

Book Symposium: Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics, and Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda by *Nancey Murphy*

MURPHY ON POSTMODERNITY, SCIENCE,
AND RELIGION

by *J. Wesley Robbins*

Abstract. Nancey Murphy claims that a shift in “thinking strategy” from modern to postmodern modes of thought makes it easier to exhibit the intellectual respectability of theology vis-à-vis the sciences. Her case for this proposition depends on modernist interests, most notably in systematizing the sciences for reasons that have their origin in Plato’s divided line.

Keywords: Cartesian minds; Deweyan pragmatists; embedded minds; modernism; Nancey Murphy; postmodernism.

This volume is a collection of essays based on material that Nancey Murphy has published and/or presented in various venues over the past ten years or so. As such, it is a convenient introduction to, and summation of, her views about a number of issues in one place. For those who might wish to familiarize themselves with her work in more detail upon reading these essays, this volume includes well-documented references to her other books and essays as well as those of her interlocutors on the topics it

J. Wesley Robbins is Professor of Philosophy at Indiana University South Bend, P.O. Box 7111, South Bend, IN 46615. His e-mail address is wesrobbins@worldnet.att.net. He maintains a website at <http://sun1.iusb.edu/~wrobbins/>.

[*Zygon*, vol. 33, no. 3 (September 1998).]

© 1998 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

covers. Regardless of whether one agrees with her overall thesis or with the details of her working it out, the essays collected here represent an impressive body of work ranging over a broad array of philosophical, theological, and scientific matters.

Murphy's overall thesis is that a dramatic change in "thinking strategy" has occurred amongst Anglo-American intellectuals during the last half of the twentieth century. She claims that this paradigm shift has important implications for Christian theology, particularly a conservative theology that insists on the authority of Scripture, God's special action in the world, and the truth of Christianity (p. 118). The most notable of these implications for readers of this journal is the return of theology to intellectual respectability with respect to the sciences.

The change that Murphy recounts in the volume's introductory essay is from modern thought characterized by epistemological foundationalism, linguistic referentialism, and metaphysical reductionism to postmodern thought characterized by holism in these areas. The essays in part 1 relate this change to the philosophy of science. There, among other things, Murphy suggests that the debate about scientific realism, including the advocacy of critical realism, is best dropped. The essays in part 2 relate the change from modernity to postmodernity to the philosophy of religion. There, Murphy outlines the prospects in the new context for what she calls a postmodern conservative theology. The essays in part 3 reconceive theology and ethics as sciences that are located above the natural and social sciences in a postmodern hierarchy of the sciences.

Most, if not all, of the factors that figure in Murphy's account of the shift from modern to postmodern thinking are functions of a change in intellectual self-image, from a generically Cartesian view of human minds to a view of them as embodied and embedded. Generically Cartesian minds are entities whose contents and processes are describable without reference to their embodiment or to their environment. Modern epistemology presupposes that human minds are generically Cartesian. It therefore makes sense to specify the sorts of topics that such unlocalized minds are capable of thinking about and the mental operations that are standard for them, regardless of how they are embodied or what their environment is.

Embedded minds are entities whose contents and processes are only describable contextually, with reference to their physical, social, and historical setting. Modern epistemology makes no sense with respect to such localized minds. There is no way to specify what topics embedded minds can think about, or what mental operations are standard for them, apart from their surroundings. Given this view, our historical traditions and social surroundings are crucial factors in all of our thinking rather than extraneous factors that have to be discounted before we can uncover the

untainted mental starting points of genuine knowledge, as is the case for the generically Cartesian view.

If we think of the differences that Murphy highlights between modern and postmodern thought as functions of the shift from generic Cartesianism to a view of human minds as embedded, then her key contentions about the theological significance of this change are problematic. She claims, first, that “it has simply been impossible to do theology in an intellectually respectable way using the resources of modern thought” and that in this predicament “the problem is not with theology but rather with modernity” (p. 112). Second, she claims that in the context of postmodern thought “it is once again possible to make theological reasoning respectable” (pp. 155–56). This can be done in at least two ways. First, we can identify methodological parallels between theological and scientific reasoning. Both occur in historical research programs to which the criterion of progressivity can be applied in order to distinguish acceptable ones from unacceptable, degenerating ones (chapters 3 and 8). Second, we can locate theology at the top of a hierarchical structure of the sciences because it provides answers to questions raised in other sciences that they are incapable of answering (chapters 9 and 10).

If theology indeed is impossible given the resources of modern thought, this is not, as Murphy alleges, a case of a foreign body attaching itself to theology and draining its life. It is a case of self-destruction. Modern epistemology is based on the generically Cartesian view of human minds. And that view, in turn, is nothing more or less than an extension of the Platonic-Christian theological doctrine of the soul. If Christian theology comes out revived on the other side of the modern-postmodern divide, as Murphy says, it is not because it has shaken off the foreign body of modernity. It is because it has seen fit to replace one of its central historical doctrines, that of the unlocalized soul.

Murphy also overestimates the prospects for making theological reasoning respectable given the postmodern view of human minds as embedded in historical traditions. The first element of her case depends on using a Lakatosian criterion of progress prospectively to distinguish acceptable research programs from unacceptable ones “on the fly.” For embedded minds, there is nothing for a criterion of progress to be but the projection of what has worked so far for some purpose, that is to say, more of the same. Continuing to do things that have turned out to be useful over time is not a bad thing. But it certainly is not a recipe for progress. Taken by itself, it is a recipe for stifling innovation.

The problem is not with Murphy’s claim that there are parallels between theology and science construed as historical traditions. The problem is with her supposition that historical traditions are suitable subjects of a methodology that does more than identify practices that have

been useful for some purpose or another to date. That supposition places her much closer to modern epistemological concerns than she seems prepared to admit. In my view the question of intellectual respectability is future oriented. The important question is whether, to what extent, and in what respects Christian theology is a historical tradition worth continuing into the future. For anyone who views human minds as embedded, there are no methodological answers to that question. Structural parallels between theological and scientific practices to date, even if they exist, are beside the point as answers to this practical question about what to do in the future.

The second element of Murphy's case for the intellectual respectability of theology involves placing theology at the top of a hierarchy of sciences, because theology provides answers to boundary questions that sciences further down the ladder raise but cannot answer themselves. These include, for example, questions about the Big Bang and cosmological constants in physics (pp. 176–77). More important for her purposes, they include the question of "the ultimate purpose of human life" in ethics (p. 177).

Murphy's case for locating theology at the top of a presuppositional hierarchy of sciences itself presupposes that there are questions that human minds are destined to ask willy-nilly, regardless of location. This is not what one would expect from a postmodernist advocate of the embeddedness of human minds. Compare Murphy on this point with John Dewey. In his essay "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," Dewey says, "intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both alternatives they assume—an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them; we get over them."

For embedded minds, boundary questions are nothing more than questions that people engaged in some field of inquiry have been interested in asking even though the field provides no resources to answer them. But then, practitioners in a field of inquiry might well lose interest in an inherited boundary question, come to disregard it as of no concern to them, and conclude that their field was better off as a result. For those of us who take the social sciences, and indeed ethics, to be matters of figuring out how to improve upon the natural goods of life regardless of any ultimate purpose that human life may or may not have, Murphy's hierarchy of the sciences topped by theology holds no interest. It is just another indication of the closeness of her philosophy to modern thought.

REFERENCE

- Murphy, Nancy. 1997. *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.