve the comprehensive perspective on theology required by the truth question. Consequently, I will propose a number of crucial modifications to Lakatos's approach that are required to make it relevant to disciplines outside the "hard" natural sciences, beginning with a recent debate about the applicability of his methodology to economics.

This stress on the social sciences reflects a methodological assumption, namely, that the work of philosophers of natural science is not sufficient on its own to determine a theological methodology. One must adjust positions in the philosophy of science in light of the concepts of meaning and human action that emerge in the social sciences. Though this is widely acknowledged, I will here make the case for a second mediation: one must *further* modify the work of philosophers of science until it adequately fits the context of the softer or so-called nonexplanatory disciplines among the humanities—disciplines such as historiography, philosophy, art criticism, and literary criticism—before applying it to theology. In this paper I focus on methodological questions raised by literary criticism. More generally, however, I believe the science/theology discussion has yet to grapple sufficiently with the disciplines that are concerned with the construction and interpretation of contexts of human meaning. *These* disciplines are the proving grounds upon which we must test—and modify—our reflection on science before it can be fruitful for theological use.

My thesis will be that the implications of a Lakatosian model for theology, when viewed from the context of the social sciences and humanities, are rather more revisionary and rather more skeptical than has often been granted by those under the influence of Lakatos. It is only the multiplicity of the tasks of theology (I concentrate on four below), and the present impossibility of prioritizing them within a single methodological model, that prevents an unambiguously skeptical judgment concerning theology's final epistemic status.

Lakatosian Philosophy of Natural Science

For the sake of brevity I will not attempt to provide an in-depth treatment of Lakatos's methodology of natural science nor a detailed defense of my particular interpretation of it.[2] Four key concepts will suffice. First, Lakatos takes *research programs* (RPs) as the starting point for analyzing scientific rationality. The basic unit for assessing science is neither an individual theory nor a vague paradigm that scientists employ or reject, but rather an ongoing program of research that ties together the activity of various scientists over some period of time. By beginning with fluid programs of research rather than individual observations or theories, Lakatos conveys his opposition to inductivist and falsificationist views of natural scientific rationality. I will argue that this move also holds the key for discussions of relativism in disciplines far removed from the natural sciences.

Next, RPs are divided into a *hard core*, which defines the essential features of the research program and is not falsifiable, and a *protective belt* of *auxiliary hypotheses*, which is modified as the RP develops through time. Third, each RP must include a *positive heuristic*, a "long-term research policy" or positive set of directions to be pursued; this research strategy cannot be purely negative, ad hoc, or reactionary. Lastly, over time a RP will evidence either a *progressive* or a *degenerating problem-shift*. In the natural sciences, some assessment of the state of a given RP can be made after sufficient scientific energy has been invested in it. For Lakatos a RP is *progressive* when it gives rise to novel and empirically successful hypotheses, and *degenerating* when it no longer produces new discoveries and when other, more attractive alternatives are available. We will find that defining progressive problemshifts for nonempirical or nonscientific disciplines is one of the most perplexing tasks facing the potential Lakatosian.

The Lakatos who makes his appearance in this paper believes that we can sometimes determine whether a given RP is progressing or degenerating; he thus holds that natural scientific activity is (at least sometimes) rational and that the natural sciences progress at least at times when they display progressive problemshifts. Put differently, I presuppose a Lakatos who sought to bridge the gap between Karl Popper's formalist approach and the "contextualist" orientation of Norwood Hanson, Stephen Toulmin, Thomas Kuhn, and Paul Feyerabend. This presupposition has been disputed by some philosophers of science, most notably by Feyerabend in *Against Method* (1975). Feyerabend alleges that Lakatos's philosophy of science amounts to "epistemological anarchism" when applied as a maxim for scientific activity. In what follows I assume that Feyerabend has badly and tragically misinterpreted Imre Lakatos, though I cannot pause to defend this claim in detail.

There is, of course, a pragmatic reason for disagreeing with Feyerabend and for construing Lakatos as a nonrelativist. Even if the relativist grants me an epistemologically robust Lakatos *in the context of natural science*, she may watch with glee as the normative dimension of Lakatos's methodology dissolves into anarchy as we move through the various mediating disciplines toward theology. It is this alleged gradual dissolution from objectivity to relativism, and its implications, that I wish to trace in what follows.

Since the early work of Popper, critics have drawn attention to the difficulty of substantiating general normative claims in the philosophy of science. Admittedly, the broad comparisons made here are (to use Lakatos's suggestive term) "rational reconstructions" rather than detailed descriptions of scientific practice. The typologies and genetic theories developed below should therefore not be read as exceptionless rules or binding prescriptions on how particular sciences should be pursued. On the other hand, the disagreements which cripple contemporary debate over the nature of theology are so fundamental that methodological analyses must now proceed at a rather general level. If an exploration of recent developments in social theory helps us formulate even a few necessary conditions for work in theological method, it will have served its purpose.

Lakatos and Research Programs in Economics

Lakatos has been applied to a few general discussions in the social sciences.[3] It is standard to summarize the positions of philosophers of natural science when doing social theory and then either to embrace or abandon them (see, for example, Jones 1977; Portis 1986), less common to modify them to the point that they might become appropriate for use in social science. The only social scientific discipline in which there has been sustained discussion of Lakatos's work is economics.[4] For this reason, and because economics is often taken to be the "hardest" of the social sciences, I will focus on this discipline as a prefatory case study before sketching the outlines of a Lakatosian theory of the social sciences.

A number of economists have argued that Lakatos's theory of RPs nicely represents the growth of economic theory in this century. Kuhnian paradigms are too imprecise a model, Mark Blaug writes, and the only clear example of a "revolution" in economics is the Keynesian revolution. But the pre-Keynesian principle of "economic equilibrium via the market mechanism" can be reconstructed as the hard core of an extended RP that added and discarded a number of auxiliary hypotheses over the years. With John Maynard Keynes a decisively new RP was initiated (Blaug 1986, 243-44), with a new batch of auxiliary hypothe-

ses and a strong positive heuristic of its own. Consensus was quickly reached that the Keynesian program was progressive, for it made novel and accurate predictions about (for example) the chronic tendency of competitive market economies to generate unemployment. Lakatos helps account for the general acknowledgment of Keynes's explanatory success after 1936; the successful Keynesian predictions stemmed directly from the hard core of his program, whereas similar claims in other programs were ad hoc modifications, desperate attempts to incorporate economic developments of the twenties and thirties within degenerating programs.

The interdependence of hypotheses in economics is further reason to choose a Lakatosian account of this discipline, according to Rod Cross. Lakatos's theory does not entail any "specific prescriptive advice" for economists, but it does "suggest certain courses of action" or general methodological guidelines for rational progress in the field (Cross 1982, 334). Unlike much natural science, however, economists cannot agree on a formulation of the hard core of successful RPs, although there may be sufficient agreement on the positive heuristics to separate out a few rough RPs. Moreover, the majority of economic theorists, like T. W. Hutchison and J. R. Hicks (in Latsis 1976), insist that appraisal in economics is more difficult and tenuous than in the natural sciences. This fact poses a serious obstacle for those who wish to describe the rationality of economic theory choice in Lakatosian terms: Lakatos may have found exactly the right delicate balance between conventionalism and "naive falsificationism" for the natural sciences, but the decreased precision and more extensive disagreement in economics may mean that Lakatosian standards amount to "anything goes" in this field.

Despite the confident use of Lakatosian terms, it is clear that major modifications of Lakatos's original program have been made by economists. At least four should be noted here. First, in economics only a few candidates for RPs can be discovered. In contrast to the multitude of natural scientific examples, only Keynesian theory is acknowledged as a standard case in contemporary economics. As a result, we find Joseph Remenyi (1979) arguing that Lakatos's *hard core* is too general a term, and that we need to isolate economic *demi-cores*, or smaller subprograms within research programs.

Second, the relation of economics to its history is different. Economists tend to rewrite the history of their discipline from the perspective of each new RP, a tendency which Lakatos also recognized in the natural sciences.[5] But in economics the narrative is rather more fuzzy and pluralistic; many of the Lakatosian efforts at chronicling economic history call to mind Douglas Hands's (1979) warning against "baked" histories that retell the history of science as if it were purely

rational. Nonetheless, using Lakatos's terms, we can still recognize an *internal* history of economics, in which disciplinary progress is described as the product of theoretical decisions, experimental confirmations, and so on, as opposed to its *external* history, where nonrational factors (accidents, political battles within the profession, vacillations of intellectual fashion) play the determinative role.

These factors impact, third, on the question of evaluation. Economic theory abstracts from the noneconomic or "nonrational" concerns of individual actors, who are assumed in economic models to be ideally rational agents. Human actions can therefore be formalized and evaluated in economics in a manner quite similar to certain natural sciences. In mainstream contemporary economics meaning questions are bracketed, the concept of market allows us to cancel out the noneconomic motivations of the individual actors, and predictions are formulated and evaluated mathematically. As a result, agreement concerning progressive RPs should be found here if anywhere in the social sciences. Nonetheless, perhaps ironically, one finds economic theorists questioning whether economics is too subjective for Lakatos's methodology of scientific RPs to yield anything other than relativism when applied to it. For example, Blaug (1986) illustrates how economists tend to cling to degenerating problemshifts in the face of facts, remain unconcerned with producing refutable predictions, ignore empirical content, neglect to search for novel facts, and "tell stories" by creating different theories from the same empirical data. If we are justified in ascribing relativism to a discipline to the extent that its decision procedures are influenced by subjective whims or external (societal or cultural) contingencies, then theories in economics must be judged more relative than those of the natural sciences.

Lastly, what of truth in economics? I am aware of no significant essays on the subject of economic truth. Economic theories are open to the same sort of purely instrumental interpretation often given in the natural sciences. In fact, the recourse to instrumentalism appears inevitable when one reflects on the counterfactual assumptions, mentioned above, that are necessary to produce economic predictions. One could, of course, interpret economic theories as merely useful fictions. Still, if one wanted to defend the truth value of economic theories, it would be natural to use correspondence language: laws about individual or market behavior represent claims about relationships or tendencies really existing in the world. Unlike most social sciences, the truth of meaningfulness need play little role here.

Toward a Lakatosian Theory of the Social Sciences

Let us step back now from the specifics of the economics discussion. I have worked elsewhere to formulate a Lakatosian theory for social

scientific RPs (Clayton 1989, chap. 3); there is time only to sketch such a theory here. Since Lakatos's methodology of science is fundamentally historical in nature, the theory must be presented in genetic terms. First, to apply the notion of RPs already presupposes that there are some empirical social sciences: economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and the like. Second, the birth of a social scientific RP occurs when a thinker weds a new concept with an existing social discipline. Often the wedding is preceded by some new data (perhaps cross-cultural or drawn from the natural sciences) or a new method (Verstehen-based methods, Wundtian introspection, ethnography, factor analysis). The moment of birth is not social science at its most rigorous: suggestions for the core of a RP often have to do less with justified inferences than with an insight, a new way of looking at the world, in which the innovator may rely on introspective, emotive, or nonscientific reactions. One thinks of the oft-cited Copernican, Newtonian, and Einsteinian revolutions in natural science, the birth of positive social science in Auguste Comte, the beginnings of the study of the unconscious with Sigmund Freud.[6]

Third, a positive research tradition then arises to carry out the line of research suggested by the founder. Initial theories are formulated; a label for the new area of study is derived (social psychology, ethnomusicology, psychoanalysis); a few experts are acknowledged; perhaps the first journal is founded. Of course, at this point the implications of the new approach (both theoretical and practical) are as yet unclear; scientists' attention is taken up with the new lines of research and field work or testing stemming from the new insight. Social scientific RPs are thus rather eclectic and fluid groups of theories, evidencing surprising degrees of change over time. Generally they are collected around a hard core, which imposes a particular structure on the empirical research by encouraging certain sorts of research questions and methods, condoning some hypotheses instead of others, dictating how hypotheses are to be evaluated, and so on.

Social scientific hard cores are more malleable than in most natural sciences; they may contain at first only a vaguely formulated understanding of the "essence" of the program. But if a core is scarcely formulated it can hardly exercise control over the positive heuristic. If, as Cross (1982) has suggested, even in economics talk of hard cores is too vague to be helpful and economic RPs should be distinguished by their positive heuristics alone, it is even less clear that "softer" social sciences have irrefutable cores that expressly guide their progress. In the natural sciences we recognize the early stages of explicit RPs in, for example, electrodynamics following Michael Faraday but prior to the mathematics of James Clerk Maxwell, or in early work in modern chemistry. Parallels in the social sciences could include the work of

Freud and his early followers, or the early decades of anthropology, after Edward Tylor's 1871 *Primitive Cultures* but before the long debates about the definition of culture and the development of more specific techniques for cross-cultural research. Lakatos's framework is still helpful in describing the birth of social scientific RPs, but one must admit that his distinctions cannot be quite as clearly drawn in this field.

Fourth, with the passage of time research programs in the social sciences become more explicit. A recognized field of inquiry is established; the initial insight devolves into competing schools of research; leading representatives work to convince a broader readership (or at least their doctoral students) that their RP is the most successful and the one worthy, for example, of the greatest amount of funding. Lakatos rightly gives the competition between alternate RPs an essential role in science. One thinks in physics of the battles about the interpretation of the equations of quantum mechanics in the 1920s and 1930s and in biology of the smooth versus cataclysmic (Darwinian versus Lamarckian) models of evolution. But the same is equally true in psychology about the debates over Verstehen and introspection (Windelband, Rickert, Wundt), and of the warfare among Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, and Freud over psychoanalysis.

In many cases, social scientific RPs exist mainly as reactions or defenses against other approaches. Out of this warfare, and empirical research carried out over time, these RPs gain their sophistication and explanatory power. The resultant schools develop institutional forms (journals, conferences, control of departments[7]), a clear sense of identity and, often, interest and expertise in methodological debates like the present one.

Fifth and finally, according to the Lakatosian model, the stage of evaluation is reached where one begins to be able to tell which RPs are progressing and which of the initial leads did not pan out. Based on the progressively clearer statement of the RP's hard core and methods and on its empirical success over time, a consensus must eventually be reached by a large segment of the scientific community on the adequacy of the RP—or, more cautiously, many scientists should agree on whether it is still a fruitful program of research to pursue. In fact, certain statistical innovations *have* become part of the common repertoire for research in (for example) sociology and political science; portions of psychological theory are now standard tools in clinical work; and research programs such as ethnography utilize distinctive and widespread methods that have now superseded the techniques and theoretical assumptions used by their predecessors.

These optimistic comments notwithstanding, the social sciences are not to be equated with the natural sciences on the level of evaluation.

For the methodological disagreements are simply much more fundamental in this area. John Kekes speaks of "the prevailing confusion about rationality in the social sciences" (Kekes 1979, 105), and Anthony Giddens writes of the malaise or "state of disarray" characterizing the social sciences today that has resulted from the disintegration of the "orthodox consensus" of the postwar period (Giddens 1979, 234-37). Evaluation of smaller RPs as progressive or degenerating may be possible only over a much longer period of time, if at all. More than in natural science, an unbroken continuum seems to exist from specific theories to the broader, philosophical issues raised by comprehensive social theories.

Moreover, unless one rules them out by caveat, as in economics, interpretative questions are crucial in most social sciences. It has become *de rigueur* to tout *all* science as involving hermeneutic concerns, human interests, and values issues. Nonetheless, it is indisputable that the social sciences are, on an imagined continuum from objective to subjective, less objective than the natural sciences. Giddens has correctly portrayed the social sciences as involving a "double hermeneutic": not only the researchers, but the objects of research—human subjects—are interpreting agents who create and inhabit worlds of meaning (Giddens 1976; see, for example, 158). As a result, evaluation is more difficult. Because semantic worlds are multiple, their reconstructions in social theories must also be multiple. Faced with a multiplicity of incompatible reconstruals of subjects' worlds, the social scientist cannot but grant the greater degree of relativity in her field. The attractive univocity of correspondence truth appears to recede from us here; one is tempted instead to speak of the "truth of meaningfulness." The reconstruction of a personal or social context is true if it makes the context meaningful to us (criterion of truth); in fact, to speak of the truth of social theories means precisely that they re-present or evoke the meaningfulness of the context in question (definition of truth). We return to this hermeneutical notion of truth below.

Lakatos and Literary Criticism

When we turn to the humanities, the contrasts with natural science are so overwhelming that thinkers on both sides of the fence are wont to forsake methodological comparisons *tout court*. Throughout the social sciences so far considered, adequate explanation remained an important goal; empirical considerations could be adduced and (in most cases) replicable experiments designed; hence there was no need to challenge the applicability of Lakatos's term *research programs*. But matters are different in those disciplines whose primary work is interpretation. We might speak of *hermeneutical disciplines* in those cases

where interpretation of texts, historical events, or works of art is the *primary* focus. To modify Lakatos in light of the distinctive rationality (and theory of truth?) of literary criticism is particularly important for theological methodologists, for a number of theologians have recently sought to develop "hermeneutical theologies" modeled on one or another theory of literary criticism.[8]

Parenthetically, although I concentrate on literary criticism, very similar things could be said of other humanities. For instance, the conclusions would be similar for the historical disciplines to the extent that they are concerned with how to interpret past events. Of course, historiography also involves factual decisions concerning past events, which gives it certain affinities with the social sciences as well. In fact, even literary criticism has occasionally been presented as a sort of explanatory social science.[9] The parallels with social science are strongest when literary critics or historians employ historical-critical methods to reestablish the intentions of authors or historical agents—a significant fact given that theology *also* faces a historical-critical task in its work. However, despite these affinities, we would obscure central features of historiography, literary criticism, philosophy, and theology were we to *equate* such disciplines with the empirical social sciences. We can therefore acknowledge that there are portions of these disciplines that are social scientific, and then concentrate in what follows on essential features that are not replicated in the empirical social sciences.

An example of a program in literary criticism where one would expect to find parallels if anywhere is the structuralist school. Note that it would be better to call structuralism a *program of interpretation* rather than a research program, for critics are more concerned with the activity of interpreting texts structurally than with any program of research. Given this caveat, a five-step Lakatosian theory of structuralist criticism, adapted from the theory of the social sciences presented above, suggests itself. First: the existence of certain empirical disciplines on which literary critics can draw is still presupposed. In the case of structuralism, Saussurian linguistics and certain schools in anthropology and sociology played this role.

Second: early practitioners wedded a social scientific discipline with a new positive heuristic for reading literature. They approached the interpretation of texts using the so-called linguistic metaphor, that is, the suggestion that we treat texts as purely linguistic objects. Texts are fixed systems of signs, *langue* (language) rather than *parole* (speech); as formal structures they contain discernible (and allegedly universal) patterns that can be analyzed according to a small number of general categories, such as order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice.

Third: a positive program of interpretation quickly arose to carry out the method of interpretation suggested by the early thinkers. Structuralists appealed to the success of structuralism in the study of linguistic phenomena, social groups, and tribal cultures to justify use of the linguistic metaphor on literary works. Critics went to work to provide new readings of classic texts, and theorists began to formulate the philosophical foundation and consequences of this new way of reading.[10] Vladimir Propp examined the morphology of Russian folktales, Roman Jakobson looked at Charles Baudelaire's *Les Chats*, and the program found further applications in the work of Tzvetan Todorov, early Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond, A. J. Greimas, and their followers.

Fourth: at this point in my Lakatosian model of the social sciences we observed the development of successful research programs in disciplines like economics. But note that something very different happens in literary criticism. Here all we can say is that the initial structuralist intuition continues to be applied. Without doubt, early structuralist intuitions were refined, primitive analyses were replaced by complex techniques, and structuralists became skilled in defining and defending their methods in theoretical contexts. Likewise, the battle with rival programs of interpretation, which is central in social science, finds its parallel in literary criticism; indeed, an entire discipline, literary theory, has been founded to aid and abet these controversies. In the case of structuralism, such battles have helped to raise the approach to a full-fledged program of interpretation, complete with a distinct body of primary and secondary literature and its own standard recounting of the history of literary criticism. Lakatos's description works here: the hard core of the program has been more clearly formulated and additional auxiliary hypotheses have been added to guide research. But, unlike scientific research programs, programs of interpretation cannot be judged by empirical fruitfulness: no startling predictions are made and no falsifications occur. The difference is significant: what results is a way of reading and a multitude of readings rather than a growing body of information about the world. One might be tempted to say that the canon of "great literature" here serves as data and the *quantity* of structuralist readings as proof of the success of structuralism, but this seems rather forced. The various Lakatosian analogies notwithstanding, the outcome of literary criticism remains a multiplication of possible readings rather than the subtraction of invalid theories or the convergence on a final interpretation.

Fifth: the implications of the first four steps for the evaluation of literary programs such as structuralism are as one might expect. In contrast to scientific debates, little consensus has been reached in

literary criticism as to whether structuralism represents a progressive or a degenerating problemshift in interpretation. Various attacks on and modifications of structuralism have arisen—post-structuralism, Derridean deconstruction, Marxist and feminist readings, the later Barthes—at the same time that other critics continue to employ structuralist methods or to work within yet older programs of criticism. If literary criticism were a religion, it would more parallel the syncretism of the Hindu tradition that the exclusiveness of Western doctrinal faiths.

We can now say something about the questions of relativism and truth in the context of disciplines such as literary criticism. First, for purposes of evaluation it is significant that there is no *given* (except perhaps for the text or the canon; I return to this issue below). Literary critics do not begin with a fledgling program of research that suggests a theory, and certainly not with conclusive empirical results, but instead with a suggestion for interpretation that seems to create its own results. Moreover, programs of research need not extend over time. They may be as shortlived as the lone volume in which a critic suggests a principle of reading and applies it to a single text.

Of course, programs of interpretation *do* usually include some reflection on the program. Unfortunately, it is a mode of reflection unlikely to give much consolation to philosophers of science. One inevitably finds a rewriting of the history of literary criticism from the standpoint of each new program. One thinks of Terry Eagleton's popular *Literary Theory* (1983), of Mark Taylor's *Deconstruction in Context* (1986), and of Terrence Hawkes's *From Structuralism to Semiotics* (1977).[11] In each of these cases the author presents the history of literary theory as a more or less continuous narrative pointing toward (and thus substantiating) his particular stance. There may be some control here, for we can ask, Does the history of criticism really support the rereading of the text (or the history) by a given critic? But such controls are rather minimal. When historical considerations are not helpful, the theorist tends to choose a nonhistorical order of presentation (see Eagleton 1983 and Taylor 1987).

What then, if anything, could make a program of interpretation progressive? Obviously, critics are not striving for explanations that are straightforwardly true or false of the world, but for interpretations that are more or less adequate, more or less enlightening, more or less interesting, more or less novel. Another way to put this is to say that science is convergent, at least in structure or intentionality, while the goal of criticism seems to be the proliferation of readings. While there is little point in simply labeling literary criticism relativistic, clearly the differences prove a greater degree of subjective variability and undecidability than we found elsewhere.

This observation brings us back to the truth question. On the one hand, for various reasons it seems insufficient simply to dismiss the question of the truth of literature. For one, parts of theology are similar to literary criticism, yet few theologians are willing to dismiss theological assertions as neither true or false. Coherence-based notions of truth go part way toward explaining what it is for an interpretation to be true of a text, namely, if it offers a coherent reconstruction (or construction) of the content of the literary work in question.

On the other hand, beyond stressing the inadequacy of correspondence-centered theories of truth in this field, it is tempting also to "adjectivize" truth, to explore the particulars of *literary* truth in contrast to the truth sought in natural science. Significant work has already been carried out in this direction.[12] Literary truth—and theological truth as well?—would have to be a notion that includes the subjective dimension of the reader's response: a reading is true if it discloses something to me as reader (see Tompkins 1980). What Arthur Holmes has called "personal disclosure value" (Holmes 1969; 1971) therefore has an intrinsic place in this theory of truth. We might add, following Paul Ricoeur: "true" literature—and true theology?—must reveal to me a possible mode of being-in-the-world. It does so by formulating "metaphorical truths": metaphorical relationships that are not *factually* true or false but that are suggestive of subjective possibilities for existence (see Ricoeur 1977, especially chap. 7). A natural scientist might object that metaphorical statements do not correspond to any real relationships in the world and hence are either false or meaningless. But the move to coherence-based theories of truth makes this claim rather more difficult to substantiate than it was for correspondence theories. I suggest that no reason remains for protecting the purity of the notion *true* by keeping it unsullied by subjective-sounding predicates. Some readings are truer than others because, when the term *truth* is used in literary criticism, it connotes readings with disclosure value.

The Four Tasks of Theology

We are now ready to turn explicitly to theology. My hypothesis throughout this paper has been that theology can best be—indeed, must be—approached through the mediation of the social sciences and humanities. Theological methodologists drawing on Imre Lakatos need to appeal *not* to Lakatos the philosopher of natural science, but to a Lakatos modified by what we have learned from the various social sciences and humanities. What we have seen so far is that Lakatos's thought continues to provide some interesting leads despite the many modifications that are necessary.

I have no wish to equate theology with any one of the particular disciplines mentioned above. We are only too familiar with the various attempts to reduce theology to literary criticism, to ethics or, in the projectionist critiques of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Freud, to political theory, sociology, and psychology. Still, it seems indisputable that theology evidences parallels to a number of disciplines ranging from physics through economics to artistic interpretation. A crucial task for the science/theology discussion is to explore and weigh these various methodological options.

As a first step, I suggest that there are four major tasks of theology, corresponding to four different types of programs of inquiry in the sciences and humanities. Theology includes the tasks of *explanation*, of *historical criticism*, of *interpretation* to determine meanings and explore their significance for contemporary believers and the contemporary world, and of *general or philosophical reflection* to assess the overall coherence of the worldview underlying Christian theology. I take these four tasks to be individually necessary, and perhaps conjointly sufficient, for a methodological definition of theology.

I will be briefest on the first two, for the arguments are already familiar. Theology's explanatory task has been a mainstay of the theology/philosophy dialogue since the Patristic era; the fact that portions of theological systems attempt to explain the world gave rise to the centuries-long project of natural theology. Recently, the explanatory dimension has received important clarification through significant work on science/religion parallels, notably in the pages of this journal and in conferences reported here (see note 1).

Historical-critical work remains inevitable insofar as Christianity is inherently a historical religion. Certain historical events lie at its origin; however extensively they may be reinterpreted or their significance reconstrued, the truth of these historical claims remains indispensable. The historical-critical method from its advent has been used to increase the available information on these normative events, including how they were understood by those in closest proximity to them. Admittedly, the results of this extended investigation have been far from decisive. Nonetheless, from a methodological point of view, theology in its historical-critical guise must be compared to other historical-critical disciplines and granted all the rights and privileges pertaining to them.[13] If theology were exclusively a historical-critical pursuit, it would be no more relativistic than the historical-critical study of other events within the ancient world. Its truth would be the truth of correspondence to the actual past events (to the extent that they are known), its goal, a knowledge of what actually happened (*wie es geschehen [ist]*).

Consider, third, the task of interpretation. Much of theology is concerned with meaning questions. Our concern is not just with what

happened in the first century, but with the significance of these events for our lives and for the contemporary world. Moreover, in many cases we have to do predominantly with texts—biblical texts as well as the texts of early interpreters and creeds—which must be translated and interpreted as a basis for any further theological reflection. Here the humanities provide a closer parallel to theology; they come closer to conveying the essence of theological method, for they are explicitly noncumulative, value-laden, interpretive disciplines.

A quasi-Lakatosian consideration of the nature of the programs that we find in theology substantiates this point. We could speak of theology as a *research* program only if it offered agreed-upon criteria for testing theological hypotheses and agreed-upon tasks for theological research.[14] More typically, theological schools have amounted to programs of interpretation. To the extent that theology is concerned with one (or a series of) normative texts, textual interpretation and its methodology must be granted a privileged position in theology. Theologians such as Wolfhart Pannenberg have long maintained that not texts but rather the whole Christian tradition (and ultimately *Universalgeschichte*) should be our central focus. But is not the history of the Christian tradition itself a sort of text, as Ricoeur has shown convincingly in several important papers?[15] Therefore, the "textual" part of theology should be extended beyond the merely written portion of the tradition to include such things as central events of sacred history, rites and rituals, doctrinal disputes, and institutional factors.

The final task, general philosophical reflection, links theology to the tradition of systematic reflection in philosophy. Where theology is like metaphysics, it must share the criteria that govern that type of discourse. I have argued elsewhere that a theory of philosophical coherence can be developed to explain the manner in which comprehensive metaphysical positions are evaluated (Clayton 1988a; 1988b). Undeniably, such evaluations are less definitive than those made in empirical scientific disciplines. Yet it can be shown that they need be no more relativistic than the evaluation of other metaphysical systems, and that metaphysics in general need not be immune to any sort of rational criticism. At any rate, *to the extent that* rational evaluation of metaphysical systems is possible by means of assessments of their greater or lesser systematic coherence, it will not be difficult to define a concomitant notion of truth as ideal coherence as a means of characterizing the results of this evaluation (Clayton 1989, chap. 4).

Lakatos and Theological Truth

Given the discrepancies that we have discovered between the methodology of scientific research programs and the four tasks of theology,

one wonders to what extent we can still use Lakatos at all for ascertaining the status of theology. Even if Lakatos's approach can be stretched to encompass programs of interpretation such as literary criticism, there is another dimension of religious or theological programs that may set them apart: they are also *programs for living*, since added to their explanatory and interpretive functions is that of guiding life. This feature could either be added as a fifth task of theology or understood as an umbrella criterion that encompasses all the others. At any rate, theology's role as a program for living—whether the effects are personal or rebound to transform society as a whole—will at minimum give the criterion of personal disclosure value a rather more important role here than in literary criticism.

Despite its limitations, Lakatos's philosophy of science does provide a means for unveiling the consequences of an interdisciplinary approach to theology. One may of course construe theology as an endeavor that shares no standards of rationality with any other discipline, asserting that all theological criteria are relative to its particular purposes (call it Barthian relativism). But for those of us who do wish to defend theology as rational discourse in more general terms, one obvious strategy is to model it, to the greatest appropriate extent, on disciplines that are widely taken as paradigms of rationality. I close by formulating some of the requirements that Lakatos's methodology of scientific research programs seems to pose for theologians who are sympathetic to this strategy.

Theology modeled on science (science à la Lakatos) would have to consist of distinct, competing programs of theological inquiry. Each will have a clearly stated hard core of basic assumptions about Christianity, and each will include a number of auxiliary hypotheses that together structure study in its field. These programs of inquiry will be required to demonstrate that their particular set of assumptions can yield a constructive theological program. With time, the theological community must have some way to evaluate which of the various RPs remain fruitful and which are no longer so. There are several indispensable conditions for Lakatosian evaluation: the RPs must be explicitly formulated; all theological claims need to be advanced within the context of a specific RP; and the confrontation between theological RPs must remain unencumbered by any immunizing strategies that would prevent assessment of success or failure.

Now nothing in Lakatos's work will determine for us how *fruitfulness* should be defined in theology. Fruitfulness, the question of criteria, will continue to be a matter of controversy, depending on which of the spectrum of disciplines from physics to literary criticism most influence one in drawing up epistemic standards. If we look to natural scientific

disciplines, we will evaluate theological positions for their consistency and the explanatory power of their models. We will also place a stress on empirical questions. One would presumably wish to design empirical hypotheses and test them for their ability to synthesize the significant data of human experience—including the results of science, the insights gleaned from the study of comparative religions, and the basic parameters of moral, aesthetic, and mystical experience. By contrast, as we have seen, when we lay greater stress on disciplines such as literary criticism, theological readings will be considered fruitful when they provide interpretations of original Christian texts (correct interpretations or creative interpretations, depending on one's hermeneutic views), when they yield a more aesthetic reading of the Christian tradition, or when they offer us new modes of being-in-the-world.

What of truth in theology? A general theory of truth does not resolve the question of standards for us; in fact it is parasitic on the outcome of that discussion. Still, I believe that four significant components of a theory of truth in theology have emerged in our discussion here. First: to the extent that one carries the methodology question directly from the empirical sciences to theology (assuming that one holds the predicate *true* to be applicable to scientific theories), one will simply ask whether theological assertions correspond to the way things actually are: does God exist? was Jesus' tomb empty? when and by whom were these scriptures written?

Second: a new dimension is added by the discussion of truth in the human sciences, namely, the demand that we link the truth question to the demands of human interpretation. Consequently, *meaningfulness*—in the sense of personal disclosure value or the individual's ability to integrate his or her experience into a coherent whole that is perceived as cognitively and affectively adequate—is at least a necessary condition for the truth of theological assertions. In fact, the link is definitional as well as criteriological: meaningfulness in the sense of personal disclosure value is actually part of what is involved in holding that a theological assertion is true. Third: to the extent that we draw the standards for theological method from disciplines like literary criticism, additional factors are introduced. Here truth assessments involve questions of the beauty or aesthetic value of a perspective, and value is placed on multiplying perspectives rather than choosing between them. Fourth and finally: metaphysics presupposes a notion of truth as systematic coherence of belief. To the extent that its standards pertain to theology as well, the broad coherence and comprehensiveness of a theological approach will be relevant to its assessment.

I have suggested that the theory of truth could be revised to include distinctively theological desiderata. Nonetheless, I must admit that one

is not compelled to make one's theory of truth do this work; the same result might also be achieved by relativizing the role of the truth question itself. According to Jürgen Habermas, for instance, the focus on truth is only one of the goals of linguistic communication (1986, chap. 1). The more general human goal is "discourse oriented toward understanding." Such discourse presupposes three different regulating ideals—truth, rightness and truthfulness—and no one of them has preeminence. Although I believe there are significant problems with this position, one *could* simply say that theology is a form of discourse in which moral or aesthetic or experiential questions play a more central role than does truth. The concept of truth takes no modifiers; we cannot separate scientific truth from literary truth or theological truth. Truth has only to do with correspondence to the world, and theology is simply not concerned with that question.[16]

NOTES

1. Lakatos's work has recently been widely utilized by methodologists of theology (see Hefner 1988, Murphy 1987; 1988; forthcoming, Clayton 1989).

2. The *locus classicus*, which is relatively clear reading (and highly recommended), is Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes" (1978, chap. 1). Shorter summaries of Lakatos's position can be found in Ian Barbour (1974, chap. 6), and in the works cited in note 1.

3. See Hands (1979) and Sarkar (1980). A few applications to more specific disciplines have been made, such as Steinvorth (1980; 1982) and Fransman (1984-85).

4. See Latsis (1976), esp. the essays by Hicks, Hutchinson, Latsis and Leijonhufvud. See also Archibald (1979), Blaug (1986), Cross (1982), and Remenyi (1979).

5. See Lakatos, "History of Science and Its Rational Reconstructions," in Lakatos (1978).

6. Perhaps the vagueness of some of our discussions of theological method over the last few years can also be attributed to the early stages in which *this* program of research, the science/theology debate over methodology, now stands.

7. See the work of Gerald Holton in the sociology of science, for example Holton (1978) and Holton and Blanpied (1976).

8. See Hans Frei's seminal work in narrative theology, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), Ron Thiemann's more recent work in the same genre (1985), David Tracy's application of the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (Tracy 1981), and Mark Taylor's use of Jacques Derrida's methods of deconstruction (Taylor 1984; 1987). Theologians working under the influence of the later Heidegger, such as Fuchs and Ebeling, could also be classed as hermeneutical theologians.

9. The most startling and unabashed monograph in defense of this position is Livingston (1988).

10. This sounds like a neat division of labor. In fact critic and theorist were more often than not indistinguishable: books of criticism were (are) laced throughout with long theoretical asides, and theoretical treatises spent significant time providing new readings. Such co-mingling will obviously affect the task of evaluating positions in this field.

11. Note Hawkes's subheadings, which manage to reconstruct the entire historical movement from Vico to Barthes as a direct, unbroken arrow that points to his own chap. 4, "A Science of Signs."

12. See Kayser (1959), Sedlmayr (1978), and Hübner (1985). The source for many of these efforts can be found in the later Heidegger; see esp. "On the Essence of Truth" and "The Origin of the Work of Art," both of which have been translated in Heidegger (1977).

13. For an uncompromising defense of this perspective see Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Evaluation of Jesus' Resurrection in Modern Dogmatics" (1968, 108-14).

14. Nancey Murphy, making extensive use of Lakatos, has suggested a number of general links between scientific research and theological progress and has applied them to the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg (Murphy 1987; 1988). If her suggestions for evaluation were accepted as standards by theologians, they could help to give substance to the term *theological research programs*.

15. See Paul Ricoeur, "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," and "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text" (1981, chaps. 5 and 8).

16. This paper, originally inspired by Pannenberg (1976), has benefited from extensive discussions with Jonathan Bolton and Kevin Vanhoozer during both the research and writing phases. I have also profited from criticisms from Philip Hefner, Nancey Murphy, Robert John Russell, and Kevin Sharpe.

REFERENCES

Archibald, G. C. 1979. "Method and Appraisal in Economics." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 9:304-15.

Barbour, Ian. 1974. *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*. New York: Harper & Row.

Blaug, Mark. 1986. "Kuhn vs. Lakatos, or Paradigms versus Research Programmes in the History of Economics." In *Economic History and the History of Economics*. New York: New York Univ. Press.

Clayton, Philip. 1988a. "Anticipation and Theological Method." In *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques*, ed. Carl Braaten and Philip Clayton, 122-50. Minneapolis: Augsburg.

_____. 1988b. "Being and One Theologian." *The Thomist* 52:645-71.

_____. 1989. *Explanation from Physics to Theology: An Essay in Rationality and Religion*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.

Cross, Rod. 1982. "The Duhem-Quine Thesis, Lakatos and the Appraisal of Theories in Macroeconomics." *Economic Journal* 92:320-40.

Eagleton, Terry. 1983. *Literary Theory*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.

Feyerabend, Paul. 1975. *Against Method*. London: NLB.

Fransman, Martin. 1984-85. "Conceptualising Technical Change in the Third World in the 1980s: An Interpretive Survey." *Journal of Development Studies* 21:572-652.

Frei, Hans. 1974. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1976. *New Rules of Sociological Method*. London: Hutchinson.

_____. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1986. *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon.

Hands, Douglas W. 1979. "The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 9:293-303.

Hawkes, Terrence. 1977. *From Structuralism to Semiotics*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Hefner, Philip. 1988. "The Role of Science in Pannenberg's Theological Thinking." In *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques*, ed. Carl Braaten and Philip Clayton. Minneapolis: Augsburg.

Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell. New York: Harper & Row.

Holmes, Arthur. 1969. *Christian Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. Nutley, New Jersey: Craig.

_____. 1971. *Faith Seeks Understanding*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Holton, Gerold. 1978. *The Scientific Imagination: Case Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

_____ and W. A. Blanpied. 1976. *Science and Its Public: The Changing Relationship*. Boston Studies, vol. 33. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Hübner, Kurt. 1985. *Wahrheit des Mythos*. Munich: C. H. Beck.

Jones, Kenneth. 1977. "Some Epistemological Considerations of Paradigm Shifts: Basic Steps Towards a Formulated Model of Alternation." *Sociological Review* 25:253-71.

Kayser, Wolfgang. 1959. *Die Wahrheit der Dichter*. Hamburg: Rowohlt.

Kekes, John. 1979. "Rationality and the Social Sciences." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 9:105-13.

Lakatos, Imre. 1978. *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1: *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, ed. John Worrall and Gregory Currie. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Latsis, Spiro, ed. 1976. *Method and Appraisal in Economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Livingston, Paisley. 1988. *Literary Knowledge: Humanistic Inquiry and the Philosophy of Science*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.

Murphy, Nancey. 1987. "Acceptability Criteria for Work in Theology and Science." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 22:279-97.

_____. 1988. "A Lakatosian Reconstruction of Pannenberg's Program." Paper presented at the Pannenberg Symposium II, Chicago Center for Religion and Science, November 15.

_____. Forthcoming. *Theology in the Age of Probable Reasoning: Historicist Philosophy of Science and Theological Method*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.

Pannenberg, Wolfhart. 1968. *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis Wilkens and Duane Priebe. Philadelphia: Westminster.

_____. 1976. *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh. Philadelphia: Westminster.

Portis, E. B. 1986. "Theoretical Authority in Social Science." *The Social Science Journal* 23:397-410.

Remenyi, Joseph V. 1979. "Core Demi-core Interaction: Toward a General Theory of Disciplinary and Subdisciplinary Growth." *History of Political Economy* 11:30-63.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1977. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. R. Czerny. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press.

_____. 1981. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Sarkar, Husain. 1980. "Imre Lakatos' Meta-Methodology: An Appraisal." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 10:397-416.

Sedlmayr, Hans. 1978. *Kunst und Wahrheit*. Itzelsberg: Mäander.

Steinvorth, Ulrich. 1980. "Lakatos und politische Theorie." *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 11:135-46.

_____. 1982. "Busshoffs Wissenschaftstheorie der Politikwissenschaft und Lakatos." *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 13:370-82.

Taylor, Mark. 1984. *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

_____. 1986. *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

_____. 1987. *Altarity*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Thiemann, Ronald. 1985. *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel of Narrated Promise*. Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press.

Tompkins, Jane, ed. 1980. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.

Tracy, David. 1981. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. London: SCM.