

GUSTAFSON'S THEOCENTRISM AND SCIENTIFIC NATURALISTIC PHILOSOPHY: A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN?

by *William A. Rottschaefter*

Abstract. Examining James M. Gustafson's views on the relationships between the sciences, theology, and ethics from a scientifically based naturalistic philosophical perspective, I concur with his rejection of separatist and antagonistic interactionist positions and his adherence to a mutually supportive interactionist position with both descriptive and normative features. I next explore three aspects of this interactionism: religious empiricism, the connections between facts and values, and the centering of objective values in the divine. Here I find much accord between Gustafson's theocentrism and a scientifically based naturalistic philosophical account of the relationships between the sciences, theology, and ethics.

Keywords: empiricism; fact/value gap; is/ought gap; naturalized epistemology; naturalized ethics; religion; science; science and religion; theocentric ethics.

I recall some ten years ago reading in *Theological Studies* John Connery's reviews of the two volumes of James Gustafson's *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Connery 1982, 1985). As a philosopher of science and religion with a great interest in the relationships between the sciences, theology, and ethics, I told myself these were important books, and placed them on my must-read list. Alas, there they remained, until several months ago. First impressions of such power do not fade quickly, however, so when asked if I would serve as the philosophical commentator for this Profile, I did not—perhaps I should have—let my ignorance stand in the way of my enthusiasm for finding out more about Gustafson's work. Though I do not count myself as one of “the cultured despisers of religion” with whom Gustafson says he would like to communicate,

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I am a philosopher of scientific naturalist persuasion whose religious sensibilities and scientifically based philosophical commitments have moved him away from traditional religions and theologies. Thus, I come to this task of philosophical commentary not as a well-read student or expert in Gustafson's thought, but as a beginner who appreciates the opportunity to join in the dialogue of exploration that Gustafson's papers in this issue and his writings elsewhere, to the extent that I am familiar with them, so engagingly and effectively promote.

Readers of *Zygon* know it as a premiere journal for the exploration of the multiple intersections between the sciences, religion, theology, and ethics. In his two papers for this issue, Gustafson has given us an understanding of how his work fits with that goal. In his original piece, "Tracing a Trajectory" (hereinafter referred to as "Trajectory"), Gustafson outlines a perspective on the general patterns for relating theology and the sciences and the sciences and values. He then traces some of the highlights of his own attempts to understand and forge these relationships. In the other, previously published piece, "Explaining and Valuing: An Exchange between Theology and the Human Sciences" (hereinafter referred to as "Explaining"), Gustafson gives us a detailed and concrete example of how he goes about this process of exploration and yoking.

In my comment I shall first lay out and briefly discuss Gustafson's views on these general patterns of relationships. In the process, I shall also note where his own work as illustrated in both "Trajectory" and "Explaining" seems to place him. Next, I shall address three issues from the many that Gustafson's pieces raise that seem to me to be critical for the kind of approach he takes. These are the issues of religious empiricism, the connections between fact and value, and the centering of objective values in the divine. I also shall indicate briefly some points of confluence between his views and my own scientific naturalistic approach to these issues. I hope that I have gotten Gustafson's views as presented in "Trajectory" and "Explaining" right and that my comments will further the dialogue envisioned for *Zygon's* Profiles series, a dialogue so well facilitated by Gustafson's contributions to this issue.

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE SCIENCES, THEOLOGY, AND ETHICS

For Gustafson theology and ethics are intellectual disciplines that concern themselves with, respectively, religion and morality, that is, the phenomena of religious and moral doing and being. Moreover,

theology and ethics are intimately connected because, in classical philosophical terms, the understanding of being and the good are bound together; and these two intellectual pursuits are themselves linked to religious and ethical practice. Gustafson indicates that, although disciplinary boundaries and particular research interests govern the kinds of questions and issues scholars bring to their investigations, some general patterns can be discerned in the ways the sciences are related to theology and ethics. Using my own terms to understand Gustafson, the poles of the continuum of these relationships are characterized by separatism and interactionism (Rottschaefer 1988). The latter may be characterized either by antagonistic interactions or by various mutually supportive exchanges. These exchanges range from (1) the theological interpretation of the sciences through (2) the use of the sciences for theological interpretation (including the classical faith-seeking-understanding approach, in which, though the truths of theology are independent of those of the sciences, the findings of the sciences are used to interpret theological doctrines) to (3) the use of scientific results to support theological and religious claims (including the classical approach of natural theology, in which the findings of the sciences are used to support theological claims). Gustafson finds similar patterns of separatism and interaction in the relationships between ethics and the sciences.

Gustafson suggests that these patterns capture some of the ways in which *Zygon's* editors, readers, and contributors might view the relationships between the sciences, theology, and ethics, and that they might serve as a heuristic for exploring these relationships. This strikes me as both correct and a helpful suggestion for those interested in factual questions about what these relationships have been, are, and might be. In addition, such explorations could serve as sources for descriptive and explanatory accounts of these relationships. Indeed, taking a naturalistic turn, they might well provide the bases for the more difficult task of determining what these relationships *ought* to be. In other words, given that relating the sciences with theology and ethics is a genuine interdisciplinary task, similar, for instance, to the joining of biology and chemistry in biochemistry, adequate descriptive and explanatory accounts of how these relationships have been and are fashioned should serve as a basis for evaluating the potential of various approaches to joining these disciplines. It seems reasonable to suppose that interdisciplinary relationships should aim to achieve such goals as, for instance, comprehensive understanding, explanatory power, and empirical adequacy. In addition, Gustafson rightly demands that to be deemed successful,

relationships between the sciences and theological ethics also should yield more satisfactory moral conclusions and practice than were previously available. Given such criteria of success, factual accounts of past and present interactions between the sciences, on the one hand, and theology and ethics, on the other, can provide an understanding of what means are more or less well suited to the achievement of these goals. Thus historical and current case studies of interactions could furnish evidence for determining what the relationships between the sciences and theology ought to be, thereby allowing us to discern the relative fruitfulness of separatist, antagonistic interactionist, and mutually supportive interactionist approaches. Using the criteria of comprehensive understanding, explanatory power, empirical adequacy, and ethical fruitfulness, it seems to me that separatism and antagonistic interactionism have shown themselves to be less satisfactory than mutually supportive interactionist strategies. Gustafson's outline of his own efforts in "Trajectory" and the example of his work in "Explaining" clearly place him in the mutually supportive interactionist camp, descriptively, explanatorily, and normatively.

Moreover, as Gustafson's own schema reveals, there are a number of different forms of mutually supportive interactionism. Since each approach has its own set of epistemic and ontological presuppositions, the confirmation of the relative superiority of one approach over the others would lend support to its particular presuppositions. We might assume that all mutually supportive interactionist positions would presuppose, on the epistemic side, a coherence of religious and scientific truth and would generally agree about methodologies, granting that these must be subject matter and context sensitive. On the ontological side interactionist strategies would seem to presuppose the unity of scientific and religious realities. As a scientific naturalist one of the epistemic presuppositions of my own version of mutually supportive interactionism is that scientifically based methodologies, when applicable, are epistemically preferable. Thus claims based directly or indirectly on such methodologies are likely to be closer to the truth than those not so based. An implication of this presupposition is that empirical approaches in both the sciences and theology will generally turn out to be more satisfactory than various nonempirical alternatives. Granting this very rough map of the territory of science, theology, and ethics and of Gustafson's approximate location in it, I will now try to specify more precisely the sort of mutually supportive interactionism that Gustafson seems to be holding.

RELIGIOUS EMPIRICISM

What one might call Gustafson's religious empiricism is consonant with the above-mentioned general scientific naturalist account of mutually supportive interactionism. In "Trajectory" Gustafson states that a "commonsense empiricism" has guided his own work and argues that it should function in the acceptance of religious beliefs as well as the interpretation of events and beliefs. If I understand him correctly, he is claiming that one should be careful about reading religious understandings into one's observations and interpretations of perceptual and experiential events and, even more strongly, that religious interpretations and beliefs should be subjected to empirical scrutiny and, perhaps, rejected on that basis. But his commonsense empiricism—correctly, I believe—does not require that the category of religious experience be abandoned. In fact, Gustafson maintains that there are certain general, if not universal, experiences that can be called religious. He has in mind such things as the "sense of dependence, of gratitude, of obligation, of remorse or repentance, and of possibilities." This is a plausible hypothesis and seems to me to beg no important questions between various major religious traditions or between religious and nonreligious understandings of ultimate reality. The nature of the divine that is the object of these various senses can be left open to further empirical investigation and is constrained by both the empirical and theoretical findings of the sciences. Gustafson remarks that his intuition is that these senses are universal. This intuition also is open to empirical investigation; its investigation constitutes an important research project in religious psychology and epistemology, one necessary for the attainment of an adequate descriptive and explanatory account of religious experience.

In addition, Gustafson suggests that these substantively universal religious experiences take various forms in different cultural settings and communities. This too seems to me a reasonable conjecture. It also has independent support, as does his previous suggestion, from general considerations about the ways in which our cognitive and affective capacities are fashioned. The evolutionary history of our species, the developmental and learning history of individuals, and the social and cultural learning histories of the groups in which individuals live all work to fashion our individual and species-wide cognitive and affective capacities. From my scientific naturalistic perspective, the different traditions of religious experience that shape our religious experiences should be, to the extent that it is possible, compared and tested for relative adequacy. I take it that Gustafson's

religious empiricism allows for such testing, including the test of implementing religious views in ethical practice, though these latter tests may well not be as decisive as those used in the natural and social sciences. Indeed, I think that religious views may have to garner their relative probabilities more from their coherence with the accepted findings of established sciences than through independent empirical religious foundations, though the latter are not to be completely abandoned. Thus, I take a religious empiricism to be informed by both the more direct inputs of religious experience and ethical practice and by the less direct, empirically based contributions of the natural and social sciences.

Gustafson tells us that the position that he developed in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Gustafson 1981–84) contains tensions “simply because neither the Christian tradition nor modern sciences nor experience finally trumps the other two” (Gustafson 1995b, 188). He appeals to the notion of reflective equilibrium to describe the method he has employed in making use of these sources. Given Gustafson’s rejection of revelation as a source of religious knowledge independent of religious experience, as well as his critical acceptance of elements of the Christian and reformed tradition insofar as they reflect the basic sorts of religious experience he has identified, it seems to me that religious experience does and ought to trump the Christian tradition when the two are in conflict. Similarly, it seems to me that, in cases of conflict, scientific findings do and ought to trump the Christian tradition. Finally, I am suggesting that scientific findings should trump religious experience in cases of conflict. Though these broad epistemic norms ought to be applied with sensitivity to both context and subject matter, I contend, though I cannot argue for it here, that they are based on our best current accounts of the differential reliability of our cognitive capacities and practices. However, these normative epistemic positions may move beyond what Gustafson has in mind by reflective equilibrium.

THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN FACTS AND VALUES

The importance for Gustafson of a bottom-up, experientially based approach is also evidenced in his views on the relationships between ethics and the sciences. In “Trajectory” he stresses such an approach in the formation of social policies that are based on social scientific descriptions and explanations. In “Explaining” he contrasts the top-down and bottom-up strategies of theologians and scientists, respectively, emphasizing the importance of the behavioral and biological sciences not only in providing relevant information for the formation

of policy and particular decisions but also for understanding the nature and limits of moral agency, both generally and particularly.

In pursuit of empirically based theological accounts of morality and moral agency, Gustafson shows himself in both articles to be open to making use of scientifically based accounts of human nature and agency. As a scientific naturalist, I am in full agreement with him here and would argue that both the natural sciences, in particular biology and psychology, and the social sciences are beginning to, and will increasingly in the future, provide rich, detailed accounts of how we humans acquire our moral capacities and put them to work (Rottschaefter 1991a, 1991b). The extent to which these findings may demand corrections in ordinary moral experience and reflection is, I believe, an increasingly important question for both theologian and philosopher.

I also think that Gustafson correctly stresses the problem of normative gaps. In the case of theological ethics a gap appears between what one might call theological oughts and theologically formulated normative accounts of human nature, on the one hand, and scientifically based descriptions and explanations of human nature, on the other. With regard to scientifically based approaches to ethics a normative gap seems to separate both scientific descriptions and explanations from normative conclusions. Whether at the level of conclusions about particular actions or that of conclusions about general norms or policies, Gustafson contends that the gap is not closed. As regards his two test cases in "Explaining," Gustafson claims, "If there is a gap between Konner's last chapter and the rest of his work, there is also a gap in Niebuhr's work. What each most appeals to for the sake of human well-being goes beyond the 'data' each adduces from human life itself" (Gustafson 1995a, 172). As Gustafson puts it, their data "permit" but do not "necessitate" their conclusions. And in "Trajectory" he contends that "the explanation in retrospect of how an 'ought' or valuation follows from a scientifically descriptive account of events and circumstances does not fully justify the choice" (Gustafson 1995b, 186).

In my view Gustafson and scientific naturalistic philosophers can agree that although normative inferences do fall short of *deductive* necessity, this poses no special problem for normative reasoning. In this regard normative inferences are no more or less problematic than descriptive and explanatory ampliative inferences, which, given the truth of their premises, nevertheless do not necessitate the truth of their conclusions. However, what ought to be of crucial concern in the use of ampliative inferences, whether descriptive, explanatory, or normative, is the relative degree of support that their premises

provide for their conclusions, specifically, whether there are adequate ways to assess the different degrees of support that varying factual premises provide for normative conclusions. Scientific naturalistic philosophers of my persuasion, following arguments developed in naturalized epistemology concerning epistemic justification, argue that the relative justificatory adequacy for normative conclusions based on premises appealing to, for example, experience, feelings, emotions, or reasons, should be assessed in the light of the degree to which these psychological processes do in fact serve as mechanisms for achieving moral ends in given contexts. Ordinary human experience and reflection, as well as scientific findings, can and do play crucial roles both in the identification of justificatory processes and moral ends and in the assessment of the relative adequacy of these processes (Rottschaefer 1991c, forthcoming a, forthcoming b). Thus, although there may be disagreements about ultimate causes, Gustafson and proponents of a naturalized ethics can, I believe, travel a long way together in bridging the supposedly unbridgeable gaps between is and ought and fact and value.

OBJECTIVE VALUES AND THE NATURE OF THE DIVINE

Some naturalists, myself among them, will applaud Gustafson's emphasis upon the objectivity of moral values, and themselves have attempted to develop a realistic account of the nature of moral values (Rottschaefer and Martinsen 1990; Rottschaefer forthcoming b). From my point of view any completely adequate account of moral reality and moral agency must provide an understanding of the causal role of the former in moral action. In such an account moral values are emergent, natural properties supervenient on natural nonmoral properties. In addition, rather than being merely epiphenomenal, they play a causal role in the acquisition and activation of moral agency.

In Gustafson's theocentric approach it is God's purposes that are constitutive of objective moral values. These purposes are discovered in the activity of God as creator, sustainer, governor, judge, and redeemer. Gustafson contrasts the theocentric character of these values with the anthropocentric nature of the values that are the focus of much, if not all, of theological and secular ethics. Gustafson does not deny moral value to human fulfillment, but he does forcefully argue that human fulfillment is not the sole moral value and that other realities and their fulfillment have intrinsic and not merely instrumental value. Although scientific naturalistic philosophers are not of one mind on this issue, I am in complete agreement with

Gustafson in his rejection of anthropocentrism. However, I do not believe there is sufficient scientific evidence at present to center objective values in *one* purposive though nonintentional source, let alone to characterize that source as divine (Gustafson 1981–84). From the point of view of cosmological and evolutionary history individual humans are evolved, complex entities that are themselves parts of larger complexes, human societies, the human species, and various ecosystems, including nonliving physical systems. All these emergent systems possess some degree of order and some of them seem to be teleological systems that act to achieve certain fulfilling ends for themselves and for other systems. Any nonanthropocentric ethics must try to balance the objective values of these many systems. Although as far as I can tell, Gustafson postulates no grand overall end for all these systems, he does seem to postulate in his theory of theocentric values some sort of unity in purposive origin, development, and fulfillment. Given the current state of scientific knowledge, it is not clear to me that there is enough evidence for such a purposeful, though nonintentional, center of values. On the other hand, I have some personal inclination toward the hypothesis that larger systems of value *might* emerge. So, perhaps, in the future—the far future—a unified center of values worthy of the term “divine” might come to be (Rottschaefer 1982). In that eventuality, I can look forward to being in agreement with Gustafson. Yet, it could well turn out to be the case, given what we know so far, that morality is itself an ephemeral phenomenon, practiced more or less well for some very small period of cosmic history by one or a few relatively unimportant types of organisms and that the far future will lack both moral agents and moral values of any sort.

Whatever the future, I appreciate the present opportunity of reflecting on Gustafson’s provocative views and offering some—I hope not too uninformed—reflections from the point of view of a scientific naturalistic philosopher who finds himself currently in happy agreement with much of what a distinguished theologian has to say about the sciences, theology, and ethics.

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