

MAINTAINING RESPECTABILITY: RESPONSE TO NICHOLAOS JONES

by Gregory R. Peterson

Abstract. Nicholaos Jones argues that theology is not a respectable discipline because of its inability to meet the standards of contemporary science. Although Jones makes a bold claim, I suggest that he has not made his case by focusing on the question of defining science and metaphysics appropriately, the analysis of the literature he cites, and his central claim that theology presupposes the absolute certainty of God.

Keywords: Philip Clayton; Imre Lakatos; Nancey Murphy; scientific method; theological method

Nicholaos Jones (2008) has put forth a clear and concise argument making the case that theology is not a respectable discipline because theology as a discipline does not meet the standards of modern science, in particular because of the putative unwillingness of theology to treat God as anything other than an absolute certainty. Although Jones did not write his article with my accompanying essay (Peterson 2008) in mind, their themes are related, and I have been graciously given the opportunity to comment on Jones's argument.

It is worth noting at the outset that Jones's definition of *theology* is considerably narrower than the one I employ in arguing for theology's place in the university. Because my approach includes the possibility for the narrower subset of theology as God-talk in a more traditional sense, however, there does exist an important conflict: I am claiming that theology is, or at least can be, respectable. Jones claims the opposite, and targets one of the

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authors, Nancey Murphy, whom I cite with approval as providing important contributions buttressing the epistemic status of theological discourse. If Jones is correct, I am at least partly mistaken.

I am perplexed at a number of crucial points in his argument. This may be due to the brevity with which Jones has put forward his case, but I suspect it is more likely the result of sharper differences. I will be correspondingly brief, focusing my comments on three points: issues of definition and scope, the analysis of the primary authors he cites, and the claim of absolute certainty that Jones seems to think is the linchpin of his case.

DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE

It is clear that Jones seeks to attack the epistemic status of theology. Theology is not “respectable,” to use his turn of phrase, which may be a euphemistic way of saying that theological claims, meaning specifically claims about God, cannot be considered knowledge claims and so should be jettisoned along with talk about phlogiston, numerology, and other conceptual flotsam from our past. All of this is clear enough, but it becomes much less so when he starts using the words *science* and *metaphysics* and then tries to connect the two. As the title of Jones’s article indicates, it is theology’s respectability as a metaphysic that he takes to be at issue. He asserts that such respectability is conferred by science, and he cites a number of theologians, including Murphy, Philip Clayton, Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell, and Arthur Peacocke, who recognize the epistemic primacy of science, to buttress his claim.

Although it may seem a minor point, I find the claim that “empirical science today embodies the canons of respectability (for metaphysical disciplines)” (p. 578) a bit odd. Such a claim without elaboration smacks of positivism and suffers from the same problems, among which is the problem of determining the grounds of the normativity of science, since these cannot come from science itself. I would like to think that Jones’s aims are more modest and that he is not conflating metaphysics and science, but he makes several statements suggesting otherwise. Although the theologians he cites acknowledge the epistemic high ground held by the sciences, I would be surprised if they would agree with Jones that science is the only game in town.

This leads to the second definitional problem, which is that it is nowhere clear in Jones’s essay what exactly he means by *science*. Given the character of his argument, it would seem that he takes physics as the epitome of good science, characterized by (among other things) clearly quantitative theories with implications that are, ideally, repeatably testable. But the term has a wide range of connotations, both in the philosophy of science and in popular usage. Science often is understood to include only the natural sciences, including physics, chemistry, and biology. Evolutionary theory,

cosmology, and natural history typically are included as sciences, although the nonrepeatability of historical events creates issues. More problematic are disciplines such as political science, history, and literary theory. These are obvious points, and I would not belabor them, except that Jones's argument crucially hinges on how he understands these issues. If history and literary theory are not sciences, his argument would seem to entail that they are also "disreputable" in the same way that theology is; if they are sciences, his case against theology becomes correspondingly weaker. Consideration of the scientific status of personal experience, memories, informed hunches, tacit knowledge, and so on make the problem more acute. Jones speaks as if science is coextensive with knowledge, but this seems to be little more than a wishful claim. At the very least, elucidation is needed.

ANALYSIS

Jones spends a fair portion of his essay analyzing the positions of Clayton, Murphy, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. He suggests that theologians are faced with a dilemma: either they embrace the claim that theology is a science, as Jones understands Murphy and Clayton to be doing, or they claim that there is knowledge outside of science, as Wolterstorff does. Jones claims that theology does not meet the criteria of science, *contra* the claims of Murphy and Clayton, and he also claims that there is no knowledge outside of science, *contra* Wolterstorff. Correspondingly, theology is disreputable.

Here the definitional issues mentioned above become crucial. Jones correctly indicates that Murphy and Clayton have prominently endorsed the methodology of Imre Lakatos as importable for theology as a discipline, although both have nuanced their views in later works, some of which Jones cites. These proposals may be understood to be making the claim that theology is or can be scientific—a claim that is made elsewhere and with different implications (for example, McGrath 2002). Although Murphy in particular gives examples of past theological research programs such as Catholic modernism that might meet the standards of a Lakatosian research program and has partially outlined proposals that would constitute a contemporary research program (Murphy and Ellis 1996; Murphy 1994), one can take the point that Jones is keen to make: No past or contemporary theological research program meets the kind of criteria requisite for the physical sciences. There are no quantitative models of God that produce the kind of hypotheses that could be repeatably testable. But it is not at all clear that this is what Murphy and Clayton are aiming at; I sincerely doubt that they are. What they are suggesting is that the Lakatosian framework provides the criteria for calling an enterprise scientific, criteria that are broader than those that Jones himself seems to hold, for Lakatos's schema for describing science says surprising little about such issues as repeatability and quantification (Lakatos 1970). Jones's real debate, then, may be

not with Murphy and Clayton but with Lakatos, and the debate concerns not whether theology is a science but what counts as science.

This same definitional problem comes up in Jones's critique of Wolterstorff, whose philosophy of religion is cursorily dismissed because Wolterstorff does not concede that "modern science not only *exemplifies* the canons of respectable human reasoning but also *constitutes* those canons" (p. 580). It is hard to believe that Jones really believes this. Either he believes that anything not fit to print in a scientific journal (my memory of the tearing down of the Berlin wall, an analysis of the historical factors involved in the Rwandan genocide, anything said by a philosopher) does not constitute knowledge, or he is claiming that all genuine knowledge is scientific in character, in which case adding the word *science* is both misleading and redundant. Neither approach appears particularly promising, and it would seem that the onus is on Jones to clarify his epistemological stance in order to better understand the nature and quality of his critique.

ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY

Central to Jones's argument is the claim that theology requires the existence of God to be absolutely certain, and that this disqualifies theology from being a science and, consequently, a knowledge-bearing discipline. The basis of this argument seems to be twofold—first, that it has historically been the case that theology has claimed the existence of God cannot or should not be doubted; and, second, that because theology is by definition the study of God, theology must assume that which must in fact be proven; to doubt the existence of God is to cease to be able to do theology.

The first line of argument has some plausibility to it. It is not too difficult to find a history of casting aspersions on doubting the verities of religious belief, and it would likely not be too difficult to see this attitude widespread among religious individuals today. That this is an expected feature of contemporary theology is another matter, and Jones himself seems to realize that this view is problematic, citing N. K. Verbin, among others. He seems to be admitting that this is not a very persuasive argument, however correct it may be descriptively concerning the attitudes of many people.

The argument that theology cannot be a science and therefore seen as knowledge-producing because it must assume that which is to be proven—the existence of God—does not fare any better, and at the least it needs some elaboration. This is one area where the difference in the way that Jones and I define theology becomes relevant. If theology is defined by the questions it asks, questions of meaning, the argument that there exists a God who provides such meaning is one possible answer, but not the only one. On the definition I employ, the problem does not even arise.

Even so, it is not clear that there is a problem even if theology is defined more narrowly as the science or study of God. One may understand physics as the study of motion, but does physics prove that motion exists, or do

physicists simply assume that things move (“It is obvious, is it not?” they might say, and wave their hands suggestively at some moving object) and then go about the business of creating models of and formulas for motion, and perhaps even argue about what motion is? Even physicists must make some assumptions about the core of their discipline in order to get things rolling. Perhaps stranger are disciplines that are recognized as scientific but whose objects are not known to exist. Cosmology is sometimes characterized this way, and astrobiology. Of course, if a given discipline is defined by the objects that it studies, and then it turns out that there is no good evidence that those objects exist, that discipline should probably close up shop. The kind of cryptozoology that looks for exotica such as Bigfoot and the Abominable Snowman could serve as an example, and it has been suggested by some that string theory is near that point (Smolin 2006).

Jones might agree with this analysis and then go on to point out that theology is in such a sorry position: Having been around for millennia, theology has yet to provide the kind of empirically confirmable theories that are characteristic of the physical sciences. Theology is like cryptozoology, a long-degenerating research program that should be abandoned. I would disagree with such a conclusion, but I believe that directing the debate down this road would be a useful enterprise, for it gets us to the nub of the matter with which we are both concerned, the epistemic status of theism. We might then begin to have a more interesting conversation.

In this respect, Jones homes in on an important issue: the way theologians themselves acknowledge the epistemic status, even privilege, of the physical sciences, and the efforts of at least some to suggest that the epistemic status of theology can be secured by observing that theology engages in methods of inquiry that are analogous or even identical to those found in the physical sciences, or by arguing that theology can become secure by adopting such methods. When these arguments were first put forward by Murphy and Clayton, they were novel in their employment of Lakatos’s work, which at that time was unfamiliar to most theologians, and they were correct to argue that theological inquiry can be construed in terms of a Lakatosian research program.

Although these ideas have proved stimulating and ushered in a mini-flurry of activity and response as well as a heightened interest in Lakatos among some theologians, I suggest that we are at enough remove to see some of the problems in these proposals. Lakatos’s proposal works in part because it is sufficiently vague, encompassing not only the physical sciences but possibly any form of rational inquiry. If there is a strict demarcation between the kind of science exemplified by physics and chemistry and other forms of knowledge inquiry, it is not clear that Lakatos’s approach provides enough information to guide us.

Indeed, although the effort on the part of theologians to reflect on the philosophy of science is and has been a productive enterprise, it has its

limitations. Theology may be understood to be similar to the physical sciences in some ways, but it is also important to inquire how theology is different, and perhaps different in ways similar to other knowledge enterprises that are not counted among the physical sciences or even science generally. Theology can involve considerations of personal experience and reflection that are not easily subject to scientific modes of inquiry. Because theology is inextricably committed to exploring questions of meaning, it seeks to address not only what is true but also what is worth committing to and even hoping for. The value of Jones's critique perhaps lies in revealing this point, that too much can be made of homologies, real and apparent, between the methods of theology and the physical sciences, and that a disservice is done to both when these comparisons are stretched too far.

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