Theology and Ontological Minimalism

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Abstract

In this essay I want to discuss how an ontological minimalist can make sense of theological propositions (or conceived declarative sentences, as I understand them). In particular, I want to articulate a way to accommodate theological theses in a framework with a very low tolerance for hypostatization. My main goal is twofold: i) to provide an account (a way) to down-to-earth theists cohere their beliefs about God and their every-day naturalistic ones, and ii) to provide a framework by which theological argumentation is not just attitudinal animosity or kinship. I will not argue for the epistemic appropriateness of theism or ontological minimalism. And although my case is abundant in Christian themes, it is not my aim to argue for the Christian God or, more generally, for monotheism. The non-Christian religious down-to-earth reader may co-opt some of my philosophical solutions for him or herself. I will proceed in a dialectical form, more abundant in details and clarifications, but in the end I will summarize the main points.

Keywords: semantics of theological technolects, ontological status of religious canons, hermeneutics, ontological minimalism
Development

«Systematic theology claims to represent knowledge concerning alleged beings of a supernatural order. A claim of this kind must be examined according to the same rigorous standards as any other claim of knowledge. […] this examination has clearly shown that traditional theology is […] entirely out of line with the scientific way of thinking in the present century. Any system of traditional theological dogmas can usually be interpreted in many different ways. If they are taken in a direct and literal sense […] based on a literal interpretation of statements in the Bible […] then most of the dogmas are refuted by the results of science. If, on the other hand, […] a refined reformulation is accepted which puts theological questions outside the scope of the scientific method, then the dogmas have the same character as statements of traditional metaphysics. […] I came in my philosophical development first to the insight that the main statements of traditional metaphysics are outside the realm of science and irrelevant for scientific knowledge, and later to the more radical conviction that they are devoid of any cognitive content. Since that time I have been convinced that the same holds for most of the statements of con-

1. In regard to notation, “….” is used in made-up sentences or when I’m pointing to the linguistic expression itself, and «….» is used in quotations.
Problematization

In my experience with philosophical texts, Carnap was surely the one author who best developed some of my pre-analytic opinions, i.e. opinions without any reasoned backup. Those opinions could be classified as scientistic. The efficacy of contemporary scientific methods is impressive. In my view, if a set of explanations and descriptions facilitates success in precise prediction of future states or events and goal-oriented manipulation of oneself or the surrounding environment (including other organisms), it is very plausible to me that those explanations and descriptions are about reality and not simply what one thinks reality is.

One of the requirements of this methodology is to operationalize the concepts used in one’s scientific work. This requirement puts a tremendous constraint on hypostatization tendencies. It works like a sieve for extravagant imagination. I guess it was partly this kind of methodological demands, present in scientific training, which moved Carnap towards his theses about traditional philosophy. The most innovative one was non-cognitivism. A total rejection of ethics and metaphysics as fields of enquiry devoid of sense (or meaning). Sentences customarily classified as “moral” and others as “metaphysical” were taken to be sophisticated expressions of attitudes and emotions by intelligent and competent language users. Linguistic expressions which have an appearance of stating something about the world but under scrutiny

2. From scientism. A set of ideas under the credo «that science is our best guide to the nature of reality. Its methods and its findings are our best account of the nature of reality.» Extracted from an interview with Alex Rosenberg in whyarewehere.tv.

3. According to Murray & Sell, Laboratory Experiments in the Social Sciences 2nd ed., 255, 266: «An operationalization is the translation of a theoretical variable into procedures designed to give information about its levels. I treat ‘operationalization,’ ‘operational definition,’ ‘measure,’ ‘indicator,’ and ‘observable’ as close notions. Operationalizations tie theoretical ideas to evidence.» «Operationalizations are a researcher’s translation of theoretical variables into procedures that render them observable.» According to Coronas & Oliva, Encyclopedia of Human Resources Information Systems, 101: «The process of converting concepts into specific observable indicators that can be measured. Operationalization is a key component of the scientific method as it ensures the reproducibility of (results of) experiments.»
manifest nothing other than a preference or a gut-instinctual valuation.

I can see, in the face of contemporary biologically based social sciences, how this non-cognitivist hypothesis can be empirically grounded and argued for, but in my present state of philosophical development, I cannot say the same for metaphysics. How, for instance, can an animalist theory of personal identity or a platonic theory of numbers be presented by a set of sentences that are no more than the emotive ramblings of an intelligent language user? I can read and hear about the theory and understand it. I don’t need to make any efforts to change my personality traits (like agreeableness and openness) or elicit any emotions to reject or accept the whole theory or individual propositions of it.

And the same can be said for theology. I don’t need to build myself up into a proper sensitive state to accept or reject theoretical theses from Catholics, Unitarians, Muslims or Hindus. So it seems there must be something theoretical underlying theological assertions. And there is, although not in the way theologians understand their field of inquiry, or would like their field of inquiry to be about. Traditional theologians look at theology the same way modern scientists look at their scientific fields of enquiry, viz. they look at their enterprise as an effort to bring reality into the intellectual gaze with maximum precision and generality. Their subject is different though. Theologians aim at the understanding of divinity. A theory of justification (in the soteriological sense)⁴, for instance, is related to divinity the same way a theory of bonding is to processes in matter.

It is this ontological assumption which makes ontological minimalists with a scientistic bent to think the way Carnap thinks (as it is shown in the above quotation). Because theologians understand their enterprise at the same footing as the natural scientist, and no other set of methods was so efficacious in putting reality in our control as the developments and modifications to the scientific method did, theology is doomed to lose every battle for cognitive legitimacy. There is no way to test a theory of justification, or of the Trinity or of the Decalogue’s deon-

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⁴ Soteriology is a subfield of theology in which researchers provide accounts of salvation. Christian soteriology accounts usually gravitate around the story of Christ’s sacrifice for humanity and the metaphysics of how such action operates over sin and the soul.
tic binding. No criterion, being verification, falsification or confirmation, allows a meaningful theological technolect.\(^5\) Something is wrong here. On the one hand, I don’t need any emotional gymnastics to avoid indifference to a theological proposal, on another hand, the received theology appears to be barren of theoretical significance. What is going on?

**Eureka Moments**

I’m going to introduce my solution with a piece of psychological genesis.\(^6\) Maybe the reader has heard of the Systematizing Quotient. This test measures how pervasive is the drive to find the rules and variables operating in a certain dominion of interactions. In fewer words, an impulse to find coherence, order and predictability in things. The writer of this essay is well into three standard deviations above the neurotypical mean, in its scoring system.\(^7\) That said, the tension between theism and scientistic ontological minimalism was, well, unbearable. This to say, the problem was always on the back of my head.

One day, when I was reading Charles Hodge’s first volume of *Systematic Theology*, I found the following insight: «The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain

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5. If one takes a proposition as an hypothesis about the world, one can also treat it with a form of validation. That said, verification is unworkable. By this I mean, one does not have the means to practically make it run. But let’s step back for little. By verification, one distinguishes two modes of acquiring information, viz. *a priori* and empirical. The former relates to derivations from formal systems, the latter relates to reports and elaborations based on experience. It is easy to dispense with the *a priori*, concerning theological claims, but the same doesn’t apply to the empirical. One cannot in an *absolute* manner guarantee the falsity of theological claims. Falsification, however, might help us here. One can provide conditions of falsification. And confirmation at least can give us some degree of likelihood. As Carnap put it: «If by verification is meant a definitive and final establishment of truth, then no (synthetic) sentence is ever verifiable, as we shall see. We can only confirm a sentence more and more» (“Testability and Meaning”, 420). The question is, where to begin? That is, how can one falsify a theological thesis such as the ones above mentioned? And how can one establish any degree of probability without assuming any subjective gut-feelings? To my knowledge nobody did this. Anyway, even though one cannot do this using the real world as the search basket, it is my contention one can do it using another framework. But we will pick up on that a little further.

6. The conceiving (or imaginative) counterpart of the Reichenbach context of discovery.

7. Wheelwright et al., “Predicting Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ) from the Systematizing Quotient-Revised (SQ-R) and Empathy Quotient (EQ)”. "Testability and Meaning". }
what nature teaches.»

This insight was second, though it was the one which triggered the basic ideas to work out a solution for the problem.

The first one, I found it in John Owen’s *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*. Concerning what is spiritually profitable for the Christian says Owen: «It will ruin our souls, if when we read in the Scripture, how the saints of God express their experience in faith, love, delight in God, and constant meditations on him, we grant that it was so with them, that they were good and holy men, but it is not necessary that it should be so with us. *These things are not written in the Scripture to shew what they were, but what we ought to be. All things concerning them were written for our admonition;* 1Cor.x. 11 [my italics]. And if we have not the same delight in God as they had, the same spiritual mindedness in thoughts and meditations of heavenly things, we can have no evidence that we please God as they did, or shall go to that place whither they are gone.»

Owen’s overall thesis was that the abundance of spiritual contents and their continual spring into mental existence in our thoughts, combined with an affective clunging to them (positive emotions for lawful objects of intention, negative emotions for unlawful objects of intention), were evidence of «spiritual mindedness», a frame of mind necessarily present in the elect. This evidence must be assessed and nurtured against and by scriptural revelation, respectively. It seems then God reveals what is *profitable* for humanity.

*Uses of “literal”*

So how did these two ideas worked together? In chronological order, the first one led me to think that one can make a distinction between two senses of the word “literal” – in regard to interpretation. The *popular* use of “literal” in conversations about religious canons makes these texts to be accurate reports of reality – like a science or history textbook. In this sense, there’s no difference between items like “the English Church met great resistance from the Scottish covenanters” and «in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day» (ESV, Ex. 20:11). This was the sense Carnap was talk-
The second sense of “literal” is used only in very specific contexts, viz. by people who are trying to make an adaptation of an old written story to a new media format. Questions of how close and faithfully one is going to reproduce the story arise. This can go from basic physical features to the overall direction of the narrative.

Religious canons are mostly taken in the first popular sense. This is the beforementioned traditional way theologians frame their inquiries. As I said before, the upshot is that it collides with science. Mystical and allegorical solutions, to me, are not on the table. This is the hermeneutic of the every-man-for-himself. As I see it, it is impossible, by these solutions, to establish a set of norms to govern methods, concepts and terms within a theological community. Team work and peer review go out the window. It just adds fuel to the fire when I’m trying to put it down. So, what am I going to do with the second sense? Not just yet. That would have to wait for Hodge’s contribution. But before going into that lane, there was something else Owen gave me.

Useful Fictions

My take from Owen’s idea opens conceptual space to not thinking of God’s revelation as the popular sense makes of religious canons, viz. it doesn’t need to be strict factual report. To be profitable, useful or fruitful (all words that point to the same thing I think) doesn’t equate to be descriptively factual. Take as an example folk tales such as The Three Little Pigs and The Grasshopper and the Ant. These two narratives are obvious fictions. Animals don’t talk, build houses or feel sorry for each other. However, being complete fictions doesn’t make them cognitively sterile. Myths and other types of folk tales, though not so much today, were the means par excellence to communicate life lessons, i.e. lessons about mores and practical reasoning. The two tales exemplified can be used as instantiations of prudence (a form of practical reasoning).

In the first tale, the pig who invested more time, made the most effort and planed his house, was the one who better resisted tribulation from the world, and even helped his idle careless brothers. The second one, a little harsher, makes the working forethoughtful ants fully prepared for winter, while the carpe diem grasshopper must face
the consequences of his excesses during summer time. These two stories communicate how-to knowledge. Pragmatic policies, forged in the fires of human survival, which, if followed, may take one to a long life full of years and relative comfort. I now look at the Bible in a similar fashion: a revealed fiction useful to convey life lessons. And what kind of how-to knowledge can one derive from the Christian canon? In its most general way to put it, knowledge of how to please God, i.e. what one must do, or in a Christian way to put it, how one must walk before God (Gen. 17:1) in order to please Him (1 The. 4:1).

**Performative Vs. Procedural**

Before I proceed to a couple of objections, let me draw the conceptual lines a little more precisely. This knowledge-how I’m talking about should not be understood as performative, but rather procedural. Scriptural content does not enable one to do God’s bid but instructs one on how to do it (2 Tim. 3:16). Just because a person read the instructions from a Guide-to [insert whatever activity], that doesn’t produce a successful performer. The prescriptions must be practiced over-and-over again until one can observe proper ability to perform them. So does that mean we have knowledge-that about God’s will? It seems, by these conceptualizations of knowledge, that by knowing how to please God one knows God’s prescriptions, and by knowing the latter one knows God’s will. It is God’s will that we do such-n’-such, and that such-n’-such are the instructions on how to please Him. This seems reasonable to think, but let me add a bit more of qualitative nuance. As I see it (now) the only piece of knowledge-that concerning God’s will is the demand for pleasing Him. Everything else are optimal policies on how to achieve this, i.e. the best protocolary statements to inform the performance of Soli Deo Gloria. Knowing-how, on the procedural sense, equates to being able, on demand, to adapt the instructions to various scenarios, viz. to devise strategies of action considering both the instructions and the environmental circumstances. Knowing-how, on the performative sense, equates to being able to act on those strategies.  

10. Like many other topics in philosophy, there is an ongoing discussion on how best to conceptualize phenomena we usually term as “knowledge”. A set of these phenomena concerns the relation between doings and thinkings. There are people who cannot say a single thing about performance X, they just do X. Other can perform and theorize about X (making generalizations such as “in situations of type A you do things of type B or C…” and account for exceptions such as “… unless there’s a thing of type D, because type D things do this-n’-that”). Finally, others can account for X but
The Ascertaining Objection

So much for clarification. An immediate objection in form of a question, I think, would be: “how do you test a thesis concerning the decoding of God’s instructions?”. Without burning too much coal in my cognitive machinery, my answer would be: “the same way we deal with written wills of departed beloved ones”. Of course, putting the matter in this way prevents any unworkable demands on the table. I think it is safe to say that nobody would demand asking the dead ones what they really want us to do. Between analyzing their written will and experiment with necromancers I would rather go with the first. I’m not implying here that God is dead, or atheism or deism. The take away here is that no one can communicate in such a way with God that it can obtain some kind of an answer to this problem. Again, masters in divine telepathy or mediums don’t seem to be solutions. This brings me to Hodge’s insight, but let’s wrap up with Owen first.

The What-about-the-rest Objection

Another objection would be: “what to do with the ten plagues, talking clouds, donkeys and snakes, water spontaneous generation from rocks, eternal life, glorified bodies, New Jerusalem, resurrections, and so forth? How do all these things fit into that how-to knowledge?”. These things can be viewed as illustrations, a picturesque or sensorial way, to convey useful prescriptions conducive to the pleasing of God. As I said earlier, fictitious narratives with rational and emotive agents doing this-n’-that and going here-n’-there, interacting with each other within space and time, were very efficacious in their purpose. Even today we can find people having a hard time digesting information solely on abstractions. They ask for examples and to “dumb it down”, usually taking the form of more visual analogies – I hope the reader experi-
enced this kind of requests; they are especially common when trying to explain philosophical or scientific theses. The imagery present in Scripture makes it accessible to a larger set of readers and hearers.

It can also be argued that this sensorial aspect of the Christian canon facilitates the development of proper mental schemata. Schemata which maximizes successful praxis, i.e. that shortens the gap between the acquired knowledge-how and practice. That is, to please God it is not enough being able to mentally generate possible courses of action, in each given circumstance, which would foreseeably please Him. One is required to act. If there is any connection between action and whatever is in one’s schema, and the pleasing of God requires His followers to act in a certain way, it seems plausible to suggest there are better and worse schemata, being the ones more heavily influenced by Scripture the best at their job. And now we are getting into theology. We are ready for Hodge.

We have two points leading us to my next set of contentions: iii) the need to properly analyze a text (suggested by the written will analogy) and iv) the need for proper schemata (suggested by a) the bridging between the biblical knowledge-how and practice, and b) the plausible connection between schemata and action). Hodge’s insight addresses these two points.

**Theological Data**

Concerning point iii), if the Bible is to be taken as a «store-house of facts», it is of the utmost priority to find a hermeneutic that takes the theologian to them. Before we dive into this let’s first change Hodge’s terms. Instead of talking with “facts” let’s use “data”. “Fact” is generally used in a sentence to establish the reality/existence of whatever occupies the subject position or is pointed by a suitable

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According to psychcentral.com: «A mental structure that represents an aspect of the world, and streamlines information processing by categorizing objects. [...] This mental organization system is a way of processing the complexities of reality and making them easy to understand. This system gives us the ability to respond in a situation where an item is new to us, see something in a new way/apply prior knowledge to it, or simply reconcile its existence.». 
determiner. The use of such word signals a strong ontological commitment – a level of cognitive acceptance I don’t have for numerous contentions. I understand “data” to be used mostly in scientific technolects. Its usage points to processed experience (or processed raw data). By this I mean, quantified and qualified experience. This taxonomized, catalogued, graded (and so on) experience, can be described as refined experience. Taken the words this way, I’m more willing to go with tidied experience than unveiled reality claims.

Now, what kind of surface data one can extract from the Bible? Linguistical data. Modes of research in Discourse Analysis, Lexicography, Etymology and Grammar subdisciplines (Morphology, Phonology, and so on) are apt to make this kind of data collection. Examples of this kind of data are: frequencies of words, regularities in sentence formation, morphemes’ semantic roles, etc. There are problems concerning which Bible is closer to the never seen autographs or which books should be classified as canonical. These problems are taken cared by textual criticists and bibliologists. The output from all these fields is informative to generate our deep data. These last data are the equivalent of Hodge’s «facts». But what exactly are these data?

**Theological Models**

A few paragraphs earlier I mentioned two senses of “literal”. We have seen that the first cannot contribute positively to a senseful theological technolect, and then I asked the reader to wait just a little bit concerning the second. This is where it comes in. Every single datum is a panel of the comic-book we are trying to create as faithfully as possible to the writing. Without the analogy, a single datum is a part of a semantic model. All the data is supposed to make up the model. Carnap called these models as state-descriptions. Richard Montague just called them models (which is much better). Well, it is not just a matter of name tagging, but this is not the place to delve into that. The basic point here is that Carnap was riding the same model-theoretic train as Montague, and there is some irony here when I’m using his own line of work to solve the problems he raised in theology. And what is a model then? A few clarifications:

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«A model begins by specifying what sorts of thing there are in the world, and then, with respect to this assumed ontology, specifies an interpretation of the object language.» Dowty & Wall, *Introduction to Montague Semantics*, 11

«[A] model consists of a set together with an assignment of appropriate entities (members or subsets of this set, or truth functions) to the basic expressions of [a disambiguated natural language].» Tomason, *Formal Philosophy: Selected Papers of Richard Montague*, 29

«[A] model […] represents precisely what events, properties and relations make up the situation being modelled. The model provides a description of the denotations of all the basic expressions (content lexemes) in the object language.» Cann, *Formal Semantics: An Introduction*, 18

Probably the reader already knows what is at stake here, but just to make sure, the overall gist of a model is to go from a given expression of a natural language (what we all use to communicate verbally with each other) to a possible ontology representative of the content conveyed in the expression, by means of mathematical and logical formal systems, such as Set Theory, Predicate Logic, Type Theory, and others. This brings us to my previous considerations
about being «descriptively factual.» A model doesn’t have to be, or needs to be, compatible with current scientific knowledge or historical-arheological reconstruction. It can be pure fiction. But that doesn’t mean one cannot speak sensibly of theology, i.e. assert something with truth-conditions.

**Exemplifying with other Fictions**

For instance, can we not make up questions and answers about the *Lord of the Rings* saga? Of course we can. Where was the One Ring forged? It was forged in Mount Doom, in the Black Lands of Mordor. What about the *Warhammer 40k* universe? Yes. How do the Adeptus Astartes preserve their battalion numbers? By saving the gene-seed from fallen brothers and implanting them in new normal human recruits. And what provides us with the truth-conditions to evaluate the answers and make sense of the questions? The ontology generated by proper interpretation of the relevant writings. And are these writings cognitively barren concerning the real world? No. Both *Lord of the Rings* and *Warhammer 40k* contain in their narratives a certain view of human nature and how different or similar value systems interact in their human embodiment. These views are what animates the characters – their conversations, decisions and actions – but also the fictitious communities, nations and civilizations.

Again, these implicit non-stated views of human nature, or how things work in the human sphere of interactions, is what elicits in the narratives a possibility to acquire procedural how-to knowledge. The story of Frodo says something about perseverance in tribulation as an underdog. The lesson is: never quit, even if all hope seems lost, thrust yourself forward and the world will pay sooner or later your dividends. The story of Sanguinius’ sacrifice to save God-Emperor of Mankind says something about loyalty and self-negation as attitudes conducive to a humanity saving altruism. The lesson is: strive to give yourself to your comrades and fellow kin, even at the cost of your life, you’ll never die in their memories. Both these lessons prescribe a certain behavior which merits appraisal in certain social contexts and makes life go better in a myriad of situations. But we have seen they are not categorical truth-candidates, rather they are useful maxims of practice to deal with the world. In regard to the first example, one can find and
conceive situations where insistence on a certain path can be detrimental. In regard to the second, the same can be said, for instance if one is lowering one's head to a falsely perceived gentle potentate, thinking to be the best course of action to guarantee the wellbeing of the subjects under his or her rule. The same with myths, folklore and religious canons.

**Role of Schemata**

This to say, pure fictions can be cognitively apt both descriptively and prescriptively. They are descriptively apt relative to a modeled possible ontology derived from their written form. They are prescriptively apt relative to the real world, as long as one can find maxims of practical reasoning conducive to a valued certain end. Point iv) comes to the surface now. Models from pure fictions will surely be falsified by models of the scientific enterprise. The maxims will be tested in the trials of life. It is irrelevant the illustrative surroundings of those life policies. If a falsified model, which contains eternal life, facilitates the arising of efficacious attitudes and emotions to closing the gap between knowledge-how and action, and the actions work to the relative betterment of one's life, then the fiction did its job and the practical policies proved useful. Going a few steps back, I raised a possible objection concerning how can one assure oneself regarding the direction the maxims point to – the instructions one can find in the Christian canon. Like any other claim under truth-conditions, it has to be evaluated by means of the modeled possible ontology. Questions such as “what did God really command regarding this matter?” are to be answered this way.

**Theological Disputation**

Probably the next question would be, how does one dispute models? This is where theology as a domain of research comes in. It is the job of theologians to provide theses concerning specific parts of the model or how to keep the whole together. I'm appealing here to a coherentist criterion for both truth and justification. But going down this path would be to change the course I delineated in the beginning of this essay. I can only anticipate to the reader that theological disputation, in my view, would look exactly the same as scientific argumentation, though, as Hodge suggested, the data used to evidentially
warrant the theses are very different.

**Objections from presuppositionalists**

But just to add an interesting idea from Hodge, before I go to the concluding summary, I ask the reader to ponder on this quote:

«The language of the Bible is the language of common life; and the language of common life is founded on apparent, and not upon scientific truth. [...] Here is [...] a distinction to be made between the Bible and our interpretation. The latter may come into competition with settled facts; and then it must yield. Science has in many things taught the Church how to understand the Scriptures. [...] Christians have commonly believed that the earth has existed only a few thousands of years. If geologists finally prove that it has existed for myriads of ages, it will be found that the first chapter of Genesis is in full accord with the facts, and that the last results of science are embodied on the first page of the Bible. It may cost the Church a severe struggle to give up one interpretation and adopt another, as it did in the seventeenth century, but no real evil need be apprehended.»


Hodge, together with B.B. Warfield, is one of the faces of Princeton conservative Presbyterianism. One cannot get anymore orthodox
than this. And even here one can observe enough flexibility to conceptually separate science from theology. Of course, I’m not claiming Hodge was proposing something in the likes of what I have written here – I think he would be appalled with my offer. Hodge would never concede that the descriptions we find in the Bible concerning God’s properties are mere useful illustrations to fill up a schema conducive to the performance of prescribed action. I only want to note that through history, even the most conservative sophisticated theologians conceded space to modern science. It is the role of the theologian to preserve scriptural teachings in the face of current scientific findings and cultural changes. Hodge did that, and I’m also trying to walk on that road. Speaking of which, there is a trendy presuppositional weltanschauung(ish) foundationalist theoretical framework gaining more and more supporters in Christian reformed quarters. These Christians would contend with the idea that I’m helping to preserve Christian teachings.

The presuppositionalist might argue that their framework is the one that puts the Christian in tune with reality. He might argue that I’m using a double standard. In the beginning I said that the usefulness of science suggested the truth of its truth-candidates. On the other hand, I’m saying descriptive statements in the Bible are mere illustrations to facilitate proper action. If one follows this reasoning, scientific models should be also taken as pure fictions useful to the development of schemata conducive to action (a view under the name of instrumentalism). Why should one not take the Bible’s descriptive statements as truth-candidates also? It seems they have been useful too. My answer is, the standard is always the same – usefulness. That doesn’t mean science and theology (or devotional writings) are useful in the same way, or in the same domains of practice. Theological thinking wasn’t useful to building bridges, sailing boats, draw maps, develop mathematics, catalog chemical elements, or design marketing strategies. Science was. Scientific thinking, on its turn, wasn’t useful to provide existential security or mental
strength and courage in tribulation, create an impulse to work diligently in every occupation, or to find solace in loneliness. Theology was.

The presuppositionalist might press on and say that doesn’t alleviate any tension between the two sides. Even if one concedes each is useful in its own domain of practice, one still has conflicting beliefs at play. In more detail, there is still a tension between schemata conducive to successfully build bridges, and so on, and schemata conducive to successfully follow divine prescribed action. Should one go for a strategy of «inconsistency tolerance», as Nicholas Rescher puts it? 14 Why should scientific schemata be ontologically privileged relative to the real world since existential security and so forth also take place in the real world? Starting with the second question, the consequence of going through with that line of reasoning is that all useful fictions would contain truth-candidates. *The Three Little Pigs* and *The Grasshopper and the Ant* would also have to be open to contain truth-candidates – such as pigs building houses and ants talking to grasshoppers. I think no one would accept such an idea, but on the other hand one cannot also deny their usefulness since they survived orally for so long as educational instruments.

Now, to the first question. A question such as this one emerges from the consideration that, a person who thinks in the lines of the scientific method and holds scientific results to be the best attempts at truth (or truth *simpliciter*), cannot have faith in the virgin conception or the separation of the Red Sea. These things don’t fit in our present scientific body of knowledge. A person who holds both must compartmentalize the two ontologies and modes of acquiring knowledge and live in a constant cognitive dissonance. But an objectional question of this sort comes from a place where the cogni-

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14. Rescher, *Epistemology*, 25-27: «This approach would have us simply take the inconsistency in stride […] and to accept at face value the incoherence of what we know. This involves abandoning the traditional idea that it is a nonnegotiable demand of rationality to insist on the consistency of one’s knowledge claims.».
tive involvement of a person with a statement is conceptualized as dichotomous, viz. a total acceptance or a total rejection. This dichotomy is accommodated in the concept of “belief” – or one believes or one doesn’t. This to say, the cognitive involvement with scientific single statements, theories and methodologies doesn’t need to be the same as with the religious-theological counterparts.

A religious person can take her religious devotional commitments seriously without any tension with scientific findings. There is no risk of creating some sort of double thinking between two competing schemata. One can hold the scientific body of knowledge as best descriptions of reality. This kind of acceptance amounts to putting whatever science proposes pro tem in the fabric of reality, until something better surfaces. Biblical data and theological theses can be held as inspiring visions or motivating imaginations. Reality is not the only spring for action. Knowing the common cold spreads through air particles might motivate one to avoid people coughing and sneezing, but the simple act of conceiving fictions, in certain cases, is more than enough to produce action or emotional responses. The reader might have experienced this, when for instance a novel makes us see the value of family or friendship, the value of bravery or honor, the fragility of life, and so on. These two cognitive involvements are perfectly complementary. They fit together perfectly in one schema.

Other than that, these different cognitive involvements are not arbitrary. They are not a mere product of spontaneous cognitive order. It is also rational to be in these states or to seek their development. This has to do with the justification procedure used in each of them. One does not need to hypostatize theological entities and relations between entities to explain one’s devotional commitments. They don’t need to be real to spark emotions or be optimal motivators of action. But one cannot do the same when studying static forces in bridge building or cell division in germ spreading. When water is...
running against bridge columns, the amount of pressure between the structure and the water is not just some inspiring vision. The pressure is really there. Everybody with a functional sensorial apparatus can observe it, every relevant piece of technology can measure it, and everybody can die in it if it is too strong. On its turn, to work oneself up to please God and do His bidding, one does not need to investigate the world, one only needs to fill oneself with biblical and theological imagery, meditate on it and practice. Although the beneficial products of this mental exercises take place in the real world, that doesn’t in the least suggest the reality of the ontology in question.

This then seems to lead to the conclusion that not only talking donkeys and walking over the water go down the fictional drain but also God Himself. And yes, that seems a reasonable conclusion. God can be explained away as a motivating fiction as means to produce, not prescribed action (that would suppose God’s existence), but action conducive to an idealized state of being. As I said in the beginning, I will not discuss the epistemic appropriateness of any sort of theism. Part of my twofold goal was to provide an account capable of minimizing the tension between a cognitive disposition of ontological minimalism and theism. I cannot avoid believing God. I cannot work myself up to the point of disbelief. It is just there. I cannot also shake from my head the belief in the Christian God. But I can ponder on a way to minimize any further ontological commitments and in the process provide a framework to build a senseful theological technolect and modes of argumentation.

Concluding Summary

Now that the more dissective mental ruminations are over we can proceed to a short bullet-point type exposition:
«i) to provide an account (a way) to down-to-earth theists cohere their beliefs about God and their every-day naturalistic ones.»

Solution 1

The how-to knowledge approach: A religious canon is not cognitively barren. Myths and folklore are useful to promote life lessons (maxims of interpersonal and intergroup behavior as well as maxims of extra-social practical reasoning). A religious canon can be viewed in a similar way, viz. a revealed useful fiction. In it one can find prescriptions, i.e. procedural statements pointing to actions capable of bringing about a certain goal – practical policies or maxims. Knowledge-how of these prescriptions equates to being able to generate goal oriented strategies.

Solution 2

The conceptualization of different cognitive involvements: Religious canons are useful by influencing the development of schemata conducive to the performance of the prescriptions found in them. However, schemata influenced by these canons or their respective theology don’t need to frame every contention in equal footing. The scientific body of statements and theories can be taken as knowledge, i.e. an empirically evidentiated and rationally systematized body of truth-candidates. Data from religious canons and their respective theological treatment can be taken as motivating springs-to-action fictions, i.e. fictional content which under meditation can propel a person to act.

Result

The ontological minimalist theist with a scientific bent is able to preserve God in the fabric of reality without any further hypostatizations. The scientific enterprise guards knowledge and scientific methodologies are the best modes of knowledge production. Data from religious canons and theses from theology provide deep moving imagery.
«ii) to provide a framework by which theological argumentation is not just attitudinal animosity or kinship.»

**Solution 1**

The two senses of “literal”: There is more than one sense of “literal” in regard to the interpretation of religious canons. “Literal” doesn’t have to mean accurate report of events or natural mechanisms. It can mean accurate representation of fictional scenery and agent interactions. This is not innovative thinking, video-game and movie adaptations already do this.

**Solution 2**

Fictional ontologies as semantic models: After producing linguistical data, content data is the next step. Interpretation should ideally be a process of going from linguistical data to models. A singular datum would be a part of the model, the whole data would compose the model. These models would suggest wider theological theses such as: how time is structured, what are the deity’s domains of intervention, accounts for life-death dichotomies and so forth.

**Results**

Carnap’s objection is avoided, and the tension between the seemingly theoretical content (apt to being evaluated in terms of truth-conditions) and its emotive or attitudinal output is explained. On the one hand, truth conditions can be generated relative to the models. Questions can be sensible and answers objectively evaluated. On other hand, the fictional ontology described in these models can provide moving imagery.
the same way other models generated from other written works can.

References


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