

# EVIDENCE AND FALSIFICATION: CHALLENGES TO GREGORY PETERSON

by *Nicholaos Jones*

*Abstract.* In this reply to Gregory Peterson's essay "Maintaining Respectability," which itself is a response to my "Is Theology Respectable as Metaphysics?" I elaborate upon my claims that theology treats God's existence as an absolute certainty immune to refutation and that modern science constitutes the canons of respectable reasoning for metaphysical disciplines. I conclude with some comments on Peterson's "In Praise of Folly? Theology and the University."

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## THEOLOGY

The discipline that most people for roughly the past millennium would tend to describe as "theology" inquires into the following questions, among others: What are the differences and the similarities between ourselves and God, if we are created in God's image? How, if at all, does God communicate with us? Is baptism necessary to salvation? Can we lose our salvation? Why does God allow us to suffer? These questions concern the relation between God and humans.

One assumption I make in my article "Is Theology Respectable as Metaphysics?" (Jones 2008; hereafter ITRM) is that the answers to these questions are not purely conceptual. For example, if God communicates with us through prayer, this is not something that is true merely in virtue of appropriate definitions of *God*, *communication*, *prayer*, and so on. If God communicates with us through prayer, this is something that is true in virtue of an empirical fact about the world. Even if our access to this fact

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relies on revelation, the conviction of conscience, mystical intuition, or some other kind of private or privileged source, the correct answer to the question “Does God communicate with us through prayer?” is correct because of something more than relations among our concepts. This is why inquiry into the correct answer to this question is a *metaphysical* inquiry. And it is why theology has a metaphysical component.

A second assumption in ITRM is that most metaphysical inquiries within theology accept the presupposition of questions like “Does God communicate with us through prayer?”—namely, that there exists a God. That is, most inquiries within theology do not provide answers to questions about God according to which the term *God* fails to refer to anything. This is the sense in which theology is the study of God.

A central claim in ITRM is that, for the most part, theology treats God’s existence as an absolute certainty immune to refutation. This is an empirical claim. Gregory Peterson (2008b) correctly notes that ITRM is not entirely clear on this point. The support for this claim is not a definition of theology as the study of God, for the same reason that defining physics as the study of motion does not entail that physics treats the existence of motion as an absolute certainty immune to refutation. Rather, the support is historical facts about most of the inquiries that fall within the purview of what most people for roughly the past millennium would tend to describe as theology. These facts are contingent; theological inquiries could have been different. But the claim in ITRM is that, as a matter of historical fact, most theological inquiries treat God’s existence as an absolute certainty immune to refutation.

Advocating this empirical claim is consistent with admitting another empirical fact, namely, that doubt in God’s existence is nowadays a widespread attitude among religious people. Contrary to Peterson’s suggestion, this fact does not undermine the claim that theology treats God’s existence as an absolute certainty immune to refutation. Instead, it merely shows that nowadays many religious persons reject the status that God’s existence has within theology. Moreover, the empirical claim about how theology treats God’s existence is consistent with the existence of radical theologies according to which God is dead, because sometimes these theologies mean only that God’s existence is hidden from us or that God does not *now* exist, although God existed in the past; and both of these approaches seem to treat at least God’s *past* existence as an absolute certainty immune to refutation. Then again, sometimes these theologies really do mean that there is not now and never has been a referent for what we mean by the term *God*. But this attitude marks a radical departure from the historically prevalent attitude within theology, it is not part of any currently flourishing research program within theology (to the best of my knowledge), and it does not falsify the claim that most theologies treat God’s existence as an absolute certainty immune to refutation.

## SCIENCE

Another central claim in ITRM is that modern science constitutes the canons of respectable reasoning for metaphysical disciplines. In “Maintaining Respectability: Response to Nicholaos Jones” (2008b) Peterson offers five objections to (or, more charitably, requests for clarification of) this claim: It is not clear which disciplines “modern science” denotes; the claim itself is either obviously false or else “misleading and redundant”; it amounts to “little more than a wishful claim”; “without elaboration [it] smacks of positivism”; and it seems to conflate metaphysics and science.

Paradigmatic cases of modern science include physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology. Admittedly, there are cases such as history and perhaps political science that are not *clearly* cases of science. But whether theology resembles the clear cases of science, and even whether it resembles the borderline cases, is irrelevant to the argument in ITRM, contrary to what Peterson suggests. What is relevant is whether theology violates modern scientific methodology.

According to ITRM, a discipline accords with the canons of modern scientific methodology only if at least the central claims of the discipline meet at least one of the following conditions:

- *The Falsificationist Requirement*—If the claim is a categorical claim, there is some logically possible circumstance that would count as a refutation of that claim.
- *The Evidentialist Requirement*—The degree of confidence assigned to the claim is proportional to the claim’s degree of evidential support.

That is, if one of the central claims of a discipline satisfies neither The Falsificationist Requirement nor The Evidentialist Requirement, the discipline violates the canons of modern scientific methodology. (Technically, this is a condition weaker than the one that appears in ITRM; but it suffices for the argument in ITRM, because the claim that God exists is central to theology and satisfies neither of the above requirements.) The currently available evidence about modern scientific methodology seems to best support the preceding condition—and it seems to do this even if some discipline contains a central claim that violates that condition despite qualifying as a scientific discipline. This is why the methodology of modern science need not be coextensive with the methodologies common to all of the sciences and why, contra Peterson, the argument in ITRM does not “crucially hinge” on the issue of which disciplines count as scientific.

The preceding remarks are intended to clarify that “modern science *constitutes* the canons of respectable reasoning for metaphysical disciplines” means, in part, that a discipline does not now provide knowledge of human-independent facts about the world if it contains at least one central

claim that violates both The Falsificationist Requirement and The Evidentialist Requirement. (Probably there are further conditions that a discipline must satisfy in order to provide metaphysical knowledge, but the argument in ITRM does not depend upon details about these other conditions.) This is not quite to say that “all genuine knowledge is scientific in character,” as Peterson suggests, since it is consistent with, say, knowledge of logical truths needing to satisfy neither of the above requirements. Nor is it to say that “anything not fit to print in a scientific journal . . . does not constitute knowledge,” since knowledge of human-independent facts about the world might be unfit to print in a scientific journal in virtue of not advancing any scientific research program or being scientifically uninteresting. Nor, contra Peterson, is it either “misleading” or “redundant,” since it is an empirical claim about what the standards for metaphysical knowledge now are, and it is consistent with this claim that there were different standards for metaphysical knowledge in the past.

Furthermore, treating the canons of modern science as constitutive of respectable reasoning for metaphysical disciplines is not “little more than a wishful claim,” for there seems to be ample evidence that this is so, such as that we nowadays are inclined to neither defer to nor act upon knowledge claims from disciplines, like numerology and astrology, containing at least one central claim that violates both The Falsificationist Requirement and The Evidentialist Requirement. Despite Peterson’s concerns, all of this is compatible with allowing some metaphysical knowledge to be based on personal experiences, memories, and so on. The argument in ITRM depends on a very weak condition that a discipline must satisfy in order to accord with the canons of modern science. This condition does not require that claims be repeatable or quantitative in order to provide metaphysical knowledge. It does not require that each theoretical claim be translatable or otherwise reducible to a claim in a purely observational language. It neither entails nor relies upon a criterion of meaningfulness or cognitive significance. In fact, it makes no demands typically associated with the positivist movement. So it is not clear why, according to Peterson, treating the canons of modern science as constitutive of respectable reasoning for metaphysical disciplines “smacks of positivism” (p. 594).

Relatedly, it is not clear that this approach to the canons of modern science suffers from the problem of determining the grounds of science’s normativity. ITRM contains the claim that the canons of modern science are constitutive of what it is for reasoning within a metaphysical discipline to be respectable. If this claim is correct, Peterson’s demand for the justification of this standard is misplaced, in the same way that a demand for an account of why the standard meter bar in Paris counts as the standard for length would be misplaced if that bar were constitutive of what it is for something to be a meter in length. This is not to say that the meaning of “respectable reasoning for a metaphysical discipline” cannot change with

time, for the same reason that adopting a bar in Paris as the constitutive standard for length does not entail that the meaning of the phrase “one meter in length” cannot change, since we can adopt different standards.

Finally, treating the canons of modern science as constitutive of respectable reasoning for metaphysical disciplines does not conflate science and metaphysics, because this treatment is based on a contingent claim about what the current standards for metaphysical knowledge are rather than a conceptual claim about the meaning of the terms *scientific* and *metaphysical*. Moreover, the argument in ITRM seems to succeed even if the canons of modern science are not constitutive of respectable reasoning for metaphysical disciplines, as the literature within epistemology and the philosophy of science indicates that those canons happen to instantiate whatever the normative standards are for such reasoning. Evidence for this includes the fact that failure to legitimize paradigmatic cases of scientific reasoning counts as a severe mark against an epistemological theory in that literature.

#### RESPONSE TO PETERSON’S “IN PRAISE OF FOLLY? THEOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSITY”

A potential limitation of the argument in ITRM is its restriction in applicability to the discipline that most people for roughly the past millennium would tend to describe as *theology*. Peterson suggests an alternative characterization of theology, according to which theology is the discipline concerned with questions of “ultimacy, meaning, and purpose.” This conception of theology is more liberal than the conception prevalent among most people for roughly the past millennium, so it will be helpful to distinguish between extended-scope theology (theology in Peterson’s extended sense) and, for lack of a better adjective, narrow-scope theology. Insofar as extended-scope theology need not treat the existence of God as an absolute certainty immune to refutation, ITRM does not show that extended-scope theology is disreputable as a metaphysical discipline.

Peterson’s thesis in his essay “In Praise of Folly? Theology and the University” (2008a) is that extended-scope theology deserves to be part of the university. Sometimes he speaks as if this means that extended-scope theology deserves its own department, but other times he seems to mean only that the university ought to support extended-scope theology research. If Peterson’s thesis has this second meaning, by his own admissions the university already does this. For example, he acknowledges that some popular writings by academics, such as Daniel Dennett, qualify as “atheistic theology,” and he observes that physicists and philosophers, among others, often address questions about ultimacy, meaning, and purpose. So perhaps Peterson intends his article to be a warning against overspecialization and a further call for interdisciplinary research efforts.

Suppose, however, that he means to argue that extended-scope theology deserves its own department. His reasons seem to be that other departments typically do not adequately address extended-scope theological questions and that extended-scope theological questions “are real and legitimate questions that need to be addressed.” All of this may be true, but it does not seem to justify a separate department for extended-scope theology.

Consider the discipline of cognitive science, which addresses real and legitimate questions, including how the human brain works and how information is processed and translated into behavioral outputs. Arguably, no traditional university department adequately addresses these questions, as cognitive science is an interdisciplinary endeavor between linguists, neuroscientists, philosophers, psychologists, and others. Yet many universities, rather than having a department devoted exclusively to this discipline, have a cognitive science cognate in which students take classes from faculty in other departments who have an interest in how their discipline contributes to cognitive science. Part of the reason for this seems to be that cognitive science has not yet reached a stage in which there is a significant body of knowledge. The same is true of extended-scope theology. So, assuming that the general hesitancy toward instituting a separate cognitive science department is not unfounded, the reasons Peterson gives for why theology deserves a separate department are not compelling.

Peterson also suggests that an extended-scope theology department would “be a place where the prophetic voice may be heard” (2008a, 567). If this is true, it seems to be so in virtue of the kinds of people who would be employed in that department, and Peterson provides no reason to suppose that the same kinds of people are unlikely to be found in other departments. So it is not clear how this reason is supposed to justify the presence of a separate extended-scope theology department at universities.

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