WHAT EPISTEMIC VALUES SHOULD WE RECLAIM FOR RELIGION AND SCIENCE? A RESPONSE TO J. WESLEY ROBBINS

by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen

Abstract. Postmodernism in science rejects and deconstructs the cultural dominance of especially the natural sciences in our time. Although it presents the debate between religion and science with a promising epistemological holism, it also seriously challenges attempts to develop a meaningful relationship between science and religion. A neopragmatist perspective on religion and science is part of this important challenge and eminently reveals the problems and reduction that arise when pragmatist criteria alone are used to construct a holism that renounces any demarcation between different areas of rationality. In this pragmatist vision for a holist culture, the cognitive resources of rationality are bypassed in such a way that a meaningful interaction between theology and science becomes impossible.

Keywords: cognitive; epistemic values; holism; intelligibility; postmodern culture; rationality; theory-acceptance.

Postmodern thought today confronts those interested in the interaction between religion and science with a special challenge: to explore again the continuity that some so readily presuppose between Christian theology and the general human enterprise of understanding our world rationally. Not only theology, however, but also the sciences have been profoundly influenced by contemporary postmodern culture. This development gives an unexpected and complicating twist to the centuries-old theology and science problem: Not only theology, but also postmodern science and philosophy of science have moved quite dramatically away from positivist and technocentric conceptions of scientific rationality, with its closely aligned beliefs in

J. Wentzel van Huyssteen is James I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ 08542. Brad Elliott, Wioleta Polinska, and Bill Greenway, Ph.D. students at Princeton Theological Seminary, made contributions to this paper through discussion.

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linear progress, guaranteed success, deterministic predictability, absolute truths, and some uniform, standardized form of knowledge. Some philosophers of science now argue for a postmodern philosophy of science that, along with feminist interpretations of science, focuses on trust in local scientific practice while, at the same time, rejecting all global interpretations of science (cf. Rouse 1991). This kind of postmodernism in science not only sharply deconstructs and rejects the autonomy and cultural dominance of especially the natural sciences in our time, but seriously challenges any attempt to develop some form of unified view, or at least a meaningful and intelligible relationship between science and religion today.

J. Wesley Robbins's stimulating paper "A Neo-Pragmatist Perspective on Religion and Science" (1993) becomes part of this important challenge by forcing us to reflect again on the epistemic values that should shape the current religion and science discussion. Robbins wants to overcome the modern split between science and values through a pragmatist vision of ourselves as language users. Implied in this vision is a rejection of any approach that would see science as the paradigmatic human activity or as an area of our culture that could be demarcated by a special method or a special relation to reality. Also rejected would be any nonpragmatic criteria that might distinguish science from nonscience (cf. Rorty 1988, 49). On this view our scientific, religious, and broader cultural vocabularies are integral parts of self-reliant human problem solving and of our coping with the larger natural environment.

What emerges from Robbins's paper is a pragmatist view of rationality, a holism that renounces any demarcation between areas of rationality or different rationalities. By pursuing an image of humans as language users, Robbins conceptualizes both religious and scientific language as integral parts of the quest for usefulness. His remarks about the natural world and about the implied object(s) of religious devotion, however, reveal strange bedfellows: the reality of the natural world is presupposed, while any possible knowledge about the claims of religious language is denied. Thus, an ontological realism is presupposed while, at the same time, an extreme epistemological skepticism is maintained by emptying epistemology into pragmatist hermeneutics.

The kind of holism sought by a pragmatist rationality eventually leads Robbins to deny that there could be any philosophy of the interaction between religious and scientific vocabularies. For Robbins such interactions from part of a trial-and-error process by which human language use changes over time: there are histories of such processes, but no philosophies of them. This view, however, is not

just an untraditional way of viewing the history of this interaction; it also implies a reduction of the philosophical complexities that arise between the often vastly different kinds of knowledge claims made in religion and science respectively. The differences and similarities between claims to knowledge in religion and in science raise precisely serious epistemological problems. These problems cannot be resolved easily by pointing to human self-reliance and the usefulness of language in history, i.e., to only the pragmatic dimension of rationality.

Of course, the history of the religion and science debate has shown that the conflict between religion and science is, more often than not, rather a deeper conflict between often radically different worldviews. This observation may or may not apply to the way Robbins and I view differently the serious epistemological issues raised by the religion and science debate. But when a concept of rationality is constructed that completely bypasses the broader cognitive values that shape that rationality of both scientific and religious thought, a few epistemological eyebrows have to be raised.

This issue becomes even more challenging as Robbins proceeds. He not only sees the relationship between religion and science in exclusively pragmatist terms but also lets this pragmatism grow into a wide-ranging religious humanism. The holism that is aimed for here obviously cannot allow for forms of more "traditional" religious faith and commitment. The deconstruction of the demarcation between religion and science ultimately leaves us with a reductionist view of rationality and thus defeats the purpose of a holist epistemology that would aim for some form of shared rationality between religion and science. The really important question, however, is whether the kind of holistic culture that neopragmatists imaginatively project, and the implied ontological realism combined with epistemological antirealism and skepticism, can ultimately be justified by pragmatist criteria alone. It is more likely that they are supported by a pragmatist metaphysics, a "horizontal" fideism that indeed functions as a religious humanism.

I do, however, applaud Robbins's holism: we cannot remain content with a pluralism of unrelated languages if they are languages about the same world. Thus, if we seek a coherent interpretation of all experience, we cannot avoid the search for a unified worldview (cf. Barbour 1990, 16). A pragmatism that shuns the cognitive dimension of rationality will be an impoverished pragmatism, and as unsatisfactory for religious reflection as mere instrumentalism would be for science (cf. Polkinghorne 1991, 14). Also, why should anything be conceptually powerful or pragmatically useful unless it

somehow relates, through the language we use, to the way things are?

A neopragmatist view of religion and science, finally, so much restricts and limits more traditional concepts of religious faith that meaningful interaction between theology and science becomes virtually impossible. What is needed in the postmodern interdisciplinary discussion is a methodological approach that not only recognizes theology as an explanatory discipline but also takes seriously the following issues: the epistemological problem of the shaping of rationality in theology and science, the explanatory role of religious experience and beliefs, the hermeneutical problem relating context and meaning, and the fallibilist and provisional nature of both theological and scientific truth claims. The discussion of the problem of rationality in contemporary philosophy of science has proved more and more important as a guide to theology of late—perhaps the most fruitful link between theology and science to date. This discussion not only opens up definitions of rationality and indicates the criteria needed to govern theological assertions; it also highlights the centrality of experiential factors in rational explanation and therefore in rationality in general.

The problem of rationality in theology centers on the epistemic values that shape theological reflection. Generally speaking, the nature of rationality consists of the intelligent pursuit of certain epistemic values, of which intelligibility is the most important. Theology, whatever its differences with the other sciences might be, shares this quest for intelligibility with all the other sciences. Now, if rationality is a means to the goals of science (cf. Mc Mullin 1988, 25) and as such primarily consists of pursuing intelligibility by making the most progressive theory choices (cf. Laudan 1977, 121ff.), intelligibility itself can be seen as a quest for understanding at the deepest possible level. Thus theology, like the other sciences, proceeds by inferring to the best available explanations. Rationality is thus primarily shaped by the quest for intelligibility, and in theology intelligibility is attained through the explanatory role of religious experience and religious beliefs in our theological reflection. In both theology and science we should therefore beware of an overly narrow and rationalistic conception of rationality. Rationality as such is complex, many-sided, extensive, and as wide-ranging as the domain of intelligence itself.

Along with Nicholas Rescher (1988) we can identify at least three contexts of rationality that are highly relevant, not only for theology, but also for the social, human, and natural sciences: the cognitive

context, the evaluative context, and, yes, the pragmatic context. What this evaluation of rationality means for theological reflection is that also in theology there are good reasons for hanging on to certain beliefs, good reasons for making certain moral choices, and good reasons for acting in certain ways. Within a holist epistemology these three contexts go together as a seemless whole and can also be regarded as three resources for rationality: they merge in the common task of uniting the best reasons for belief, choice, and action. We therefore act rationally in matters of belief, action, and choice when our reasons "hang together", i.e., are cogent. In theology, as a reflection on religious experience, rationality implies the capacity to provide a rationale for the way one thinks, believes, chooses, and acts. Theory acceptance in both theology and science therefore has a very specific cognitive dimension. When we ask, however, what else other than belief is involved in theory acceptance, pragmatic and evaluative dimensions are revealed (cf. Van Fraassen 1989, 3ff.). Pragmatist criteria alone are not adequate, however, to justify what happens in scientific or theological theory acceptance, or to define the limits of religion or religion's interaction with science.

In both religion and science (and also in theology and science), rationality pivots on the deployment of good reasons: believing, doing, choosing the right thing for the right reasons. Being rational is therefore not just a matter of having some reasons for what one believes in and argues for, but of having the best or strongest reasons to support the rationality of one's beliefs within a specific context. Rationality in theology and science is shaped primarily by a shared quest for intelligibility. And this understanding at the deepest possible level is attained by inferring to the best possible explanations. In this sense rationality and explanation go together very closely.

The hazy intersection between the diverse fields of theology and the other sciences is therefore not in the first place to be determined by exploring methodological parallels or degrees of consonance between theology and science. What should be explored first is the epistemological question of the nature and status of explanations and explanatory claims in theology and the other sciences, since theological theories and constructs, as well as scientific theories aim at giving the best possible explanations in their respective fields. In this reflection we should be wary of dangerous epistemological shortcuts. Rationality should not be reduced to any one of the epistemic values that shape its role in our lives: not just the cognitive or evaluative dimensions, and certainly not just the pragmatic dimensions of theory acceptance.

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