

A Defense for the Compatibility of Science and Religion

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Introduction

Is the title, *Religious Scientist* an oxymoron? And if it is, what makes it so? In our contemporary world it is very common to see science and religion in conflict or even as incompatible. Science has the “scientific method” (whatever that is)¹ seeking truth about reality through empirical investigation and reasoning while religion relies on faith and revelation to find truth about reality. Because of this difference, they can sometimes have conflicting claims. For the sake of brevity, in the limited space I have, when referring to “religion” I will only be considering the monotheistic religions based on revealed scripture from God, and specifically Christianity because it has the largest group of followers. By *science* I refer to any discipline that seeks to find out about the world through observation, experiment, and reasoning.²

Science and Religion differ in their epistemic approach to the world, and this begets conflict whenever a claim of the one is contradicted or called into question by a claim of the other. However, in this paper I will argue that there is no necessary incompatibility between science and religion. Two reasons are often cited for the claim of incompatibility: (I) Science is the only (or most) reliable source of knowledge, so one cannot reasonably use other sources of knowledge to get information about the world (*scientism*); and (II) science supports or endorses *philosophical naturalism* which rules out *theism* with its *supernaturalist* metaphysics.³ Taking each in turn I argue that both of these claims are mistaken; the idea that science and religion are incompatible is a canard and a deeply ruinous concept.

The two incompatibility claims that I mentioned above are very popular and can be found in virtually anyone who writes on the subject. For my paper I will focus on two specific works that make these objections very clear, Jerry A. Coyne’s *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* and Victor J. Stenger’s *God and the Folly of Faith: The Incompatibility of Science and Religion*.⁴ Let us move on to consider the first objection.

I Scientism

Stenger and Coyne give us a striking model of scientism and represent the view that science is our best source of knowledge about reality. Stenger writes, “The working hypothesis of science is that careful observation is our only reliable source of knowledge about the world.”⁵ Of course, it is no part of science to say that it is a reliable source, much less the *only* reliable source of knowledge about the world. Coyne, however, agrees, “[S]cience,

1 There is no clear definition of what the “scientific method” is. See, for example, J.P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science: A Philosophical Investigation* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), ch. 2.

2 These definitions of “science” and “religion” are not at all agreed upon, and in fact, it is very hard to define them concretely at all. For the sake of my paper, however, these will do just fine. Furthermore, I am using an understanding of science in a strict realist sense. That is, science tells how the world *actually* is.

3 I take “naturalism” to be the belief that there is no God or anything like God or, indeed, any supernatural realm at all. And, of course, theism is the belief that there is a God and that he is a necessary being of supreme perfection.

4 It is hard to imagine titles more consonant with my paper topic.

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construed broadly as a commitment to the use of rationality, empirical observation, testability, and falsifiability, is indeed the only way to gain *objective* knowledge (as opposed to subjective knowledge) about the universe... [I]n that sense scientism is a virtue – the virtue of holding convictions with a tenacity proportional to the evidence supporting them.”⁶ There are generally two forms of scientism, *strong* and *weak*. Strong scientism says that the only truths are scientific truths and the only way to discover them is through doing science. Weak scientism says that while there are some truths outside of science, they are less justified and that science is the most rational way to obtain knowledge. Unfortunately (or fortunately), strong scientism shoots itself in its own foot. The statement itself is self-defeating. That is, the statement of strong scientism is not a statement of science (how could one empirically investigate such a claim?); it is a statement of philosophy. Thus, according to strong scientism it cannot be true. Consequently, if strong scientism is true, then it is false.

However, it does *seem* like both Coyne and Stenger are advocating for such a view. They use phrases like, “science is... our only reliable source of knowledge” and science “is indeed the only way to gain *objective* knowledge.” And *both* of them try to justify their use of science from science *itself*. Again, I will let them speak for themselves. Stenger says that science “analyzes observations by applying certain methodological rules and formulates models to describe those observations. It *justifies* that process by its practical success [...]” he concludes, “Science has earned our trust by its proven success.”⁷ Coyne adds, “[T]he superiority of science at finding objective truth comes not from philosophy but from experience. Science gives predictions that work.”⁸ Now, obviously, this is philosophically bankrupt. You cannot justify something by using itself as the justification. Take the proposition, “Empirical confirmation provides objective knowledge.” This proposition, contrary to what Stenger and Coyne suggest, *cannot* be justified by offering empirical confirmation of some scientific theory. To justify this proposition solely based on empirical confirmation, one would have to *assume* that empirical confirmation provides some sort of objective knowledge which is what one is trying to prove.

This inevitably leads to a vicious circle. This is a classic example of *begging the question*. One assumes science is a source of truth when that is exactly what one is trying to prove.⁹ Surprisingly enough, Coyne admits to this with remarkable candor, “[I]t may smack of circularity to use empirical results to justify the use of the empirical toolkit we call ‘science’, but I’ll pay attention to the circularity argument when someone comes up with a better way to understand nature.”¹⁰ The answer is not to ignore the problem as Coyne does here, and remain in a vicious cycle of circular reasoning – not all of us want to abjure our faculty of reason. The rational way to react to such a predicament is to realize that one needs to go outside of science (maybe to philosophy?) to justify its effectiveness. But of course, to do that would mean Coyne would have to give up his scientism, which he does not want to do.

5 Victor J. Stenger, *God and the Folly of Faith: The Incompatibility of Science and Religion* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2012), 26.

6 Jerry A. Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 198.

7 Stenger, *God and the Folly of Faith*, 25.

8 Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact*, 206.

9 This is analogous to attempting to justify the use of reason by appealing to reason alone. The attempt to argue, based solely on reason, that reason is justified will always end in a circle. For one would have to assume that reason worked just to make the argument. The same is true of science.

10 *Ibid.* 207.

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Nevertheless, maybe I am being unfair, and Coyne and Stenger are endorsing some sort of weak scientism. Does that fare much better for them? Not really. There are two main problems with weak scientism.¹¹ The first problem is that because science relies on presuppositions that are supported by philosophy, the conclusions of science cannot be any more justified than those presuppositions. The following analogy illuminates this: When driving we all assume something about how our car will function – presumably that it functions properly! This is a presupposition we have before driving. Now suppose that when someone got in her car to drive, they had little confidence – low epistemic justification – that the car would work properly when driving. Nevertheless, the driver starts driving to her destination. She *cannot* be any more certain or confident that she will reach her destination on time than she is confident in her car working properly. It would be absurd for her to have high confidence that she would get to the destination on time and without problems even though she had low confidence in her car working properly. Similarly, our scientific truths and our scientific knowledge cannot be any more justified or certain than the presuppositions that underlie them. Consequently, weak scientism leads to this absurd conclusion and should be rejected for this reason alone.

However, the second objection seems to be more fatal (at least to me). It is simply false that we do not have rational objective knowledge outside the realm of science and independent of it. I am thinking specifically moral knowledge.¹² For example, it is no part of science to tell me that “raping an innocent child is morally wrong”. I *know* this more confidently and rationally than I know some scientific truths. It would not be that surprising to me that in 50 years most of what we know about science will have changed. But I find it *inconceivable* that the moral prohibition of child abuse will ever change, much less in 50 years.¹³ If weak scientism is true, then some of our most intimate and sure beliefs in basic moral truths, are not optimally rational and may even be *false* if science does not support them. This does not seem correct, and leads to a very distorted view of reality where we have to rely on science to tell us if murder is wrong and to tell us *why* and *how* a sunset is beautiful. We seem to know these things as sure – if not *surer* than – our most justified scientific beliefs and *independently* of science.

It is not my goal to argue for the truth of certain knowledge claims outside of science, such as moral truths. It suffices for my purposes to simply acknowledge the fact that *if* weak scientism were true, then one would have to conclude that acceptance of moral statements is less rational than acceptance of scientific facts and should be underwritten by science. This, however, is contrary to our experience of the world and seems too high a price to pay. This makes weak scientism unlikely at best. Therefore, not only is strong scientism a feeble position, but so is weak scientism. Moreover, if one takes the view of scientism then one must give up science. Del Ratzsch makes this point succinctly, “The price of holding out for science as the only legitimate basis for belief is the illegitimacy of science itself, and that seems too high a price”.¹⁴ Thinking that science is the only or most reliable source of knowledge

11 The ideas for these two objections came from J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 370-3.

12 There are those who think that science can provide answers to moral questions. I have no space to cover that in this paper, but suffice to say, I think the attempts to do so have failed.

13 Quite frankly, it is as inconceivable as $2+2=5$; “The man who says that it is morally acceptable to rape little children is just as mistaken as the man who says, $2+2=5$ ”. See Michael Ruse, *Darwinism Defended* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1982), p. 275.

14 Del Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science: The Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 100.

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leads to a distorted and impoverished worldview, and, worse, rids us of science itself.

So far in this paper, I have argued that science is not our only or even our most reliable source of knowledge about reality. Because of this, science need not dismiss religious claims as irrelevant or direct religion on what claims it can and cannot make. Science and religion ought to work together to get a complete picture of reality. But there is another problem for this prospect of concordance. That is the idea that science makes theism unlikely or even shows it to be false because it supports naturalism. If this is true, then it seems we arrive at some form of incompatibility again since science would show religion to be irrational, improbable, or even false. This is the second objection I shall consider.

II Science Supports Philosophical Naturalism

It is often thought that the so-called “scientific worldview” supports naturalism. Thus Coyne, “[B]ecause there is no evidence for supernatural entities or powers, although there *could* have been such evidence, one is justified in thinking that *those entities and powers do not exist*. This attitude is called *philosophical naturalism*.”¹⁵ Stenger agrees with Coyne,

At the current stage of scientific development, we can confidently say that no empirical or theoretical basis exists for assuming anything other than that we inhabit a universe made entirely of matter... Faith is a folly. It requires belief in a world beyond the senses with no basis in evidence for such a world and no reason to believe in it other than the vain hope that something else is out there.¹⁶

Coyne continues and likens the evidence for and belief in the Loch Ness Monster to the evidence and belief of God. No one would conclude, given the lack of evidence for the Loch Ness Monster, that it really did exist and thus believe in it. But when it comes to God, Coyne states, many do the exact opposite.¹⁷

This objection is often promoted by those who do not believe in God as a way of implying that religious people thoughtlessly believe without evidence. This derisive attitude, expressed in the comparison of belief in God (usually involving a person’s deep emotional and personal commitments and beliefs) to that of, in this case, the Loch Ness Monster (a silly story that almost no one takes seriously), is commonplace in discussions of philosophical naturalism such as in the above statements of Coyne and Stenger. But of course, the *vast* majority of people takes belief in God, or something like God, seriously and many think it is the best explanation of reality (the same can hardly be said of the Loch Ness Monster!). Of course, believers agree that the story of the Loch Ness Monster is silly however they emphasize that the idea of God, or a metaphysical theory like theism, has explanatory depth and need not be a ridiculous idea (more on this below).

It is here where believers must exercise equanimity and solemnly answer these objections. Take the issue of evidence. Believers do not thoughtlessly ignore the relevance of evidence. As Del Ratzsch points out, what we take to be evidence depends on our “background beliefs.”¹⁸ The Sun is superb evidence for the claim that atoms are not immutable; if atoms were immutable there would be no Sun. But those who were questioning whether atoms were immutable in the past never knew that the Sun was counter-evidence because their background beliefs did not

15 Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact*, 94.

16 Stenger, *God and the Folly of Faith*, 44-5.

17 Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact*, 95

18 Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science*, 109.

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include beliefs about how the Sun was powered. So while there may be much evidence for some proposition's falsity or truth, we may not take it to be evidence because of our background beliefs. The believer does indeed think there is good evidence for something like God. Maybe they take as evidence the existence of the universe, the *fine-tuning* of the universe,¹⁹ the existence of objective morals, their personal experience of God, or something else. (I do not claim that any of these actually *are* evidence, just that a believer may *think* that they are evidence). Thus, the charge that believers accept the existence of God *without* evidence is flatly wrong. The objection is really an attack on the believers' background beliefs, but saying believers are blithely unconcerned with evidence is an overstatement.

More importantly, the fact that there is no empirical evidence for the existence of God or that God is not required for the explanation of a natural phenomenon does not necessarily lend support to naturalism. This would only lend support to naturalism if 'God' were a term in a scientific theory. But as Keith Ward notes,²⁰ theism is *not* a scientific hypothesis and God is not posited as a term in a scientific explanation, "[Theism] is not a theory invented to explain particular occurrences in the world."²¹ For most, if not all believers, theism arises from the apprehension of the objective reality of a supreme goodness and perfection and a practical commitment to it with worship and prayer. That is, it is their *experience* of the world that produces this belief in them and makes the most sense of reality to them. Theism, to believers, seems to form a coherent, adequate, and consistent description of the world.²² This is all in the absence of scientific or *empirical* evidence on the matter,²³ and thus, the existence of God is not a scientific hypothesis at all. So, it is not as if the fact that God is not a term of scientific explanation makes belief in God any less rational or warranted. Theism is a *metaphysical* hypothesis, so while it competes with something like naturalism, it does *not* compete with science.

As I use the term, a *metaphysical* hypothesis or explanation addresses questions such as "Why is there something rather than nothing?", "What is the ontological structure of reality (i.e., what kinds of things *actually* exist)?", "Why are things the way they are and not some other way?", "Is there any *order, purpose, or telos* to the universe?", "Are there any objective normative properties of our universe?", and so on. This kind of explanation is primarily and fundamentally philosophical in nature. A scientific explanation, roughly, will relate some observation or phenomenon to observed or hypothesized laws or regularities. Thus, it addresses *empirical* claims which are wholly different – *categorically* – from the kinds of claims that metaphysical explanations address. For example, while scientific explanations use laws and causal relations to account for phenomena, a metaphysical explanation will elucidate why or how certain laws obtain and how causes and effects are related. So, it is not possible for a metaphysical explanation to compete, in *any way*, with a scientific explanation. They deal with answering completely different questions. This is why the *experiential-empirical* distinction is important. The *empirical* deals

19 Roughly, *fine-tuning* is the idea that given the physical laws that obtain in our universe, the values of the physical constants in those laws must fall within a specified *range* in order for life as we know it to exist. The claim is that *fine-tuning* is improbable without the hypothesis of an intelligent creator.

20 Keith Ward, *God, Chance & Necessity* (Oxford: Newworld Publications, 1996).

21 *Ibid.* 96.

22 *Ibid.* 100-3.

23 The *empirical* has to do with some observation of and experimentation on a phenomenon in the world *sans* reference to values or subjective responses. The *experiential*, on the other hand, has to do with the subjective apprehension of value, meaning, purpose, beauty, and, in religious connotations, faith.

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with scientific explanation, whereas the *experiential* deals with concepts of value, meaning, purpose, beauty, and, perhaps, faith. These concepts, especially value, purpose, and faith, are more pertinent to metaphysical explanations and provide answers to some of our most fundamental questions. Theism and naturalism both try to answer these kinds of questions and make sense of reality by giving an explanation in this metaphysical sense. *Neither* of them competes with science for explanations.

There is a rejoinder that one might make to this idea. Does this conception, then, make God superfluous, thus making naturalism the more likely theory since we can explain natural phenomenon without reference to God? As claimed above, theism is not a scientific hypothesis and so God may very well be superfluous when it comes to scientific explanations. It is not all that surprising that we do not have to embrace theism to explain any physical or chemical law. But obviously, this does not mean that the idea of God is wholly superfluous. Indeed, the very questions that are answered by metaphysical explanations (see above) are hardly superfluous and carry great existential and pragmatic weight. One would most likely only claim God to be superfluous if one subscribed to some form of *scientism*, and thus thought areas of knowledge outside of science were unworthy of consideration (and, as I argued, *scientism*, in either of its forms, is not a convincing philosophical position). Nevertheless, it is important to see how theism and God are relevant to other areas of explanation if not natural phenomena. It is arguable – and disputable – that theism provides a better explanation of our ability to do science, and gives us more justified grounds for pursuing science than naturalism does.²⁴ This would be a *metaphysical* explanation, not a *scientific* one. Furthermore, Ward points out, theism can explain the existence of a universe like this more adequately than naturalism can.²⁵ Ward adds theism actually leads to an “elegant, economical and fruitful explanation of existence” and its “comprehensiveness” in unifying a variety of our experiences that materialism or naturalism cannot (he cites purpose and personal conscious experience as examples) lends more support to theism. Again, these claims are disputed, but the main point here is that God is not superfluous when it comes to these kinds of explanations.²⁶

To further illustrate this point, consider this analogy that Ward offers to explain why theistic explanations are not superfluous: one can investigate the physics and chemistry of someone’s body without considering her personal or moral qualities but of course, her personality or moral qualities are not superfluous for those who love her. So too can we examine the physical world and understand it without denying spiritual properties or ontology. These are not superfluous when we become aware of beauty, purpose, and meaning.²⁷ Similarly Ratzsch notes that there is no reason why naturalistic explanations should take precedence, or even compete, with non-naturalistic explanations.²⁸ There is no reason to exclude the latter or put them in competition with the former unless one has specific philosophical prejudices. The claim that God is superfluous relegates God to acting only in the natural world where there are scientific gaps. Unfortunately (fortunately?), this claim is not necessary for theism. One can see the laws of nature as means God uses to accomplish his purposes. So, why should we have to choose between the two? Both explanations, i.e., purposeful and natural, seem perfectly reasonable and not in tension. John Lennox

24 For more details see Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science*, 16-19.

25 Ward, *God, Chance & Necessity*, 103.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.* 104.

28 Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science*, 114.

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points out, “[S]cience does not compete with God as an explanation. Science gives a *different kind of explanation*”²⁹ [emphasis in the text]. There is no reason to see God as superfluous or unneeded just because there are things that can be explained without explicit reference to him. To quote Ward once more, “God is not a scientific theory. God is a personal reality of supreme perfection, to whom persons can be related in knowledge and love. That is the basis of belief in God, but it entails that God will also be explanatory of the nature of the universe, in a strong metaphysical sense.”³⁰ Theism does not compete with science or scientific theories, it does, however, compete with naturalism as a metaphysical theory.

There is one more crucial point to consider. Sometimes it is asserted that “scientific conclusions” lend support to naturalism such as the claim that scientific theory shows that evolution is a purposeless process or that religious belief is formed from wishful-thinking psychological factors and not from the apprehension of a supernatural reality. If this is the case, then why is it improper to state that science does indeed support metaphysical naturalism? To answer this, consider Alvin Plantinga’s distinction between *Augustinian science* and *Duhemian science*.³¹ *Augustinian science* takes into account *all* of what one knows or believes, thus it gives a *metaphysical gloss* to the empirical data or mere scientific data. By contrast, *Duhemian science* is focused on the *empirical data* or mere scientific data to the exclusion of further beliefs or assumptions, metaphysical or otherwise. As Plantinga notes, this approach is exemplified in sciences like physics and chemistry.³² An example of the use of *Augustinian science* would be answering whether or not evolution is purposeful or purposeless. The theist asserts that there is an *end* to evolution while the naturalist denies it. The *empirical data* does not settle such a question – this is not a question for *Duhemian science* but metaphysical or religious beliefs can provide answers.³³

Therefore, we can maintain that the conclusions of empirical science do not support naturalism. Empirical data are silent about these questions. Thus, scientific rejection of theistic belief, a case of *Augustinian science*, would have to be based on a view of the best *metaphysical explanation* of the data. The *empirical data*, by themselves, do not support or refute any views about, for instance, the ends of evolution. One can say that the scientific or empirical data *underdetermine* which metaphysical theory is correct.³⁴ Settling disputes of this sort requires debate about which metaphysical hypotheses are more coherent and cogent, and which theory makes the most sense of the data, a *metaphysical* debate that is not settled by scientific data alone. I do not have the space here to address this heated and venerable debate. Nonetheless, it suffices for the purposes of this paper to simply acknowledge that the scientific data does not give support to *either* theism or naturalism without the addition of philosophical or metaphysical beliefs or arguments. Hence, it is not the case that science, *necessarily*, supports *philosophical naturalism*.

Conclusion

The question I tried to answer in this paper is, “Does science rule out religious knowledge as impossible,

29 John C. Lennox, *Can Science Explain Everything?* (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2019), 33.

30 Ward, *God, Chance & Necessity*, 104.

31 Alvin Plantinga, "Science: Augustinian or Duhemian?" *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 13: Iss. 3, Article 4 (July 1996): 368-394, 10.5840/faithphil19961335.

32 *Ibid.* 383.

33 *Ibid.* 382.

34 Note the important qualification that empirical data can rule out metaphysical claims that contradict the data such as claims that imply that the Earth is 10,000 years old.

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nonexistent, second-rate, or even superfluous implying they are incompatible?” The answer to that – as I have argued above – is no. Science does not rule out other possible sources of knowledge. Nor does science imply God is superfluous or make belief in God or theism less likely. If what I have argued in this paper is cogent, then there is no reason to see science and religion as incompatible. They work together to give us a fuller picture of reality. One without the other, leads to a less than interesting view of the world. To quote Ratzsch at the end of his book, “There will, however be substantial differences in the significance assigned to science seen as investigating God’s creation versus investigating ‘just one of those things which sometimes happen.’ To paraphrase George Marsden, nonbelievers may hear all the notes of science, but without the theistic context and perspective, they will not hear the song.”³⁵

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35 Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science*, 149.