Differences in Investigation: Conceiving of a Theistic Science
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ABSTRACT

Your average person does not believe that science is in trouble— that we should be very suspicious of the results of medical or biological research, for example. Institutionalized science has led us to great success in understanding and manipulating the world, and this is due to hard work using the “Scientific Method.” But there is suspicion about whether we can trust the results from variations on the traditional method. This paper will examine the idea of natural inquiry that is informed by Theism. It is unclear whether we should be concerned about this type of inquiry because, perhaps, there is some special status to religious claims, or they have an effect on the human mind that inhibits objective study of anything, or there is a methodological standard elsewhere established that requires religious knowledge. Even if true, it cannot be a part of real science. However, after examining what we call real science, certain features and values are revealed that make it clear how Theistic inquiry could be real science.
Few doubt now whether modern science is capable of doing good for society, as physics, biology, and technology all give good things to society. This success may be largely attributed to the accepted methodology for doing science—the “Scientific Method.” As there are deviations from this method, often there is suspicion about whether such research is worth trusting. This is especially so for research that in some form incorporates religion. The Enlightenment ideal of science is basically the use of reason and observation with a desire to have knowledge, which places aside all non-science ideas such as those from religion. This may be “nowadays regarded as an idealized myth,” as John Lennox has claimed, but it is indeed at least an oversimplification of what happens when science occurs (Lennox, 112). However, it would also be a mistake for us to let anything be called “science.” With that said, contrary to the Enlightenment ideal, I argue that inquiry informed by Theism meets the reasonable standards that give us cause to appropriate the name of “science.”

For the sake of this discussion, terms must be changed that differ from those intended to be proven. For example, instead of “science,” the attempt to study the world will be called “inquiry,” which represents an attempt to find something out. However, “science” can denote a product such as knowledge itself, or a group of people, or an institution with an opinion about reality. Also for this discussion, “science” will be a kind of enterprise—a term that simply means “inquiry made systematic.” In this case, we are only concerned with inquiry about the natural as opposed to the supernatural or non-natural. Theism also can mean many different things. Theism means here Christianity, and despite the diversity within Christianity, we may take those basic creeds of Christianity such as the doctrine of atonement or the canonicity of Scripture. Therefore, the question to be asked is whether there is inquiry that is systematized by Christian-Theism, such that it may be properly called science.

Conceptual Fulfillment

The first question then to be asked is whether Theism can “systematize” inquiry. Inquiry is activity, and an enterprise is inquiry that is directed by principles and/or core propositions used to build the “products” of research. Of course, were it true that all Theistic claims were false or, even worse, meaningless, they could not be used for systematization. However, I assume that they are true (hence, meaningful) in order to see whether the Christian-Theistic enterprise (CTE) is science. Therefore, the only question that remains is whether people can consider the claims of Theism that seem to be about the world, to be literal, and to take seriously those principles that apply to people. The resurrection of Christ, the beginning of the universe, the earth being the center of God’s creation, the fallen nature of man and his actions, and man’s having an immaterial soul are ideas that are pulled out of traditional Christian doctrine by theology, and are paradigmatic examples of the literal ideas. Thus, were it possible for a person to somehow know that Christ rose from the dead before knowing what death or life are in expansive biological terms, for instance, that person nonetheless would already have beliefs about nature. The absence of a degree of understanding would probably not preclude belief. That understanding, however primitive, could be part of CTE. Those beliefs could then serve as tools for determining in a systematic way what the world is like, were that person to participate in CTE.

We may frown, though, at the use of things not verified by science, that is, components of enterprise that are purely justified elsewhere. An objection to this very thing may be to say that science does not use assumptions about the world that could not be possibly evaluated by natural investigation. That is, to begin, prior to any or much inquiry, with the assumption that the world had a beginning or that the earth is six-thousand years old, is to yield to parochialism and to halt thinking (Mcmullin, 168). As John Draper said, science should not be “cut to fit Revealed Religion” (Numbers, 2). Alex Rosenberg has said in effect that the rise of science in the modern age finally signifies man’s growth to stand up to his cravings for mere stories, and this is through testing his hypotheses and generally subjecting all of his knowledge to objective study through the use of reason and observation.

However, a natural enterprise must have components that are not verified by science. Natural investigation is not independent, for it must use logic and often uses mathematics (among other things) in order to reason about events in
the world. It follows then that starting with some things that are not verified by investigation is a precondition for investigation. The belief that Christ rose from the dead would be a belief in a miracle, as it would be contrary to the laws of decomposition, but that does not mean that it is not true. The use of particular non-typically-verified claims must be evaluated by another standard other than that of science, which only builds on those things that science itself has verified.

Even if CTE can use those things revealed in Scripture and derived through theology, we may ask exactly how it “directs” its participants. Might it allow the explanation “because God made it so” to be a satisfactory explanation, and if not, what would make CTE distinctive from other enterprises? Indeed, a scientist might evaluate theories after examining the plausibility of the theory and comparing them to the alternatives. Since natural inquiry theories build off of each other, the rejection of some allows for the belief in alternative theories, and also subsequent ones that would not be possible otherwise. CTE would at least require a Christian to evaluate certain theories and work from the various natural theories that remain after those evaluations. As Plantinga has pointed out, certain evolutionary psychological theories of behavior and some about cosmology are absurd on the basis of Christian belief (Plantinga, 2-13). Therefore, Theistic belief affects inquiry at the level of the scientists reasoning about theories, which is an important part of investigation.

Viability

With CTE established as logically consistent and its possible roles explained, we may ask whether people can participate in it, since enterprises where people cannot are not important and probably should not be considered science proper. Those enterprises that people can participate in are called viable, and those where they cannot, unviable. Therefore an enterprise participated in maximally or perfectly is the thing to be studied, that is, those participants within it understand what can be offered by the enterprise and understand all of the consequences of believing in a God that is good and just, and in his revealed commandments including those more specific ones derivable from the general. They also take all of these moral principles seriously.

One possible problem may be that people are unable to make good judgments from biblical principles or “articles of faith” because these statements cannot be given precise prior probabilities. Indeed, scientists customarily do expansive research into their field in order to evaluate a theory or solve problems within it. Their trial-by-trial method increases the probability of laws, and when scientists extrapolate the occurrence of events or processes as a whole, it is rarely whimsical, but is rather a result of much work (Draper, 291). This method solves the problem of progress being halted by dissenting scientists in the community who might disagree with some theory. To answer their doubt about a theory, the evidence is presented to suggest to them that the theory is plausible (291). With this observation, it may be suggested, as McMullin has, that religious belief, by its lack of rigorous testability, is given an infinite amount of probability because it is based in faith – that is, not in laboratory trials and laws developed in the scientific community (168). That is to say, judgments from those principles may perhaps be good, but the articles of faith cloud the operation of the community indefinitely.

Support for this view may come from the fact that the scientific community works effectively because even general laws about thermodynamics or gravity, for instance, are brought under proper and extensive scrutiny. Thus, it may further be said that Theistic hypotheses, at least some, are further problematic by virtue of our not being able to assign definite probability to them (Draper, 293). Scientists should have precise methods of determining how plausible theories are. This challenge may especially be presented against some belief in God's direct action that is contrary to the laws of nature. By some law of nature, a miracle is by definition very improbable, and without the use of laws, the probability of hypotheses is difficult to establish, or it is unclear how they could be established. Investigative judgments on the basis of these may therefore be arbitrary on some occasions or to some degree. One solution may be to say as Basil Willey suggests that in order to avoid all confusion, science should be “ provisionally atheistic” (Plantinga, 2). In this way all events that occur are only those that can be explained naturalistically and are thus understandable to humans and can more easily be assigned definite probabilities.

However, as was said before, not all things that are used to evaluate the
plausibility of theories are gained through trial and error – or rigorous laboratory study. Mathematics is believed by many scientists to apply somehow in the real world, but this could be false. However, no one would say that there is an infinite amount of plausibility to a mathematical theorem, but rather that its probability is somehow dependent upon the assumptions that are made in mathematical reasoning (though they may be called self-evident). In fact, some amount of plausibility can be assigned to Theistic claims, although it may be done in a less rigorous way than described above. Thus, to some extent, a participant of CTE may hold certain beliefs by faith, but that does not preclude those same statements from having justification elsewhere. Since this is so, it is conceivable for the participant to present reasons for statements that may convince others, but that they themselves do not consider the perfect justification.

In fact, to the extent that this allows for a community to work within an enterprise, the question becomes whether precision comes in degrees. Rather than being agnostic with regard to giving religious beliefs prior probability, we may say “high” or “low” or some other vague term, and then work from there. Demonstrating some statement in more ways than one increases its plausibility. Religious claims may be established several ways. Since “precise” is a relative term, using this ability to assign some probability, however vague, to a hypothesis is better in practice than believing that knowledge about plausibility is impossible. For one example, the plausibility of the claims of the Old Testament may be examined through archaeological research, but that plausibility may also be increased by appealing to Christ's support of it. If Christ is omniscient, then by definition His support of those documents means that they can be trusted. An appeal like this may change the probability that some statement is true, and in this example, such a change would have great consequences for interpreting other parts of history.

But beyond that difficulty, those who would know all of those commands that are derivable from CTE and would follow them might be restricted from participation. If in fact no one who tries to seriously follow the principles provided by an enterprise cannot follow them, that enterprise is clearly not viable. We would be concerned, for example, if some command said that only upper-class Caucasian males could participate in CTE. But in the case of Christian-Theism, it is hard to see how anything of this kind can be derived. CTE simply lacks any disturbing prescriptions for enterprise conduct. Therefore, worry about religion influencing investigators finds an exception in at least CTE.

Still, if certain beliefs about reality necessary for investigation of nature to occur are undermined through CTE then it is clearly not viable. Therefore, there needs to be some ideas about what the preconditions for science are. There are some uncontroversial candidates for this. These candidates would be (1) the uniformity of nature (which would allow laws of nature to be believable); (2) the logical law of non-contradiction; (3) the intelligibility of the world; and (4) the ethical belief that some things should be explained, controlled, etc. Without these four, the enterprise that uses some system that entails the opposites of these would not be a viable investigation, and thus, if these are denied by CTE, then it is clearly not viable.

However, all of these are not denied through CTE and in fact are supported by it. It seems clear that belief in the Christian God provides good reason to believe those preconditions for science. Since God desires for man to know him through nature, and God created man and the world, it would be expected that the universe would be intelligible to man – that man would be able to formulate laws that describe what happens in nature, and that the laws of logic would be true. It is difficult to think of how Theism would philosophically rule out those uncontroversial beliefs necessary for investigating nature.

Feasibility

With the viability now addressed, we may ask if there is any place for CTE in our world where there are goals and real consequences, and whether CTE is worthwhile, even viable. Indeed, we are not sure whether a completely useless enterprise should really be given the name “science.” That is, although CTE allows the use of beliefs that are possibly justified independent of the classical scientific method, as traditionally explained in textbooks, it is still possible that Theism opens a methodological “black box” for the scientific in all other
enterprises and their traditional mission (Draper, 291). Indeed, many people believe that science is worthwhile.

What would make an enterprise worthwhile is that which makes it successful. The substance of success for a natural investigation, as Sahotra Sarkar suggests, would be (1) an understanding of the natural world in its working; (2) the ability to predict accurately future events; and (3) the ability to manipulate the environment at will (Sarkar, 147). The normative arguments for a certain method often use a strong appeal to the last couple hundred years of scientific success and argue that that success indicates that the current method is desirable. No one denies that there has been great advancement through whatever has been done for natural investigation by the whole spectrum of scientific enterprises thus far utilized. Indeed, the television program NOVA regularly extrapolates the current success of science, as it is, and how it will continue into greater success in the future. Hence, a method like the successful one will likely also be successful.

We may then ask whether CTE is like the traditional method. Although the slightest changes can have the greatest results (such as having a fever being a factor in the discovery of useful drugs like penicillin), the acceptance of Theism in a community does not require the change of most traditionally-scientific practices within that community. CTE does not require odd standards for explanation. “God made it so” is still an unhelpful explanation. CTE does not require that special statistical methods be used for investigating biological population growth. In fact, assuming that those participants in CTE are as motivated as the average scientist, they likely would use the same tools of science as their counterpart scientists. Since there is no major difference in method, the extrapolatory argument may be transposed in favor of CTE.

But even if CTE is suggested to be successful, this does not show that including it as science is a good course of action. It must be asked whether CTE would have poor outcomes that can be weighed against the good. These are frankly difficult to find, for there are none, for example, about how a laboratory must be organized, what language scientists must use, or what race they must be in order to be scientists. This perhaps may not be said for an Islamic enterprise, which may require that women not be scientists or work within a laboratory. It follows from this that Theism will not directly affect the success of investigation, and that CTE will not, by virtue of its own principles, be especially handicapped as it might have been during the Middle Ages.

At this point, the question is how much good, albeit marginal, would be sacrificed were science bestowed as CTE. Should CTE be called science, perhaps more people would participate in it; however, this method is non-traditional and there may be loss of success, which is undesirable. Of course, there may also be greater success. In any case, the amount is difficult to surmise, but the best support that could be offered to this concern is that the differences in method seem insignificant. Certainly, not all worry or concern can be offered solace through a philosophical work such as this. The question then becomes how far the definition of “reasonable concern” extends to marginal cases.

Nevertheless, CTE has been presented as the idea that if Theism is true, it makes sense as an enterprise and would be viable if taken seriously and known well, and could also be useful to us. Although the use of beliefs such as original sin and the resurrection of Christ may appear to be dogmatic, they may, as Plantinga argues, be used by their own plausibility to evaluate theories as they are presented (Plantinga, 14). I do not know if all of these tests together are the conditions for an enterprise being scientific. However, to the extent that the name “science” should be appropriated carefully, the ability of CTE to pass through a multitude of scrutiny attests to the belief-worthiness of its being science. If the characterization of science cannot reasonably be restricted any other way, then the Christian-Theistic enterprise should be called science proper.
Works Cited


