



Knowing the Word and the World?

H. FREDERICK REISZ, JR.

Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina

I. I THINK, BUT IT MAY NOT BE

It is easier said than known. Most of the time, we assume that our talk is about what really is. Philosophy, theology, and the philosophy of science ask, “Really?” How “real” is what we assume is real? When we talk about it, what are we “really” saying?

These questions are the sorts of things best left as play toys for indulgent and abstract philosophers. That is what we usually assume. What difference can it possibly make? Most of our lives are lived as pragmatists without knowing. Besides, it would be too risky to really know. Why risk the fate of the philosopher who exclaimed, “I think not!” and vanished into non-being.

The matter with matter is that it does matter. In all sorts of social, political, and ethical ways, how we think about our “talk” and how it relates to “reality” matters. In our vast and contentious pluralism, what we think we know about what we say is a matter of social significance and existential importance.

In the dialogue between scientists, theologians, and other people of faith, it is important to recognize that there are differing convictions about the relationship between our theories and/or models and what we know, think, believe, and/or construe about the “actual” world.

Equally, similar perspectives exist about how we know, think, believe, and/or construe the word. Are the philosophy of science and various modern schools of theology riding parallel rails? I think so. Will they meet at some point in

infinite and curved space? Only God “knows,”...I think. I will characterize five general approaches to the relationship between expression and what is being expressed as “actuality” or “possibility” in science and theology.¹

II. NAIVE REALISM: WHAT IT IS, I SAY IT IS

Naive realism asserts that what we are able to say scientifically about reality describes what actually exists and the manner in which things are related and interact in the “real” world. Generally affirmed scientific theories are statements that describe what the world is. Often such assertions are affirmed without remainder. There is no ambiguity, although there may be segments of reality that we have not yet been able adequately to observe and describe. Scientific theories are related analogously to actuality as the most exacting reproductions are related to works of art, or fine photographs to their subject, or a holograph to its object.

Many lay persons carry around in their heads this conception of science. The philosophy of science has moved far away from this position. However, many of us live our lives as if this

were the case. The contemporary quest for long life exhibits a naive realism as persons flock to buy vitamin C, oat bran, and broccoli, or consume aspirin at the release of a reporter's summary of the "latest scientific" study. Naive realists believe that scientific assertions are absolutely and relatively unambiguously true. They tell us what is real and guard us from what is fantasy and myth. Thus, coming into this century, science was conceived of as the savior of the world, because through science we would have unlimited progress toward truth. The science taught in many elementary schools, and too many high schools, reflects this view.

Theologically, fundamentalism is the conviction that parallels scientific naive realism. In fundamentalism, religious doctrines or theological assertions are statements about the nature of God and the relationship of God and world that are true without ambiguity. Through inspired revelation, theology can state what is the case. Revelation will reveal all in time.

By labeling these perspectives "naive" or "simple" realism, we place a valuative judgment on them. This judgment is backed by the historical and theoretical components that have produced the following views.

III. EMPIRICAL OR SCIENTIFIC REALISM: WHAT WE HAVE SAID IT IS PROBABLY IS WHAT IT REALLY IS

Scientific theorists have discovered limits to our abilities to observe. Some things are too large or too small or too complex or too far away for our current abilities. We have incomplete data. Our instruments may not be tuned finely enough. Thus naive realism gives way to empirical or scientific realism. Scientific realism believes that as scientific theories are used and prove to be helpful in

¹Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 34-38. My designations of theories of models in the philosophy of science are elaborations from and additions to Barbour's work. I have extended the discussion and related it to schools of theology.

predicting outcomes, explaining relationships, and indicating what can be expected, the theories prove that they are true. The hypotheses being tested yield theories that exhibit their trustworthiness over time and reach a level of conclusion that warrants our stating that they must reflect something like the entities, relationships, interactions, and outcomes in what is actual.

Scientific realism claims a weaker form of "truth." However, it still claims that we know what for all intentions and purposes is reality. Where naive realism asserts that scientific theories are true, scientific realism would state that scientific theories correspond to reality. If we use a visual model, the theories are not exacting reproductions but more of a template that can be placed over much of actuality and will correspond to it.

Neo-orthodox theology represents a theological cognate of scientific realism, a sort of theological realism. Its confidence in our ability to know God and reality is chastened. The experience of the hiddenness of God, the chastened view of the dominance of Christianity, the glimpse into the demonic edges of Christian triumphalism, the impact of the world wars and the holocaust in this century, all served to distinguish between the word of God and the word and ways of humanity. It was not as easy to equate theology and actuality. However, revelation remains God's graceful gift to us. That revelation which is the treasure of the church over time

and which is lodged in the tradition can be expressed and systematized in theology so that there is a correspondence to the realities of God and the world. Our perceptions and formulations of revelation become trustworthy over time as they are proven faithful to the word of God. God has remained changeless and eternal yet personally responsive in most neo-orthodox theologies. Thus there is a relatively unchanging reality or truth to which we might aspire. However, sin and finitude thwart our access to complete knowledge of God. In grace, God reveals to us. Over time and in Jesus Christ, this revelation has communicated reality. Thus we can claim a correspondence between our doctrines and our theology and the reality of God and the world insofar as they have been trustworthy for the people of God over time and faithful to the word of God most manifested in the Bible.

IV. EMPIRICISM AND POSITIVISM: WHAT I SAW IS, AND THAT IS ABOUT WHAT I SAID

The modern age brought the dawning realization that our instruments and our methods of observation were limited as we discovered things, in Robert Frost's words, "out far and in deep." Human imaginative powers were capable of great leaps. With the questioning of the extent to which science could be the savior of the modern world and the guide to unlimited progress, science itself drew up into a theoretical corner to defend itself. At least it could adequately state what it could adequately observe. Confidence was lodged in the specificity of the powers of observation and the inherent and invariant rational logic of mathematics.

Scientific theory should only be formed from data and theories that are the direct results of observation. Only those theories that are directly derived from observation are "true." There may be other theories that are pragmatically useful,

page 266

but they have a lower status and are not true. Ian Barbour has noted that in this view theories are derived directly from observations by the power of "inductive generalization," without the need of the mediation of models. The observer's power and specificity is such that the connectedness of observations is apparent. The observer is capable of directly reporting the observations in a connected and coherent theory. Such scientific theories are true. Using an analogy from the visual arts again, scientific theories are like trustworthy renderings or illustrations that replicate observations but that do not make any metaphysical claims. The assumptions of the perfectibility and unambiguous nature of observation are unspoken.

The theological correlates of this positivism are modes of neo-fundamentalism that focus the view of theology down to the specificities of a certain revelation directly observable in a specified text, community, historical tradition, or personal interpreter. The claims to truth are attached to the revelation delivered through a particular mode, person, or community. While it might be admitted that revelation has to be interpreted, there is a confident and truthful interpretation. While the Bible may have come through human agencies, there is "a" text authenticated by God that is truthful revelation in all its parts. It may take a trained and inspired observer to report the truth.

V. PRAGMATISM AND INSTRUMENTALISM: WHAT HAS PROVEN USEFUL, I SAY IT

IS, AND THAT GETS ME BY—WHAT WE SAY IT IS FOR US, IT IS FOR US

Science also discovered that by the required processes needed to observe something at the microcosmic level the observation itself affected what was being observed. There was no way to observe and not affect the outcome. Further, it was discovered that what in the past was assumed to be set in concrete, namely time and space, were themselves not fixed but relative. In addition, the very scales, units, or types of measurement used were not absolute but matters of choice relative to ourselves and affected what we observed, how we observed it, and how we would express what we observed in terms of conclusions. Different scales, units, and types of measurement would produce varied conclusions. There are varying types of mathematics yielding dramatically different results.²

Perhaps whether or not scientific statements really told us about actuality does not matter. What is crucial is what scientific theories enable us to do consistently. Pragmatism or instrumentalism does not assert that scientific theories make truth claims about actual reality. Scientific theories are instrumentally or pragmatically helpful to us.

Scientific or other theories are created by the human mind for operational purposes, although they can also be for other purposes (aesthetic, political, etc.). The pragmatic or instrumental view of scientific theories is that they do not refer to actuality for the purposes of making claims of truth. Scientific theories are only pragmatically or instrumentally useful. They enable us to relate one observation to another or predict future outcomes of relationships. They set directions for inter-

²See the article by Beverly Stratton in this issue.

esting programs of research or pragmatically enable us to control and manipulate our environment, disease, our relationships, values, social order, etc. If a theory pragmatically is useful or instrumentally enables us to do what we desire to do or can do, then it is “valid” in the sense of productively useful. There are no claims made as to its “truth.” Using a visual metaphor, scientific theories are like maps that enable us to negotiate a terrain even though in themselves they do not exactly correspond to the terrain. A map is judged by whether it works as a guide.

In America, since the beginning of this century, there have been pragmatic schools of theology, often aligned with the work of Josiah Royce, John Dewey, Charles Peirce, and William James in philosophy. They have often been characterized as rational religion in a liberal mode. Gordon Kaufman’s work represents a new manifestation of this stream. Modern liberation theologies in which praxis produces theology are a type of instrumentalist approach to theology. Theology is that which enables liberation in political and social circumstances and in thought. A newer contemporary variant related to this perspective is the current Yale School of theology. In his book, *The Nature of Doctrine*,³ George Lindbeck advocates a cultural-linguistic approach to defining the meaning of doctrine or theology. A theology states those rules of discourse, attitudes, and actions which a community has agreed will be authoritative for them. Religious myths, rituals, and doctrines structure human experience and the understanding of a “world” in a culture. They are instrumental to the creation of a people. In Lindbeck’s view, there is an important distinction between theology and doctrines and the more fundamental and communally “truthful” liturgical, kerygmatic, and ethical modes of speech and action. I sense in Lindbeck’s work an ambiguity about ontological reference. However, reality itself is socially constructed,

and doctrines are instrumentally purposeful as rules. Theology does not make ontological “truth” claims. It can be true to the life-world and revelation of a community of religious practice. A religion is adequate or “reasonable” insofar as it can assimilate and interpret the varied experiences of a community. It is instrumentally pragmatic. Other theologians now talk about theology as a particular “construal” of a world. Such construals can be judged or adjudicated by various means. Some of these means are instrumental or pragmatic.

VI. CRITICAL REALISM: WHAT I SAY SEEMS APPROPRIATE TO REALITY, AND THE FUTURE WILL TELL

A moderating viewpoint in the philosophy of science is critical realism. The critical realist knows that models and theories are creations of the human mind. They are both “rational” and “imaginative.” They are “construals.” These models or theories are used negatively to rule out certain things, and positively to enable certain things, processes, actions, etc. Some critical realists further claim that theories refer to “reality” in an ontological sense. They refer to that which is more than

³George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

page 268

particular to a community, historical time-space, or culture. While they intentionally refer to reality, their reference is flawed. Barbour says that they “inadequately represent particular aspects of the world for specific purposes.”⁴ However, over time, certain theories are refined and gain a universal usage which warrants claiming a validity for them which approaches “truth.” The theory coheres to reality. In another sense, it is inhabited by reality. The *critical* realist maintains a critical stance to test theories beyond older accustomed limits and from a wider variety of perspectives. However, the critical *realist* bears a faith that the theories ultimately will cohere with the “real” and be “true” for more than us. Using again a visual metaphor, scientific theories are like relatively abstracted paintings that attempt to express the inner reality of a thing using the talents of a particular artist, but with the hope of the work taking over, and having a life of its own. Eventually, some works are so “truly” expressive of reality that they not only survive, but as Tillich said, participate in the power and meaning of that which they re-present.

Religious people will recognize that the above view verges on the sacramental and incarnational. Some modern theology speaks of theological statements as “construals.” These are to be critically evaluated, and tested by the community of faith and across communities. While being bound as human formulations, still there is faith that God in revelation imparts the word in, with, and under the theology. There is an ingression of reality in these finite forms. Over time, the spirits are tested and the Spirit is discerned. Thus the referent of theological statements or the more primary religious symbols is reality in a more than limited communal sense. Truth is not only intended but addresses us. God is not a creation of human symbol-forming, but is the Creator. There is a confidence that God does break through and that some symbols and theological statements endure over time, enough to be warrantably asserted as “true.”

VII. HARDLY AN ENDING...JUST A BEGINNING

Every day in both science and theology, many of the above views fade into one another.

Any person or community may actually think, believe, or use more than one.

Theologians and religious people may help scientists to see the mythic dependencies of their own disciplines. Science can aid theology to be honest about the world and our capabilities of perception and formulation. Both science and theology can be aided in their dialogue together by noting what the presuppositions of their “talk” are. Too often we talk past one another because we assume we are talking on the same ground, when in fact we are separated by great fissures caused by disparate underground assumptions. Talking together about our talk and the status of our models and theories seems abstract, indulgent, and complex. It may be critically necessary for clarity and dialogue.

⁴Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 37.

H. FREDERICK REISZ, JR. is president of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and former senior pastor of University Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he developed much of this essay in discussions at Harvard and MIT. He is a theologian with interests in the philosophy of science.