

STREAMS OF WISDOM OR SIGNS OF CONFUSION?

AN ATTEMPT TO RAISE SUSPICION

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OUTLINE: In *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books 1999), the famous paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould develops a model of the relation between religion and science in terms of two non-overlapping magisteria (the so-called NOMA-principle). In this model, religion is in charge of ethical reflection, while science should keep itself to “the factual character of the natural world” (22). This NOMA-principle should eventually lead to wisdom. Wisdom, in Gould’s opinion, consists in bringing these two magisteria together into a coherent worldview. Gould in effect argues for a two-world model of religion and science. At first sight, Gould’s approach seems to respect the autonomy and integrity of both religion and science while allowing for a potential ‘covenant’ between them. Thus, his position seems to be opposed to strands of scientism. Yet, appearances work deceiving.

Gould argues that “[t]he first commandment of all versions of NOMA might be summarized by stating: ‘Thou shalt not mix the magisteria by claiming that God directly ordains important events in the history of nature by special interference knowable only through revelation and not accessible to science.’” In other words, Gould excludes divine action, for to argue that God works in nature violates the NOMA-principle, for it constitutes a religious claim about events in the natural world (i.e. the domain of science) as the result of divine action. By talking about divine action, theologians trespass into scientific territory. The only conception of God that seems compatible with the NOMA-principle is a ‘clockwinder’ God, i.e. deism (cf. 21f., 84f.). However, does not Gould here violate his own principle by making claims – as a scientist! – about the magisterium of religion?

At first sight, Gould’s NOMA-principle seems anti-scientistic. But is it really? The main problem is this: Gould makes it seem as if his NOMA-principle is entirely objective or neutral. However, on closer scrutiny it turns out that this is not so: it is science that sets the limits for what religion can justifiably claim. Scientism sneaks in at the backdoor. Using Gould’s model as an example, I shall argue in this paper that *in the contemporary religion and science dialogue, scientism occasionally sneaks in through some backdoor*. This is especially the case in discussions of divine action. In my view, divine action is not – or rather: should not be –

problematic for religion and cannot be a problem for science, but it becomes one when scientism rears its head. The question then becomes: On what premises can science/scientism claim anything about divine action? I shall argue that underlying scientism's problems with the possibility of divine action lies not wisdom, but confusion: a confusion of physical and logical possibilities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Almost every scholar working in science and religion has in one form or other provided a schematic description of possible relationships between science and religion. If we look at Ian Barbour's approach, we find that he points to a spectrum of possible views in between the extremes of a 'conflict' between religion and science, and 'integration'. One of these possibilities is that science and religion constitute two separate realms. In a recent book with the enchanting title *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, the famous paleontologist Stephen J. Gould explores argues that science and religion are separated and have no direct connection to each other whatsoever.¹ His approach is explicitly used to avoid either of the two extremes of warfare and of integration. As Gould describes it:

Our minds tend to work by dichotomy – that is, by conceptualizing complex issues as “either/or” pairs, dictating a choice of one extreme or the other, with no middle ground (or golden mean) available for any alternative resolution. (Gould 1999, 50)

His model points exactly to the golden mean between the extremes of battle and synthesis, and grants “dignity and distinction” (51) to both science and religion. His NOMA principle, as Gould calls it, attempts at resolving the tensions between science and religion; tensions of which the effects Gould himself has witnessed in several cases against creationism. His principle is a proposal to settle the matter once and for all. However, will it work? That is what this paper sets out to investigate. Before we can give some critical comments about NOMA, we will have to look at the details of Gould's principle.

2. THE NOMA-PRINCIPLE AS A ROAD TO WISDOM

Science, according to Gould, is concerned with the factual nature of the universe. It is “a teaching authority dedicated to using the mental methods and observational techniques validated by success and experience as particularly well suited for describing, and attempting to explain, the factual construction of nature” (54). Science deals, e.g., with how our genetic material (DNA) developed the way it did; how it relates to the DNA of other organisms; and why there is some genetic material that does not serve any apparent function. But there are also questions as to whether we are allowed to change our genetic material using technology;

¹ All references in the text are to this book, unless stated otherwise.

whether or not we violate some moral code if we change the genome of vegetables; and whether humans are more valuable creatures than bugs or bacteria. Those latter questions are of a different category, they concern moral issues and questions of value. Gould groups those questions under the discourse of religion. Though he admits that morality is not the sole domain of religion (Gould admits that there are also moral atheists), he asserts that traditionally religion has constituted the center of ethical reflection.

Religion and science are both *magisteria*. A magisterium is “a domain of authority in teaching,” “a domain where one form of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution” (5). The magisterium of science is the authority in teaching concerning fact and theory, while the magisterium of religion is the authority in teaching concerning questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. The basic thrust of Gould’s position is that the two magisteria of religion and science do not interfere; they are to be kept strictly separated. They “do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry ... To cite the old clichés, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven” (6). Thus it is called the principle of *non-overlapping magisteria*, or NOMA. This principle is an example of what Ian Barbour calls the *independence position*, where religion and science “can be distinguished according to the *questions* they ask, the *domains* to which they refer, and the *methods* they employ” (Barbour 2000, 17). In Gould’s words, if we want to know the differences between different magisteria, we should look “to the subject, the logic, and the particular arguments” (26). Each magisterium has its own rules of discourse, its own internal logic, defined by the people in the magisterium.

What are the consequences for religion? As mentioned, Gould places moral reflection entirely under the magisterium of religion. He admits that moral reflection is not limited to religion, but argues that “human societies have usually centered the discourse of this magisterium upon an institution called ‘religion’” (56; cf. also 58). The radical view issuing forth from his NOMA-principle is that religion is limited to the realm of human purposes, meanings, and values (4), and that it is not allowed to make claims about the factuality of nature. On this base he dismisses what Barbour calls ‘integration’ (Barbour 2000, 27ff.) and what Gould calls ‘syncretism’ of science and religion. This syncretism, according to Gould,

continues to embrace the oldest fallacy of all as a central premise: the claim that science and religion should fuse to one big, happy family, or rather one big pod of peas, where the facts of science reinforce and validate the precepts of religion, and where God shows his hand (and mind) in the workings of nature. (212)

Gould thus not only rejects natural theology, but also finds suspect (to say the least) any theology of nature that reflects from a religious perspective on the workings of nature. There is no way religion should concern itself with nature. Does this mean that religious believers should give up any belief in God? Not necessarily, for, according to Gould, even a scientist can be pious and devout, but (s)he should merely hold to a conception of God “as an imperial clockwinder at time’s beginning ...” (22; cf. 84f.). In theological terms, a *deistic* concept of God

is the only one allowed for the NOMA-principle. Any claim to miracles, “defined as divine suspension of natural law” (19; cf. also 85), therefore must be rejected as well.

It seems as if religion and science become completely and definitely separated, and I believe this is exactly what Gould intends. However, he leaves one small opening for contact. He believes that the NOMA-principle will eventually lead to *wisdom* when religion (moral reflection) and science are integrated (not fused!) in a coherent view of life (cf. 58). Honoring the NOMA-principle is the road to wisdom.

3. GOULD AND DIVINE ACTION

Gould states: “The first commandment of all versions of NOMA might be summarized by stating: ‘Thou shalt not mix the magisteria by claiming that God directly ordains important events in the history of nature by special interference knowable only through revelation and not accessible to science’” (85). Gould excludes divine action, for to argue that God works in nature violates NOMA, as it includes a religious claim about events in the natural world – the domain of science – as a result of divine action. The NOMA-principle thus imposes limitations on our concepts of God. Yet, one may wonder, does Gould not flagrantly violate his own principle? Gould writes *as a scientist* about religion, claiming *as a scientist* that religion *should not* make claims about the factual nature of the universe. It seem as if the NOMA-principle is entirely neutral, but on closer scrutiny this is not so: it is science that sets the limits for what religion can and cannot justifiably claim.

The problem is that underlying his approach there is a conflict-view which drives his position: the conflict between evolutionary theory and Creationism (cf. 125-170). Now, I believe it is incorrect to assume that Creationism (or Intelligent Design for that matter) is representative for religious attitudes towards the natural world in general. However, the conflict between the Creationist and scientific claims leads Gould to dismiss all religious claims about the natural world as illegitimate. Gould does not leave room for the possibility that religious claims are *totally unlike* scientific claims in the first place! He assumes that religious claims about the natural world share the internal logic intrinsic to scientific claims. How else can religious claims contradict scientific claims? But this is inconsistent with his insistence, mentioned earlier, that religion and science both have different logics. Gould seems to display a tacit scientism himself, as he judges religion by standards of rationality intrinsic to science.

Is Gould right in his assertion that religious claims to divine action are logically similar to e.g. scientific claims about natural causality? It is easy to see that we get into absurdities if we take this seriously. Suppose a father sees his first child being born, and exclaims: “Thank God! It’s a miracle!” Should we then propose to investigate the DNA of the child in order to establish who the real father is? And suppose there are found no traces of divine DNA, should we then conclude that the man was lying? These are absurdities that are caused by taking religious language as having the same logic as scientific language. Yet that is exactly how many scientists, Gould included, regard religious utterances.

But this attitude towards religious language is also embraced by many in the religion and science debate. In my book (Smedes 2004), I explore the way John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke deal with divine action, and I conclude, first of all, that their attempts to

construct new models of divine action are triggered by problems with divine action that derive from the very same scientific ‘category mistake’: the confusion of scientific and religious language. But, secondly, their own models are philosophically and theologically muddled, because they do not deal with the ultimate issue at stake, which is logical and connected with the use of language.

Gould’s arguments are compelling, because his way of viewing religion is so familiar to many of us. As the philosopher Rush Rhees writes about our understanding of miracles:

The difficulty [with miracles] is not because science has shown that there are no miracles. (How could it show that?) Our difficulty is partly in understanding what a miracle would *be*, and this is a result of our scientific ideas – a result of the mass of preconceptions from which we start and which we cannot escape, regarding how things should be viewed. (Rhees 1969, 7)

In other words, when talking about the possibility of miracles or divine action in general, our scientific concepts are an obstacle for assessing them properly. This “mass of scientific preconceptions,” or, as I would call it, the tacit scientism of Western culture is, I believe, also present in Creationism and Intelligent Design: they also holds to the tacit view that scientific and religious claims are on the same logical level. It is exactly their struggle with mainstream science that shows their scientific assumptions. No matter how much Dembski may want to argue against ‘naturalism,’ his scientific assumptions are as strong as are those of Dawkins or Dennett. And I agree with Gould that there is no wisdom to be found in such approaches.

4. COUNTERING SCIENTISM: LOGICAL AND PHYSICAL POSSIBILITIES

I agree with Rhees when he writes “that there may be wisdom in science, but ... it brings confusions if we think that its results reveal to us what the world is like” (Rhees 1969, 8). I do not for a minute doubt the tremendous insights that science provides us, but I simply believe that they are only painting certain parts of the pictures. The cultural scientism, to which Gould but also many theologians assent to, asserts that the sciences paint the whole picture. Rhees already hints at a possible response to those scientific tendencies in Western culture when he speaks about how science has affected our view of things: “We have come to rule out certain questions and certain sorts of explanations” (Rhees 1969, 7). As Gould writes, those questions and explanations that are not accessible to science, are illegitimate and excluded. But this is a very narrow way of viewing the world. In philosophical terms, what science has access to is the realm of what is physically possible. Yet, the physically possible is merely a subset of what is logically possible (i.e. what does not result in a contradiction). It may be physically possible that God suspends the laws of nature, but is it not logically possible to say that God can act in the universe by circumventing those laws in ways which are inconceivable to us? Can it not be possible that God’s action is so subtle, that it is only noticed by those that have eyes to see?

The scientific view of the world is narrow, and it may be possible that by taking science too seriously we simply do not notice other aspects of the world that simply cannot be captured in scientific terms. The tacit scientism of Western culture is pervasive in that we

simply do not notice God's presence anymore, except in certain circumstances, and even then we tend to rationalize our exclamations as being 'mere' metaphors or analogies. We have forgotten to see God in the ordinary, and we have to recover the capacity for wonder (Frost 2000). Gould is right in that science and religion are non-overlapping. Indeed, they are simply incommensurable, and any attempt to reduce one to the other leads to serious 'visual impairment.'

So, in the end, I am in basic agreement with Gould's position, though not with his arguments. Religion and science should not interfere with each other, as each has a different internal logic. Yet, the difference is not merely propositional or logical, having to do with making claims, but also with seeing the world differently, of dealing with the world in different ways, of *Being-in-the-world*. It is a difference in attitude, leading to action, leading one person to exclaim "Thank God! It's a miracle!" whilst leading another into silence. Which response is more appropriate? Who can tell without some *tertium quid*? Why not simply consent to those wise words of a poet, that

" ... in everyday life
it is the plain facts and natural happenings
that conceal God and reveal him to us
little by little under the mind's tooling."
(Thomas 1995, 355)

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