

Dialogue: Response

On Reducing Nearly Everything to Reductionism

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Let me begin by endorsing my friend Roy Clouser's commitment to "thick" conceptions of science/religion engagement. That seems right, and I am with him there and on a variety of other points as well. However, I have reservations concerning a number of Clouser's other contentions, and in what follows will focus on some of those.

Definitions

Clouser begins with an attempt to characterize *religious belief*.¹ The core of that characterization consists of two stipulations: that to be *divine* means (minimally) to have unconditional reality, and that beliefs are *religious* in that they involve the divine in specified ways. Although I cannot pursue them all here, I have a number of reservations concerning this part of the paper.² In any case, Clouser's proposed characterizations of "divine" and "religious belief" would (as he notes) turn propositions, numbers, sets, necessary truths and other such things (as frequently conceived) into divinities, and would turn various beliefs about such things into *religious* beliefs. Clouser, however, embraces that implausibility.³ But define things how you like, I am not convinced that my mathematician friends who believe in the abstract independent existence of sets thereby hold *religious* beliefs in mathematical *divinities* in any sense of "religious" or "divinity" of interest to science/religion discussions.

Metaphysics, Philosophy of Science and Science

Terminology aside, Clouser contends that (a) every scientific theory implicitly presupposes some explanatorily ultimate independent existent (divinity), that (b) every such divinity-presupposition *regulates* every scientific theory generated under its auspices (by setting parameters for the nature of postulates, postulated entities, explanations, explanatory strategies, etc.), and that (c) particular presuppositions concerning specific divinities uniquely and characteristically impact the content, character, and truth of the theories in question.

I am suspicious of all three. Does accepting kinetic theory of heat inevitably commit one to anything very substantive concerning what ultimately independently exists ("divinity")? Does believing that God alone independently exists generate significant parameters for chemical bonding theory? Do Richard Dawkins and Owen Gingerich really have significantly different theories concerning the type of nuclear processes occurring in our sun? Or concerning why windows break when hit by bricks? Should their theories differ here? Given an epistemological coherentism such views might appear plausible, and although I suspect that something like that underlies Clouser's intuitions here, Clouser has certainly given us no such philosophical case.

I think that Clouser is correct that deep metaphysical differences (call them what you will) *can* make substantive differences in theoretical science.⁴ But Clouser's *universalization* of such claims is a quite different question. In fact, it might even be true that taking the collection of all theories as a whole "there should be an interpretive stance for scientific theories that is unique to theism" (see p. 10). But it does not follow

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from that that *every* theory individually will have some unique theistic imprint, or that *every* theory generated under pagan divinity beliefs will inescapably be “partly false” (p. 11).

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In any case, the difficult matter—and, it seems to me to be the *real* issue of interest—is in (1) establishing whether specifically religious belief and issues in the *usual* sense⁵ are among the deep matters having potential consequences for science, and if so in (2) establishing the whats, wheres, and hows of those consequences. The mere general fact that deep metaphysical matters can have scientific theoretical consequences does not by itself, of course, tell us much of anything on either of those points—not even if one chooses to *call* some such beliefs “religious.” So what sort of relevant case does Clouser give us here?

(Real) Religious Belief and Science

The heart of Clouser’s case emerges in “A Theistic Perspective for Metaphysics and Science” (p. 11). Scripture, as Clouser reads it, teaches not only (d) that God, as sole Creator, is the only explanatorily ultimate, independently existing divinity, but also (e) that belief in God must have *universal impact*—impact even upon our most abstract theories. That, of course, fits very nicely into Clouser’s above general picture concerning “divinity” beliefs and universal theory regulation. Since belief in God is not only a divinity-belief but the only legitimate one, it will be the sole (relevant) regulative presupposition of a believer’s proper theorizing. Since that belief will impact *all* such theorizing (both as required by Scripture regarding (e) and as entailed by (b) above), every proper theory of a believer will bear the imprint of that foundation and of *only* that foundation (as ultimate). Identification of anything *other* than God as independently existing (as explanatorily ultimate, as divine) will constitute a forbidden *reductionism*—idolatry, even—so any theory bearing the imprint of

ultimate explanatory appeal to that other alleged “divinity” will itself be (in a derivative sense) idolatrous.

I have several reservations here. For instance, it is not obvious to me that the specified scriptural passages are intended to apply to, say, ballistics (contra (e)). Nor, again, is it obvious (*pace* (d)) that the belief that *the law of non-contradiction has independent existence* is reductionistic (or idolatrous). However, I will not pursue such issues now, but will turn instead to one of Clouser’s major moves.

Creation and Causation

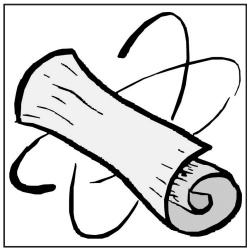
The theories of unbelievers, on Clouser’s view, will be *a fortiori* reductionistic, and any reductionistic theory “no matter what truth it hits on” is thereby “partly false.” What that means, according to Clouser, is that attempts to baptize and appropriate the theories of pagans intact (the facet of creation mistakenly identified as divine merely being declared itself to be a dependent creature of God, all other ramifications of the theoretical structure built on that reductionistic foundation being incorporated unaltered) will be illegitimate from a proper believing standpoint. Why so?

The immediate problem with these theories involving merely indirect causal dependence upon God will (on Clouser’s view) be that the appropriated theoretical entities, their very construction having been regulated by pagan divinity presuppositions, will lack the required constitutive “impact” of belief in God.⁶ The (still pagan) upper reaches of the hybrid structure will thus be implicitly inconsistent with the ramifications of belief in God, which is alleged to ultimately undergird this conceptual chimera. Thus, believers’s attempts to appropriate intact the theoretical structures generated out of nonbelieving presuppositions will produce, at best, theories of God’s indirect creation which violate the scriptural “universal impact” requirement (e), and, at worst, conceptual edifices which are flatly incoherent.

Granting his various premises (which I do not propose to do), Clouser’s intuitions might be right to this point. Unfortunately, Clouser takes a further step. Clouser insists that *any* theory involving merely indirect causal dependence upon God is unacceptable, asserting that

all entities found in the universe, along with all the kinds of properties they possess, all the laws that hold among properties of each kind, as well as causal laws, and all the precondition-relations that hold between properties of different kinds, depend not only ultimately, but directly, on God (p. 12).

But why so? It does not obviously follow from *divinity* considerations (i.e., only God existing independently and only God being explanatorily ultimate) that only God has causal capability. Surely God (being divine, omnipotent, Creator) could have directly created some dependent existent (property, law, whatever) with causal capabilities,



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While Clouser has argued that the “impacts” of belief in God must be universally present, he has given no reason for thinking that such impacts must be universally directly caused by God – that they cannot be produced by secondary causes themselves deliberately designed and created by God for exactly that purpose.

that creature then exercising that capability to cause the existence of other (even all other) creatures. Aside from God, all else would depend ultimately upon God (only God being divine), but not all would depend *directly* on God. In fact, claiming that God *could not* do that would apparently commit one to the view that there were principles (concerning the capabilities of omnipotence) which existed *independent* of God and beyond his control—in violation of Clouser’s claimed rejection of “reductionism” (in his sense).

Nor does Clouser’s claim seem to follow from the *universal impact* requirement. While Clouser has argued that the “impacts” of belief in God must be universally *present*, he has given no reason for thinking that such impacts must be universally *directly caused* by God—that they cannot be produced by secondary causes themselves deliberately designed and created by God for exactly that purpose. Complicating the situation is the fact that we are given few details concerning what such impact consists of and concerning how regulation works.

Let us suppose that regulation operates by constraining presuppositions, or conceptions, or possibilities. If the directly divinely created creatures (entities, properties, laws) reflect those constraints not only in themselves but in their causal capabilities, then whatever they in turn cause will presumably fall within bounds also reflecting those constraints—i.e., the impact is passed on. Or suppose that rather than constraint, impact (in theoretical matters) involves an implicit commitment (somehow imprinted or melded into the theory) to some specific proposed divinity. We have been given no reason to think that this component—if it really is *inextricable* from all aspects of the theory—does not flow through the implications of the theory as well. And if it is instead *extractable* from the theory, then in what sense is it *not* a theoretically inert “fifth wheel” of the sort Clouser decries?⁷ (My *suspicion*, again, is that there is an epistemological coherentism lurking in the depths here, but I will not pursue that.⁸)

Conclusion

It seems to me, then, that some of Clouser’s assumptions are shaky, that aspects of his philosophy of science are highly questionable, and that some of his major inferential

moves are suspect. Furthermore, we have been given little detail concerning the specifics of regulative functioning, concerning exactly how theories carry the “impact” of belief in God, and concerning exactly what the sort of view Clouser has in mind really comes to. Only if Scripture intends to teach that belief in God is undetachably relevant to all theory, only if unbelief so affects the scientific theories of unbelievers that such theories are all “partly false,” only if God did not or could not create dependent beings with causal capacities—only if all of those are true (and they are far from obvious)—has Clouser given us reason to think that we need the sort of view he has in mind (whatever that view would look like in detail) much less that the specific candidate view he refers us to elsewhere is a superior, adequate, or even plausible exemplar of the type. ☘

Notes

¹Discussion in this area constitutes about three quarters of the paper.

²For instance, Clouser’s “god rule” requires that requisite beliefs about a god be classified as *religious* beliefs, his definition entails that a belief is religious only if it concerns something divine, and yet Clouser cites examples he claims to be of religions involving gods who are not divine. Beliefs about such *gods* would be religious (“god rule”), but would apparently not involve *divinity* in the ways stipulated by the definition of “religious belief.” I also think that Clouser sometimes gives his own peculiar definition to a term, then simply attributes *that* meaning to anyone who uses that term.

³“What is shown instead is that beliefs about what has divine status play an important role in theories ...” [his emphasis], p. 6.

⁴Many (perhaps most) philosophers of science have accepted that sort of position for decades.

⁵I take that sense to involve the divide between metaphysical naturalism and nonnaturalism, between theism and nontheism, etc.

⁶Indeed, what we might call their “impact sites” will be filled by paganly-shaped impacts from the mistakenly identified “divinities,” preventing the right sort of impacts from gaining any traction.

⁷Despite Clouser’s suggestion that the nonreductionism just is the denial that anything other than God is divine, the “impact” will have to be more than an implicitly embedded insistence that the other things in question are really just creatures, only God being divine. Were that all it came to, the “partly false” part of a pagan theory could be stripped off and the “what truth it hits on” part be preserved and attributed to God’s creating, thus avoiding reductionism. Clouser, however, emphatically rejects that move, so *something* else must be operating here.

⁸I also suspect that there is some epistemology/ontology slippage occurring in the vicinity, but I will not press the issue.