MINDING *MINDING GOD:* A RESPONSE TO SPEZIO AND BIELFELDT

by Gregory R. Peterson

Abstract. Michael Spezio and Dennis Bielfeldt have each raised important issues with regard to my positions in *Minding God: Theology and the Cognitive Sciences*. In this article I respond to several of their criticisms, including issues of the nature of theology, my stance on epistemology and realism, and issues of physicalism, freedom, and determinism.

Keywords: coherence; freedom of the will; physicalism; realism; theological method.

Although being praised is much more fun, there are few greater honors than being criticized, because it shows that one's work is being taken seriously and has avoided the two most dreaded forms of reception: faint praise and sheer silence. Dennis Bielfeldt and Michael Spezio have done me the honor of reading my work carefully and providing careful, thoughtful critiques. While I do not follow all the directions they go, their work provides me an opportunity to expand, clarify, and develop my own thinking.

BIELFELDT: REALISM, SALIENCE, AND DIVINE ACTION

Bielfeldt asks me three primary questions. First, am I advocating realism or not? Second, what is the most salient feature of cognitive science for theology? Third, does cognitive science contribute anything positive to divine agency and causation? While these are quite separate and distinct questions, a clear concern for Bielfeldt throughout his essay is the nature and task of theology. Keeping this in mind, I attempt to consider his three main questions in a way that addresses this broader concern.

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So, am I a realist or not? I should note at the outset that part of the agenda of *Minding God* is to be useful for a broad audience, and one of my claims is that the impact of cognitive science for theology is not limited to a particular kind of theology (Peterson 2003, 17; see excerpt in this volume, pp. 541–54). The dialogue between religion and cognitive science does not need to rise and fall with the fate of theological realism—or any other brand of theology, for that matter.

Furthermore, I suggest that we are all realists, at least in the sense that matters. Here I consider realism the opposite not of idealism but of solipsism. When I die, my perception of the world dies with me, but very few of us would say that the world dies as well. To borrow a page from Ludwig Wittgenstein, it might be asked, What does it mean to be an irrealist? To live is to judge between what is real and what is not and act accordingly.

Clearly, however, Bielfeldt wants something more. He is looking for a general epistemological and ontological framework for theology and (more specifically) God-talk, providing me the standard options found in any introduction-to-philosophy textbook. The question might be better put, What kind of realist am I? To that end, I make a few observations.

First, I am more an empiricist than a rationalist when it comes to the question of the source of truth. In the classical philosophical divide, rationalists argue that truth can be intuited and rationally deduced, while empiricists argue that reason needs something, experiences, to work on. I am not a pure empiricist (something that may in fact be impossible), but I do give greater weight to theories that have some experiential heft or at least a connection to them. A significant factor in this regard is simply that I have not been overly impressed with the history of rationalist arguments. Rationalism seems too often prone to the claim, "You can't believe that!" A prime example of this is the Aristotelian opposition to Copernicus and Galileo, which may have been conceptually correct within the confines of their argument but was, it turns out, historically and quite dramatically wrong. Given this empiricist bent, a dialogue between theology and the sciences makes particular sense, because I would argue that theology must too draw much of its knowledge from experience. Notice that I say "much." There is room for rationalism in theology, but one must be very careful in supporting rationalist claims over empirical ones.

When it comes to the criteria for truth (How do I know what is true or not?) I would list several criteria. Ideally, a true theory has some correspondence with the data. *Data*, of course, is a construct, but, I would argue, not a specious one. When speaking of criteria for truth, I do not speak of correspondence with reality, which is something I believe (following Kant, among others) that we cannot achieve. But a central role of explanation is to account for the world as it appears to us, however we conceive of its reality status. A good epistemology should do precisely that.

Despite this, I suggest that correspondence with data is not the only criterion we should use. There is room to speak of coherence, scope, fertility, and parsimony—rationalist categories all. This implies a certain tension in my epistemology, because the desire to correspond with the data will sometimes conflict with these other, rationalist categories. This, as far as I am concerned, is all to the good. Correspondence to the data is not a be-all and end-all. Sometimes there are good reasons to resist the data, which are historically conditioned and theory-laden. Similarly, when the data are of low quality, we may at times be required to abandon, at least temporarily, the commitment to coherence. This is a crucial point that plays a role in my response to Spezio below.

Although the criteria of truth cannot be a correspondence with reality, I maintain that the meaning of truth needs to be. This may seem paradoxical, because it would seem that the criteria of truth as I have laid them out can never get us in any clear fashion to the meaning of truth (that is, correspondence with reality). Unfortunately, I think that this is correct. I can never know whether something is absolutely true; nevertheless, I inevitably must judge some things to be true—and therefore real in an ultimate sense—or not. When I make a judgment that, for instance, quarks are real, I am making (among other things) a correspondence claim. My criteria for truth may require me to believe in quarks, but why should I suppose that these lead me to believe that quarks are in fact real?

One answer might be that such an assertion is simply a faith claim, since I cannot know absolutely whether or not they are real. To some extent, I think that this is correct. However, there are reasons to suppose that the criteria of truth can be connected to the meaning of truth. That truth means correspondence with reality may be taken as a hypothesis that competes with others, and it is not unreasonable to think that the correspondence notion is (by use of these same criteria) true. For instance, while the pragmatist criterion of usefulness does not imply a correspondence with reality, it seems more plausible that something is useful because it reflects something that is true (in the realist sense). Certainly there are useful fictions, but it would be surprising if everything turned out to be a useful fiction.

These perhaps opaque comments finally allow me to speak more properly about theology. I am a realist about theology in the sense that we do make claims that the objects of theology are real. We act on theological claims (such as the promise of redemption and resurrection) not simply because they serve some regulative function but because we believe (judge) them to be true and real. Can we know this absolutely? No, the limits of epistemology prevent that, but we must judge them to be real or not and act accordingly. Integral to a scientific (rational) theology is that it make reality claims in the same sense that other sciences do. This is not to deny that religious language has multiple modes, that it functions to inspire,

console, and build communities. It is to deny, however, that theological language is limited to those functions.

This implies several things. First, theology is an autonomous discipline and not simply reducible to something else. As I lay out in *Minding God*, theology is concerned with questions of meaning and purpose. Bielfeldt takes the categories of meaning and purpose to be merely subjective, but I deny this. First, the basic questions of meaning and purpose (Who am I? What is the ultimate nature of the universe?) either clearly have an answer or they don't. And although different people obviously claim to find meaning and purpose in all sorts of things, that does not mean that each of those things is a satisfactory source of meaning and purpose, just as Paul Tillich argued that not everything valued as an ultimate concern is in fact an ultimate concern.

Second, it is a mistake to assume that the dialogue between theology and science is simply one way. Cognitive science is not a hammer. There are sometimes grounds for theology to resist (at least temporarily) the direction of the data, and my resistance to functionalism in the book is one such case. One could argue that appropriate resistance may spur new research directions in cognitive science itself. Having said this, however, I think it more natural for the flow of influence to go from the bottom up than from the top down. Cognitive science sets constraints that do not determine philosophical or theological position but rather provide boundaries within which dialogue about those positions occur.

Third, Bielfeldt complains that I do not address the main loci of Christian theology or deal sufficiently with what he considers to be the main issue of the science-theology dialogue, the issue of divine action. The latter complaint seems strange. After all, it would be odd to fault a book on medieval history for not dealing with what the reviewer considered the most important topic of history, the American Civil War. In order to be doing theology, must one simply and solely be talking about God or following the classical loci of Christian systematics? By such lights, it could be argued that Reinhold Niebuhr was not a theologian because he never wrote a systematics. Moreover, many if not all of the issues *Minding God* treats (freedom of the will, the image of God, original sin) are central to the theological tradition. Some of the classical loci that Bielfeldt claims I do not cover (regeneration, justification, and the doctrine of last things) do get their nod, sometimes prominently. Certain subjects that do not appear (the Trinity, the two natures of Christ) are missing partially because of space reasons, not because there isn't anything to say. I would challenge Bielfeldt to speak intelligibly of the embodiedness of Christ without making reference to scientific concepts of anthropology.

This response to Bielfeldt's first question is somewhat long-winded, and I shall reply more briefly to the other two. He asks me to identify the most salient feature of cognitive science for theology. I am reluctant to be so

simplistically minded, but if I had to give one answer it would be that the cognitive sciences as a whole provide an account (or perhaps a set of accounts) of human nature that is relatively unified and that provides challenges and opportunities for theological anthropology. I had thought this was obvious, but perhaps not. As his comments about the classical loci seem to indicate, Bielfeldt seems to think that anthropology is not a proper subject for theology. This would be a surprise to Augustine, who divided with Pelagius over the issue of freedom and perfectibility, and to Luther, who divided with Erasmus over the same issue. Bielfeldt's line of thinking is revealed in his criticism that cognitive science has nothing to do with soteriology. To which I reply, Really? Does not soteriology imply an anthropology? What, after all, is one being saved from? Does this not require some accounting for modern scientific accounts of human nature?

Finally, Bielfeldt asks whether cognitive science contributes anything to an account of divine action and takes me to task for denying a straightforward God:world::mind:body analogy (this after initially complaining that I don't treat this favorite subject). There are a couple of things to be said. First, it is not clear to me that the Christian theological tradition univocally supports such an analogy. Certainly the biblical texts speak of God as person and agent, but they also speak of God as logos/wisdom, an understanding of God that became dominant in the ancient world. Among others, Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* endorsed an analogy of being (*analogia entis*), the purpose of which was to limit the literalness of person language. While Luther speaks of the *deus absconditus,* modern theologians from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Tillich have made a variety of interpretive moves that limit the literalness of personhood language when applied to God.

Moreover, the strictly dualist account of the God:world::mind:body analogy has never seemed to me to be very satisfactory. Is God simply a soul writ large, bigger and better than the ordinary run-of-the-mill soul? The theological tradition has historically maintained some connection between God and humankind (located usually in the doctrine of the image of God), but it also has maintained a categorical distinction. God is creator; we are, at best, created co-creators.

Admittedly, I am against the theological grain on this issue. A good many modern theologians are suspicious of the Greek moves away from personhood, and for some good reasons. I affirm divine personhood but recognize that there is more work to be done. What role cognitive science plays in these future models I am hesitant to say.

Spezio and the Question of Compatibilism

In contrast to Bielfeldt, who takes up several issues, Spezio focuses almost exclusively on the issue of freedom as it is discussed primarily in chapter 4 of *Minding God* and reprinted in this issue (Peterson 2004). Spezio's charges

are twofold. First, he accuses me of being a compatibilist who attempts to reconcile the existence of freedom with a physicalist understanding of the world and human nature. Following the analysis of Jaegwon Kim (2000), Spezio argues that genuine freedom (and more generally any intelligible account of mental causation) is incompatible with physicalism so that I must, in the end, choose between the two. Second, he charges that I give the analysis that I do because of a misplaced emphasis on coherence; if only I would adopt a pragmatist/radical empiricist approach, as Spezio does, I would find myself much better off.

The general question that must first be addressed is my commitment to physicalism. I will accept the label of being a physicalist, but only with the caveat that I understand the term and its implications differently than Spezio does. *Physicalism*—and its cognates, materialism and naturalism—is a much-used term that is rarely adequately defined. In normal discourse, physicalism often is taken to imply that only those things are real which the physical sciences (meaning especially chemistry and physics) discover. The problem is that this is a nearly vacuous position ontologically. While modern physics would have us believe in quarks, gluons, electrons, and the like, if tomorrow physics discovered Leibnizian monads, presumably a physicalist would have to believe in those, as different as they are from the entities described by physics today.

More narrowly, physicalism can be (and often is) taken to imply that only those things are real which have been uncovered by the physical sciences to date, or (more contentiously) which are emergent properties (however defined) of those lower-level entities. The term *nonreductive physicalism* is usually used to describe this position, and in the religion-and-science dialogue it is associated with the position of Nancey Murphy (1999), among others. I find this position to be problematic for the same reason that defining physicalism in terms of what natural science discovers is problematic. It is not at all clear to me that we are in the final stage of science where we can make a completeness claim with regard to ontology. It is quite conceivable that I will wake tomorrow to find that a new particle or even a radically new theory (à la string theory) will be discovered that will have ripple effects on ontology all the way up through biology. If so, physicalism seems a rather rickety platform.

It might be argued that such radical discoveries are unlikely nowadays. Although significant paradigm shifts have occurred in the past (the shift from Newton's physics to Einstein's, for instance), we know a great deal more about the physical universe than ever before, and we may therefore conclude that while there may be the odd particle or minor theory adjustment to make, we basically know all that there is to know, and whatever changes do take place will not have the ripple effect that my criticism of nonreductive physicalism implies. I am not much persuaded by this claim. Important issues remain in the realm of physics, such as the compatibility

of relativity theory with quantum mechanics and the nature of dark matter and dark energy. If verified, string theory would be a significant paradigm shift from current cosmology, and one could easily imagine even more unusual theories. Admittedly, such alterations would not have much to do with the larger-scale realities of biology and the cognitive sciences on the face of it. What gives me pause, however, is the perplexing nature of consciousness itself. If functionalism (the reigning paradigm of cognitive science) is unable to account for consciousness, we need to seek an alternative account that, presumably, will imply new principles. Spezio rightly notes my skepticism with regard to existing appeals to quantum mechanics to explain consciousness, so at best I can only propose a prudent agnosticism.

What would this agnosticism imply? Rather than advocating nonreductive (what I call shallow) physicalism, I argue for what I call a *deep physicalism*, which I characterize in terms of three commitments. First, deep physicalism has a strong commitment to scientific explanation broadly construed, and in this it differs from conventional supernatural dualist accounts that typically set strong limits on scientific inquiry. Second, deep physicalism is committed to the stubbornness of the data and does not simply pigeonhole complex phenomena into existing scientific categories (more on this later). Third, deep physicalism has a commitment to undiscovered principles of significance. It might be argued that, because it can appeal to radically new positions, this is not really physicalism at all. I would demur, and note that David Ray Griffin (2000) has made a similar set of distinctions with regard to the term *naturalism*. It is this distinction between shallow physicalism and deep physicalism that I was trying to get at in my distinction between open- and closed-system emergence. Perhaps I have failed in this. It is admittedly a position that needs more working out.

I give this lengthy explanation because it is necessary for responding to Spezio's claims about compatibilism. The question for me is not so much whether I am a compatibilist but what kind of compatibilist I am. In philosophical analyses of human freedom, we are usually limited to three possible options. Either we are not free and our actions are fully determined, or we are free and our actions are not fully determined, or we are free but this is somehow compatible with determinism, usually at a lower level of analysis.

Debates about freedom hinge on how freedom is defined, and here we find ourselves in a troubling philosophical situation. Freedom is usually contrasted with determinism, but determinism is often contrasted with randomness. In analyzing why an event happens, we are inclined to say that it was caused by antecedent events (and thus determined) or that it was uncaused and therefore in some sense random. But when we say that an action is free, presumably we are saying that the action is not fully caused by antecedent events and also saying that it is not simply random.

A random action is no more free than a fully determined one, and it is hardly satisfactory to say that it is a combination of the two. *Metaphysical freedom* (a term I use in *Minding God*), then, is a position that holds that an action is neither merely determined nor merely random nor merely a combination of the two. Metaphysical freedom is something else entirely. Unfortunately, we have no idea what this something else is, and so the advocate of metaphysical freedom must either appeal to mysticism or to the stipulation of freedom as a brute, unanalyzable reality.

Because this is such a philosophical nonstarter, I prefer to start by speaking of *empirical* freedom rather than metaphysical freedom. Empirically (phenomenologically), we have the experience of being free. For at least some of the actions that I perform, I have the sense that I perform them because I (the conscious self) will to do so; the conscious self has a causal role to play in the actions that I perform that is not fully determined by antecedent events. The question before us when we turn to the cognitive sciences is whether this empirical sense of freedom is accurate or not. Here, I have perhaps not been as clear as I could be. In the book, there were three claims I was trying to make, and I shall try to spell these out a little.

First, we are clearly not free without limit; cognitive science shows that there are physical and biological constraints on our freedom of which we are sometimes only dimly aware. This is partially the point of citing the scientific literature that I do. I cannot simply will myself to be joyful (or, conversely, depressed) in any serious sense. This is a negative constraint. There are certain things we cannot do, and the various forms of mental illness and brain injury that human beings suffer testify to this.

Second, cognitive science suggests that there are constraints in a positive sense, that the kind of brain/mind that we have enables us to do things that we might not be able to do otherwise. What do I mean? The point is best made in terms of species comparison. The brain of an iguana is different from the brain of a chimpanzee, which is different from the brain of a human being. The brain of each enables each organism to do certain things. Take away specific regions of the brain, and cognitive ability (with some important exceptions) is correspondingly curtailed. This is an important point. The kind of brain that we have enables us to do the kinds of things that we do, and this should be seen in no small way as a wonderful gift.

Neither of these points, however, detracts from my third claim, which is that the sense of empirical freedom (that the cause of my actions is me, the conscious self) is true. Here perhaps Spezio and I disagree. After all, if points one and two are true, can there be freedom in any real sense left? If cognitive science shows that mind is constrained by the brain, how can I be free?

Terminology is important here. To be constrained is not the same as to be determined. To give an example, an individual is constrained by a physical handicap (say, a leg injury) but not necessarily determined by it. I am

constrained by the fact that I have no wings, but I am not determined by that fact. Despite my winglessness, I can still fly in an airplane.

But if cognitive science is accurate, does not the brain determine the activities of the mind? If the mind is supervenient on the brain, then (following Kim, as Spezio suggests) isn't the mind reducible to the brain? My first problem here is the construal of the brain-mind relationship. The presumption of much of the supervenience debate is a shallow nonreductive physicalism to which I do not adhere because of the problem of conscious awareness. Any reduction would have to be to some future, deep physicalist understanding of the mind/brain. The proper question in this context, I argue, goes something like this. When we have a complete understanding of the physical world and a complete understanding of what the mind and brain are and how they work and interact, will that give an exhaustive answer to the mind/brain? The answer (tautologously), is Yes. But it is not clear to me ahead of time in what sense this complete understanding would be reductive or deterministic. Indeed, the experience of phenomenal freedom, to some extent at least, militates against its being so.

This leads me to Spezio's discussion of coherence, and here I think we actually disagree much less than I have inadvertently led Spezio to believe. Spezio asserts correctly that I place a high value on coherence but incorrectly that I place an absolute value on it. As I have noted, coherence is one of several criteria used for judging the truth of claims, and I agree with Spezio that the rawness of experience is another. The question is how to balance the relevant values, and I confess to placing greater emphasis on coherence than Spezio does. With regard to his proposal sketched out in the final pages of his response, I have both sympathy and concern. My concern is that an adherence to multiperspectivilism not become an excuse to not look for coherence where it may exist. It is this search for coherence that makes a dialogue with the cognitive sciences exciting and that may pay off in unexpected ways as the dialogue continues.

Conclusion

I end with a mea culpa. I have not answered sufficiently. Bielfeldt and Spezio both ask important questions, and a sufficient answer requires lengthier responses. But they have asked the right questions, and I hope to be able to answer them more satisfactorily in the years to come. They also reveal the extent to which the basic questions of theology-and-science dialogue are linked. To understand the problem of freedom is also, necessarily, to make claims about physicalism. To make claims about physicalism is to make claims as well on basic issues of ontology and epistemology, of realism and coherence. To realize this is to realize how truly difficult a good religion-and-science dialogue is and how much work is left to be done.

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