Is Theism a Scientific Hypothesis? Reply to Maarten Boudry

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Several scientists and philosophers maintain that theism in any form is in conflict with the established findings of science. Maarten Boudry is one of them. In his recent review of my *Religion and the Sciences of Origins* (Clark 2014), he expresses weariness of the “endless spate of books on science and religion, most of them purporting to show that the twain can meet and live in harmony” (Boudry 2015). Moreover, he is critical of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the world’s largest scientific society with more than 127,000 members, and the National Center for Science Education (NCSE) “for promulgating the distortion of science that science is by its very nature restricted to natural causes and explanations, and must remain studiously neutral on questions about the supernatural.” He holds that “this is a politically convenient fiction, which does not survive philosophical scrutiny and historical analysis.”

I disagree. The intent of my book was to critically examine such claims and explore various models for understanding the religion–science relationship. I argue that (a) certain forms of theism are in conflict with science (and that this conflict should be resolved in favor of science), (b) some forms of theism are cognitively separate from science (and so can’t, in principle, conflict with science), and (c) there may be some meaningful ways of integrating theism and science. One finds, philosophically and historically, a little bit of conflict here, some separation there, and a modicum of integration over there. There is, I argue, no one-size-fits-all view of the relationship between science and theism.

Throughout his essay, Boudry seems to endorse scientism, the view that science is applicable, perhaps uniquely, to every domain of human inquiry; only the empirical or the testable can meet the (scientific) standard of truth and so constitutes reality. Whatever lies outside the domain of science is rejected. Boudry’s scientism is a throwback to the widely discredited logical positivism of the 1930s. But since mathematics, logic, literary criticism, the study of human history, and morality (among many, many other things, including all of Boudry’s claims) lie outside of the domain of science, I see no reason to endorse and every reason to reject such an imperialistic view of science.

Boudry insists that God (better, theism) is a scientific hypothesis, one “that has failed to garner empirical support, or has even been decisively refuted.” Is God really a scientific hypothesis? We can address this issue only if we have some sense of what a scientific hypothesis is and how it differs from non-scientific beliefs.

A scientific hypothesis is one that achieves warrant by way of explanation and, in most cases, prediction. The warrant for scientific ideas such as $E=mc^2$ and the germ theory of
disease comes from their surprising and illuminating ability to explain and predict (often in mathematically precise ways). The law of universal gravitation both explains the orbits of the planets and the tides and makes precise predictions of the appearances of comets and eclipses.

Most of our beliefs, though, do not receive their warrant by way of explanation and prediction. I believe that I exist, that I am typing right now, that there is an external world and a past, and that there are other people in the room. I form these beliefs immediately, without reflection or inference, when my cognitive faculties are stimulated in various ways. I don't believe such things because they are the best explanation of this or that sort of experience. If I were to meet you, I would instantly believe that you are a person, not because assuming you are is the best explanation of my experiential data, but through the functioning of my “mindreading” cognitive faculty, which disposes us to form beliefs about other's mental states.

Such non-scientific beliefs are warranted when one's properly functioning cognitive faculties are in the right relationship to the “cause” of the belief. For example, my perceptual belief that there is a tree in front of me is warranted if it is produced when my perceptual faculties are stimulated by said tree. A fond recollection of my mom is warranted by my properly functioning memory faculty (and my mindreading faculties) and by me being in the right causal relation to the events (events that include my mother) that gave rise to the memory. I don't hold perceptual or memory beliefs because they are the best explanation of my experiences. Most of our beliefs are warranted in this way.

Most beliefs produced in this immediate manner are defeasible—if one has sufficient, well-warranted evidence or experience that contravenes such beliefs, one should give them up. If I learn that I wasn't looking at a tree but instead at a cardboard cutout of a tree, then I should give up my tree belief. If my brother and sister compellingly remind me that that event with my mother never really happened, I should give up my memory belief.

What might justify belief in God? Belief in God would be justified if there is a set of cognitive faculties which adequately makes people aware of God and if there is a God who is the ultimate cause of that belief. If there is a personal God, then the mindreading faculty, among others, is likely involved in the production of justified God beliefs. God must also be the ultimate cause of such beliefs; this could happen through, for example, experiences of God, the testimony of someone who had an experience of God, or reading a divinely inspired text. One might also come to a justified belief in God through some sort of reasoning process, though I suspect most do not.

Belief in God, thus construed, is not, as Boudry insists, license to be “intransigent and dogmatic.” Like most beliefs produced by our cognitive faculties, belief in God is defeasible. What might induce one to give up one's initially justified belief in God? While I don't think there's a precise logic or science of rational defeat, the usual suspects for undermining or rebutting belief in God are suffering and divine hiddenness.

Even if God is not a scientific hypothesis, it does not follow that one's religious beliefs could never conflict with science. Although you couldn't tell it from Boudry's review, I enthusiastically endorse contemporary science and argue that some religious beliefs—in a young earth, say, or in the special creation of humans—are in conflict with science. And so
I don’t reject all claims to conflict between science and religion (though I do reject, together with many experts in the field, the Conflict Thesis: the claim, as I describe it in my book, that “science and religion are in continual conflict, both historically and fundamentally”).

Even if one believes in God in the way I’ve suggested, one’s belief might have some broadly empirical consequences. One might thus conceive of theism as science-like (though not science), holding that because theism has empirical consequences it bears some resemblance to science. Theism, thus construed, might figure in the fine-tuning argument, the cosmological argument, and the argument from evil. On this view, theism is similar to a scientific hypothesis, with assessable empirical consequences. But one’s initial and even continuing warrant for belief in God need not (and probably did not) come from its success in explanation or prediction.

Boudry’s essay and my response raise some important questions: Is there truth outside of science? I think (and I think that you should think, too) that there are lots and lots of truths outside of science. Is the claim that science refutes theism a claim that lies outside of science? I think this claim itself (and its denial) is a philosophical or metaphysical claim, not a scientific claim. I also think that versions of theism, those which impinge upon well-established science, need to be reexamined and, in some cases, even rejected.

I hope you take my brief response here as an invitation to read my book, which is unrecognizable from Boudry’s review, and discover just what those options are.

REFERENCES


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