

ON THE "USE" OF NEOPRAGMATISM

by Philip Clayton

Abstract. The present article continues an earlier critique of Robbins's and Rorty's neopragmatism. Their skepticism about the traditional *concept* of correspondence and about the *criteria* for truth are both unjustified, and their own assertion of *meaning as usefulness* either presupposes a prior notion of linguistic reference or fails to qualify as a sufficient criterion for knowledge. The difficulties with neopragmatism have implications for two other areas of the religion/science discussion, postmodernism and empirical theology. Postmodernism shares neopragmatism's mistakes regarding the philosophy of language and can be rejected without endangering one's empiricism, humanism, or naturalism. By contrast, the strengths of empirical theology, and of religious empiricism in general, can be preserved without Robbins's proposed ban on metaphysics.

Keywords: Dewey; empirical theology; Lakatos; neopragmatism; postmodernism; realism and reference; Rorty; scientific method.

In this, the second round of the *Zygon* debate about the neopragmatism of J. Wesley Robbins and Richard Rorty, I am struck by some extremely crucial issues the debate raises for those interested in empirical theology or the empirical study of religion. I find little right in the *specific* arguments of Robbins/Rorty, and have expressed these reservations in an earlier *Zygon* article (Clayton 1992, responding to Robbins 1992); they are presupposed in what follows. But the *broader* issues—of empiricism, humanism, naturalism, and theological method—demand continued attention.

My thesis is that the neopragmatism of Robbins/Rorty breaks down into two distinct approaches to religion and science: postmodernism and the "empirical" approach to religion. Neopragmatism challenges us to sort out what is right (positive, useful, interesting) from what we should reject in these two approaches. When we agree on the scope of the term *experience*, and on the

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manner in which it is used to test religious claims, it becomes easier to address the dilemma raised in Robbins's article: the (alleged) opposition between "naturalist" science and philosophy and theistic or "metaphysical" beliefs.

NEOPRAGMATISM

The position of Robbins/Rorty is not hard to restate: Language in religion and philosophy does not refer to anything that can be said to be true or false; "what 'x' refers to is a sociological matter" (Rorty 1982, xxiv). As long as theories are *useful*—if they are self-expressive and creative—it does not matter if they were caused by physical anomaly or mental illness (Robbins 1993, 341). Since religious language refers to nothing, no theistic language can be true, and religion cannot be about any divine force or reality. Robbins does condone religious language when it is understood as being about nothing other than "our own imaginative projections" (Robbins 1993, 338). General theories of the reference of language (e.g., van Huyssteen 1989) should be eschewed—though Robbins's article does seem to present *its own* theory of language—as should methodologies or theories of the relation between science and religion (Clayton 1989; Murphy 1990)—though, again, Robbins has something to say about how *he* thinks they should be related.

I have major difficulties with this position. Robbins obviously believes his opponents' positions are wrong ("realism is a reactionary impediment to human self-reliance") as much as we believe his position is wrong. When he says his view is *more useful* or that it "can make our life . . . better than before" (Robbins 1993, 348), he presumably means it *really* is more useful; that is, that it is *true* that it is more useful. The charm of Rortyan "anti-essentialism" is its tone of humility and tolerance. But pragmatists are dead set against their realist opponents (and should be—we really do disagree about something), just as theists can show equal or greater levels of tolerance toward those with whom they disagree.

Pragmatism presupposes *some* referential use of language: There must be *some* world relative to which our theories are useful. By claiming that his view avoids the reference question and makes no truth claims, Robbins actually finesses the issue, sliding in a particular ontology: He assumes that "the world" in which our languages help us live is ultimately *physicalistic*, which must mean *something like the physical sciences tell us it is*: useful theories "anticipate *physical* events and processes" (Robbins 1993, 347, emphasis mine).

Robbins/Rorty tell us that the only issue theorists of science or religion need worry about is whether their positions are “useful,” and the only determiners of usefulness are the reactions of oneself and one’s peers. But *why* should we accept this claim? Because talk of whether or not an assertion really is true is meaningless? I do not see why one would think this: Sophisticated theories of how language (scientific *or* religious) might refer are available, though Robbins does not criticize them. Should we accept this claim because, if our scientific claims are really about the world, we will never know whether they are true? No, philosophers of science have provided convincing accounts of how scientific theories are tested; Robbins does not give us any reason to become skeptics. Should we accept it because humanity’s interests will be best served if we disregard notions like truth and pursue only what is useful to us? Again, this argument is unconvincing: Seeking knowledge of the world for its own sake *may* in the long run be *more* useful to humanity than seeking only what is useful (a number of technological examples could be given here).

Finally, Robbins tells us that religious belief cannot really be about anything transnatural and proclaims himself a religious naturalist. This one mystifies me the most: Rorty’s transformation of John Dewey has removed precisely the metaphysical arguments that justified Dewey’s naturalism (Rorty 1982, 72f.), and Robbins himself tells us that physicists “are no more firmly in touch with reality” than political theorists or artists (Robbins 1993, 342).¹ Once the old fact/value dichotomy is gone, along with the naturalism of Newtonian physics, why would it matter whether religion is theistic or naturalistic? If theism had unacceptable social or political consequences (say, if it led inevitably to racism or tyranny), then we might all agree that it should be abandoned. But Robbins has given us no reason to believe that theism is intrinsically antihumanistic. I thus suggest the following dilemma: Either neopragmatism really *is* a nonmetaphysical position, in which case it is compatible with a full range of theistic positions (but is neutral regarding the theism/naturalism distinction); or it is a decidedly *naturalistic* position, in which case it is *not* metaphysically neutral but must defend its metaphysical assumptions against (say) theistic competitors.

POSTMODERNISM

Neopragmatism has a tenable and an untenable side; I suggest we label them, respectively, its *postmodernism*² and its *empiricism*. We will return to Robbins’s empirical commitment in the following

section. But what *separates* him from defenses of empirical theology such as Karl Peters's (1992)? I suggest that it is his rejection of claims to knowledge, truth, reference, justification—in short, the theory of language-without-reference he shares in common with postmodern thinkers. That is, what makes neopragmatism postmodern is not its pragmatism—for even its opponents agree that usefulness is *a criterion* for accepting a theory—but rather the contention that usefulness is *the only* admissible criterion.

Of course, postmodernism in contemporary literary theory, philosophy, and theology includes more than a theory of language. For Jacques Derrida it involves an attack on the four central ideas of modernity—God, the self, the text, and history. The result? In postmodernism, scientific reasoning loses its role as paradigm; physics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and voodoo are equally likely to discover (or create) truth. There is no outside the text; the reader creates his text in the reading, and the scientist creates the world she studies; all is caught up in the endless play of signifiers; explanation is now subsumed by (is a part of) the endless layers upon layers of interpretation; power relations, or historical coincidences, or sheer creative variation account for differences or agreement, between thinkers; and our goal should be “participating in a conversation rather than contributing to an inquiry” (Rorty 1979, 371).

I shall not attempt to argue that postmodernism is true (a paradoxical task!), nor to show that it is mistaken (though I think some of its claims are). It does seem, though, that Robbins must convince us that the only adequate science is a postmodern science—or, descriptively, that science as it really is is best described by Paul Feyerabend and Rorty. Until the case is made, I think we should hesitate to forego scientific inquiry. It does seem that scientists are sometimes swayed by the force of the better data and the better argument.

Instead, let us raise a different question: What are the conceptual relationships between postmodern theories of language such as Robbins's and positions such as empiricism, humanism, and naturalism? I have already argued that postmodernism is *incompatible* with the sorts of arguments that led empiricists from David Hume through Dewey to be naturalists; if so, postmodernism cannot entail naturalism. And surely it does not entail empiricism, if atomic theory is now on the same (epistemic) level as art and politics (Robbins 1993, 342). Let us assume Robbins is right that truth-as-usefulness entails humanism. (Parenthetically, I suggest that humanism does not require naturalism: A panentheistic theory of God may *better* support humanist concerns than naturalist theories do.)

What about the other direction: Do any of these positions necessitate postmodernist assumptions? Clearly, humanism does not entail a postmodern theory of language, since humanism flourished under modernist assumptions. Nor can naturalism: Naturalism is (as Dewey saw) a metaphysical position, whereas nonreferential (postmodern) theories of language take away any reason for preferring natural to supernatural theories or causes as long as the result is useful to us. Elsewhere I have pointed out some serious tensions between Nancey Murphy's (alleged) postmodernism and her attempt to preserve empirical theological experimentation (Clayton 1991).

Ultimately, then, although empirical theology will have to include pragmatic criteria, it neither entails nor is entailed by Robbins's postmodern theory of language. Nor does it appear that postmodern theories of language even encourage the sort of empirical controls that empirical theology will require. So let us leave the distinctively postmodern side of Robbins's position and ask now about the other prong of his position, the empirical or naturalist side.

RELIGIOUS EMPIRICISM

Here neopragmatism does help point out a fundamental disagreement, drawing attention to a rather basic division within the programs of study that *Zygon* represents. Take the example of the set of "acceptability criteria for work in theology and science" (Murphy 1987), derived from Imre Lakatos and frequently cited by *Zygon* contributors. Karl Peters (1992) appeals to the criteria in his defense of empirical theology, using them as basic to a "naturalistic" theology: "If there are realms of being other than spatiotemporal nature and history (as in supernaturalism), they are beyond our ken and have no relevance to life today" (Peters 1992, 303). Murphy, by contrast, understands theological data to be "judgments resulting from Christian discernment," which stems from the involvement of "a personal God" in the life of the church (Murphy 1990, 174, 172). She argues that "experience" of this sort will enable us to test theological programs such as Wolfhart Pannenberg's, whose "hard core" is "that the God of Jesus is the all-determining reality" (Murphy 1990, 176).

The question is whether an empirically oriented theology must forego all metaphysical components or terms. Robbins's piece implies that it must. Yet I think religious empiricism is a much broader and richer tradition than he allows; indeed, the parts that he neglects are exactly the ones that should be of most interest to the student of religion and religion/science parallels. To see this, consider

(1) the history of the movement, and (2) recent developments in the philosophy of science.

(1) Religious empiricism emerged out of a basic dichotomy, one involving the differences between idealism and empiricism, or between rationalism and empiricism. In his influential book, William Dean (1986, 6ff.) uses the unfortunate labels “pietistic liberalism” (Friedrich Schleiermacher) and “empirical liberalism” (John Locke, Jonathan Edwards, and the “Chicago School” of theology, e.g., Shailer Mathews, Shirley Jackson Case). All liberals appeal to the experience of the individual as the touchstone, challenging appeals to any authority outside the individual. But rationalists or “pietistic” liberals, Dean believes, make a number of mistakes: They say things about God beyond what can be derived from experience; they ascribe to God attributes that are supernatural rather than part of a naturalist ontology; and they conceive God in static terms rather than as pervasively historical.

Note first that religious empiricism is an extremely broad category. William Dean includes, for example, A. N. Whitehead, Jonathan Edwards, and even Martin Luther as religious empiricists (Dean 1986, 13, 20ff., 26f.)! Take just the first: Whitehead’s thought includes various abstract ideas, a universal principle of Creativity, and a primordial nature of God. But Whitehead is still an empiricist, according to Dean, because he relies on an “intuition of holiness, the intuition of the sacred, which is the foundation of all religion” (Dean 1986, 29). I suggest that when the net of religious empiricism is cast this wide, any fundamental dichotomy between empiricism and rationalism becomes untenable. Religious empiricists broaden the notion of experience beyond Locke and Hume to include affective, aesthetic, and religious experience; they even allow talk of a “mystical intuition” (Dewey) or “mystic consciousness” (Henry Nelson Wieman). But appealing to basic intuitions just was the characterizing attribute of rationalism!

Dewey is a particularly interesting border case. He does deny the existence of God, and he broke with the neo-Hegelianism of his early years. Yet he also defends metaphysics as providing “the generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds” (Dewey 1925, 412). Books such as *Art as Experience* ([1934] 1982) and *The Quest for Certainty* ([1929] 1984) clearly intend to offer metaphysical theses and arguments—an implicit metaphysics made explicit and systematized in several recent monographs on Dewey.³ As a result, Rorty/Robbins are forced to distinguish between good and bad empirical liberalism. Rorty says, for example, that there are two Deweys: the exemplary pragmatist, and the unfortunate empirical naturalist who

is still partially caught in metaphysics even if he does not (usually) employ the word *God* to speak of “the whole.” Some passages (e.g., Dewey 1925, 412) are rejected, and the acceptable Dewey becomes the one who wanted to “clear away the dead wood of the philosophical tradition” (Rorty 1982, 73).

(2) But this sorting out of Deweys—or of theistic (i.e., unacceptable) and nontheistic (acceptable) contributions to religion/science—is unnecessary and unjustified. As Philip Hefner pointed out in a seminal article, empirical theology may mean that one “will eschew the metaphysical efforts, or at least hold them in abeyance for a time, and devote his attention solely to the empirical categories and symbols” within religion (Hefner 1969, 236f., emphasis mine). Yet empirical theology does *not* require abandoning theistic language; it requires only that “what one experiences is . . . a norm of theology whose integrity cannot be violated” (Hefner 1969, 235). This, if anything, we have learned from Lakatosian philosophy of science: *The hard core of a research program does not have to be directly testable; hence it does not need to favor naturalism or physicalism.* It can be as metaphysical or theistic as you wish. Rather, what matters to the scientifically minded theologian is that he or she can *subsequently* find a way to test the claims made. Put differently, empirical theology modeled on Lakatosian science (as I have reconstructed it in my 1989 book) will move beyond foundationalism or logical positivism to a *holism* that takes as the unit of empirical inquiry “an entire array of sentences,” *without* going as far as Rorty’s holism, which takes as its only unit “an entire culture” (Robbins 1992, 227f.).

Ironically, an empirically adequate study of religion may require *avoiding* reductive treatments of religious language. If religious persons take their language and practice to be *about* a transcendent dimension, as phenomenologists of religion have shown, then construals of religion exclusively in terms of the *construction* of religious symbols and their usefulness to human agents should be judged as *empirically* less adequate than construals that do justice to the belief world of the religious subject. Anthropologists like Clifford Geertz have correctly fought against reductionistic studies in ethnography; the same methodological guidelines should apply to the study of religious practices and beliefs—unless one has overriding reasons to conclude that the beliefs in question must be false. One would have to show, for example, that the theist breaks some rational obligation in speaking about an existent God, or that such language is inherently meaningless, morally unacceptable, or objectively less justified (less likely to be true) than nontheistic accounts of religion.

The trouble is, by Robbins's own lights, no such general inter-subjective arguments can be given; for him to enter into such debates would be to recant on the skeptical parameters of his position.

CONCLUSION

What is enduring in empirical theology is its emphasis on hypothetical rather than dogmatic theorizing, on openness to criticism and revision, and on continuing dialogue with *all* areas of human experience, including the sciences. By contrast, what advances in our understanding of science have left behind are narrow construals of experience and scientific method that grant validity only to physical experience, to deductive-nomological explanation, and to "theory-free" (or metaphysics-free!) observation reports. Neopragmatists correctly remind empirical theologians of the holistic nature of experience; by curtailing our remaining prejudices in favor of physicalism, they hold us open to the full variety of "data" in religion and science. We can appropriate these lessons without letting holism run rampant, without turning scientists and philosophers into "informed dilettantes" (Rorty 1979, 317) and seeking the "subordination of truth to edification" (1979, 373). Usefulness need not usurp the goal of getting the world right—nor even the question of whether there might be a God.

NOTES

1. This crucial paragraph in his argument is incomprehensible to me. Let us suppose that our present theory of atomic structure is "no more firmly in touch with reality" than developments in politics or art (Robbins 1993, 342). So do we say that *both* types of theory have got the world right, or neither does? Surely this is not an invalid question. Are scientists merely "the mouthpiece for higher powers" when we assert there is good reason to think that today's theory of the atom is largely correct?

2. It is simply impossible to trace the sources for and to defend my interpretation of postmodernism here. In a full treatment of the subject I would include discussions of: the replacement of semantics (traditional theories of meaning) by semiotics (the theory of signs); poststructuralist theories of language; major precursors (Nietzsche, de Saussure, Wittgenstein, Heidegger), and contemporary representatives (Derrida, Foucault, and of course Rorty). Lyotard's seminal (1984) work provides basic parameters for the contemporary use of the term, and Mark C. Taylor (e.g., 1984) provides a good picture of what a postmodern theology would look like.

3. See e.g. ch. 11, "Nature, God, and Religious Feeling," in Rockefeller (1991, 491-540), and Boisvert (1988).

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