RETHINKING RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE IN THE AGE OF SCIENCE

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1. Introduction

Relation of science and religion has been at the centre of many discourses in the past as well as in the recent times. Some of these were meant to refute religious claims in the light of scientific truths about the world, while others took the pain of explaining the essential compatibility between the two. The former subjects religion to the scrutiny of science while the latter reads science in religion or religion in science.[1] Both these attempts are ill-conceived as they conflate the logic of one with the other. Ian G. Barbour, who has pioneered the philosophical debate between science and religion, provides four typologies to relate the two domains of science and religion, namely, conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration.[2] Nevertheless, his position is one that treats the two as distinct disciplines and yet sharing a common ground rather than two separate and conflicting discourses. In what follows, we attempt to understand the nature of the interaction of these two, science and religion, from a phenomenological perspective. In order to do that, we have to look into the 'life-world' (*Lebenswelt*) that engenders science and houses religious experiences.

2. Positivism and Phenomenology

Positivism is the dominant image of science that came along with the 'enlightenment rationality'. Central to the positivist philosophy is the conception that there is a firm line that separates facts from values. The fact-value dichotomy that informed positivism culminated in the 'verifiability theory of meaning' and the consequent rejection of

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[1]The argument for "Intelligent Design" voiced in Dover, USA, is an offshoot of reading religion into science, whereas the talk of scientific truths in the *Vedas* is an instance of reading science into religion.

[2]Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

'metaphysics' in the last century. According to logical positivists, statements are cognitively meaningful only if they are verifiable in principle. Thus, for them the meaning of a proposition lies in its method of verification. Connected to the 'principle of verification' is the positivist thesis that the world is a collection of individual facts. The positivist belief that observations are pure seems to make the principle of verification credible. However, the post-positivist philosophy of science has convincingly shown that our observations are theory-laden and many have questioned the availability of an independent world as our beliefs about the world itself are fashioned by our theories.

In contemporary philosophical writings, many have called the verifiability thesis into question as they regard the same as a 'dogma of positivism'. Phenomenology rejects positivism as the latter fails to grasp adequately how facts themselves are constituted. The positivist failure to problematise 'facts' resulted in the reification of facts and ignoring the role of human subjects in making facts meaningful. Phenomenology, on the other hand, tries to look at the ways in which facts are constituted in human consciousness. Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology, views science not just as a fact, but also as a problem that is in need of philosophical understanding. Phenomenology understands science as a cultural fact that has been shaped by human practice. It originates from the interaction of the members of the professional community of scientists. The scientific community is an open community insofar as the works achieved by the predecessors are taken up and continued by the successors. Criticisms, confirmations, and corrections find place in the activities of this community. Husserl identifies the spirit of modern science with Galilean Science that mathematizes nature.[3] Through mathematization of nature, nature itself becomes idealized. Mathematical model makes the study of nature a routine affair. Husserl compares the Galilean Science to a machine. The method of science, once formalized, renders science to a mathematical process. The successful operation of the machine guarantees the success of practical achievement, especially in the form of technology. Husserl criticizes the Galilean style of mathematizing the nature. It misunderstands the objective nature as something hidden from the 'life-world', a reality that is to be explored beneath the appearances of the life-world.

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[3]See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

3. Life-World: Home of Science and Religion

According to Husserl, the crisis of European sciences is borne out of the fact that it severed its relation to the life-world. The European sciences, thus, are uprooted. It erroneously substituted the world of everyday experiences, the life-world, with the idealized world of science. Thus, 'Nature' is identified with its constituted mathematical or quantifiable object. The technological success of science prompted to ignore the foundational acts that constitute scientific experiences from the pre-scientific experiences. To understand the real significance of the alienation of science from its soil, the life-world, we have to first analyze the life-world. Gurwitsch notes three prominent features of the life-world.[4] First of all, the life-world is extended in space and time. This spatio-temporal framework makes our experience of objects in the everyday world related to one another. Secondly, 'life-world' exhibits regularities amidst variations. Things have their 'habits of behaviour', as Husserl puts it. It is not from science that we learn that if a stone is lifted and consequently released, it would fall down. Thus, we gain the idea of universal causality from our everyday world of experiences. Knowledge of such regularities is significant in conducting our lives. Finally, things in the life-world exhibit a sort of relativity and subjectivity. Our observations in the life-world are perspectival. Each of us sees things in the life-world according to our standpoints. Thus, the same thing appears to each of us in a different manner. However, through our inter-subjective experiences we learn that all of us share the same world of objects, live in the common life-world, at least, with respect to a community of fellow inhabitants. Husserl writes about the origin of geometry to elaborate his points. According to Husserl, geometry originated in the practical needs of measurement in our everyday life. Every historical community, however ancient it may be, possesses some idea of measurement. The accuracy of our measurement depends upon the purpose for which we measure. The whole of science, like other cultural enterprises, exists through tradition. They have not merely arisen casually. Being a tradition, it has formed through human activity. Tradition is not something that had been handed down passively. It is dynamic in the sense that we renew our traditions by way of sustained inquiry. It thereby makes up a totality in which each present stage functions as the premise

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[4]Aron Gurwitsch, "Galilean Physics in the Light of Husserl's Phenomenology" in *Phenomenology and Sociology: Selected Readings*, ed. Thomas Luckmann, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978, 72.

for the future project. Thus, all our scientific activities have a further project, which awaits its execution.[5] Phenomenological philosophy of science maintains that the life-world is prior to the world of science. The world of science is a theoretical construction that comes up later. However, this is not to rule out the reality of the scientific world, rather it maintains that it is only through the life-world that we have access to the world of science.

If science, thus, enables us to gather knowledge about the physical world, religion refers to a system of values by which man places himself in relation to nature and a reality that transcends nature. The factual knowledge provided by the sciences often count as the epitome of rationality while the religious values we cherish are explained away as mere articles of faith. Many a time we tend to be sceptical about religious claims and beliefs. Quite often, the doubts regarding the truth, or even the plausibility of such beliefs, germinate from our seemingly rational appraisal of religious notions. Thus, the religiously inclined ones tell us not to subject religion to the test of reason; rather we must surrender to the dictates of faith. Understanding the nature of religious beliefs in the above manner institutes a sharp boundary between the realms of faith and reason. We tend to banish reason while invoking faith to ground religious beliefs. In doing so, we seem to think that rationality is the sole privilege of our scientific beliefs where faith has no role to play. However, many a scientific theory develops from the faith the scientist has in holding certain beliefs. In addition, what we reason out to a great extent depends on what we believe as a matter of faith. An example from science itself illustrates this point. Though both Huygens and Hooke held that light travelled in waves, just like sound, Newton propounded the corpuscular theory of light that conceives the phenomenon of light as a stream of particles. Of course, Newton had certain rationale to believe so. For instance, sound that travels in a waveform can be heard around corners, light cannot normally be seen around a corner unless it is reflected from a surface. Nevertheless, Newton did not have all the evidence for his theory. More than a century later another scientist, Thomas Young, once again, came up with the wave theory of light. In fact, Young suggested that light travelled in transverse waves, like waves of water, and not in longitudinal waves as sound does. Of course, the current theory on light holds that light sometimes act like

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[5]Edmund Husserl, "The Origin of Geometry" in *Phenomenology and Sociology*, 67-68.

particles and sometimes like waves, which amply explains why scientists could not succeed conclusively in defining the nature of light for so long.[6] However, the point that needs our attention is why did Newton who performed much earlier the same experiment, as young did, hold on to particle theory even when his contemporaries argued in favour of wave theory? Philosophers of science point out that it is because of Newton's metaphysical faith in atomism that prompted him to adhere to the particle theory rather than the wave theory.

4. Language-Game: Being of Science and Religion

Those who conceive faith and reason as antithetical to each other seem to think that unless these two are kept at a distance from each other it is impossible to defend religious beliefs in the era of science and technology. Apparently, it becomes imperative for them to argue for faith alone as constituting the domain of religion. However, faith devoid of reason degenerates into dogmatism and fundamentalism. Thus, we need to give reason its due respect and domain even in religion. This does not mean that we have to subject religious beliefs to the scrutiny of science. What I try to articulate may be illustrated by invoking Ludwig Wittgenstein's metaphor of 'Language-Game' that clarifies the nature of language and meaning.[7] Just as rules at once constitute and regulate games, our language is constituted and governed by a set of rules. We play each game according to the specific rules of that game. In following the set of rules of a game, the game itself is played out. Similarly, every language-game has its own set of rules and by following the rules of a language-game we bring to fore a particular fact. Though both volleyball and basketball are games we play with a ball, we differentiate between the two games on the basis of the rules applicable to each game. Similarly, we have to differentiate between science and religion. Here, I wish to submit that religion and science are two different language-games and, as such, it is meaningless either to do science by following the rules of a religious language-game or to practice religion by following the rules of a scientific language-game.[8] By the same

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[6]See Ray Spangenburg and Diane K. Moser, *The History of Science: From the Ancient Greeks to the Scientific Revolution*, Hyderabad: Universities Press, 1999, 68-75.

[7]See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953.

[8]Though Wittgenstein gives many examples of different language-games such as 'telling a story', 'making a joke', 'reporting an event', etc., in *Philosophical*

token, what counts as an evidence of scientific rationality need not be the evidence for rationally holding a religious belief, nor can we contradict a religious belief by the rationality of science, as science and religion are two different language-games. It is a wasteful exercise to look for scientific compatibility as far as religious beliefs are concerned. Following rules, whether we play soccer or practise religion is a matter of rationality. Only rational beings can consistently follow rules. A soccer player who suddenly changes rules in the middle of a game and start playing according to different rules is seen as an irrational player. The necessity of rationality along with faith in religious beliefs is all the more felt in our contemporary cultural matrix.[9] One who exercises reason in his religious faith can see that different religions are not different language-games but belong to the same language-game of worship, devotion, humility, righteousness, and other attenuated values.

5. Conclusion

The language-game interpretation of the practice of science and religion has its critics amongst scientists and theologians as well as philosophers. The advocates of science oppose it because it dethrones science from the privileged position it has enjoyed since its birth, as it becomes one language-game, albeit quite useful, amongst many other language-games. Accordingly, science as the sole rational way of understanding the world is no more defensible in the metaphor of language-game. However, post-positivist philosophy of science has rejected many such exalted image of science. The idea of objective truth, which science used to claim for its findings is shown to be highly problematic. A pragmatist like Quine says that in point of epistemological footing the physical objects that are posited by science and the gods of Homer differ only in degree and not in kind.[10] The superiority of the scientific over the cultural, then, may be seen

Investigations, he does not cite 'science' and 'religion' as language-games. Later, Phillips and many others gave currency to the metaphor of a religious language-game.

[9]The recent controversy surrounding Sethusamudram in India is a best example of this confusion of the logic of two distinct language-games. In this regard, see Koshy Tharakan, "Science amidst Religion: The Politics of Knowledge," *Current Science* 94, 6 (March 2008), 714.

[10]W. V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in *Classics of Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Robert R. Ammerman, Bombay/New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1965, 196-213.

as to do with the efficacy of the former in structuring the experience that we have of the world.

Advantage of the metaphor of language-game is that it successfully resists any attempt to read science in religion or vice versa, which is an obscurantist enterprise that confuses the logic of two distinct language-games. However, it may be opposed by the religiously inclined on the ground that it does not justify the importance of religion. Religion, thus, may at best be conceived as a game but could not explain why it is important.[11] Here we may want to emphasize that the importance of religion apart from the spiritual values it fosters lies in its role of providing a "language of contrast" vis-à-vis other language-games. In other words, religion assumes a logical necessity for the appreciation of other spheres of life-world and vice-versa. As Phillips points out, the "force of religious beliefs depends, in part, on what is outside religion… So, far from it being true that religious beliefs can be thought of as isolated language-games, cut off from all other forms of life, the fact is that religious beliefs cannot be understood at all unless their relation to other modes of life is taken into account."[12] Thus, it can be argued that understanding religion as a distinct language-game does not diminish the significance of religion or reduce it to an isolated and contingent activity of language-game.

It is important to understand that it is the spiritual experience and not the doctrine of any religious tradition *per se* that is of significance to phenomenological analysis of religion. Religion tells us how to live in the world purposively and meaningfully. It informs us how to obtain nonmaterial satisfaction from the world. Unlike scientific knowledge, in this sense, religious experience is very much a part of the 'lived experience' of human beings. Nevertheless, human existence in terms of the lived experience is an integral whole. We do integrate different spheres into our lived experience, thus engendering meaning and purpose. In other words, life-world expands the horizon of both science and religion.

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[11]D. Z. Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language Games" in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, 132.

[12]Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language Games," 134.