

The Science of Unknowable and Imaginary Things

An Invited Position Paper By

Jack David Eller,
Community College of Denver

Editor's Note: The “Invited Position Paper” segment is a unique feature to SHERM journal where hand-selected scholars are invited to write their particular standpoint or attitude on a specific issue. While the position paper is intended to engender support for the paper's line of reasoning and overall conclusion, the paper is not intended to be a simple op-ed piece. Rather, each essay must be academic in nature by deriving its position from verifiable data and/or the author's training and experience as a scholar in a particular field of study.

In this particular case, the author was asked to answer the following question:

“Can the study of theology and/or metaphysics be classified currently or ever qualify in the future as a scientific endeavor? Why or why not? If yes, what criteria or methods would need to be in place and practiced to make them scientific? If no, what is it about ‘science’ that prevents theology and/or metaphysics from qualifying?”

Abstract: In this paper, I address the question of whether metaphysics and theology are or can become science. After examining the qualities of contemporary science, which evolved from an earlier historic concept of any body of literature into a formal method for obtaining empirical knowledge, I apply that standard to metaphysics and theology. I argue that neither metaphysics nor theology practices a scientific method or generates scientific knowledge. Worse, I conclude that both metaphysics and theology are at best purely cultural projects—exercises in exegesis of local cultural and religious ideas and language—and, therefore, that other cultures have produced or would produce radically different schemes of metaphysics or theology. At its worst, metaphysics is speculation about the unknowable, while theology is rumination about the imaginary.

Keywords: Science, Metaphysics, Theology, Exegesis, Cultural Comparison

Introduction

CONSIDER THE ETHER. BASED on the discovery that light was or was like a wave, and on the understanding that waves of sound or water require a medium that is “waving,” nineteenth-century scientists hypothesized the existence of a light medium that they dubbed the “ether” (i.e. light was waves

of ether). It was predicted that the speed of light should be relative to the ether, just as the speed of sound varies as sound passes through air, water, metal, etc., and that the movement of the earth through this omnipresent ether should generate an “ether wind” that affects the speed of light. Although fiendishly difficult to measure, Albert Michelson and Edward Morley devised an experiment in 1887 using mirrors in various positions to measure changes in the speed of light through the hypothetically moving ether. Detecting none of the predicted changes, the Michelson-Morley experiment conclusively disproved the existence of the ether, and scientists then and since have universally abandoned the idea.

Consider now “substance” and “God.” For Aristotle and much of subsequent philosophy, substance is that which “stands under” (*sub*, stand + *stare*, to stand, to make or be firm) the things that we experience. It is what makes things what they are. Aristotle regarded substance as the “essence” of a thing, the “ultimate substratum, which is no longer predicated of anything else” and cannot be further reduced.¹ Call it a hypothesis if you will, but what possible observation, measurement, or experiment could reveal anything of the nature of substance? How many substances are there—two à la Descartes (matter substance and mind substance), one à la Spinoza (which is equivalent to God), or more—and can we even know if substance exists? For traditional Christianity and related theisms, God is that which made and sustains the universe as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent. It regards God as the ultimate cause, which/who is not caused by anything else. Call deity, along with Victor Stenger, a hypothesis if you will.² But what possible observation, measurement, or experiment could reveal anything of the nature of God? How many gods are there—one à la Christianity and other monotheisms, many à la polytheism—and can we even know if god(s) exist?

It should be obvious, given the contrast between the ether, substance, and god(s), what position I will be taking in this paper. On the question—are metaphysics and theology scientific, or can they be?—I answer with a resounding, no. Despite some feeble pleading on their part, neither metaphysicians nor theologians have practiced or can practice anything approaching a scientific method, nor have they produced anything approaching scientific knowledge (or arguably any knowledge at all). Indeed,

¹ English translation appears in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, W. D. Ross, trans. (London: Global Grey Books, 2018), 78.

² Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis; How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

thing that Western philosophers are not aware of, it's the existence of other peoples with different intellectual traditions."⁵² But if he is correct—and he is—that knowledge of “other peoples and of the Other in general are necessary conditions of thinking,”⁵³ then metaphysics, theology, and philosophy as a whole will finally begin their mission when they take these other human experiences and thought-systems seriously. Science can rescue metaphysics and theology from irrelevance and error, but neither will be the same, and both will be humbled after a good scientific purging.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Angere, Staffan. *Theory and Reality: Metaphysics as Second Science*. Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 2010.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by W. D. Ross. London: Global Grey Books, 2018.
- Badham, Paul. “What is Theology?” *Theology* 99, no. 788 (1996): 101–6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571x9609900203>.
- Barth, Karl. *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963.
- Beebee, Helen, Nikk Effingham, and Philip Goff. *Metaphysics: The Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203835258>.
- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition*. 1938. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.
- Boyce, James P. *Abstract of Systematic Theology*. Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887.
- Charlton, William. *Metaphysics and Grammar*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472594327>.
- Dentan, Robert Knox. *Overwhelming Terror: Love, Fear, Peace, and Violence among Semai of Malaysia*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.
- Epple, Carolyn. “Coming to Terms with Navajo ‘Nádleehí’: A Critique of ‘Berdache,’ ‘Gay,’ ‘Alternate Gender,’ and ‘Two-Spirit.’” *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 2 (1998): 267–90. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1998.25.2.267>.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1937.
- Frame, John M. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013.

Castro,” *Common Knowledge* 22, no. 3 (2016), 414, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754x-3622248>.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 399.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 414.

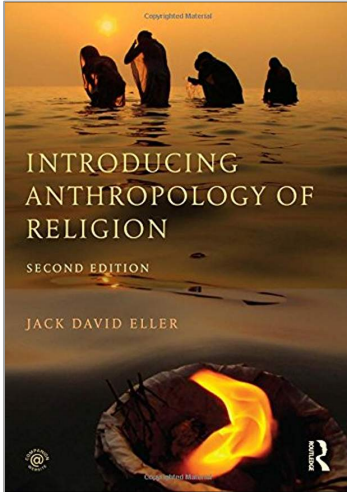
- Hallowell, A. Irving. "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View." In *Contributions to Anthropology: Selected Papers of A. Irving Hallowell*. Edited by Paul Radin, 357–90. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. 1872. Vol. 1. Reprint, Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 1997.
- Jokic, Zeljko. *The Living Ancestors: Shamanism, Cosmos, and Cultural Change among the Yanomami of the Upper Orinoco*. New York: Berghahn, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt13wwz6f>.
- Katz, Richard. *Boiling Energy: Community Healing Among the Kalahari Kung*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Kaufmann, Walter, ed. *The Portable Nietzsche*. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.
- Kearney, Richard. *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Lessa, William A. *Ulithi: A Micronesian Design for Living*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966.
- Maffie, James. *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.5876/9781607322238>.
- Martin, Michael. *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990.
- Merino, Stephen M. "Religious Involvement and Bridging Social Ties: The Role of Congregational Participation." *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 291–308. <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.voll.no2.10>.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. *The Ainu of the Northwest Coast of Southern Sakhalin*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1974.
- Overing, Joanne. "Images of Cannibalism, Death, and Domination in a 'Non-Violent' Society." In *The Anthropology of Violence*. Edited by David Riches, 86–102. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Paynter, Steve. *Systematic Theology: Introduction and Prolegomena*. Unpublished, 2014. www.academia.edu/9755310/Systematic_Theology_Introduction_and_Prolegomena.
- Park, Jungnok. *How Buddhism Acquired a Soul on the Way to China*. Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2012.
- Pedersen, Morten Axel. *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801460937>.
- Pohle, Joseph. "Theology." In *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, edited by Charles G. Herbermann et al. Vol. 14, *Simony-Tournéy*, 580–97. New York: The Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1913.

- Ronkin, Noa. *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition*. New York: Routledge, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203537060>.
- Schilbrak, Kevin. "Myth and Metaphysics." In *Thinking Through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives*. Edited by Kevin Schilbrak, 85–100. New York: Routledge, 2002. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203398449_chapter_4.
- Skafish, Peter and Eduardo Vivieros de Castro. "The Metaphysics of Extra-Moderns: On the Decolonization of Thought—A Conversation with Eduardo Vivieros de Castro." *Common Knowledge* 22, no. 3 (2016): 393–414. <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754x-3622248>.
- Smith, Quentin and L. Nathan Oaklander. *Time, Change, and Freedom: An Introduction to Metaphysics*. New York: Routledge, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203980668>.
- Stenger, Victor J. *God: The Failed Hypothesis; How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007.
- The TalkOrigins Archive. "Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District: Trial Transcript: Day 11 (October 18), PM Session, Part 1." Accessed July 28, 2019. <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/dover/day11pm.html#day11pm315>.
- Tillich, Paul. "Relation of Metaphysics and Theology." *The Review of Metaphysics* 10, no. 1 (1956): 57–63.
- van Inwagen, Peter. *Metaphysics*. 4th ed. New York: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429495021>.
- van Inwagen, Peter, and Meghan Sullivan. "Metaphysics." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2014. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaphysics/>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

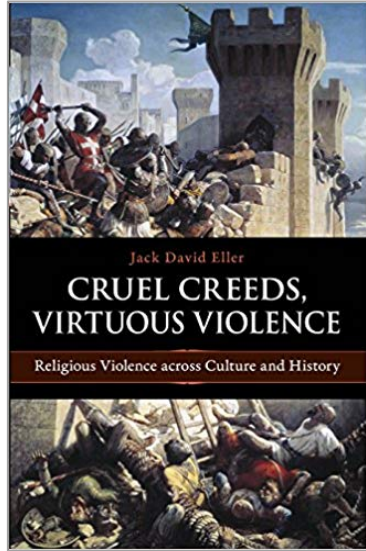
[Jack David Eller](#) holds a PhD in anthropology and has conducted fieldwork on religion and religious change among Australian Aboriginals. His other areas of interest include ethnic and religious violence, and he is the author of a number of books on cultural anthropology, anthropology of religion, psychological anthropology, and atheism/secularism.

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



Introducing Anthropology of Religion, 2nd edition

Routledge, 2015



Cruel Creeds, Virtuous Violence: Religious Violence Across Culture and History

Prometheus Books, 2010

