

Is Christian Science Possible?

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Part I: The Question

At first glance, the answer to my title question seems as obvious and as easy as the answers to questions about the possibility of Christian mathematics, Christian physics, Christian chemistry, and even Christian biology. The common sense answer to all these questions is simply — NO! In fact, one might reasonably argue that the answer to the more general title query logically follows from the answers to the other more specific questions about the parts or divisions of “science(1)”¹ in the same way that what is true of the parts of a thing is also true of the whole thing itself. Yet, I do not think either that the common sense answers to any of the questions raised above are correct or that the argument given above is sound.

It is not the case that the argument is unsound, however, because it is an instance of the fallacy of composition. Rather, it is unsound because the obvious answers to the more specific questions are mistaken. It is also not the case that the answers are mistaken because Christians know that $3=1$, or that God/Love makes the world go round, or that some elements in addition to hydrogen and oxygen combine to make water. Rather, the answers are wrong because they are incomplete. And they are incomplete because, for Christians, they fail to recognize the special role of God in both the knower and the thing known, and, as a result, for scientists, they fail to account for all of the relevant data (regardless of whether or not scientists have the tools for such an investigation). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explain just why this is the case. Moreover, it will argue that the answer to my title query is YES, precisely because Christian “science(1)” is necessary.

Part II: The Context

Let me begin with a brief intellectual biography. I have, for some time now, been wrestling with questions about the nature and possibility of Christian philosophy. More specifically, I have been investigating various theological accounts of the effects of grace on the cognitive powers of human knowers. In short, I have been exploring the philosophical consequences of believing or maintaining the Christian doctrine of the theological virtues, while simultaneously examining the nature of human knowing from the point of view of philosophy. While I have not arrived at a complete, detailed, and satisfying solution to these rather complex questions, I have formulated a general theory about the effects of grace on the human cognitive apparatus. In this paper I will be applying the features of my general theory to the specific case of the natural sciences.

Part III: Western Intellectual History

The old adage that hindsight is 20/20 is usually understood to mean that after an event one knows or understands what should have been done or what should have happened. I wonder, however, if that ever really is the case. Even the most superficial acquaintance with history in general (i.e., the recent controversy over the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian, or the controversy over Columbus — a good guy or a bad guy?) and the history of any discipline in particular (i.e., disputes about the very nature of science, or disputes about whether Aquinas was a good Aristotelian or a closet Neo-Platonist) reveals that we usually do not understand what has happened or, at least, cannot agree about what has happened. With that sentiment in mind, I will begin outlining my theory about the effects of grace on our cognitive apparatus by first situating it within a version of the history of ideas or, more exactly, one version of the human attempt to understand reality.

One plausible account² of the Western attempt to understand reality begins by noting that our first efforts to understand and explain the universe can be found in the mythology of classical antiquity. The ancient Greeks, including Homer and Hesiod, tried to explain the natural events of the ordinary world of experience by appealing to supernatural or divine causes. In their early versions of the truth about reality, one could understand ordinary events like the weather by recognizing the hands of the gods. This account of the physical world, however, was soon criticized by thinkers with a more empirical frame of mind.

Thales (WATER) and other Pre-socratic natural philosophers rejected the accounts of their predecessors and insisted on natural explanations of natural events. Thinkers such as Anaximenes (AIR), Heraclitus (FIRE), Empedocles (4 ELEMENTS), Leucippus and Democritus (ATOMS), offered reasoned and empirically verifiable explanations of the world of experience. In fact, they seem to have performed some rudimentary experiments to support their accounts (i.e., Anaximenes is said to have discovered the principles of rarefaction and condensation by blowing into his hand with his lips open and then pursed). However, their inability to arrive at any consensus on the ultimate principles of reality soon led to criticism by the Sophists.

The Sophists reacted against the cosmological preoccupation of their predecessors, and were concerned with the practical affairs of ordinary life. They espoused a form of pragmatic relativism about the “Ultimate Truth,” and were characteristically suspicious and skeptical about claims of “Absolute Knowledge.” Thinkers like Gorgias and Protagoras were itinerant teachers of “wisdom” who offered instruction on human conduct and how to get ahead in society. Their various accounts of human excellence or virtue focused on achieving material success through the effective use of the art of rhetoric. As a group, the Sophists were generally less interested in examining claims about universal truths and objective moral laws than their predecessors. Instead, they seem to have been more interested in developing and promoting effective strategies for success in the realm of practical human affairs. It was their advocacy of skepticism and relativism, however, that brought them into direct conflict with Socrates.

Socrates responded to the objections and challenges of the Sophists in two ways. First, he agreed with their rejection of the cosmological speculation of the Pre-Socratic natural

philosophers (cf. Plato's Apology). Second, however, he rejected their version of "wisdom." While simultaneously affirming their humanistic turn in the pursuit of the truth about reality, Socrates also vigorously attacked their versions of philosophy and the good human life. In place of their characteristic ethical relativism and epistemic skepticism and their insistence on the importance of material success (i.e., money, power, pleasure, fame, etc.), Socrates advocated care of the soul and the examination of one's life as the point and purpose of philosophy. He believed that the true meaning of existence was to be found in the rewards of the afterlife (cf. Plato's Phaedo, Republic, and Gorgias), which not only were reported in the mysterious writings of the poets and theologians of the past (i. e., Homer and Hesiod), but also were the object of his own "great hope." In fact, his interest in and focus on the knowledge and existence of the other-worldly elements of reality had a lasting effect on his student Plato, who both reports the words and deeds of his teacher, and also later constructs a complete philosophy — a metaphysics, an epistemology, and an ethical theory — with a clear preference for the timeless, eternal, and unchanging existence of the world of forms in opposition to the temporal, material, and changing world of sense. Plato himself, however, was unable to convince his student Aristotle of the soundness of his account, and as a result Aristotle tended to focus almost exclusively on the empirical world of experience as the locus of true being and reality (cf. Aristotle's Physics, On the Soul, Ethics, Politics, On the Parts of Animals, On the Senses and Sensible Things, etc.).

The successors of Plato and Aristotle, including the Epicureans, Stoics, Skeptics/Academics and Neo-Platonists, tended to focus on various parts of their predecessors' views. Some (i.e., the Epicureans, Skeptics, and the Stoics to some extent) tended to highlight the importance and significance of the world of sensible experience, while others (i.e., some Stoics and the Neo-Platonists, especially Plotinus and Porphyry) directed their attention to the reality of the world beyond the flux of material beings. This latter group made a considerable impact upon the emerging Christian theology/philosophy of the era.

As a whole, early Christian theologians and philosophers (i.e., Augustine, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus Erigena, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas) seem to have self-consciously attempted to bridge the "gap" between the two worlds. On the one hand, their scripturally rooted understanding of the goodness of the created natural world as well as their acceptance of the fact of Christ's incarnation seem to underline the genuine metaphysical value of the material world. On the other hand, their interest and belief in the Second Coming of Christ and the future Kingdom of God seem to highlight rather clearly the intrinsic superiority of the spiritual world. In fact, in many ways, the subsequent intellectual history of the Christian West can be seen as an unfolding of the tension and struggle between focusing on the goodness of the natural world of sense experience, and simultaneously aspiring to the supernatural world of the spirit beyond or above it. This dynamic tension continued up to the time of the Renaissance with its subsequent separation of science and theology into both academic and professional activities. Moreover, the discussion of the exact nature of the relationship between these two now separate but historically once related disciplines continues to our own times. It

is the clarification of the features of this relationship that occasions both this paper and our seminar.

The point of this necessarily brief and rather sketchy account of Western intellectual history is simply to provide some important historical evidence for the claim that while theology and “science(2)” are two different ways of explaining or accounting for the data of ordinary experience, their differences in methodology are not adequately or correctly captured by the traditional faith vs. reason distinction (cf. Kenneth Kemp’s paper, “The Virtue of Faith in Theology, Natural Science, & Philosophy”), but rather by a physical/empirical vs. a non-physical/non-empirical approach to the phenomena and their explanation. In other words, the crucial epistemic difference between theological and scientific accounts of reality is the extent to which each is ready and willing to explain ordinary natural events by appealing to supernatural (i.e., non-empirical) causes and explanations.

As I see it, the history of the Western attempt to understand and explain the ultimate nature of reality (whether by myths, natural philosophy, theology, experimental philosophy, or “science(2)”) centers around a dynamic tension between two fundamentally opposed versions of that story. On the one hand, there is the mystical, other-worldly tendency to account for the ordinary events of nature by appealing to some extra-ordinary or supernatural cause or causes. At the same time, on the other hand, there is an equally vigorous, empirical, common sense tendency to explain the course of nature by appealing, at least initially, to obvious natural causes of ordinary events. Christians have traditionally believed, however, that the ultimate truth of the matter lies somewhere in the middle (that is, that the most complete and true account of reality (i. e., “science(1)”) involves both empirical, scientific explanations (i. e., “science(2)”) from below, and inspired, theological understanding from above).

One crucial feature of just how this middle version accounts for ordinary natural events can be seen in its explanation of the role of the theological virtues in understanding reality. It is to one such explanation that I now direct my attention.

Part IV: The Theological Virtues

In order to understand my answer to the title query more fully it is important to recall the traditional account of the theological virtues. Although a complete and detailed account of these virtues is beyond the scope of this paper, I think that a simple review of one influential version of them will be sufficient for my purposes.

For those who are unfamiliar with Thomas Aquinas’ account of the theological virtues, let me begin by pointing out that for Thomas there are three theological virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity or Love (Summa Theologiae, I-II, Q. 62, A. 3). Now according to Thomas, the theological virtues are supernatural virtues that direct the human person to supernatural happiness in the same way that our natural inclinations direct us to our natural end. Thomas points out, following Aristotle, that the natural inclinations do this in two ways:

1. Through the reason or intellect which contains the universal first principles that are known to us by the natural light of the intellect and are the basis from which reason proceeds in both speculative and practical matters.
2. Through a right will that tends naturally to the good as defined by reason.

Thomas quickly adds, however, that both of these natural inclinations are inadequate to attain supernatural happiness — and he refers us to 1 Corinthians (“Eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has it entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those who love him.”) for support of his claim. And then he concludes that some supernatural addition to both the intellect and will is necessary to direct us to our supernatural end.

First, Thomas asserts that certain supernatural principles are added to the believer’s intellect which are received by divine light and these are the objects of belief with which FAITH is concerned. Second, the will is directed to its supernatural end — both as to the movement of its intention towards something that is possible to attain (this pertains to HOPE), and as to a certain spiritual union which transforms the will to that end (this takes place through CHARITY). Thomas also maintains that these theological virtues are infused in us by God alone, and that these virtues are not made known to us, save by divine revelation, contained in Holy Scripture. In other words, we cannot even KNOW about them unless we accept the revelation, and we cannot accept the revelation unless we have the help of DIVINE GRACE. In short, they cannot be obtained by human reason or practice and are entirely dependent on the free gift of God.

The next question for my purposes is: what effect do these virtues have on the natural operations of our intellectual and appetitive powers?

When we turn to Thomas’ account of FAITH, we discover that he thinks that because the nature of the human person depends upon a higher nature, natural apprehension is not sufficient for our completion (ST, II-II, Q. 2, A. 3). In fact, he insists that since the completion of the rational creature consists not only in what belongs to it according to its nature, but also in what is attributed to it by a certain supernatural participation of divine goodness, we cannot achieve our final end except in the way of one who learns from God as teacher. Yet Aquinas points out that this kind of learning does not make us a participant all at once, but successively, as is the way of nature. And so Thomas concludes that every such learner must BELIEVE, so that he might come to complete KNOWLEDGE, as even the Philosopher (i.e., Aristotle) says, that the learner ought to BELIEVE (ST, II-II, Q. 2, A. 3). In fact, Thomas goes even further and declares that it is necessary for human beings to accept “IN THE WAY OF FAITH” (ST, II-II, Q. 2, A. 4) not only the things that are ABOVE REASON, but also the THINGS THAT CAN BE KNOWN BY REASON. And this for three reasons:

1. So that human beings might come more quickly to the apprehension of divine truth.
2. So that the apprehension of God be more common.
3. On account of certainty.

In each of these reasons, Thomas clearly recognizes the limitations of unaided or NATURAL human reason and its ability to arrive at truth. In fact, Thomas insists that the investigation of NATURAL reason DOES NOT SUFFICE to humankind for the apprehension even of the divine things that CAN BE SHOWN BY REASON (ALONE) (ST, II-II, Q. 2, A. 4, ad. 1). It should not be surprising, then, that when we turn to his theory of knowledge, it is quite clear for Thomas that we cannot KNOW even natural things without the help of divine assistance. In fact, the recent Catechism of the Catholic Church echoes Thomas' thoughts:

This is why man stands in need of being enlightened by God's revelation, not only about those things that exceed his understanding, but also "about those religious and moral truths which of themselves are not beyond the grasp of human reason, so that even in the present condition of the human race, they can be known by all men with ease, with firm certainty and with no admixture of error." (p. 16, #38)

Part V: A Theory of Knowledge

For the purposes of this paper I am assuming without argument that something close to Aquinas' theory of knowledge is a true and accurate account of human knowing (a full defense of this claim is well beyond the scope of this paper!). If that is not the case, then at least something like his version of epistemology has been traditionally accepted by both non-Christian philosophers and many Christian thinkers as an arguably adequate explanation of the matter (i.e., Aristotle, Augustine, Boethius, Bonaventure, Locke, and Lonergan). I will not rehearse Thomas' complete theory of knowledge, but will only indicate briefly the essential features needed to support my thesis, that the most complete and true account of reality (i.e., "science(1)") involves both empirical, scientific explanations (i.e., "science(2)") from below, and inspired, theological understanding from above.

For those who are unfamiliar with Aquinas' epistemology or theory of knowledge, I hope my outline is enough to convince you of my main point: that Thomas in particular and Christians in general think that we cannot ultimately know without divine assistance. Thomas' account consists of the following claims:

1. Natural knowledge begins with a material thing and sensation.
2. The sensible image is then transferred to the internal senses.
3. The internal senses produce a phantasm.
4. The Agent Intellect abstracts the intelligible species from the phantasm.
5. The Passive Intellect receives the abstracted form and produces the concept — i.e., the material object is known.

Obviously, Thomas' theory is far more complex and complicated than my summary of it, but the key point for my purpose is step #4 — the activity of the Agent Intellect. According to a tradition of Christian thinkers, including Augustine, Aquinas, and Lonergan, the Agent Intellect is not only something in the soul, but it is also "a participation in the higher intellect — which according to the teaching of the faith is God

himself” (ST, I, Q. 79, A.3-4). In other words, realist epistemologists like Aquinas think that the human intellect understands by participating in the divine light or deriving its intellectual light from God. Moreover, this participation occurs not only during the normal and ordinary use of our cognitive faculties, but also, and most especially, when we operate under the influence of the infused grace of the theological virtues.

Now if, as this tradition believes, this is true of the intellect in its natural state, then exactly what kind of help does God provide for the believer through GRACE and FAITH? And further, what effect does this added assistance have on the natural power of knowing? In short, what happens to our ordinary cognitive faculties if we take this version of epistemology and the accompanying theory of the theological virtues seriously?

Part VI: Consequences

If we consider the consequences of the purported effect of the theological virtues on our natural cognitive faculties, I think it is clear, that Christian theology is generally committed to the notion that some kind of divine assistance is required in order to understand and achieve a complete account of reality (i.e., “science(1)”). In fact, when we apply this theological understanding of epistemology to the enterprise of human “science(2),” it seems clear that, for Christians, the best hope for a genuine human scientific account of reality is to be found in the work of truly Christian scientists. In other words, I submit that according to traditional Christian thinking about the ultimate nature and account of reality:

P1: If “science(1)” is sought by scientists, then scientists must be believers (i.e., they must receive the graces necessary to understand reality).

P2: “Science(1)” is what is sought by scientists (at least insofar as “science(2)” is part of “science(1)”).

C: Scientists must be believers.

What this argument means with respect to the answer to my title question is that Christian “science(1)” is possible, precisely because, for at least one version of the Western Christian theological tradition, it is necessary to achieve the purported end of “science(1)” (i.e., the ultimate explanation of reality) — on the assumption that “science(1)” itself can be and is about the ultimate explanation of reality.

In order to reject this valid modus ponens argument one must deny either one or both of its premises. Those who would deny P2 must reject the notion that scientists are seeking the ultimate explanation of reality. They could do this in one of two ways. First, they might simply assert that such an explanation is impossible. For that claim they would need an argument to counter the explicit claims and practices of those traditionally understood by themselves and others to be scientists. Second, they might say that “science(1)” is not about any ultimate explanation or understanding of reality but merely is an exercise in constructing empirically adequate accounts of the data of experience. To this response one might reasonably ask: why or for what end? Is the construction of

empirically adequate accounts of reality just a nice way to spend some time? Or are such accounts just a single moment of a more comprehensive “wisdom,” as traditionally conceived, about the world of experience? At least some historical evidence and practices seem to support an affirmative response to the latter question.

Those who would deny P1 must reject the connection between the scientific search for an ultimate explanation and the need for belief and divine assistance. They might do this in a number of ways. First, they might simply reject the antecedent as impossible, either in itself or for us. Second, assuming that they think that such an enterprise as discovering an ultimate explanation is in fact possible, they might deny our ability to achieve it, or deny that divine assistance is required to achieve it, or simply deny that God exists at all. In short, they might simply say that our human cognitive faculties are so weak and limited in power that an ultimate explanation is impossible because it is beyond our capability. They might also deny the account of the theological virtues presented earlier in the paper, and instead insist with the Pelagians that we can do it on our own. Finally, they might reject theology itself as the study of a non-existent being.

I do not think that these are easy objections to respond to, and I am well aware that almost all of them have been seriously maintained at one time or another in the history of Western thought. However, I do believe that at least one strand of the Western Christian theological tradition possesses the wherewithal to respond to these objections. While such responses are beyond the scope of this paper, my own faith in that tradition’s capacity to provide reasonable responses as well as the fact that an ever-increasing number of contemporary scientists are sympathetic and open to dialogue with theology indicates to me a growing recognition on the part of “science(2)” itself of its own limitations and incompleteness. It is precisely this incompleteness that Christian theology promises to fulfill. It is for this very reason that I think that the answer to the title question is definitely YES!

Notes:

1. “Science” means different things to different people. In this paper I will make use of two distinct but related senses of the term:

- The first, and primary, sense of the term is derived from its traditional etymological meaning — “science(1)” means knowledge about reality. In this sense it refers to the earliest pursuit of a comprehensive account of reality by ancient theologians and philosophers. It also refers to an undifferentiated whole of knowledge.

- The second, derivative, sense refers to the modern conception of science as the distinct disciplines and methodologies that have independently developed since the Renaissance. In this sense, “science(2)” refers to physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and the various specific parts of human knowledge. The title question refers to “science(1)”.

2. This version has been influenced by my reading of various works in the history of philosophy including: Kirk & Raven, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, Robinson,

Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy, Wheelwright, The Presocratics, Lloyd, Early Greek Science: Thales to Aristotle, and Greek Science After Aristotle.