

## *Commentary and Response*

J. WENTZEL VAN HUYSSTEEN: REFIGURING  
RATIONALITY IN THE POSTMODERN AGE

*by Jerome A. Stone*

*Duet or Duel? Theology and Science in a Postmodern World.* By J. WENTZEL VAN HUYSSTEEN. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998. xviii + 182 pages. \$16.00.

*Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology.* By J. WENTZEL VAN HUYSSTEEN. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997. x + 285 pages. \$35.00.

*The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science.* By J. WENTZEL VAN HUYSSTEEN. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999. xi + 303 pages. \$35.00.

*Abstract.* In his three books J. Wentzel van Huyssteen develops a complex and helpful notion of rationality, avoiding the extremes of foundationalism and postmodern relativism and deconstruction. Drawing from several postmodern philosophers of science and evolutionary epistemologists who seek to devise a usable notion of rationality, he weaves together a view that allows for a genuine duet between science and theology. In the process he challenges much contemporary nonfoundationalist theology as well as the philosophical naïveté of some cosmologists and sociobiologists.

*Keywords:* Harold Brown; critical realism; evolutionary epistemology; fideism; Susan Haack; Imre Lakatos; Larry Laudan; John Milbank; Nancey Murphy; postfoundationalism; postmodernism; Nicholas Rescher; Joseph Rouse; Calvin Schrag; Mikael Stenmark; William Stoeger; Ronald Thiemann; transversality; J. Wentzel van Huyssteen.

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At last we have the fruit of Wentzel van Huyssteen's reflections on current issues in religion and science, and what a rich harvest it is! The James I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science at Princeton Theological Seminary has been studying the changing face of the philosophy of science since before Karl Popper and brings to his work clarity of writing, a clear grasp of issues, and a voice of sanity.

We have here a rich and flexible notion of rationality that avoids the mistakes of modernism and the irrational excesses of more extreme forms of postmodernism. Although its immediate relevance concerns the theology and science dialogue, it has a wider significance for cultural criticism, public ethics, and interreligious dialogue.

*Duet or Duel?* provides a clear introduction to van Huyssteen's thinking, including treatments of cosmology, evolutionary epistemology, Stephen Hawking, Paul Davies, Charles Darwin, Richard Dawkins, and Keith Ward, and a surprising study of Charles Hodge, the nineteenth-century Princeton theologian. *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* is a collection of studies of Nancey Murphy, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Gerhard Sauter, Jerome Stone, Gerd Theissen, and others and includes "The Realism of the Text," a key article in hermeneutics. His major volume is *The Shaping of Rationality*, and most of this review will concentrate on it.

#### WHAT IS POSTMODERNISM?

The key to van Huyssteen's view of postmodernism is that it is not the antithesis of modernism but rather a continuation of the critical aspect of modernism turned against its own basic assumptions. He sees modernism as a specific cultural movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with two distinguishing ideas: first, the human subject as essentially rational and autonomous, needing only to be liberated from the past; and second, the demarcation of culture into autonomous spheres—science, morality, art, and possibly religion—held together by a universal notion of rationality. Van Huyssteen replaces them with a notion of the human subject as shaped but not determined by its context and as embedded in yet capable of criticizing its traditions, and also with a notion of the possibility of genuine conversation across spheres and of epistemological overlaps and shared resources of rationality, even with differing standards of rationality in different contexts. The idea of *overlapping* is a powerful tool, for, although elementary in logic, it is often overlooked in discussions of cultural spheres.

Although postmodernism is very protean, van Huyssteen draws on Nancey Murphy and especially Calvin O. Schrag and finds two chief characteristics of postmodernism to be its cross-disciplinary character and its problematization of rationality. His response to this characterization is cross-disciplinary conversation with the partners, combining convictions with willingness to be criticized, and also his refigured notion of rationality.

Van Huyssteen focuses on postmodern views of science and the philosophy of science. He moves beyond stereotypes of rampant relativism (Alan Sokal and John Horgan) to a serious dialogue with Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, Zuzana Parusnikova, and especially Joseph Rouse. Rouse sees science as a dynamic social practice involving power relations. Rouse rejects a grand narrative legitimation of science as progress toward truth in favor of local legitimation in specific contexts. He also rejects a sharp cleavage between the natural and the human sciences, because, despite differences, both involve interpreted experience. However, Rouse escapes the radically decontextualized implications of his belief that scientific knowledge is primarily local knowledge by developing the idea of *standardization*, whereby local knowledge is decontextualized, similarly to the way a tool designed for a specific task is changed into a general-purpose piece of equipment. Van Huyssteen finds these ideas useful, including the idea that there is no *essence* of science, no single aim. But this adds bite to a problem he takes seriously: Do the pluralism and localization of both theology and science make any dialogue between them impossible today? His answer is that they make it difficult, because there are no longer simple entities known as *science* and *theology*. Since Ian Barbour, it has become common to sort theories about the relation between science and theology into theories of conflict, separation, dialogue, or integration. Van Huyssteen finds this unsatisfactory because the fragmentation in theology and the multiplicity of disciplines in science create an unmappable terrain. The hazy intersection between theologies and the sciences cannot be explored by noting methodological parallels or areas of agreement, but by finding the shared epistemic resources and developing a refigured notion of rationality.

#### TOWARD A RICHER NOTION OF RATIONALITY

Thread by thread van Huyssteen weaves his idea of rationality. One way of setting his question is to ask how to move theology out of its isolation without unduly privileging either theology or natural science. His image is that of human beings entering cross-disciplinary conversation with full personal convictions yet open to criticism. This is possible because of shared resources of rationality and the overlap of reasoning strategies, which provides a safe space for conversation. Different discourses sometimes link up, sometimes conflict. The fact that they can share rationality and epistemic strategies means that we can avoid the extremes of a modernist nostalgia for one unified form of knowledge and the relativism of extreme postmodernism.

The refigured notion of rationality is not a superimposed metanarrative but rather an emerging pattern. Rationality, not just in the sciences or theology but as a part of daily life, involves a quest for intelligibility and optimal understanding, responsible judgment, theory choice as a fallible process of progressive problem solving, and experiential adequacy.

Science has a paradigmatic status in our culture, even if its epistemic privilege needs questioning. Contemporary philosophy of science, with its focus on the problem of rationality, is the key link in the debate on the nature of theological knowledge. Van Huyssteen is seeking to develop a *postfoundationalist* (not *nonfoundationalist*) theology and view of rationality that will be a third option beyond the extremes of the alleged objectivism of foundationalism and the extreme relativism of nonfoundationalism. This view of rationality recognizes the role of context, tradition, and interpreted experience and yet enters cross-contextual and interdisciplinary conversation. This rationality is complex and many-sided. It needs both theoretical and experiential adequacy.

Drawing on the work of Harold Brown, van Huyssteen finds problems with the classical model of rationality. According to this model, in order for beliefs to be rational they must follow from foundational propositions by objective rules, resulting in universality and necessity. Brown argues that a postclassical model of rationality should be exemplified by the natural sciences, the disciplines we take as paradigms of rationality, but that we need to examine the actual practices of the natural sciences and see that they do not follow the classical model.

Here van Huyssteen finds Larry Laudan's reconstruction of the practices of science to be helpful. This reconstruction involves the idea of competing "research traditions," an idea that Laudan claims is a more adequate reflection of actual scientific practice than Thomas Kuhn's normal science and dramatic paradigm shifts or the unchanging essentialism of the cores of Lakatos's "research programs."

Following Nicholas Rescher, van Huyssteen speaks of three dimensions of rationality: cognitive, evaluative, and pragmatic, thus going beyond a narrow cognitivist definition of rationality. It attempts to give the strongest available reasons for beliefs, for theoretical and moral choices, and for acting in certain ways. Rationality also involves accountability, the ability to offer reasons for responsible choices in concrete situations; thus a rhetorical dimension is an inescapable part of rationality.

Rationality is not reducible to the rationality of the sciences. This should be both a comfort and a challenge to theology, the comfort that theology can be rational and the challenge that it should be rational and offer the best available reasons.

Calvin Schrag, who speaks of "splitting the difference" between modernity and postmodernity, also feeds into van Huyssteen's design. Schrag moves beyond both the totalizing metanarratives of modernity and the self-isolating relativism of extreme postmodernism with his metaphor of "transversal rationality," a metaphor derived from a line that intersects other lines and indicates the intersection of differing discourses, modes of thought and action. Van Huyssteen uses this metaphor and replaces universality of rationality with transversality. He also follows Schrag in revisioning the

human subject not as a pure epistemological point but as situated in a space of communicative praxis. Transversality thus discovers shared resources of rationality in our diverse assemblages of beliefs and practices and locates the claims of reason in these overlaps. Along with this he locates rationality within the assemblages of social practices rather than in acontextual systems of ideas. Three more ideas from Schrag go into the tapestry: (1) the value of dissensus; (2) engaged articulation, so that critique is not just the deconstruction of tradition but the articulation of new possibilities; and (3) disclosure, a postulate of reference so that we can move out of the linguistic closure of an isolated subject without a modernist notion of correspondence.

One of the key aspects of rationality is assessment, or responsible judgment. Judgment is needed in those situations in which we lack sufficient foundations or rules. Even in science, theories are accepted not by a mechanical decision procedure of following rules, as the classical model of rationality has it, but with deliberation and judgment. The move beyond the classical model of rationality means that judgment is not arbitrary but can be rational and that epistemic perfection is not the only thing that counts.

Van Huyssteen melds this idea of rational judgment, drawn from Brown, with Schrag's idea of "fitting response" to a local situation. Relativity is avoided because our criteria for evaluation are conditioned, but not completely determined, by our contexts. Thus, we can critique our traditions and communities while standing within them. The ideas of *truth* and *critique* therefore have a place in a postfoundationalist rationality; they are not foundationally secured but based on the interplay of personal judgment and communal feedback.

Part of the difference between this view of rationality and that of Thomas Kuhn is that, following Brown, van Huyssteen emphasizes the value of rational dissensus. Individuals submit their judgment for evaluation by their peers but do not necessarily accept it. After all, if we look at the real-life situations of both scientists and academics, we often disagree. There is no reason to hold that any presently existing community is fully rational. All judgments must be made by the individual. "I can step into the reality of communicative practice only from where I stand" (*The Shaping of Rationality*, 152). On the other hand, epistemic tolerance for dissensus should never lead to relativistic indifference. Rather we should seek a continual feedback relationship between communal assessment and individual judgment.

Drawing on Michael Stenmark, van Huyssteen claims that, while rationality is universal in intent, standards of rationality are relative to persons and situations. But this does not result in many rationalities, because there is an individual-communal feedback process, and these diversities overlap.

We still need the concepts of *truth*, *objectivity*, and *progress*. Truth and rationality are distinct in that achieving one does not entail achieving the

other. Yet they are linked. It is rational to attempt to discover truth, and we can take the conclusions that are rationally acceptable as our best estimates of the truth. What we achieve in inquiry is not an approximation to truth but a better estimate of it. We do not get “closer” to the truth, but we can speak of a “better estimate” of it.

Objectivity does not mean freedom from preconceptions but rather that the evidence for a belief derives from sources other than the belief. On this view the sciences do not display superior rationality but are paradigms of the systematic gathering of objective evidence. Rationality is possible in the absence of scientific objectivity.

Drawing on Larry Laudan, van Huyssteen asserts that in appraising a theory or research tradition we should look to its effectiveness in solving problems, the balance it affords between solved and unsolved problems, both conceptual and empirical.

Given this view that the effectiveness of theories in solving problems includes theoretical as well as experiential adequacy, van Huyssteen quotes with approval Laudan, who states that “the introduction of philosophical, religious, and moral issues into science” may be entirely rational and not “the triumph of prejudice, superstition, and irrationality” (Laudan 1977, 132, quoted in *The Shaping of Rationality*, 172). Given that van Huyssteen is normally circumspect about the intrusion of theology into scientific practice, he should have made some qualification or comment at this point. In context Laudan’s view is less horrendous than it might appear. Laudan is first making a historiographical point. We must not ignore the time- and culture-specific parameters of what constitutes rationality. “Thomas Aquinas or Robert Grosseteste were not merely stupid or prejudiced when they espoused the belief that science must be compatible with religious beliefs. We in the twentieth century may vehemently disagree with such views, thinking them obscurantist and harmful to the development of science. And in so disagreeing, I believe we are right.” Laudan also makes a prescriptive point: “The rationality or irrationality of any episode where ‘nonscientific,’ but intellectual, factors play a role must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.” One of Laudan’s guiding principles is that “in the case of competing scientific research traditions, if one of those traditions is compatible with the most progressive ‘worldview’ available, and the other is not, then there are strong grounds for preferring the former” (Laudan 1977, 131–32). Thus, the potentially heteronomous implications of the quotation that van Huyssteen makes from Laudan clearly disappear when its context in Laudan is studied, and, I trust from van Huyssteen’s total corpus, the latter would also want to avoid those implications. There is no duel between science and religion at the level of scientific theory. There should be a duet at the level of worldview. This allows for a robust, if chastened, doctrine of creation as a voice in the chorus. It disallows creationist pseudo-science and its political backing.

Both theology and science should have experiential accountability. Once again, theology and science are different without a sharp cleavage between them. Overlap is again the key. The difference between empirical adequacy in science and experiential adequacy in theology is real but a matter of degree.

Following William Stoeger, van Huyssteen finds the differences between theology and science to consist in epistemological focus (the aspect of reality to which a discipline attends), experiential resources (the type of data appealed to), and heuristic structures. In the natural sciences the focus is on the detailed, reproducible behavior of systems as obtained by controlled and precise observation and experiment. In philosophy the focus is on the knower. For the theologian the focus includes religious experience, story, and ritual. "The experiences of genuine love, faith, or permanent commitment may be deeply revelatory of what is believed to be beyond these experiences" (*The Shaping of Rationality*, 188).

Experience is never pure and immediate, but always interpreted. There is never a direct access to truth, either natural or revelatory. On the other hand, the "stories of our lives, of our traditions, our religious faiths, our sciences, and our theologies are therefore *about* something" (p. 212). At this point he refers with approval to this reviewer's "transactional realism," where, following Dewey, I refer to the transactional character of experience pointing to the interplay between language and experience (Stone 1992, 128–34). Hence, epistemology and hermeneutics are always intertwined.

He identifies religious experience either in terms of its depth and interpretive power in relation to other experience or as being identified by the believer as religious. The distinguishing mark of religious experience cannot be found in its subjective nature:

The religious dimension of our experience . . . transcends other experiential dimensions by providing what Jerry Gill has called the "hinge" by means of which they are integrated, and through an ultimate commitment are endowed with deeper meaning. . . . The distinguishing mark of religious experience . . . would therefore be the individual's judgment that the experience . . . can only be accounted for in religious terms. . . . Those of us who identify our experiences in religious terms are in fact seeking the best available explanations for what is happening to us. (pp. 191–93)

In a shift from his earlier position in *Theology and the Justification of Faith* (1989), he makes no generic claim for critical realism but does wish to retain a "modest" form of critical realism in theology. Our theologies are *about* something, and he espouses "the very limited epistemological conviction that what we are provisionally conceptualizing somehow really exists" (*The Shaping of Rationality*, 217). However, he rejects the uncritical transference of realism in science to the domain of religious belief.

Van Huyssteen also finds help in Susan Haack's "foundherentist" epistemology. In developing a third option between foundationalism and coherentism, she claims that our knowledge is anchored in experience but

is then justified by means of claims to coherence. Our beliefs require mutual support but also some degree of experiential support, although there is no privileged class of beliefs justified exclusively by experience with no support from other beliefs. Furthermore, the justification of our beliefs is never categorical but always comes in degrees.

Following Laudan's notion of research traditions, he also speaks of the importance of tradition. A skeptical form of postmodernism, influenced by Michel Foucault, calls into question the very possibility of tradition by claiming that any "assertion of continuity" with the past "is an invention of our need to control the destiny of our culture" (p. 253). This would indeed be a challenge to Christianity. However, drawing on Delwin Brown, van Huyssteen argues that "we are empowered to criticize our traditions while standing in them" (p. 254). Our traditions need not reflect a consensus of authority but rather a field of concerns containing both consensus and dissensus, continuity and discontinuity.

He rejects any overall theory of the nature of explanation. Religious explanations, although similar to explanations in science, are distinguished by being all-encompassing and deeply personal, often arising from vague and elusive questions concerning the meaning of life and providing ultimate meaning to life. On the other hand, scientific explanations reach a high degree of interpersonal agreement. Religious explanations share some important features with philosophical explanations, "generality or depth and an emphasis on systematic coherence and meaningfulness" (p. 261). Explanations in the social sciences are somewhere between explanations in the natural sciences and in religion.

#### CRITIQUE OF SOME POSTMODERN THEOLOGIANs

Van Huyssteen thinks narrative theologians such as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Stanley Hauerwas overlook the fact that biblical narratives are interpretations or even explanations and not just narratives. In his opinion, their view leads to relativistic understandings of justification, truth, and rationality, to an epistemic fideism that results in theological isolation. Indeed, van Huyssteen identifies many theologians who espouse nonfoundationalism, leading to an extreme relativism of rationalities and an irrational retreat to commitment.

He criticizes Ronald F. Thiemann for attempting to establish a public role for theology yet ultimately turning to a "many rationalities" fideist crypto-foundationalist protective strategy. Thus, all hope of finding a cross-disciplinary location for theological reflection as a plausible reasoning strategy, indeed all possibility of public theology, is lost. He finds John Milbank moving to esotericism and sectarian rationality. The cost of this isolationist theology is that one is never able to criticize others who think differently, because they inhabit different epistemic communities. In short, this is a theology with no impact on our world.



Theology should have a constructive and critical engagement with contemporary culture. The interdisciplinary location of theology is secured only when we discover the resources of rationality shared between our various reasoning strategies. Theology should be “an *equal partner* in a democratic, interdisciplinary conversation where an authentic Christian voice might actually be heard” (p. 86). Both theology and the sciences need “a fallibilist commitment to a corrigible point of view” that “embraces the role of traditioned experience, personal commitment, interpretation, and the provisional and fallibilist nature of all our knowledge claims” (p. 86). We need to learn that theological *and* scientific statements are hypothetical but serious.

Nancey Murphy describes what she calls the Christian epistemic practice of discernment, which includes among its criteria of judgment agreement with the apostolic witness in Scripture. Van Huyssteen asserts that such a criterion would not be automatically justified in conversation with science. Further, he suggests that her communal discernments can hardly be compared as directly to the disciplined control of scientific experiment as she attempts, that she makes no attempt to justify her theistic stance, and finally that discernment is a function of a specific theological community, which would not be able to make transcommunal judgments as to which theological program is the more progressive, a needed move in her Lakatosian approach.

He claims that dissensus plays a constructive epistemic role, and thus, contra Murphy, communal discernment is not a requisite of rationality. Further, she has not shown how to achieve intercontextual conversation beyond the boundaries of a limited believing community, and her presupposition of the existence of God in the Lakatosian “hard core” of her program raises the specter of at least a weak form of epistemological foundationalism.

Van Huyssteen maintains that Murphy’s recent writings do move toward interdisciplinary conversation but that the epistemic sovereignty she now gives to theology becomes a new modernist metanarrative, contrary to her postmodernist intentions.

Generally he finds that fideism is the chief pitfall of recent nonfoundational theology and can even refer to its “intellectual coma” (p. 111).

#### VAN HUYSSTEEN AND RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

Although I am a religious naturalist and not a theist, I find large areas of agreement with van Huyssteen. This is a measure of van Huyssteen’s success, for he has indeed created a space for dialogue with differing views. Yet there has been a running disagreement between us. The details of this mutual critique are beyond the scope of this review and can be found in the following four places: *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 91–102; *The Shaping of Rationality*, 202–9, 212–14; Stone 1998; and van Huyssteen 1994.

The agreement between us includes a desire to find a post-positivist notion of rationality and, further, a concept of interpreted experience and the need for experiential adequacy in rationality. We even both explore a modest critical realism (van Huyssteen) or transactional realism (Stone). One disagreement between us—whether or not I have a prior commitment to naturalism—seems strange in that he insists that we enter into dialogue with our commitments. A second issue is whether religious naturalism is an esoteric view for the intellectual few. However, some visions of the sacred are likely to be held by only a minority. This sociological fact seems irrelevant to its validity.

A major disagreement is whether the best explanation for our experience, religious or otherwise, is to be found in a theistic or a naturalistic outlook. He has made a claim for a theistic outlook as the best explanation, but has never argued the case for this claim. In one sense this is appropriate, since his work is to provide a safe space for such arguments, but it does indicate the next stage of the conversation. I wish to indicate that both in print and in person he has engaged in this debate in a genuine spirit of amity, thus indeed creating a safe space for dissensus.

#### DUET OR DUEL?

The slim volume titled *Duet or Duel?* gives van Huyssteen's general approach to some of the contemporary debates. Key to his view is his belief that most serious conflicts between science and theology are at the level of worldviews, not scientific theories. This may be difficult to sort out, because it is seldom clear in cosmological research, for example, where strictly scientific analysis ends and metaphysical reflection begins.

We should not draw too direct a parallel between the Big Bang and the doctrine of Creation. Neither idea "supports" the other. Such an epistemological shortcut is not open. Scientific cosmology does not present the Big Bang as a religious event of theological importance. Only the kind of Creator implied by the Christian Gospels, a God who can create from nothing (*ex nihilo*), is able to conquer death. In this sense the biblical creation story has profound religious meaning unaffected by today's cosmological theories, because a myth is never just true or false, but living or dead. Theology is a matter of redescription. The differing epistemic focus and explanatory status of science and theology need to be clarified so that they will fit together without contradiction.

The choice is between worldviews. Evolution can explain why we have developed the reflexes to dodge falling rocks but not why we can understand the laws that govern falling bodies and why we have the ability to discover them mathematically. Our brains are indeed the products of physical processes but can never be explained by those processes alone. Cultural evolution depends on biological evolution but has its own principles. At

this point evolutionary epistemology can suffer from genetic determinism and reductionism.

Furthermore, we trust our sensory and scientific knowledge as the outcome of the evolutionary process. Therefore we should not suddenly distrust our evolutionarily achieved rational competencies when it comes to religion or metaphysics. Van Huyssteen says that his argument here is not to prove theism but, more modestly, to make the case for the rationality of religious or metaphysical beliefs.

He looks forward to a sacramental theology in which the evolutionary processes open to the sciences will be seen as nondeterministic and open to creative novelty and the locus of God's continuous creativity. The existence of God can explain the propensity to complexity and consciousness present in evolution, not as a replacement of biological theory but as "a plausible redescription of the process of evolution in theological terms" (*Duet or Duel?* p. 125). This would not be a replacement of biological theory so much as a redescription of a deeply metaphysical neo-Darwinian position. Theological redescription does not merely mirror the world of science but rather provides a complementary view, where God is creatively present in the processes of life. Science cannot prove or disprove the existence of God, but our scientific understanding can both limit and expand the worldview offered by theological description.

Finally, evolutionary epistemology and contemporary cosmology offer a positive response to the postmodern disillusionment with totalizing forms of knowledge and may point the way to a comprehensive epistemology that challenges the epistemological fragmentation of a deconstructive, skeptical postmodernism.

#### CONCLUSION

Van Huyssteen's helpful notion of rationality could be extended beyond theology and science to provide the framework for ethical debate and inter-religious dialogue. Having provided a space for the public voice of Christian theology, he still needs to make a case for theism. Because he signals that he will argue for the best explanation of experience, and of religious experience in particular, he needs to clarify what he means by "religious experience," "explanation," and "redescription."

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