



The Value of Theology in a Scientific Age

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Abstract

The value of theology as a discipline has been challenged in recent years by a number of high-profile scientists, most prominently perhaps Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins. It has been questioned whether theology can bring anything to the table, particularly when compared with the clearly evident successes of modern science. This paper will take this challenge seriously and explore what value theology may have in the context of a scientific age, where the successes of the sciences have clearly reshaped how we think about the world. It will argue that theology offers a space and a language for discourse on the ineffable and intangible aspects of human experience, and can address the implicit philosophical and theological connotations of the scientific worldview.

Keywords

Theology, Science, Philosophy, Atheism, Academia, Hawking, Dawkins

“Philosophy is Dead” announces Stephen Hawking on the first page of his 2010 bestseller *The Grand Design*, co-authored with Leonard Mlodinow.¹ One suspects he holds similar sentiments towards theology. Hawking is perhaps the most famous and influential living scientist, and thus his statements or those he endorses are given due credence. Yet it seems strange to hear Hawking, who is himself one of the more philosophical of scientists, writing philosophy’s obituary. Indeed, it could be argued that it was the philosophical and indeed theological aspects of Hawking’s work which led to his recognition and status as one of the worlds’ foremost intellectuals. His work is littered not just with the facts and equations of his scientific endeavours, but also with philosophical and theological reflections on what this array of maths and physics means; he admirably offers the

¹ Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design: New Answers to the Ultimate Questions of Life*, (London: Bantam, 2010) p. 8.

popular reader the opportunity to explore the almost incomprehensible scale of the universe and cosmic history in a lucid and accessible way, and poses vital questions of its meaning. He explores the vastness of the space/time, and how this offers humbling philosophical reflections about our place in the universe.

Hawking considers whether the fundamental forces which allow for the universe to exist are indicative of a deeper meaning or purpose. Such reflections of course implore theological investigation, but again one suspects his views on the death of philosophy would be mirrored in his views on theology. He is acutely aware of the theological resonance of asking whether the universe was intended to exist, and his now infamous passage on whether we will ever understand “the mind of God” led to him being often mistaken for an ally of theologians adhering to the various interpretations of the anthropic principle, though he clearly lays his cards on the table throughout his work, and indeed has become more unambiguous in his atheism in recent years.²

Given that he attained such notoriety for the theological and philosophical connotations of his work, why the comments on the death of philosophy? Surely we would expect him to embrace it? His motives for proclaiming the demise of the oldest intellectual discipline stem not necessarily from inherent issues with philosophy itself, but it seems rather from his views that it is redundant; like an appendix serving a purpose at one point in evolutionary history, but now seemingly a waste of space. He feels that philosophy has been supplanted by science, now the sole source of all wisdom. It is easy to be sympathetic to this perspective when we look at the exponential rise of science over the last number of decades; it certainly seems science is the gift that keeps on giving. The successes of the sciences allow me to complete this article on a small computer whilst travelling on an airplane 35,000 feet above the earth. Science has eradicated diseases and sent humans to space; it has given us a glimmer into the cosmic drama that unfolds with supernovas and quasars, and the wonders of the subatomic world of quarks and photons. Science has made extraordinary leaps in our understanding, making known how astounding the universe is. So Hawking is most certainly justified in giving attributing the reverence to science that he does.

With regard to the achievements of science and its subsequent deserved veneration, however, such positive appraisals need not come at the expense of other disciplines, namely, philosophy or theology. Bearing witness to the magnificent flourishing of the natural sciences does not conversely erode the substance of philosophy or theology;

² Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From Big Bang to Black Holes*, (London: Bantam, 1988) p. 175.

there is no reason to think, as Hawking seemingly does, that philosophy and science are somehow in competition, and there is no reason for philosophy to die. The essence of the scientific enterprise, in fact, emerged from philosophical thinking. We now exist in an academic paradigm which draws distinct lines between disciplines; we acquire knowledge and instinctively categorise such knowledge into biology, economics, history, and so forth. Yet such categorisations are mainly for practical purposes, to make our ever-increasing body of knowledge manageable and teachable, but no such distinctions exist *a priori*. The great Greek thinkers did not distinguish between science and philosophy, for at that point, they were one in the same. So science and philosophy/theology are not in competition, nor are they fully distinct. There are differences of course, in terms of methodologies and subject matter, but there is no ontological or *a priori* reason for science and theology or philosophy to be bifurcated in any way.

Fact-Value Distinctions

It is tempting for many within the realms of theology to try to carve out a niche for themselves in response to the rise of science, identifying a particular domain where theology can feel comfortable and not under threat. The prominent ‘God of the Gaps’ mentality which posited God as an explanatory force in the mechanical universe was indeed significantly challenged when scientific theories unravelled explanations for phenomena previously chalked up to divine intervention. The most famous example of this is of course William Paley’s analogy of the watchmaker and the argument from design, later rebuked by Darwin’s explanation of complexity emerging from simpler forms.³ As a result, theology often sought bastions where science could not impose; if science was to continue down this road of uncovering the ‘how’ questions of the natural world, theology would focus its energies on the ‘why’ questions, or the moral questions, as evident in the oft quoted expression, attributed to Galileo quoting sixteenth century Vatican librarian Ceasar Baronius, “*Spiritus Sancto mentem fuisse nos docere quomodo ad coelum eatur, non quomodo coelum gradiatur*” (the holy spirit teaches us how to go to heaven, not how heaven goes).⁴ Voices within the scientific community have also adhered to such a fact-value distinction, or delineation of subject

³ William Paley, *Natural Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 1.

⁴ Also quoted by John Paul II, ‘The Emergence of Complexity in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology’, *Papal Addresses to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences 1917–2002 and to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences 1994–2002*, (Vatican City: The Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 2003) p. 342.

matter for science and theology. Perhaps the most renowned proponent of such a view was the scientist Stephen Jay Gould, who developed the methodological approach known as ‘NOMA’ or non-overlapping magisteria. Gould was particularly concerned with the fields of science and religion, and argued that particular questions belong to either the sphere of theology or the sphere of science.⁵

This diplomatic perspective is attractive, as it brings with it a certain clarity; theologians and scientists are presented with a space within which to work. This view however, is exceedingly oversimplified. Strict lines between the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ or between facts and values cannot be so easily drawn. This has been a prominent issue for philosophers for some time; deriving a moral ‘ought’ from a scientific ‘is’ became one of the cardinal sins of moral philosophy; the naturalistic fallacy. David Hume issued a clear warning in this regard, “Reason itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.”⁶ His warning was not heeded by everyone, however, and individuals such as Francis Galton in the nineteenth century took the ‘survival of the fittest’ premise of Darwinian evolution as a basis for social policy, proposing to implement measures aimed at preventing certain groups from breeding, “preventing the free propagation of the stock of those who are seriously afflicted by lunacy, feeble mindedness, habitual criminality and pauperism . . .”⁷ The philosopher G.E. Moore famously criticised such perspectives, again reiterating Hume’s warnings against committing the naturalistic fallacy, “These doctrines are those which maintain that the course of ‘evolution’ while it shews us the direction in which we are developing, thereby and for that reason shews us the direction in which we ought to develop.”⁸

When we more closely analyse how we develop moral positions we see that a reliance on scientific facts to some degree is often inescapable. The fact that humans feel pain and experience fear and worry, leads one to evaluate how we ought to treat them; we know from the fact that human beings feel pain, and the fact that such pain is largely unwelcome, that it seems morally reprehensible to impose pain on others. We have no qualms about destroying non-living matter, but might find it morally amiss to destroy an animal – why? Because we are aware of the fact that animals feel pain,

⁵ Stephen Jay Gould, ‘Nonoverlapping Magisteria’, *Leonardo’s Mountain of Claims and the Diet of Worms: Essays on Natural History*, (New York: Random House, 1998) pp. 269–284.

⁶ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896) p. 457.

⁷ Francis Galton, *Memories of My Life*, (London: Methuen and Co., 1908) p. 311. Of course we should be sensitive to social and historical contexts when reading such viewpoints.

⁸ G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922) p. 46.

and so forth. Such moral questions are so obvious that they become almost subconscious, and we often fail to take into account the extent to which we rely on facts to make such moral judgements. When matters get more complicated, scientific facts can too play a role. From the frameworks of evolutionary biology, our close kinship with the animals has been made known. Therefore, factually, our moral conscience becomes challenged as to why we afford human beings with certain moral rights that we do not offer to apes and elephants. Of course it is possible to justify why human beings carry greater moral weight, by noting that our capacity for conscious foresight, fear, and so forth, is greater than that of other animals and thus, we may experience greater anguish when hurt, threatened, imprisoned or killed. Yet even that is somewhat of a factual statement, acknowledging factual observations about our more complex consciousness. Moreover, on theological views which see human beings as special forms of life, moral judgements too are taken from the apparent fact, or at least the theological idea, that humans are somehow special; this is another example of taking a moral 'ought' from an 'is'.

The scientific enterprise may not set out to intentionally establish moral norms or make moral claims, but as our understanding of ourselves and the natural world grows, new facts bring implicit moral considerations. A clear example of this is the appreciation of the fragility of the environment made known to us in recent decades through scientific analysis. Such factual understandings carry with them clear moral imperatives as to how we ought to live. Our observations of how our actions are consequential for the environment (factual, measurable observations) lead us to develop new moral perspectives on fuel, waste, and other matters. So science and facts are certainly not silent on moral issues. It is thus impossible to draw vivid lines between theology and science on moral issues. Some, such as Sam Harris, one of the foremost 'new atheists' have gone as far as to say that science can potentially offer a complete framework for moral questions; if neuroscience can measure human happiness, then science can eventually offer a measurable framework for what is and what is not moral. Actions which measurably reduce suffering and increase happiness are the morally right actions (in some senses, Harris seeks to use neuroscience as a criteria for measuring the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill – the greatest happiness principle).⁹ Harris' argument is of course problematic, but one need not go that far to recognise the clear implications that scientific facts have for value judgements. Thus, neither theology nor philosophy have patents on moral discourse – partisans cannot be

⁹ Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science can Determine Moral Values*, (New York: Free Press, 2010).

so easily erected between science and theology, philosophy, or indeed any other discipline, no matter how much pragmatic clarity or comfort they may bring.

The Challenge to Theology

If it is acknowledged that theology does not have sole custody of moral questions, then where lies its value, if indeed it has any, in a scientific age? Is Hawking right in declaring the death of philosophy and the triumph of science as the only endeavour worth its salt? The atheist scientist Richard Dawkins asks the question, though more facetiously, “What has theology ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody? When has theology ever said anything that is demonstrably true and not obvious?”¹⁰ Given Dawkins’ characteristic antagonism towards theology, it has become common to almost write off completely his sentiments in this regard, as Nicholas Lash has done,¹¹ or else challenge his views head on, as Alister McGrath and Keith Ward have.¹² Of course theology has a value; it does something; the thousands of theology departments in universities across the world would seemingly be quiet and dull places if theology has never said anything of the smallest use to anybody. Yet there is some substance in Dawkins’ question if it were to be rephrased as to ask what theology offers to the wider-than-theology academic community. This is a question we do need to ask and take seriously.

Theology is often defined using Anselm’s expression of ‘faith seeking understanding’. Faith seeking understanding, however, can be a query dealt with introspectively. Theological queries can be put forth for theological investigation, and theological answers can be derived. Though are theological answers to theological problems useful to the non-theological world? This question is becoming increasingly important as the character of academia changes in line with developments in information technologies. Academia is acquiring an increasingly public character given the ease with which information can be shared. One can access scholarly resources on just about anything from sitting at home, and some universities have even embraced this by offering open access to some of their most valued courses through massive open online learning. Individuals like Dawkins and Hawking also represent a parallel of celebrity culture within academia, and

¹⁰ Richard Dawkins, ‘The Emptiness of Theology’, *Free Inquiry* 18.2 (1998).

¹¹ Nicholas Lash, ‘Where Does the God Delusion Come From?’, *New Blackfriars*, 88.1017 (2007).

¹² Alister McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) and Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly is a God: Doubting Dawkins*, (Oxford: Lion, 2008).

given that they very publically seek to pit science and theology in opposition to one another, theology can no longer be content with introspection; it must face up to this new model of academia where values, beliefs and intellectual traditions are shared with unprecedented openness. Through a shrinking of the global village, theology is thrust into the public arena where it meets its most vehement critics, and thus needs to assert itself. Globalisation is affecting academic subjects too, and the conceptual divisions which previously kept disciplines separate are being eroded given the ease of access to information one now has. This is largely a positive development, but the question remains as to how theology asserts itself in this very public setting, and indeed, what does it have to offer, particularly in a scientific age?

The Scientific Setting

The narratives of religious belief systems which theology predominantly deals with are situated in a particular historical and cultural context, one that is very different from our current age of scientific understanding. Science is as yet an unfinished project, and the themes of human identity explored in religious narratives are timeless, but it would be deeply imprudent and indeed intellectually irresponsible if we do not appreciate how much our worldview has changed dramatically as a result of scientific discoveries. For example, the prevalent pre-Darwinian philosophical ‘great chain of being’ which postulated humanity as the pinnacle of creation seems to struggle to be reconciled with the image of Earth as a tiny dot, seemingly insignificantly floating in a universe with trillions of stars and planets. Same too for when we take into account that the four basic chemical components of our bodies are the same components that make up all other living things; that we are distant relatives of cows, carrots, and HIV. So with regard to questions on the nature of human beings, I dare say that they are rendered unintelligible unless we take note of these reflections from the sciences.

What then are the characteristics of the scientific age in which theology now finds itself? What kind of image of the world do the sciences portray? What aspects of the scientific picture, according to Hawking and Dawkins, make God redundant? It is a plain fact of history that science has provided explanations for natural phenomena which at certain points in time were largely attributed to mythological forces; the rise and setting of the Sun was attributed to Apollo, while thunder was attributed to Thor, and so forth. Some mourn the loss of such powerful mythology; for example, Dawkins titled one of his books after the romantic poet John Keats’ famous lament of Newton’s

explanation of the colours of the rainbow.¹³ Yet I agree with Dawkins as he notes that our scientific explanations of such phenomena only add to their marvel; in fact, the scientific explanations for any given phenomena can offer an additional dimension of the beauty of nature; a new angle to be appreciated. The great epics of cosmic and biological evolution are more grandiose than any mythology could have ever envisaged; the wildest and most fantastical limits of the human imagination could never come close to the extraordinary reality of how we came to be. The expanding universe of a hundred billion galaxies, each containing a hundred billion stars like our sun, offers a new perspective for how we see the world.

In getting to this picture, the predictive successes and explanatory prowess of the natural sciences seem to have validated particular presuppositions that are philosophical in origin, namely the Aristotelian endeavour to understand the world by examining the ‘why’ of things, or in other words, causes.¹⁴ Modern science has followed the assumptions of an unbroken chain of causality which can in principle, explain every phenomena in the universe – the worldview known as scientific naturalism (though of course this appears in various guises, and with various objections). Scientific naturalism infers from the successes of science that any phenomena can be explained naturally even if we cannot yet provide a natural explanation. The origin of life is an interesting example, given that heretofore, chemists and biologists have been unable to definitively explain beyond mere postulation how the first DNA or RNA molecules formed. However, on the naturalistic view, it is inferred that this formation occurred naturally. This is inferred because almost all observed physical and chemical events seem to be open to natural explanation (even if one has not yet been found), and thus, there is no reason to assume that the significant event of the origin of life is any different.

This understanding of the image of the world presented by the successes of the sciences often sits uncomfortably with many theologians. If all events are explicable in terms of cause and effect, then what of God? For Dawkins, Hawking, and others, God is an outdated character excised from unfolding drama of existence – as Nietzsche famously stated, “God is dead.” A naturalistic position may cause significant tension with a theological worldview as it may leave God redundant and shape a deism or even atheism. This implication of naturalism is what has spurred theologians such as David Ray

¹³ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*, (London: Penguin, 1998).

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Physics*, Richard McKeon ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (New York: Random House, 2001) p. 240.

Griffin to assert its incompatibility with Christianity.¹⁵ In order to avoid this, what has been most common is for theologians to seek areas of compatibility between religion and science, or even between religion and naturalism. Ideas of God acting in the universe through the laws of nature, rather than against them have become popular, as have notions that certain aspects of the universe are inexplicable by science alone. Even on these compatibilist models of religion and science, however, the question still emerges as to what theology brings to the table. One may be able to assert that science does not contradict theology, but that does not go far enough in addressing the question of what positive value theology has.

The Value of Theology in a Scientific Age

If one accepts the naturalistic premise of science, that all phenomena in the universe are explicable naturally in terms of cause and effect, then particularly profound philosophical questions become implicit. There is of course the burning question of what started this domino-effect causal chain – the Aristotelian prime-mover argument. Yet this argument is not enough to give theology substance; indeed, why does the universe necessarily need to have a ‘beginning’, and why identify that first cause with a God? There are other questions though, which become more and more visible as we approach the peripheries of scientific understanding; why does the universe exist? Why is the universe the way it is? Why is the universe lawful? The elegance of the mathematical formulations which describe the fundamental forces at work in the universe beg philosophical investigation; the Dutch theologian Willem Drees terms such questions ‘limit questions’.¹⁶ These questions are necessarily beyond the grasp of scientific explanations, because they are questions pertaining to the very nature of science itself. Why is the universe so logical, and comprehensible? Why does science work, and work so well? As Einstein famously said, the fact that the world is comprehensible is a miracle.¹⁷

Moreover, there are aspects of our existence which are beyond measurement; aspects of our existence that are ineffable and intangible. There are notions such as purpose, meaning, value, awe. These are unmistakable realities for all of us – irrespective of one’s

¹⁵ David Ray Griffin, *Two Great Truths: A New Synthesis of Scientific Naturalism and Christian Faith*, (London: Westminster John Knox, 2004) pp. 74–75.

¹⁶ Willem B. Drees, *Religion, Science and Naturalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 18.

¹⁷ Taken from the German phrase, In diesem Sinne ist die Welt unserer Sinneserlebnissen begreifbar, und dass sie es ist, ist ein Wunder. Albert Einstein, ‘Physik und Realität’, *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, 221.3 (1936) p. 315.

religious beliefs, we encounter these experiences throughout our lives. They are identifiable but inexplicable. Feelings of love, oneness with nature, mystery, and value, are important facets of our experience, and appreciating the world as material and a result of cause and effect does not diminish them. Even if one understands human consciousness as a manifestation of particular physical brain-states, this does not make our experiences of value and meaning any less significant. Scientific naturalistic explanations for all aspects of the universe does not preclude higher-level discussion on such profound issues like purpose and value – that would be like ignoring the emotive power of music because you can understand it in terms of vibrating strings and sonic waves.

It is with respect to these ineffable and intangible aspects of human experience that theology and religious traditions have a clear role; it offers a sphere of discourse within which such immeasurable notions can be discussed. Concepts of meaning, purpose, awe, value, the divine, and so forth, are not fully explicable in terms of science. This is not to say that such concepts are not natural, but like art and music, cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts; a higher-level of analysis is required. If, as neuroscience seems to indicate, the human mind is a construct of various electromagnetic states which are ultimately physical in nature, this does not spell the end for psychology – indeed neuroscience may be able to provide important insights for psychology. So too for theology and philosophy; the explanatory prowess of the natural sciences does not mean that questions about meaning and purpose can only be discussed in terms of mathematical formulae – though perhaps such mathematical formulae may offer fruitful resources for such questions. There still exists a whole sphere of discourse to which theology and religious traditions have an important contribution to make.

The critics will of course object and note that the subject matter of theology (the divine, meaning, and so on) is deeply ambiguous – it is often beyond the scope of numbers and experiments. This criticism is of course valid; notions such as the divine, hope, meaning, etc. are deeply ambiguous. Yet they are also important features of our realities. Do we thus ignore them merely because we cannot measure them? They are ambiguous concepts yes, but is such ambiguity tantamount for discounting them? I do not believe so. Solely dealing with measurable phenomena brings with it a certain clarity of course; theories can be tested and verified (to the point where philosophers will allow one to say anything is ‘verifiable’). However, clearly ‘real’ aspects of our experience such as our notions of meaning and purpose should not be ignored. In fact, even certain scholars of an atheistic disposition have acknowledged such functions of theology and religious traditions in providing a realm of discourse for such matters. There has been a growth in the number of atheistic religious

naturalists in recent years; those who are not theists but see a certain value in how religious traditions explore the world, for example Jerome A. Stone and Ronald Dworkin.¹⁸ This is not a bad thing for theology, as it shows at least one aspect of its value to the non-theological community.

Theology also has particular terms for concepts which we do not fully understand – the most prominent of terms being ‘God’. This is a lexical point; we attribute terms to things and in doing so, we employ language as a symbol. The word ‘tree’ is nothing more than oddly shaped lines on a page, but the word represents something real, namely, an actual tree. In cases such as ‘trees’, ‘grass’, ‘cat’, things are quite simple, as we can see, touch, and analyse these items. But with regard to terms such as ‘jealousy’, ‘love’, ‘hate’, the lexical symbols we use represent something much more intangible – but still important facets of our experience. Within science too, the symbolism of language plays an intrinsic role; as Nietzsche once wrote, science is “exposed to the seduction of language.”¹⁹ Science uses lexical symbolism to portray certain points about the world, but the world existed before language, and thus, it does not always fit neatly into our descriptions. This leads to difficulties and arguments amongst scientists; our language cannot equivocally grasp the realities of the intricate relationship between time and space, for instance. A particularly prevalent example is Dawkins’ concept of genetic selfishness – he used this analogy which was meant in terms of consequentialism or functional behaviour and not in any normative ethical sense; a point overlooked by many critics. The sciences use the best terminology available to them, being mindful of its imperfections and inaccuracies. Physicists are particularly blunt when it comes to the employment of language; they use clear and succinct terms like ‘big bang’, ‘black hole’, ‘super-strings’ and so forth. These terms give us a general idea of what such phenomena are, but they of course fail to do any real justice in describing such extraordinary natural phenomena.

Theology finds itself too at the mercy of language – perhaps even more so, given that its subject matter is often less tangible than genes or planets. Take for instance the word ‘God’. This term is perhaps the most value-laden and emotively provocative term in all language. Yet like all language, it is a symbolic tool – one which serves to represent something ambiguous and ineffable. It is true of course, that with an absence of humility many theologians wax confident about

¹⁸ Jerome A. Stone, *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); see also, Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, Keith Ansell Pearson ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 26.

God without appreciating the ambiguities and mystery of the word; such theology should be suspect. The influential linguist and political commentator Noam Chomsky makes an interesting categorisation which is applicable in this current discussion – though he mentioned it in a different context. He distinguished between problems and mysteries, noting that problems are “questions that we seem to be able to formulate in ways that allow us to proceed with serious inquiry and possibly to attain a degree of understanding” whereas mysteries include “questions that seem to elude our grasp, perhaps because we are as ill-equipped to deal with them as a rat is with a prime number maze.”²⁰ Concepts of God or the divine would clearly be more comfortable under the rubric of mysteries, and this should be embraced and taken seriously; again, ambiguity is no reason to ignore.

It is clearly demonstrable that religious language is deeply symbolic when we look even on a very superficial level; we refer to God as ‘He’, ‘Father’, ‘above’, and so on. Such terms are not meant in any literal way – indeed such terms may in fact cause deep-seated consternation as father-child relationships may be projected onto God leading to every person having a different image of God, some positive, loving, and protective, some negative, abusive and domineering. The psychological undercurrents of such images of God were the substance of Freud’s critique of religious belief,²¹ but they were also used in furtherance of understanding humanity’s relationship with the divine by Hans Urs Von Balthasar.²² Theologian Paul Tillich made important contributions in this area also, as he clearly notes the function of religious language when speaking of God or the divine. He proposes the term ‘depth’ when speaking of the divine – an appropriately ambiguous term which does not overconfidently and fallaciously try to define an indefinable mystery. He uses the concept of depth not as spatial, but as a lexical symbol for a spiritual dimension.²³ The banalities of everyday life, Tillich writes, are surface-level distractions which drive us from our own existence, as opposed to us being in command of it.²⁴ True being, Tillich feels, is beneath our surface experiences; there is a depth beneath our day-to-day experiences, which he identifies as true being. It is this infinite and inexhaustible depth which Tillich identifies as God.²⁵ The aspects of our human

²⁰ Quoted in William G. Lycan, ‘Chomsky on the Mind-Body Problem’, Louise M. Antony and Norbert Hornstein eds., *Chomsky and His Critics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) p. 23.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Religious Ideas As Wish Fulfillments’, Chad Meister ed., *The Philosophy of Religion Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2008) p. 502.

²² Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, Medlar Kehland and Werner Loser eds., (New York: Crossroad, 1997) p. 99.

²³ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of Foundations*, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1966) p. 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

experience, which seem to be more than what we experience on the surface level, are indicators of depth. Tillich notes that it is that spiritual dimension which religious symbolism attempts to signify.

Again, the critics will indicate the ambiguities of such notions, but as Tillich rightly notes, the symbolic character of such language does not diminish its truth.²⁶ So the subject matter of theology can be ambiguous, yes, but that does not diminish its truth or indeed its value. As discussed above, even the subject matter of the hard sciences, the less ambiguous concepts of matter and biochemistry raise implicit questions which are beyond the scope of measurement – why are we here? Are we meant to be here? And so forth. Here is where theology has a valuable function which contributes not just introspectively, but also to the wider academy – it give a space and a language when asking these important questions.

Of course, this is not the only external function of theology, if theology is understood etymologically as talk about God or study of God, for this includes too the study of talk about God or talk about the concept of God, usually *vis-à-viz* religious traditions. Theology like most other disciplines in the modern academy has become more and more fragmented with those in biblical studies, or religious studies distancing themselves from theology. Such disciplines, which could sit rather comfortably under the umbrella etymological definition of theology are also vitally important, particularly in terms of prospective international relations, as Hans Küng observed, “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religion.”²⁷ The foundational beliefs of others needs to understood (insofar as possible) in order for diverse populations to coexist. Moreover, one cannot begin to appreciate the history of the world if such a history is written minus an appreciation of the world’s religious beliefs. One only has to look to Israel and Gaza, or to Irish history, to see the significance of religious beliefs (for better or worse) in the formation of our societies. Furthermore, our literary history, philosophical history, art history sociology, and many other areas require knowledge of religious traditions which is provided to the academy by theology or religious studies/study of religion. Notwithstanding these important facets of scholarly interests in religion, it is the language of theology in attempting to discuss the ineffable aspects of our existence that gives it a valued niche in a scientific age.

²⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) p. 180.

²⁷ Hans Küng, *Islam, Past Present & Future* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007) p. xxiii.

Conclusion

Although Hawking is clearly premature in pronouncing the demise of philosophy and theology at the hands of the natural sciences, there is some substance in his statement, made with characteristic overemphasis. The substance lies in the unprecedented paradigm shift brought about by our scientific perception of the universe – a paradigm shift which must change our perspective with regard to important theological and philosophical concepts regarding ourselves and our place in the universe. One could go as far as to say that a number of issues, particularly those relating to what it means to be human, are rendered unintelligible without insight from the sciences. Yet the image of the universe presented by the sciences, which Hawking himself had no small part in bringing to public attention, clearly makes implicit statements and asks implicit questions which are philosophical and theological in nature. There are clear realities of our everyday experience, deep-seated feelings and of meaning, purpose, value and awe – ineffable, and intangible, but real. Theology is a vehicle for investigation of such topics; in a sense, it has a lexical function. Moreover, it is not a *mere* lexical function, nor is it necessarily a religious function. Indeed atheists encounter such experiences, even if they do not identify them with the divine, and that is an exciting debate to be had; how non-religious discuss such matters. It is here that theology carves a bay for itself in the academy, offering a space for discourse that engages with those immeasurable but deeply significant facets of our human experience.

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