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The Final Word: Prisoners of Our Own Device

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Abstract: Over-confidence in a set of beliefs is frequently buttressed by a binary mentality and, strangely for Christians, a microscopic view of God. Such misplaced assurance can quickly lead to a fixed outlook that assumes an aura of irrefutable permanence. That humans gravitate toward rigid ways of thinking is unremarkable, but it is especially surprising how many educated individuals seem trapped in a perpetually decaying orbit about their pet theories and theologies. For scientists, theologians, and philosophers purportedly engaged in a search for truth, this is a particularly troubling state of affairs and is the root of much unnecessary conflict at the interface of the disciplines.

Key Words: binary fallacy, size of God, interdisciplinarity, freedom, constraint, philosophy of science, Christianity

Intimations of Finality

Pulling off the highway beside the rural Cimarron Cemetery between Gunnison and Montrose, Colorado, I was amused to note adjacent to the small entrance arch a black and yellow road sign proclaiming, “No Outlet.” “Well, yeah,” I thought to myself, and wondered if the humor was intentional or the sentiment correct.

Unfortunately, although the apparent decisiveness of death is obvious, intimations of finality all too often also characterize the assertions of scientists, theologians, and philosophers: the prevailing assumption in these cases being that one has the final word on some matter of importance. As a result, individuals who should know better frequently end up erecting a fortress from which they are prepared, henceforth and forevermore, to defend their position to the death.² The form a “final word” takes can be quite varied, perhaps supporting one side or the other of a specific argument, proclaiming that science or theology or philosophy can provide no solution to a certain problem, or believing that reconciliation between competing views is impossible. Sometimes the only person actually affected is the one pronouncing the “final word,”

1. The author wishes to thank two anonymous reviewers and the editor for their helpful comments and suggestions.

2. Josh Reeves and Steve Donaldson, *A Little Book for New Scientists: Why and How to Study Science* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 84.

who by his or her assumption of ultimate authority simply undermines any possibility for growth in personal insight. More often, however, such a position constructs a barrier that gives the impression to others of opinion having been elevated to truth—a position which, ironically, effectively inhibits transmission of the desired message.³ The overall effect is therefore exactly opposite from that intended, for although some may be bullied into submission by these tactics, most thinking individuals will merely walk away.⁴

Now one would think that scientists and theologians, in particular, would be more forward-looking in their views.⁵ If we have learned anything from our obsession with modernity, it is that there is no such thing, for “Thoroughly Modern Millie” rapidly becomes “Formerly Modern Millie.” Yet despite that awareness, it is typical to discover both scientists and theologians acting as if they (or at least people they admire) have the final word. Thus we find physicists David Lindley and Russell Stannard announcing, respectively, *The End of Physics* and *The End of Knowledge*, while science writer John Horgan asserts *The End of Science*.⁶ These declarations sound somewhat reminiscent of Nietzsche’s claims about the end of God,⁷ but dormant theologies can also originate from more reverent perspectives. Thus it is not unusual to observe comparable proclamations which discount Jesus’ remark that “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear.”⁸

Putting Philosophy of Science in Its Place

Jesus also promised his disciples: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,”⁹ and it is relatively easy to see how a focus on this to the exclusion of anything else (i.e., his remark above) could lead to a tendency to think one has the final word. Yet there is a subtle but important difference in knowing the truth and in knowing that what we know is the truth. One might “know” several things about theology (or

3. Ibid., 115-16.

4. As Philip Clayton notes, “The wise man is the one who knows which opinions can be altered by the force of the better argument, which opinions should be altered but will not be, and which opinions go beyond matters of argumentation altogether” (Jean Staune, ed., *Science and the Search for Meaning: Perspectives from International Scientists* [West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2006], x).

5. Reeves and Donaldson, op. cit., 81-84.

6. David Lindley, *The End of Physics: The Myth of a Unified Theory* (New York: Basic, 1994); Russell Stannard, *The End of Discovery: Are We Approaching the Boundaries of the Knowable?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); John Horgan, *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Thomas Common (Blacksburg, VA: Thrifty, 2009), 20.

8. John 16:12. While some individuals merely appear to ignore this claim, others act as though Jesus was somehow subsequently able to transfer the entire divine intellect into a subset of his original and future disciples.

9. John 8:32.

biology), for instance, but that is not the same as knowing which of those things are actually true. Ultimately we can only have some level of confidence that something is or is not the case, and the measure of that confidence is our faith, be it scientific or religious.¹⁰ That is, we may actually have knowledge about something, but knowing if it is genuine is always problematic. Of course the issue of how we (think we) “know” things is at the heart of philosophy (but also psychology, neuroscience, and so on).

In any event, this approximate nature of knowledge need not lead to a paralyzing skepticism. What the early disciples “knew” to be the case about Jesus and what people have “known” to be the case about the universe are both examples of roller coaster rides through changing beliefs but, in both cases, with a general trend toward better understanding. In each of these situations it seems unlikely that any particular state of “knowledge” is the final word, but it also appears that any particular state of “knowledge” is typically superior to its predecessors (whether it be in terms of better predictions or better relationships).

The proclamations of modernity have been and always will be moving targets. Ideally we would hope to find ourselves moving closer and closer toward the truth about the universe and God, but that is a journey without end. Recognizing as much requires a blend of hindsight, insight, and foresight that is best achieved when disciplines such as philosophy, science, and theology work together.

Not everyone agrees. By restricting “knowledge” only to that which can be obtained via traditional methods of science, the logical positivists have eschewed this interdisciplinarity and thereby narrowed the scope—with their own peculiar version—for what might count as a final word. But any claims for a final word is always a narrowing of perspective, and logical positivism simply shows that people can be positive about something illogical.¹¹ Although some folks today sound its death knell, those dirges seem premature as logical positivism has apparently been resurrected in various postmodern guises which attempt to deny any real world at all.¹² Sadly, even theology can be subject to its own positivist twist along these lines, constructing a logical edifice without any foundational premises (other than the claim that there can be none). For both logical and theological positivists, it is indeed the case that, “people look at the outward appearance.”¹³

Certainly, any philosophy of science is subject to becoming the final word. Unfortunately, the very concept “philosophy of science” suggests not only a juxtaposition but also an estrangement of science and the humanities. Yet as the

10. Steve Donaldson, *Dimensions of Faith: Understanding Faith through the Lens of Science and Religion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

11. Compare Ian Hutchinson, *Monopolizing Knowledge: A Scientist Refutes Religion-Denying, Reason-Destroying Scientism* (Belmont, MA: Fias, 2011), 83.

12. Cf. Bernardo Kastrup, *More Than Allegory: On Religious Myth, Truth and Belief* (Washington D.C.: iff Books, 2016). I do not claim that these postmodern views and logical positivism are identical, only that they seem to share similar philosophic DNA.

13. 1 Samuel 16:7.

philosopher Roger Trigg (among others) has taken pains to note, besides being undesirable, the separation is actually impossible (though many fail to appreciate that fact).¹⁴

While we might expect philosophers to defend their turf, there is good reason to think Trigg is correct, if for no other reason than multiple perspectives appear to be a better bet for unraveling questions that by their very nature cross disciplinary boundaries. When it comes to asking what it means to be human, how we might rationally reconcile randomness and providence, where God fits into an evolutionary scheme, or how meaning arises from mindless mechanisms (among other questions like these), it behooves us to bring as many aids as possible to the task. It is, after all, these big questions that intrigue us. But if things are approached solely through a disciplinary tunnel, the likely result can be (as Trigg suggests¹⁵) a rigid and dogmatic view. He could have described it as “the final word.”

Freedom and Constraint

Failure to appreciate the need for interdisciplinary study and collaboration inhibits progress toward better answers to important questions of meaning and value, but it is not the only thing. In fact, in many cases it may merely be a symptom of a deeper set of problems.

For example, humans are plagued by a host of fundamental limitations including physically and chronologically confined brains, logically fallible reasoning, and the very nature of many of the most important problems we wish to solve (which can only be approached in approximate fashion).¹⁶ Although there may be little we can do about most of these, some limitations are of our own making—what we might term culture lock.¹⁷ As the Eagles warned us, we are prone to be “prisoners . . . of our own device.”¹⁸ Thus religious individuals from at least the ancient Greeks onwards have expended significant effort “to avoid having to face a fact and reform a bad system.”¹⁹ Thomas Wolfe suggests as much about science in his fascinating (if somewhat loose)

14. Roger Trigg, *Beyond Matter: Why Science Needs Metaphysics* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2017).

15. *Ibid.* See also concerns raised by Paul Feyerabend in *Against Method* (New York: Verso, 1993).

16. Donaldson, *op. cit.*

17. Giving rise to culture shock when our dreams of finality begin to fall apart.

18. Bill Szymczyk (producer), *Hotel California*, Eagles (Miami and Los Angeles: Asylum Records, 1976).

19. Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951), 181. This is Murray’s description of the theological position of the Roman Sallustius and counterparts in the fourth century A.D.

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account of the relatively recent reconsideration of universal grammar in the linguistic community.²⁰ Of course Thomas Kuhn had already made that clear years earlier.²¹

Some of those culturally dominated moments have frequently arisen when theological and scientific ideas collide. But it would be wrong to think that this is a phenomena only ushered in by “modern” science. In a classic example of a bipolar approach to science and religion, the Roman poet Lucretius, in his first century B.C. exposition involving the nature of matter, refers to “the tightened coils of dread religion,” “crimes to which religion leads,” and “human kind . . . miserably crushed . . . beneath religion.” His conclusion? “Religion now is under foot.”²²

Given subsequent developments in the past two thousand years (especially the advent of Christianity only a short time after Lucretius wrote), that ultimate declaration looks a tad feeble—but so do all flimsy theologies and theories in retrospect. When uttered, however, they are often no more than a condensation of the cultural atmosphere and can carry the authority of a final word. Thinking—much less saying—anything different is all but impossible when so constrained.

Perhaps the most pernicious of these traps is what we will call the “binary fallacy,” a problem which has undoubtedly plagued humans from the outset and is consistently evident today. This is the belief that things must be one way or the other with nary a bridge between. Examples abound, but a few will suffice. Thus attempting to describe a meaningful role for philosophy, theologian David Bentley Hart unnecessarily pits “some real correspondence between mind and world” against “a fortuitous and functional liaison forged by evolution.”²³ But why one versus the other? Binary choices such as this lead Hart to dismiss the possibility of artificial intelligence and the idea of consciousness as emergent, but that then leaves him in a dualistic world that is at least as mysterious as the one he rejects.

One of Hart’s goals is to undermine materialism, but in his book *Consilience* the staunch materialist E. O. Wilson declares that, “Ethical and religious beliefs are created from the bottom up, from people to their culture. They do not come from the top down, from God or other nonmaterial source to the people by way of culture.” He then asks, “Which hypothesis, transcendent or empiricist, fits the objective evidence best?” and concludes, “The empiricist, by a wide margin.”²⁴ Others would argue, but the problem originates in the framing. Wilson’s sleight of hand is to claim that there is but one choice and it must be between the options he has provided.

20. Tom Wolfe, *The Kingdom of Speech* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016).

21. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

22. T. Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. William Leonard (Charleston, SC: Forgotten Books, 2007)—this, no less, after first dedicating his work to the goddess Venus!

23. David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 47-48.

24. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 270.

The absence of any possibility of a bridge between competing views can also be seen in a salvo by evolutionary biologist Jerry Coyne and a rejoinder from seminary president Albert Mohler. In his article, the atheist Coyne made an impassioned plea that “science and faith are fundamentally *incompatible*,” proclaiming that science alone is “equipped to find real truth.”²⁵ In a quick response on his blog, Mohler suggested that science and religion could be friends but wanted to dictate how that friendship should occur.²⁶ Interestingly enough, despite the different ways these men see both science and religion, Mohler revealed that the similarity between them runs deeper than their zeal, agreeing with Coyne in the end that, “there really is no middle ground.”²⁷

This lack of belief in the possibility of any middle ground characterizes the binary fallacy and can even be seen in traditional conceptions of faith itself, which is regularly assumed to be an all-or-nothing proposition. Yet anyone who seriously scrutinizes his, her, or anyone else’s beliefs (be they about science, religion, or what have you) cannot fail to note the graded scale on which most beliefs occur.²⁸ Falling for the binary fallacy stifles the creativity needed for finding meaningful solutions and deeper insight into difficult issues, and is an easy way to avoid doing the real work of reconciliation.

Fortunately, because the binary fallacy is one of the primary means by which we confine ourselves, we retain the key to breaking free of its grip (and that of other culturally limiting prisons), but any real ability to do so will depend upon how we see both ourselves and that which surrounds us. Thomas Kuhn described an “essential tension” between “convergent” and “divergent” thinking.²⁹ Convergent thinking toes the party line—which for Kuhn was the reigning scientific paradigm but, for others, might be the current religious orthodoxy—and is in many respects paramount to “the final word.” Divergent approaches provide the chance to see things in a different light and can be radically strengthened by interdisciplinary efforts and collaborations.

In short, freedom means exploration—and unless one is exploring there is little reason to consider him or her free. There is however, something worse than imprisoning ourselves, and that is trying to confine deity. But that is only possible for a small God.

25. Jerry Coyne, “Science and religion aren’t friends” (*USA Today*, October 11, 2010), italics in original. For Coyne, evidently, faith is a synonym for religion.

26. Albert Mohler, “Science and religion aren’t friends?” (AlbertMohler.com., October 11, 2010). The science he would like to see “is not naturalistic”—but does that mean it is supernaturalistic? If so, how can it be science?

27. Ibid. But see (for example) Dennis Venema and Scot McKnight, *Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture after Genetic Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2017), 89-90, for a non-binary approach.

28. Donaldson, op. cit., 27-29, 33-54.

29. Thomas S. Kuhn, “The Essential Tension,” in *The Third University of Utah Research Conference on the Identification of Scientific Talent*, ed. C. W. Taylor (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959), 21-30.

On Big and Little Gods (and Ships Passing in the Night)

It would be difficult for anyone seeing the origins debate between Ken Ham and Bill Nye several years ago not to be struck by the almost complete lack of communication between them. Neither seemed prepared to believe it possible that the other had anything to offer of value to his own rigid set of beliefs. While one dismissed deity as mostly irrelevant and the other could not believe that the complexity of evolution might possibly lie within God's expertise, both appeared to be describing a very small god. It is not difficult to think that comparable issues plagued the Mohler and Coyne perspectives.³⁰ By definition, God is infinitesimally small for an atheist and perhaps barely measurable by an agnostic but, regrettably, the god constrained by anyone's limited vision (Christian or not) may not be much larger (and a god deemed in need of defense is probably too small to merit it). Sadly, a major reason for thinking one has the final word on matters religious or scientific (and which thereby prevents dialogue with others and excludes the possibility of questioning our own views) often boils down to the size of the god one believes to exist.³¹

As it turns out, falling for the binary fallacy is a prime way to limit God, and debates over interpretations of Scripture often provide classic examples.³² The resulting complications can be disastrous. Thus, crude expectations for the reincarnation of Elijah prevented people from seeing the significance of John the Baptist just as surely as a limited perspective on planetary organization blocked the view of a more intricate and fabulous cosmos that was there all along. Paul Tillich rightly notes: "When the representatives of faith impeded the beginning of modern astronomy they were not aware that the Christian symbols, although using the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic astronomy, were not tied up with this astronomy."³³ Unwarranted literalism implicitly puts God in a box and it is therefore easy to see why Tillich complains that "Literalism deprives God of his ultimacy and, religiously speaking, of his majesty."³⁴ It is not without justification, then, that Owen Barfield labels literalism the "besetting sin" and connects it with "a certain hardness of heart."³⁵ Of course unwarranted emphasis on symbolism can be just as harmful. It is difficult not to note a certain irony here.

30. Mohler's claim (Mohler, op. cit.) that "any Christian form of theistic evolution is a contradiction in terms" is really just his way of saying that he cannot imagine how God could have pulled it off. We can all be forgiven for being unable to imagine such things but is it not a trifle arrogant to use that limitation to restrict the Almighty?

31. Cf. Reeves and Donaldson, op. cit., 112.

32. Refusal to be held captive by the binary fallacy is not to deny that there remains a straight gate and narrow way (Matthew 7:13-14). It is not to concede that anything goes but that possibilities are limited only by God, not us.

33. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 82.

34. Ibid, p. 52.

35. Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 162-63. If literalism is a sin, the pretense of literalism—literal hypocrisy?—may be worse.

Historian Peter Harrison makes a strong case that the change from an allegorical to a literal reading of Genesis actually helped usher in the age of modern science,³⁶ but it seems equally clear that a literal reading of Genesis has more recently presented for many individuals one of the greatest barriers to acceptance of some of the insights of contemporary scientific theory. In any case, a big God should be able to support a big science and if one is going to take the dust in Genesis literally, it does nothing to diminish God's credentials to note that it was star dust!³⁷

It would be a mistake, however, to think that theologians and religious folk (for whom we might expect deity would loom large) are the only ones plagued by the size-of-God problem. Paradoxically, expansive views of the physical universe promoted by many scientists are often not mirrored in anything like an equally expansive theology. Why, for example, could Darwin not have been as broad-minded in his theology as in his science?³⁸ And why is it okay in the minds of so many people—including the religious—for science to progress but not theology? Of course collective theological insight sometimes does progress—one need only observe the growing understanding of God portrayed in the Bible to see as much. Yet when we are merely at the current end of the movement forward, we are less likely to appreciate that our insights are but a phase in that development.

Unfortunately, no one is immune and philosophers (perhaps especially philosophers of science and religion) are just as subject to a “final word” mentality as are scientists and theologians. In a recent article, for instance, J. P. Moreland ponders whether “cognitive and behavioral authority” comes from the church or the scientific community.³⁹ But why must only one of these have authoritative merit? In falling prey to the binary fallacy such positions precipitate a stagnant theology where god-of-the-gaps is upended by an even more insidious god-of-the-dead-end. Becoming and remaining aware of this is important for making sense of any hypothesis—scientific

36. Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

37. This is a reference to modern cosmological theory which postulates that the heavier elements of which living beings consist were formed in second generation stars (cf. Robert Jastrow and Michael Rampino, *Origins of Life in the Universe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

38. Reeves and Donaldson, op. cit., 111-12.

39. J. P. Moreland, “Theistic Evolution, Christian Knowledge, and Culture’s Plausibility Structure,” *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*, 2.1 (2017) 1-18. In attempting to support his major thesis, Moreland argues that the church has held a more or less static position on a literal interpretation of Genesis for two thousand years but conveniently ignores the variety of Christian interpretations that have actually been given during that time (including the contextual background of the Genesis and Pauline narratives) (cf. John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009]; Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say About Human Origins* [Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012]; Venema and McKnight, op. cit.). Moreland also fails to account for other changes in Christian thinking (some of which he is likely to embrace) (e.g., Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

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or theological—and its purported evidence. But although that is my final word for this
article, it can never be *the* final word. Caveat philosophus...