



Dialogue: Response

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In "Prospects for Theistic Science," Roy Clouser sketches a framework for the relationship between religious and scientific beliefs. In particular, he develops—building on previous work¹—a neo-Calvinist view, according to which religious belief is a presupposition of, and is relevant to, any other body of beliefs.

According to Clouser, we should expect religious beliefs to play a "regulative," rather than a "constitutive" role with regard to scientific theorizing. (Indeed, Clouser indicates that religious beliefs do, in fact, regulate scientific theorizing—whether or not we are aware of it.) That is, while we should not typically expect religious beliefs to provide the content of scientific theories, we should expect religious beliefs to provide a methodological framework within which scientific theories are developed and evaluated.

What is more, Clouser claims to have identified the central methodological maxim of Western monotheism (henceforth, "theism"): reject reductionism—that is, do not attempt to explain everything in terms of the structure and behavior of a special class of "fundamental" entities within the created universe. According to Clouser, this methodological maxim is a corollary of the doctrine of creation: God is the only self-existent being.

Clouser's proposal holds out the promise for a more systematic approach to questions about science and religion. Nonetheless, there remain a few issues on which one might press for clarification.

First, Clouser claims that theists and atheists alike believe that there is a privileged class of self-existent (or "divine") beings; they differ only on which beings they identify as divine. Clouser also claims that religious beliefs regulate scientific theorizing because a scientist will attempt to reduce everything to (or, explain everything in terms of) what she takes to be the self-existent beings. But this proposal comes into tension with Clouser's claim that the theist should be a nonreductionist. In particular, if Clouser is correct that a scientist will try to explain everything in terms of what she thinks are the self-existent beings, then will not the theistic scientist attempt to explain everything in terms of his divinity, viz., God? If this is so, then in what sense is the theist different from the atheist? In what sense is the theist a nonreductionist?

Now, Clouser might claim that there are crucial differences between the two cases—e.g., the atheist's divinities are "located within the universe" (see p. 9). But, what is it about a thing's being located outside the universe that makes explanation in terms of that thing nonreductionist? Or is it that we cannot explain facts about the universe in terms of something that is not in the universe? And, if so, why not? In general, it would be helpful to have the notion of being "located within the universe" spelled out more precisely. "Located within the universe" cannot mean "in space and time," because numbers, sets, and sense perceptions are not in space and time, but Clouser clearly thinks of them as located in the universe. Similarly, it will not do to say that a thing is located in the universe if it is causally connected to things in space and time, because that would arguably entail that God is in the universe, but numbers are not. Finally, we cannot define the universe to be the collection of things that are dependent on something else, or created, because then

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on Clouser's view, even the atheist's divinities would be (according to her belief system) outside the universe.²

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Second, it would be interesting to consider Clouser's proposal in light of the distinction between the content of a scientific theory and an interpretation of that theory. For example, it is standard among philosophers of science to distinguish between quantum mechanics (as a recipe for deriving predictions about the outcomes of various experiments) and some interpretation of quantum mechanics—

say, Bohmian mechanics or Everett's "many worlds" interpretation. While there seems to be little question that everyone should accept quantum mechanics as approximately true, the theist will justifiably think that some attempts to interpret quantum mechanics are motivated by a confused idea about the aim and scope of physical theory. For example, the Everett interpretation has sometimes been motivated by the idea that fundamental physics needs to "explain" the emergence of consciousness.³

Finally, Clouser claims that "there is no good reason to retain the reductionist strategy for theories" (p. 13). However, this claim is too strong. The reductionist strategy has been, and continues to be, extremely fruitful in the development of physics—witness the enormous success of the kinetic theory of gases, or of the standard model of particle physics. Indeed, it could be positively harmful to the interaction between religion and science if theists attempted to develop some special sort of "nonreductionist physics." But even if reductionism might be a helpful strategy within a particular science, Clouser has given compelling grounds for suspicion of attempts to globalize this strategy. ☒

Notes

¹Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

²Perhaps Clouser would use Dooyeweerd's notion of "modal aspects" to make the appropriate distinction: viz., a divinity is "located in the universe" if it is qualified by some aspect.

³See, e.g., D. Deutsch, *The Fabric of Reality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

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