

## Book Reviews

Scruton ventures into an analysis of the nature of the political, a critique of utilitarianism (“moral arithmetic”), and the sacred, but space prevents me from considering these. Instead, let me close by turning to his engaging, Kantian-inspired critique of pornography. I turn to this topic chiefly for the way in which Scruton’s analysis touches upon some of the important themes of the book, namely the emergence of the self and how this is related to the ethical dimension. Scruton makes the interesting point that porn depicts such a depersonalized space in which arousal and desire occur that observers are encouraged to regard themselves as if they were disengaged automatons, that is, non-selves engaged in using the other as a kind of apparatus. With porn, human agency and intimacy is banished since there is, in a sense, no “I” or “You” in relation, only “It.”

The real evil of porn lies not in its portrayal of other people as sexual objects but in the radical decentering that it effects in the sexual feelings of the observer. It prizes sexual excitement free from the I-You relation and directs it to a nameless scene of mutual arousal, in which arousal too is depersonalized, as though it were a physical condition and not an expression of the self. This decentering of arousal and desire makes them into things that *happen* to me, occurring under the harsh light of a voyeuristic torch instead of being part of what I am to you and you to me, in the moment of intimacy. (p. 74)

I do not know if this is the best book on the topic, but, in his many books, Scruton has surely done us a service in helping us to see the vital role that philosophy and the humanities must play in a world increasingly given over to the conviction that only the quantifiable is real, only the measurable is important. I recommend this book for undergraduate libraries in the humanities.

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**THE ASHTRAY (OR THE MAN WHO DENIED REALITY)** by Errol Morris. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018. xii–207 pages plus cast of characters, bibliography, and index. Hardcover; \$30.00. ISBN: 9780226922683.

Perhaps you long have had your fill of reading Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [SSR] (University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1st edition) or one of the later three editions, as well as books or articles by his many philosophical and historical critics. *The Ashtray* by Errol Morris, the illustrious filmmaker and creator of such classics of documentary investigation as *The Thin Blue Line* and *The Fog of War*, provides an account that may reawaken your interest. This book revives an argument that Morris

had with the historian and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn in 1972. And what a combative revival it is—complete with personal anecdotes, illustrations, film references, and interviews with philosophers and scientists. This book recalls a formative event: the tossing of an ashtray filled with cigarette butts and ash at a belligerent graduate student in the hallowed halls of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey—the event that led to Morris’s expulsion from Princeton University and ended his intended study of the history of science. One could question: Should we even attempt to revive the past? Morris clearly thinks it is imperative that we do. Is it time, after almost half a century, for a student to take revenge on his former professor? Morris is not obtuse. He intends to launch a personal “vendetta” (p. 3, fn. 5). But why (the ashtray aside)?

In SSR, Kuhn outlined a revolutionary model of scientific change and examined the role of the scientific community in preventing and then accepting change. Kuhn’s conception of scientific change, occurring through revolutions, undermined (or at least questioned) the traditional scientific goal of finding “truth” in nature. The picture Kuhn presents is one in which exemplary achievements yield a family of techniques constituting a paradigm which, in the course of its extension, proves appropriate for solving certain problems or puzzles.

A paradigm is not specifiable as a list of theoretical propositions or methodological rules; it is not developed by logical deduction from premises. Rather, the exemplar is learned as a model problem solution and is applied by analogy to what are judged as similar phenomena. To the extent that the problems presented by new phenomena are solved, the paradigm continues to be adhered to, expanding and modifying its range as time goes on. This is what Kuhn calls normal science. As exemplary problem solutions, paradigms are learned as ways of seeing and doing. Quite a lot of the process of scientific education, in Kuhn’s view, consists of imparting unarticulated skills and interpretive dispositions. The required perceptual and motor abilities that apprentice scientists must learn cannot be fully spelled out as a set of rules.

Clearly there are circularities in Kuhn: “A paradigm is what members of the scientific community share, and conversely a scientific community consists of men [people] who share a paradigm” (SSR, 1970 edition, p. 176). The circularity could be avoided, he suggested, if the investigation were to begin with a discussion of the community structure of science. In his effort to explain a community’s consideration of a paradigm shift or conversion, Kuhn appealed to

certain extra-scientific factors (or arbitrary elements), particularly the role of psychological factors. This appeal to subjective elements opened the door to an array of other factors: sociological, economic, political, feminist, and religious (worldview).

For Morris, Kuhn's appeal to these subjective factors is an assault on truth and progress, and ultimately leads to a "denial of reality." Kuhn questioned how language attaches to the world and challenged the nature of truth, reference, realism, and progress. For Morris, Kuhn is an avatar of post-modernism. Kuhn is one who advocates "that truth cannot be anything like correspondence to reality." With reference to the recent appeal of "alternative facts," Morris adds, "This book, I hope, will serve as an antidote to those poisonous views" (p. 3, fn. 5).

Morris spells out his own frame of reference: "For me, truth is about the relation between language and the world, a correspondence idea of truth." Other theories of truth such as coherence theories "are of little or no interest to me" (p. 4). Three areas of dispute are central to Morris's account: (1) the character of paradigm change; (2) the question of incommensurability; and (3) the affirmation or denial of reality. In short, Morris argues, Kuhn characterizes paradigm change as irrational, believes communication between those holding different paradigms is impossible, and denies reality.

*The Ashtray* is a potpourri of Morris's encounters with other scholars. Morris appeals to scholars who affirm his general position, such as Saul Kripke and Steven Weinberg. He enters into dialogue with Stanley Cavell, Noam Chomsky, Hilary Putnam, among others, attempting to understand their reading of Kuhn. One quickly notices that Morris is extremely selective. There is not a hint of recent work by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger or pragmatic thinkers such as Joseph Rouse, Richard Rorty, or Philip Kitcher. In a way, Morris is stuck in the past, attempting, it seems, to resurrect the arguments of the day when he was a graduate student. He is also wedded to an extremely one-sided reading of Kuhn. Kuhn clearly does not deny reality. Puzzle-solving would make no sense if there were not a reality that pushes back. And Kuhn does, in fact, hold to a notion of truth. In his Rothschild lecture (Nov. 19, 1991), Kuhn states:

[If] the notion of truth has a role to play in scientific development, which I shall ... argue that it does, then truth cannot be anything quite like correspondence to reality. (*The Trouble with the Historical Philosophy of Science* [Harvard University Press, 1992], p. 14)

If Morris's reading of Kuhn's SSR (a "postmodern bible," p. 20) is indeed accurate – namely that it leads

to relativism and a denial of reality – then this could raise a pressing issue for evangelical Christians. As the philosopher James K. A. Smith expresses it in his book *Who's Afraid of Relativism?* (Baker Academic, 2014):

If all our knowledge is contingent, social, dependent, and relative, then isn't God contingent, a product of our creative impulses ... Doesn't Christian faith require that our claims about God "correspond" to the reality of God? (p. 101) [Smith denies that it does, in the sense of a correspondence theory of truth.]

For anyone wanting to relive some of the philosophical arguments from the recent past, see how one's life work could be evaluated, judged, even sabotaged, by a succeeding generation, read this book. *The Ashtray* does provide a challenge. Clearly a naïve realism is no longer viable, but what should take its place? We need, it seems, a richer and more expansive view of truth that encompasses the notion of "factual truth" so dear to the natural sciences, but which is much broader in scope and includes understanding truth as *being true*, as a way of life. Kuhn was aware of that, as he clarifies in *The Road Since Structure* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), "I wasn't saying that I want to know what is true; I was saying I want to know what it is to *be true*. And that's not something that one gets from physics" (p. 278).

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## SCIENCE AND RELIGION

**A RECKLESS GOD? Currents and Challenges in the Christian Conversation with Science** by Roland Ashby, Chris Mulherin, John Pilbrow, and Stephen Ames, eds. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019. 338 pages. Paperback; \$37.00. ISBN: 9781532687389.

How do Christians in science around the world think about science and faith? What issues do they find important and why? What strategies do they use to address those issues? How do regional and local perspectives help shape the conversation? *A Reckless God? Currents and Challenges in the Christian Conversation with Science* edited by Roland Ashby, Chris Mulherin, John Pilbrow, and Stephen Ames does not seek to answer these questions—at least not for the entire world. Instead, it seeks to provide a window into the science-faith conversation that has been taking place through the Institute for the Study of Christianity in an Age of Science and Technology (ISCAST), the main organization for Christians in the sciences in Australia. Indeed, it is the first book in the ISCAST Nexus series, published in Australia