

Three weeks before death from cancer, Cardinal Joseph Bernadin wrote: "I am at peace and I can only account for that by looking upon it as a gift from God ... (but) you have to let go. That letting go is not the easiest thing in the world." The compassion contained in the writings of these

articles may aid those struggling with letting go, which eventually may include everyone.

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Letters

Is Theism a Theory? A Response to Snoke

David Snoke has recently written a bold and stimulating article ("In Favor of God-of-the-Gaps Reasoning," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 53, no. 3 [Sept. 2001]: 152-8) in favor of GOG (God-of-the-gaps) reasoning, or perhaps more accurately, criticizing the prevalent assumption that GOG reasoning has no merit. While I agree with much of his epistemology, I think there are serious problems with his treatment of theism as if it were a theory; I doubt that Christianity can accept that kind of self-understanding. In what follows, I will attempt to explicate the main problems with Snoke's position, which are fourfold: (1) there is reason to question the religious adequacy, so to speak, of treating theism as if it were a theory; (2) there are some serious internal problems with theism and Christianity *qua* theories; (3) most people do not approach theism or Christianity with the attitude proper toward a theory; and, (4) it is not as clear as Snoke seems to think that theism and Christianity entail any falsifiable predictions.

Before I begin in earnest, I should note a few minor points. I am sympathetic to Snoke's general epistemological position. As he argues, evidential considerations should play an important role in a person's decision between theism and atheism, and generally in the evaluation of world views or theories. I am also in agreement that if a theory cannot explain something, it ought to be able to explain what counts against it, although, as a careful reading of his article makes clear, that does not automatically cripple a theory or favor one of its competitors over others. Snoke notes several explanatory failings or "gaps" in the atheistic position that weaken it, and he suggests that theism gains credence by being able to explain what atheism cannot. Although I do not think these gaps are as serious or as unlikely to be overcome as Snoke claims, space limits me to noting my disagreement and referring the reader to some of the literature that Snoke does not cite.¹

The most serious problem concerns Snoke's contention that theism is a *theory*. This is not argued for in his essay but is simply assumed. It is a controversial position, to say the least, and does not seem to sit well with the main themes of the Bible or the bulk of Christian tradition. Since when is God to be considered as part of a theory? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as of the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the apostles, confronts us as a Thou, a person, a most intimate challenge, not as something hypothetical or theoretical. *Prima facie*, theism in general, and Christianity in particular, are not theories and

it may be contrary to their very spirit to see them that way. As John Baillie has said:

Thus for the New Testament, as for the Old, God is One who is directly known in His approach to the human soul. He is not an inference but a Presence ... The knowledge of God of which the New Testament speaks is a knowledge for which the best argument were but a sorry substitute and to which it were but a superfluous addition.²

Having made this point, I will go along with Snoke's contention for the sake of argument, and offer some criticisms of theism and Christianity *qua* theories. In the first place, if theism is a theory, then it has at least the following internal problems (excepting for the moment, the problem of evil, which Snoke appears to recognize as a problem). First, its most crucial concept, God, may be incoherent. I refer to the longstanding and ongoing philosophical and theological debates over the meaning of divine attributes such as "omnipotence" and "omniscience" and over whether a God having these and other essential attributes is possible, for some of them appear to conflict.³ At the very least, there are serious difficulties in providing a satisfactory account of the concept of God. Second, a similar and related debate is over whether there are any satisfactory explanations of central Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Atonement.⁴ I submit that a theory that had as many hotly contested central concepts and claims as theism and Christianity have, and for as long as they have had them, would never last long in the world of science.

Certain other problems follow from treating theism as if it were a theory. Belief in God is not generally held as if it were part of a theory. People tend to believe in God more firmly than they would be entitled to if it were a theory, and tend not to be as willing to consider criticisms and new evidence as commitment to a theory requires. So, Snoke's contention is incorrect as a description of how people in fact embrace theism and Christianity. Should we say that Christians ought to try to accept Christianity as if it were a theory? What then becomes of faith?

The question of whether theism or Christianity entail any falsifiable predictions is more complex than Snoke indicates. A basic distinction made by the philosopher of biology Elliot Sober between *strongly falsifiable* and *weakly falsifiable* theories is instructive.⁵ A theory is strongly falsifiable if it entails at least one observation statement O (i.e., a prediction) whose truth or falsehood can be determined by direct observation. Most scientific theories do not by themselves entail observation statements; only in conjunction with auxiliary hypotheses do they do so, which is to say, they are weakly falsifiable. This is acceptable so long as the auxiliary hypotheses are confirmed (and falsifiable) *independently* of the theory in question.

Now, theism by itself does not seem to entail any observation statements, so it is at best weakly falsifiable. As Sober explains, the difficulty for theism concerns auxiliary hypotheses about God, that is, claims concerning what God is like and how he acts. To take one of Snoke's examples, he claims that if theism is true, we would expect there to be "many, daily, direct, miraculous communications from God" (p. 156), a prediction he takes to be falsified and that requires a modification of theism. However, this prediction only follows on the assumption of knowledge about how God would reveal himself to human beings, if he existed. But why suppose that Snoke or anyone else could *know* this? The problem with auxiliary hypotheses about God is that they are not independently confirmed or falsified. Is there any way of confirming or falsifying auxiliary hypotheses about God without presupposing theism? I raise these issues not to take a firm stance on them, but merely to suggest their complexity and cast doubt upon the idea that we can easily find falsifiable predictions for theism and Christianity.

Ever since Hume and Kant, natural theology has been on the defensive, only making a serious comeback in the last twenty-five years or so. Snoke welcomes natural theology as part of his evidentialist epistemology, and wants theism to subscribe to the "normal rules of evidential discourse" (p. 154). In our pluralistic world, this is an understandable and reasonable reaction. However, it is not clear that this is a move theism and Christianity can make, as the problems I have outlined show. Some serious issues concerning faith and reason still need to be addressed.

Notes

¹On the Intelligent Design—Evolution controversy, see Massimo Pigliucci, "Design, Yes, Intelligent, No," *Skeptical Inquirer* 25, no. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2001): 34-9; Niall Shanks and Karl Joplin, "Behe, Biochemistry, and the Invisible Hand," *Philo* 4, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2001) available at the website <www.philoonline.org>; and *Skeptic* 8, no. 4 (2001), which has an excellent section on Intelligent Design. On fine-tuning arguments for the existence of God, see Theodore M. Drange, "The Fine-Tuning Argument Revisited," *Philo* 3, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2000).

²"The Irrelevance of Proofs from the Biblical Point of View" in John Hick, ed., *The Existence of God* (New York: MacMillan, 1964), 209-10.

³For an introduction, see Theodore M. Drange, "Incompatible-Properties Arguments: A Survey," *Philo* 1, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 1998). Available at the website <www.philoonline.org>.

⁴For the critical side, see Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), and Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), an older work still worthy of careful study. For a defense of the Incarnation, see Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), and of the Atonement, see Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁵See Elliot Sober, *Core Questions in Philosophy: A Text With Readings*, 3rd ed., lecture 9, "Is the Existence of God Testable?" (Old Tappan, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001). For a much fuller and more sophisticated treatment, see Elliott Sober, "Testability," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 73 (1999): 47-76. Available at the website <philosophy.wisc.edu/sober>.

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Choice of Research Topic

Although I am now retired, I was for many years head of a research group and chairman of a university department of electrical engineering. I was therefore particularly interested in the recent issue of *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (53, no. 4 [December 2001]) reporting on a conference dealing with the choice of research projects by young graduates and post-docs. I have to say that I found the advice offered rather disturbing.

My chief cause for concern was the overriding importance attached to individual choice. My experience suggests that a fulfilling career in research generally requires team work. It may be that a few outstanding scientists work best in isolation, although I doubt it. But the creativity of most ordinary research workers is enormously enhanced by regular discussion with colleagues. The conference did not mention that giving is the other side of receiving. In this connection, I found the advice on choosing a supervisor to further one's career somewhat distasteful.

Nor do I like the idea of encouraging research workers to live from grant to grant. In my experience, the financing of research is best left to the head of a research group. Younger members need to be protected from commercial pressures so that they can give themselves unreservedly to the quality of their work and the enjoyment of it.

I fear that much of the advice given at the conference may increase the perception of science as a self-regarding pursuit and may strengthen the postmodern backlash against it.

I have been an appreciative reader of *PSCF* for many years and hope you will forgive the criticism.

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A Reply to the Dialogues

The March 2002 issue of *PSCF* contains a dialogue concerning science, naturalism, biology, and design.¹ Walter Thorson argues for a new definition of naturalism in science, with the unstated assumption that evolutionary biology would be included in such a science.² Although biology is usually classified as a science and biologists use the scientific method for investigation, the biochemical evolution of the first cell and macroevolution are supernatural. Uniting evolutionary biology with naturalistic science joins two mutually exclusive categories.

If science is defined as the study of natural things and natural processes in which supernatural causation is absent, evolutionary biology is not scientific. If science is defined as the study of the physical universe in which causation could be supernatural, evolutionary biology would be scientific. The two sets of definitions are functionally equivalent if God does not exist. Since the large majority of scientists accept a definition of science that excludes supernatural causation, such a definition of science should be accepted as the best working definition.