



## Considering the Place of Apophaticism within Science-Engaged Theology

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Despite its firm embeddedness in the Christian tradition, apophatic theology has been strangely absent in the science-and-religion dialogue. Given that the apophatic theologian eschews the idea that we can fully comprehend God, or positively articulate God's being, this may not be too surprising. Indeed, the model-based logic of science and religion and its ambition to articulate, for example, divine activity through the latest scientific advancements seems to run contrary to the spirit of apophaticism. This article discusses whether Perry and Leidenhag's science-engaged theology may provide a more suitable home for those who emphasize the ineffability and mysteriousness of God's being.

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## Introduction

Since the days of Ian Barbour's groundbreaking *Issues in Science and Religion* (1966), the wider field of what is often labelled "science-and-religion" has focused on the possibilities and challenges of harmonizing theological doctrines and beliefs with the deliverances of the natural sciences. As Perry and Leidenhag discuss in the first section of their book, this has yielded a number of impressive projects and volumes over the last 40 years or so. A main area of focus within this rich research discourse has been *divine action*: given what we know about the causal structure of the universe, the evolutionary development of life, and the complexities of the human mind, how is it possible to claim from a theological perspective that God acts in the world and interacts with humanity? If the world is governed by non-teleological laws and regularities, what place is there for God to act *purposefully* in the natural world?

A number of theological models have been devised to address this perplexing question. Some of these models are based on emergence theory and neuroscience (Clayton 2004; Peacocke 1993), others on process metaphysics (Griffin 2004), and still others on quantum mechanics (Russell 2006; Polkinghorne 1988; 2008), etc. There is no shortage of proposals as to how divine activity may be construed through scientific categories. However, a notable absent voice in this discussion has been apophatic theology, despite its firm embeddedness in the Christian tradition. In one sense, this is no surprise given that the apophatic theologian eschews the idea that we can fully comprehend God, or positively articulate God's being. Hence, "human beings *cannot* speak of God [...] and cannot truthfully, or even intelligibly, say *what* God is" (Simon Hewitt 2020, 3). This seemingly runs contrary to the dominant spirit of science-and-religion, which seeks to construct models, depicting how divine activity can be positively understood through current science.

My first argument is that the models-based science-and-religion, despite its ambitions, ends up inviting scientism; that is, by understanding divine causality as equivalent to scientific causality, one ends up surrendering theology to the culture of scientism. In this way, the ontological deflationism of apophaticism should be of significant interest as it may avoid such scientistic implications.

Second, I evaluate the ability of science-engaged theology (SET), as primarily expressed in John Perry and Joanna Leidenhag's *Cambridge Element*, to include apophatic theology. My argument is that the epistemological flexibility of SET can more easily (a) give apophatic theology a seat at the table and (b) avoid the problem of scientism.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 2) emphasize that they "do not want science-engaged theology to become a backdoor for naïve scientism within theology." At the same time, I also pose the question as to whether SET might nevertheless commit itself to a similar form of "the metaphysical matching game" through its notion of entanglement?

## The Problem of Playing the Metaphysical Matching Game

Many philosophers play what Huw Price (2011, 3) calls a “metaphysical matching game”: “Imagine a child’s puzzle book . . . The left-hand page contains a large sheet of peel-off stickers, and the right-hand page shows a line drawing of a complex scene. . . . For each sticker . . . the reader needs to find the unique outline in the drawing with the corresponding shape.” The aim of this game, thus, is to place all the stickers in their correct place. This, Price continues, bears a striking resemblance to the current game of naturalistic philosophers. They take a statement that we hold to be true about the world (the sticker), which we then try to place in its correct location (the scientific story about the world). Yet, some statements are extremely difficult to fit in such a naturalistic picture of the world, and thus we get what Price (2011, 188–89) calls a *placement problem*.

Although this argument, or observation, is made within the context of secular, naturalistic philosophy, I want to make the case that previous and current attempts to square divine action with the deliverances of modern science lead to similar “placement problems” and contradictions. Such divine action theories are in abundance and there is no space to survey all of them, so here I restrict the focus to Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke’s emergentist conception of divine activity, and Sarah Lane Ritchie’s theistic naturalism.<sup>2</sup>

Albeit in slightly different ways, both Peacocke and Clayton rely heavily on emergence theory in developing a model of divine action whereby God acts through natural processes in a non-competitive manner. An emergentist understanding of our world, according to Peacocke and Clayton, commits itself to a broad “monism,” in that the world is made out of stuff (Clayton 2004, 60) and no “extra *entities* or *forces*” are needed to account for the natural world (Peacocke 2007, 12). However, despite such a general monism, this view also suggests that reality is ultimately “layered,” such that higher levels are irreducible to lower levels; for example, the behavioral sciences are irreducible to chemistry or fundamental physics. This view resists any attempt at regarding a higher-level entity, such as the human mind, “as less real in comparison with some favored lower level of ‘reality’” (Peacocke 2007, 13). Similarly, Clayton (2004, 60–62) recognizes eight characteristics of emergence, one of which is the belief in “hierarchical complexity,” meaning that “more complex units are formed out of more simple parts.” Moreover, and this is perhaps the key claim of strong emergence theory, higher-level properties can exert downward or top-down causation on their lower-level constituents. For example, mind can exert downward influence on the body (see Clayton 2004, 62; Peacocke 2006, 266–73). It is here that Clayton and Peacocke, in constructing a panentheistic vision of God, make the argument that God can exert downward influence on the world through natural processes, in a similar way to the mind-body relationship, without breaking the metaphysical commitment to monism—without this entailing

divine interventionism. Although Clayton and Peacocke's emergentist proposal provides a valuable pushback against reductionism, it also raises significant metaphysical problems. As Scot Yoder (2015) and I (Leidenhag 2014; 2021) have argued, strong emergence and the notion of downward causation ultimately break the monistic commitment of causal closure, thus introducing the sort of dualism that both Clayton and Peacocke consider scientifically untenable.

It is clear that both Clayton and Peacocke, by virtue of their monistic commitment, are forced to play their own metaphysical matching game; affirmations about God's active involvement in the natural world (the sticker) have to be placed in their correct locations (the emergentist construal of the world). Yet, this effort gives rise to a "placement problem" as it is difficult to square divine action with a purely monistic understanding of emergentism.

Although Ritchie, in *Divine Action and the Human Mind* (2019, 85), vows to go beyond such emergentist proposals—which she deems not "naturalistic enough"—her account faces somewhat comparable placement issues. Overall, Ritchie (2019, 37–38) adopts a similar monistic outlook by virtue of affirming *causal closure*, "the methodological assumption for working scientists" that stipulates that "all physical events have physical causes." Hence, the notion that God can directly intervene in the natural order is considered "blatantly unscientific" (2019, 37), as it would "undermine current and future scientific practice" (2019, 37, 38). Ritchie (2019, 350), while reserving most of this book for evaluating current divine action proposals, gestures towards how a theistic naturalism may provide a more fruitful framework for imagining divine activity in a world of science, according to which "the physical is involved with God's active presence." In order to avoid a possible clash between divine action and the causal closure principle, Ritchie (2019, 347) is keen to push back against a strict dichotomy between the natural and supernatural: "To be natural is to be involved with God." Although Ritchie has wisely avoided making the plausibility of divine action dependent on any one scientific model (including emergence theory), her theory raises similar issues. On her model, it sounds as if divine activity and natural processes are concurrent. That is, divine activity, *G*, and natural regularities, *N*, both sufficiently produce an event, *E*. However, in this case, neither *G* nor *N* are explanatorily necessary for *E*, as *E* would have obtained in the absence of *G* and in the presence of *N*, or in the absence of *N* and in the presence of *G*. Depending on how one looks at the situation, either *G* or *N* would be redundant; we would have no way of telling. However, if this account allows for *E* to obtain through *G* in the absence of *N*, then this account would contradict Ritchie's commitment to causal closure. So, either divine activity might be superfluous, or it contradicts causal closure. Ritchie avoided one sort of metaphysical matching game but has encountered another serious placement problem whereby divine activity either becomes superfluous or it breaks causal closure.

This is not to say that Ritchie's proposal ultimately fails as the short argument above clearly does not accomplish this. Instead, given these problems of Clayton/Peacocke and Richie's proposals I want to raise the broader question, "why engage in such metaphysical matching games at all?" By playing this game, we risk subjugating theology to naturalism, secularism, and scientism.

Taede Smedes (2004, 207) has developed such a critique in relation to various attempts at reconciling divine action with science, suggesting that several notable theories of divine action fail to respect and understand the "internal logic" of religious language and theology. In fact, by subjugating theological claims regarding divine activity to "criteria of meaning" of naturalistically conceived scientific theories, we are letting scientism in through the backdoor. Such scientism distorts the grammar of theology by suggesting that divine action must be understood in terms of scientific causality, such that God's action is wrongfully taken to be "similar to creaturely, causal and/or intentional action, including the limitations inherent to the creaturely condition" (Smedes 2004, 207). The implications of Smedes's diagnosis are clear; by playing the metaphysical matching game, seeking to articulate divine activity through the latest scientific advancement, we are making a category mistake, thus forcing theology into the logic of scientism.

### **Going beyond the Metaphysical Matching Game: Apophaticism**

Through a brief overview of some attempts at reconciling divine action with modern science, we have seen how playing the metaphysical matching game leads to placement problems due to the ways in which these models tacitly assume a scientific criterion of meaning. One way to avoid the metaphysical matching game altogether is to adopt an apophatic approach to divine action.

Here, I briefly unpack some core features of apophatic theology, before relating it to SET. Simon Hewitt (2020, 13) aptly points out that negative theology is part and parcel of the tradition, and not an alternative way of framing Christian theology; indeed, it should be understood as "working out of Christian theology in an attempt to be faithful to the tradition." Although apophatic theology (AT) lacks a singular definition, it typically comprises a few key ideas regarding our (in)ability to describe God through human language. As indicated in the introduction, the main thrust of AT is that God is beyond human language. Here, we can quickly see how AT relates to divine ineffability, which suggests that humans are unable to describe God in words (Hewitt 2020, 13). Yet, as Jonathan Jacobs (2015, 165) points out, "it is not our limitations that ground God's ineffability." It is not that we may be able to bridge this epistemological gap in the future, perhaps with the help of a supercomputer or if human beings evolved towards greater cognitive capacities. Rather, it is God's "*transcendence* that grounds his ineffability" (Jacobs 2015, 165, emphasis added). Hewitt (2020, 14) makes a similar point when he suggests that the doctrine

of divine ineffability is closely related to (although distinct from) the doctrine of divine transcendence, which adds the further claim that “God is radically dissimilar from creatures.”

This is not to say that God and human beings merely differ in some number of properties. More strongly, this doctrine suggests that “there is no intelligible basis for comparison between God” and creatures (Hewitt 2020, 14). Given that God does not share a logical space with human creatures, it is a “category mistake” to apply a predicate associated with human creatures to God given God’s radical dissimilarity (Hewitt 2020, 101). Of course, much more can be said about the apophatic tradition, but this short description suffices to identify a seeming tension between AT and the above-mentioned divine action proposals.

From an AT perspective, which has already been touched upon through our discussion of Smedes, these proposals commit a category mistake by applying scientific accounts of causality, and what we otherwise know about human beings and consciousness, on divine activity.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the purpose of these accounts is not simply to shed light on how God interacts with the world and creatures, but they assume that the veridicality of theological beliefs in divine action and providence depends on them being successfully articulated through scientific theories or accommodated within, broadly speaking, naturalistic discourses that take a general monism to be true (as could be seen in Clayton’s, Peacocke’s, and Ritchie’s frameworks). AT, given its emphasis on the limitations of human language due in the face of divine transcendence, pushes back against the metaphysical matching games being played in science-and-theology, which assume, to use Hewitt’s phrase, that God and the world share a “logical space.” In refusing to play this game, AT can, furthermore, bypass the scientific implications of subjugating theological claims to secular and naturalistic presuppositions.

## **Exploring the Relationship between Apophatic Theology and Science-Engaged Theology**

As has been seen so far, playing the metaphysical matching game inadvertently invites a scientific understanding of the relationship between science and theology, rendering the latter epistemically subordinate to the former, whereby theological beliefs need to be accommodated within a secular and naturalistic discourse. AT, an underrepresented voice in this debate, emphasizes the particularity of the logical space of Christian theology, and so rejects the methodological principles underlying the metaphysical matching game. Here, I probe three issues: (1) Does SET avoid the metaphysical matching game? (2) Can SET give apophatic theology a seat at the table? (3) Can there be a science-engaged apophatic theology?

In analyzing the first issue, let us start off with a key feature of Perry and Leidenhag’s (2023, 16) articulation of SET; namely, its recognition of “the

gospel of complexity.” Drawing on the historical work of John Hedley Brooke, Peter Harrison, and David Livingstone, Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 19) seek to deconstruct the monolithic terms of “science” and “religion,” showing their historical situatedness by concluding that “the search for a definitive relation between science and religion is a dead end.” Indeed, modernity merely used those concepts “as badges or ciphers to separate rationality from irrationality” (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 21). In emphasizing the irreducibility of “science” and “religion,” SET, furthermore, opposes unificationism and the attempts of unifying “scientific disciplines and methods into ‘one thing,’” as most clearly manifested in A. J. Ayer’s logical positivism and, to some extent, Karl Popper’s falsificationism (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 36, 38). As a result of such scientific unificationism, theology is relegated to the realm of irrationality unless such beliefs and doctrines could, somehow, be accommodated within the logic of scientific methodology, be that either Ayer’s or Popper’s criterion for scientific acceptability. Here, we can see how the spirit of pluralism may function as “an equalizing force in interaction between scientific and theological research” (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 40). As a result of such a pluralist understanding, Perry and Leidenhag break with the problematic idea “of a single map for the territories of science and religion” (2023, 42). Without firmly committing to it, Perry and Leidenhag’s (2023, 42) argument leads them towards Ronald N. Giere’s scientific perspectivism, suggesting that different scientific instruments and theories provide different, partial perspectives of the world, and that whether something is the “best” perspective cannot be universalized but must be evaluated in relation to the goal at hand or “what type of question one is seeking to answer.”

Here, we can see how SET, in stressing the pluralistic nature of both scientific practice and theological discourse, avoids partaking in the metaphysical matching game. In the same way that Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 38) stress that science and religion do not necessarily share the same one map, apophatic theology would object to the logic of the metaphysical matching game by stressing that scientific theories and theology do not engage in the same game or play by the same rules, and that scientific and theological claims cannot be housed within a “single logical language system.” This breaks clearly with the divine action proposals of Clayton, Peacocke, and Lane Ritchie, which render the meaningfulness of theological claims dependent on scientific accommodation. Thus, if theologians fail in playing the metaphysical matching game—such that a theological claim cannot be matched with a scientific fact—this would undermine the rationality of theology. To put this in another way, unlike SET, these divine action proposals assume that theology (divine action) and science (physical and mental causation) share the same map or play by the same rules. It is such a unificationist endeavor that opens the backdoor for scientism within theology by insisting on a “neat and wholistic translation from the language of one discipline to that of another” (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 44).<sup>4</sup>

However, by refusing to play the metaphysical matching game, does SET not simply succumb to relativism and isolationism? Is SET trading scientism for quietism? Here, Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 64, 43, 44) are careful to emphasize the possibility of constructively engaging with science, but in a “highly localized way” within particular “trading-zones” where local customs and norms can be negotiated. There are still better and worse ways of doing SET as “not all maps are equally good” (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 42).

AT and SET share in their refusal to play the metaphysical matching game, conceding that theology and science do not necessarily share the same logical space and that any attempt at globalizing their relationship in terms of a metanarrative should be rejected; theology should not be uncritically subjected to or evaluated in terms of the language, norms, and rules of other disciplines. At the same time, AT and SET arrive at these conclusions partly due to different starting points. AT’s rejection of the metaphysical matching game is grounded in its affirmation of the ineffability of God and the radical dissimilarity between God and created phenomena, whereas SET follows the “gospel of complexity” in problematizing transhistorical notions of science as a stable and monolithic entity.

Can there then, given this significant area of agreement, be a science-engaged apophatic theology? In answering this, it is worth revisiting a challenge against SET as such, identified by Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 46, 66): that is, by rejecting the narrative of unity and preserving the distinctive voice, or “native tongue,” of theology, does SET not simply close off the possibility of meaningful dialogue? No. Again, it is possible to engage with science by staying local and specific, such that theological claims are not forced into some “mythological categories or metanarratives” (2023, 65), including causal closure or methodological naturalism. It is, similarly, possible to engage science from an apophatic perspective without committing “the category mistake” of ascribing properties of the natural order to God or determining the meaningfulness or rationality of theological claims on the basis of non-theological norms and criteria. One can still point towards consonance between a theological doctrine and a scientific theory, in the sense that there is no logical connection between the two and the former does not need to be accommodated within the latter, but they may “fit in with each other very well” (van den Brink 2020, 226). As such, AT is not some “*NOMA on steroids*” (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 5).

Although there is significant agreement between SET and AT in terms of how the science-theology dialogue should *not* be conducted, some claims of SET may potentially cause concerns among those theologians who emphasize metaphysical dissimilarity between God and the created order. In avoiding the conclusion that SET merely amounts to “empirical fact checking” (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 57), or that it constitutes a sub-category of the dialogue or integration model (2023, 14), the authors stress the *entanglement* of theological and scientific concepts, whereby a concept “cannot be understood as either



a scientific or theological in meaning and origin, but only as both,” meaning that “the tools of more than one discipline” is needed to understand the phenomenon (2023, 13, 48). This may go contrary to the apophatic spirit of safeguarding the unique logical space of Christian theology, if the idea is that scientific and theological concepts ought to be used conjunctively to account for some phenomenon, thus, seemingly implying that scientific and theological operate on the same level of reality or that they share the same logical space. My question to Perry and Leidenhag is: How should we understand this notion of entanglement, and may it provide a novel idea beyond that of sheer “compatibility” between science and religion, or might it unintentionally lead us back to the perilous metaphysical matching game?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I adopt an approach of constructive criticism for two reasons. First, I have been part of framing the prospects of science-engaged theology through managing an online resource in this area; see <https://www.theo-puzzles.ac.uk/>. In fact, Leidenhag and Perry’s book utilises several theological puzzles to exemplify the current trajectory of SET. Second, and most importantly, I want to maintain the peace at home.
- <sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Lane Ritchie (2018) has been crucial to the development of science-engaged theology, through co managing grants in the area and through a co written article (with John Perry), in which she sought to situate SET in relation to critiques of methodological naturalism.
- <sup>3</sup> See also Smedes’s discussion of “category mistakes” in a response to Ian Barbour (2008).
- <sup>4</sup> On page 49, Perry and Leidenhag (2003) make a brief connection between unificationism and scientism; “Given the arguments made in the preceding sections, we cannot rely on scientific assumptions regarding the superiority or unity of science.”

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