

Is Metaphysics a Science?

An Invited Position Paper By

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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: Once esteemed as the highest form of knowledge, the legitimacy of metaphysics as a rational discipline has been severely challenged since the rise of modern science, particularly since it seemed that while the latter reached overall consensus, the disputes in the former seemed interminable. The question naturally arises whether metaphysics could ever achieve the status of a science. The following article presents the view that metaphysics is not nor could ever become a science in the sense of the modern “hard” sciences today because a) it seeks a different sort of knowledge, which b) cannot be acquired by the methods of modern science; and c) metaphysics serves a different cognitive purpose than the sort of knowledge that science can provide. It is, nevertheless, a rational subject, one in fact that supplies the necessary rational foundation for the positive sciences.

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

Introduction

THE QUESTION THIS PAPER addresses is whether metaphysics is or could ever become a science. The answer it arrives at is ‘no’: metaphysics is not nor ever will be a science. That answer depends, obviously, upon what we mean by these terms. The question and the proposed answer assume that “science”

refers to a class of knowledge obtained and justified in certain ways deemed legitimately “scientific,” and the question asks if metaphysics is or could become a member of that class. In short, criteria must be established that qualify a discipline to be categorized as a member of the class “science.” To do this requires, in turn, establishing a clear notion of what science is (i.e. what it is a study of, how it studies it, and what sort of knowledge that study results in), and then, likewise, to establish what sorts of things metaphysics studies, how it engages in that quest, and what sort of knowledge that study can produce. The first two sections of this essay will explain why metaphysics is not a science, the third will claim that the two major paths by which one might think metaphysics could develop into a science would not, in fact, enable it to do so. The fourth section will maintain that, nevertheless, metaphysics does provide valid knowledge of a non-scientific nature; so, while metaphysics is not and cannot be a science, it is still a rational discipline which provides knowledge of the world over and above what science can provide. In fact, it gives us knowledge more fundamental than science, knowledge which is necessary for the rational grounding of scientific inquiry.

What Is Science?

First, it must be decided what fields of study are properly included in the class “science,” for only then can we seek to abstract from them common criteria. It is customary to distinguish the “hard sciences” from the “soft sciences” (more accurately, the “social sciences”): the former including physics, chemistry and biology (and their sub-sciences), whereas the latter includes disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology. History and economics are often included among the social sciences as well.¹ The social sciences developed over the past two centuries as an effort to study human life and human society with the same objectivity as the “hard sciences” supposedly possess, using similar methods with the aim of arriving at an

¹ There is debate over the status of “history” as a field of study where even some historians reject the designation entirely. Political science also has its detractors, some arguing that properly understood, politics is a liberal art (not a science) that requires philosophical analysis (not mathematical). See for instance, John Lukacs, *The Future of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012). See also, the discussion in Roger Emmelhainz, “Is History an Art or a Science? Why?,” Quora, June 4, 2015, <https://www.quora.com/Is-history-an-art-or-a-science-Why>. For the discussion regarding political science, see “Political Science as a Science?,” University of Political Science, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.politicalscienceview.com/political-science-as-a-science/>.

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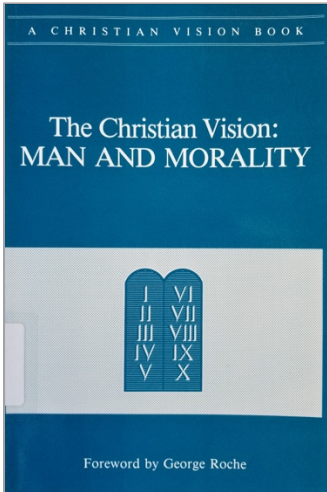
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

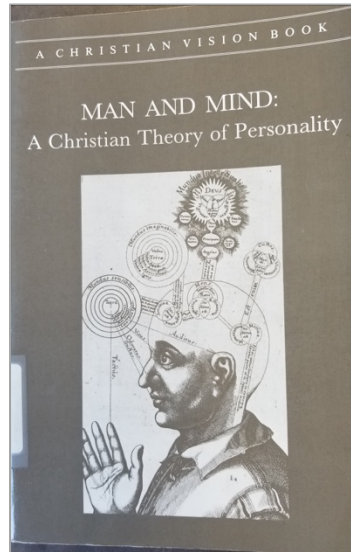
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