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The Realist Guide to Religion and Science
by Paul Robinson*

What makes *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science* both accessible and sensible is Father Paul Robinson's illustration of Thomist philosophy's coherence, starting from a basis in philosophy of being. This congruity contrasts with the incoherence and falsehoods that abound in idealism and empiricism, the latter followed by most scientists today. After outlining the strengths and weaknesses of Aristotelian philosophy, the author argues that the medieval Christian worldview enabled repair of these flaws. The resulting unified, multifaceted philosophy guided science (and other endeavors) yet kept science from swaying into metaphysical terrain. This helps readers comprehend modern science's wrong turns and possible corrections. Anyone unsettled by modern science's hubris will find this engaging reading. Robinson's book is above all a work of apologetics, as it addresses why the Catholic faith provides the most logical belief system, and why seemingly sophisticated attacks on the Church and its beliefs by seemingly rational philosophers and scientists are not only erroneous, but actually irrational. Counterarguments can be easily evoked.

Robinson argues convincingly that philosophical realism enabled the experimental method and mindset to develop in the Middle Ages

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sufficiently so that the later Age of Science and its aftermath survived realism's waning. In the "Forward," Paul Michael Haffner notes, "Realism affirms the existence of universals against nominalism. Against positivism, realism proposes that reality extends beyond that which the natural sciences can measure."¹ Throughout the book readers see realism compared to idealism and empiricism on a scale, with concrete examples illustrating why certain thinking harms both scientific and religious worldviews. Robinson warns that whenever religion or science seem to be at odds with each other, "it is not because they are incompatible with one another, it is because one or the other of them is incompatible with reality."² Aside from this important relationship between religion and science, Robinson explores timely themes, including a science-inspired pantheistic perspective, the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology, and Luther's problematic philosophical and theological teachings.

The discussion on Aristotle pinpoints strengths and weaknesses in the Greek philosopher's thinking, such as a faulty understanding of God and therefore of First Causes. Unlike some Thomist writers, Robinson keeps Aristotle and St. Thomas separate, so that we can clearly see where the Dominican corrected the Stagirite's shortcomings and therefore took the original thinking to conclusions which proved vital to science's development. This includes the Four Causes, which are clearly delineated.

A healthy metaphysics engenders a healthy epistemology, Robinson observes. The author comes back to this theme repeatedly, highlighting the key relationship between sensory perception and the intellect. Unlike empiricists, realists require more than sensory perception.

¹ Robinson, *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science*, xvi.

² *Ibid.*, xxi.

Realism results from the intellect taking sensory input further by building universals:

Both intellect and sense are able to receive reality and correctly reflect it with their respective powers, but the way in which they do so is different. The intellect reflects the common or universal aspects of reality with its concepts, while sensation reflects the particular aspects of reality with its internal sense images.³

Easy enough for non-specialists to follow, this sufficiently rich and detailed discussion also allows more serious readers to gain a coherent overview of the various facets of the issue. Robinson's critique of scientism later in the book returns to this essential issue. Scientists err when they try to build a metaphysics based solely on sense.

The chapter entitled "Catholic Creativity" captures much of the essence of the book. Robinson traces the work of French scientist Pierre Duhem (1861–1916), whose *Système du monde* traced the debt modern science owes to medieval Christianity. The Christian view of creation "naturally engenders a realist epistemology,"⁴ Duhem discovered. Just as surprising for Duhem, the key was "how the medieval church created a society of free intellectual inquiry, one in which neither theology nor the Bible impeded the progress of science."⁵ Robinson's discussion of other religions helps readers put this achievement into context. Even other Christian eras or Christian cultures failed to accomplish this. Robinson captures the brilliance of the medieval mind well, describing "a top-down unity wherein each thing has some relation to every other thing."⁶ Later in this chapter, Robinson gets around to mentioning Robert Grosseteste (1168–1253), a major contributor to the scientific method. More references to such individuals would have added more variety

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

to the discussion. Concerning Grosseteste's work, Robinson notes that modern scientists "would recognise this 'highly developed experimental method' as essentially the same as their own, though they would not recognise it as being motivated by a Christian worldview."⁷ Unfortunately, Robinson lacks the space to develop this exciting medieval age of science more. The author of *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science* shows the expansive view of the medieval mind without being able to take us too deeply into one or another strand.

Like other themes, when the author addresses Luther and the Protestant battle against realism, he focuses on the roots. Soon after realism's medieval high point, reflected in the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, William of Occam's nominalist writings became more deeply-ingrained, eventually reaching Luther through the Augustinian order. As Robinson notes with clarity, Occam fit into a widespread late medieval stream of thinking: "Seeking to save the Church from Aristotle and Averroes, some thinkers did not reconcile faith with reason, but had faith overtake reason's territory."⁸ While such luminaries as St. Bonaventure tended in this direction, Robinson accuses Occam of undermining the medieval causality that enabled a scientific mindset to develop. Occam "does not want God's will to be obliged to obey anything, not even His own mind. Thus, he claims that when God creates, God does not follow any plan in His mind, or create creatures according to certain forms or types."⁹ Robinson calls this "radical epistemological individualism."¹⁰ He describes how this destroyed the "principle of causality,"¹¹ a principle that relies on realist metaphysics. Robinson is careful to show that Occam was not the only one with this view; the English friar

⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

was representative of a powerful, centuries-long current that called into question the delicate reason-faith balance.

The author identifies the relationship between science and religion as based on the rationality of belief in God's existence. In fact, the author shows how disbelief in God leads to irrationality. He evokes the Thomistic philosophy outlined earlier:

Before anything can be classified as a certain type of living thing, it must first be a thing. It must first have the four substantial characteristics which natural species provides to a being: essence, unity, sameness, and fixity. Only then can we begin to speak of accidental characteristics that derive from those substantial characteristics, the aspects which biologists use to classify living things.¹²

A pithy statement describes this irrationality: "*The empiricist biologist must try to find a way to deny that species exist.*"¹³ Robinson follows a similar pattern for physics and chemistry. He pinpoints the inconsistency and irrationality of contemporary scientific scientists who disallow any belief in God or in the legitimacy of any metaphysics. Their own scientific reductionism replaces both God and metaphysics. The discussion on science derives much from the teachings of Jesuit physicist and theologian Stanley Jaki (1924–2009). Jaki fearlessly pointed out science's metaphysical shortcomings and opposed its hubristic claims to surpass both religion and traditional metaphysics.

Robinson thus clarifies the seemingly bold position that scientists destroy science when they reject realism. Science becomes irrational without reference to final causes: "In trying to make of natural selection a system of total explanation, Darwin seeks to differentiate one thing from another while failing to account for how anything is something."¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, 444.

¹³ *Ibid.* Robinson's italics.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 445.

Denying the most significant step in the process of creation renders modern science hopelessly incomplete. Scientists then try to fill the God-gap in much the same way that Biblicists employ a God-of-the-gaps argument against evolutionary theory. Well-known British atheist Richard Dawkins, for instance, ascribes to genes a godlike role, such as being able to perform the great miracles of macro-evolution and immortality, the latter by being passed down through the generations. Readers will appreciate the irony here. Dawkins is one of several scientists covered in the book who, having eliminated traditional Aristotelian metaphysics, assert their scientific theory as a theory of everything. This hubris badly oversteps science's boundaries. Such scientists make poor metaphysicians.

Robinson weaves the theme of pantheism throughout the book. Modern scientists are beholden to the senses due to their empiricist worldview and denial of the intellect. With his usual clarity, the author explains the connection between sensory overload, the rejection of metaphysics, and pantheism:

Thus weighed down, reason abandons logical labour, stops at the mountain's foot, and settles for a simplistic worldview, one that sees matter as the ultimate reality, one making God the all and the all God. The pantheistic god, instead of flooding reality with light, overshadows it with an umbrageous cloud, sapping the universe of all causal explanation by reducing it to a brute fact.¹⁵

These words come from the "Epilogue," where Robinson turns to the beginning of the *Divine Comedy* and the reference to the three bestial impulses that prevent Dante from "ascend[ing] the 'mountain of delight', atop of which sits 'the origin and cause of every joy'."¹⁶ Readers clearly see how we have regressed since the realist Middle Ages, even as science has gone from one discovery to another. Strongly implied

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 498.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 497.

throughout the book, and made clearer at the end, is how denying Final Cause, as science and modern man do, amounts to a spiritual fallacy.

Science's hubris is, even more than philosophical error, ultimately a spiritual sickness. The apt Chesterton quote at the beginning of the "Epilogue" bears this out: "The man who cannot believe his senses, and the man who cannot believe anything else, are both insane."¹⁷ By this time in the book, readers have been well-prepared for these words with Robinson's analysis of both empiricism and idealism. Robinson's conclusions are damning to the scientific establishment:

To fill in the vast vacuum of explanation left by the removal of formal and final causes, modern materialists tell stories. They say perturbations of nothing configured the universe, that we were born from the stars, that genes wove us from their selfishness, that fish became fowl by turns of fortune. In the end, it is the same magic and mythology of primitive thought, only today's myths do not allow for intelligent agents to enter the story. It's all magic and no magicians.¹⁸

Science denies an important part of itself, including its medieval realist heritage, when it denies religion and metaphysics. This reflects the theme Robinson develops at the book's outset, namely that any apparent discord between science and religion indicates error in one or both.

Catholic readers will come away from *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science* quite confident in their viewpoint. More importantly, the author arms us for intellectual battle against well-known currents of secularism. His citations of brilliant and inspiring Catholic thinkers such as Chesterton, Etienne Gilson, Fr. Stanley Jaki, and Jacques Maritain illustrate how Catholicism can not only hold its own against secularism and scientism, but can go far beyond this. Robinson shows us the grace and generosity of the universe as conceived by the Catholic

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 499.

mindset, an intentional, welcoming, and orderly world instead of the cold, indifferent, and accidental one of atheist science.



***The Realist Guide to Religion and Science* by Paul Robinson**

SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Paul Robinson, *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science* (Leominster, Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2018). According to the author, what makes the book both accessible and sensible is Robinson's illustration of Thomist philosophy's coherence, starting from a basis in philosophy of being. Robinson presents the philosophy of being as being appropriate to cooperate with science. This helps readers comprehend modern science's wrong turns and possible corrections. This also makes Robinson's book a work of apologetics, as it addresses why the Catholic faith provides the most logical belief system, and why seemingly sophisticated attacks on the Church and its beliefs by seemingly rational philosophers and scientists are not only erroneous, but actually irrational.

KEYWORDS

Paul Robinson, religion, Catholicism, science, Thomism, realism, scientism, secularism, idealism, empiricism.

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Robinson, Paul. *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science*. Leominster, Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2018.