

ITEST for the Future: Science, Philosophy, Theology

Eric A. Reitan, PhD

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

Cardinal Rigali Center • 20 Archbishop May Drive • Suite 3400-A • St. Louis, Missouri 63119 • USA
314.792.7220 • www.faithscience.org • E-mail: mariannepost@archstl.org

I grew up in a faithful Lutheran family, the son of a biology professor, a man of strong convictions, a Darwinian and a practicing Lutheran, and the son of a preacher's kid, a woman devoted to her father, who was himself a Lutheran Minister, a democratic socialist and an opponent of dialectical materialism and scientific reductionism. I rejected organized religion at the mature age of 9 or 10 and was a full-fledged atheist --- not simply an agnostic --- by the ripe old age of 14 or 15. I went to college as a scientific atheist, convinced that modern physics was the highest human wisdom, that fundamental particles moving according to the immutable laws of nature explained all that is, was and ever will be. Religion was a crutch for those too stupid or too weak to understand or to handle the harsh realities of the natural world; God was a projection of the human heart's longings and desires, arising from fear and powerlessness, a hope that not only the fittest would survive and flourish; and immortality mere wishful thinking for those too timid to stomach the thought of perishing forever into boundless empty space and endless indifferent time.

Now a Catholic priest, a professor of philosophy, and a teacher of seminarians, I maintain my fundamental scientific outlook on the world. In fact, it was my scientific curiosity, my desire to understand the world of nature, that moved me to acknowledge the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul and the action of the Holy Spirit in human history. For me, "science" --- natural science --- was, is and always will be the foundation of my faith, the source of my religious sentiments and the basis of my theological worldview. Grace perfects and completes nature; faith complements and rises above reason; religion affirms and raises up (or, is at least meant to raise up) all that is truly human, all that borders on the divine within us. It was my studies of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, or, rather, my study of nature with the aid of Aristotle's and Aquinas' insights, that opened up my narrowly mathematical and physical outlook to the reality of transcendence and immateriality, in knowledge, in causality, and in real existence. With a broader understanding of physical reality than is generally allowed by modern mathematical science, with a more holistic view of natural substances, a more varied and complete account of physical change and causality, Aristotle arrived at the existence of the Unmoved Mover, a being (or, rather, something beyond "a being") that is completely immaterial, separate from change and motion, outside of time, infinite in power, with no need of improvement and no possibility of corruption, something which, Aquinas says, all people call "God."

It was Aristotle's empirically grounded and scientifically reasoned argument for the Unmoved Mover, along with Aquinas' careful and critical acceptance of that argument, that enabled me to perceive the causality of God within all the intricate workings of nature and to recognize the providential hand of God's wisdom and love throughout the whole of history. The central mysteries of our Christian faith --- the Trinity, the Incarnation --- do not, and, indeed, cannot, contradict our knowledge of the universe created, sustained, and moved to action and completion by the one God of faith and reason. Neither can our truly scientific understanding of nature destroy the fundamental tenets of our redemption and salvation.

What passes for faith, religion and theology in our own day (as perhaps in any other day) is sometimes no more than wishful thinking, an irrational clinging to traditional certainties in the face of modern confusion, a promotion of personal preference or a maintenance of some perceived cultural identity, whether traditional or contemporary, in our constant struggle for power and survival. Moreover, what passes for science or scientific knowledge of nature is sometimes no more than a fanciful interpretation of a rigidly narrow-minded mathematical and materialistic outlook that refuses to question its foundations and methods or to acknowledge the limits of strictly experimental and quantitative techniques of analysis. I challenge all of us who inhabit these "two cultures" to open our minds and imaginations, to engage in a "common quest for understanding," to live and to work together for a better world, rooting ourselves in the concrete experiences of nature and history and opening ourselves to the realities that lie beyond our present horizons.

Through my own historical studies of science and philosophy, in the thought of Aristotle, Albert the Great and Aquinas, Galileo, Descartes, and Newton, Einstein, Heisenberg, and others, I have come to believe that it is possible to formulate an integrated worldview, based in natural science and incorporating philosophical and

theological insights. In fact, I believe that it is truly impossible to be a philosopher or a theologian without first being a natural scientist.

An understanding of “nature” and “body” and “human being” and “change” begins with physical, chemical, biological, and psychological concepts and realities. Any philosophical or theological analysis of these realities presupposes and depends upon our initial mathematical and empirical treatments of these natural, created, and ultimately redeemed realities. However, I believe that our empirically grounded analysis must go beyond the mathematical and mechanical to consider the whole physical reality in all of its complexity --- its aims, its internal structures, its qualitative features, and its causal effectiveness and capacities for change.

I believe that some kind of philosophical analysis of natural realities, grounded in our empirical experience, can help to bridge the gap between our modern dichotomies of body and soul, matter and spirit, fact and value, science and religion, and so help us to deal more effectively with issues of life and death, sexuality, personal freedom, and social justice. Critical, historical studies of the relationships among science, philosophy, and theology are absolutely necessary, if we are to develop a broader vision of nature in our own day and if we are to arrive at an ever more critical, rigorous, and realistic assessment of the limits of philosophical and theological speculation. Perhaps we can in this way re-evaluate the apparent conflicts between science and religion and formulate for ourselves a worldview that realistically deals with the brute facts of nature and opens hopefully into a world of truly human and ultimately divine wisdom and peace and love.