

God's Omniscience

Lesson 4

Scientific Method: Can God be discovered?

The god who answers by fire, He is God.

1 Kings 18:24 (NIV)

Introduction

The account in 1 Kings 18:16-39 appears to contain all of the elements of a good scientific experiment. Elijah believed that he served the only real God and that the god Baal was non-existent. So Elijah devised a test where both he and the prophets of Baal would call on the name of their respective gods to bring fire down from heaven to ignite a pile of wood. The results of the test would prove who was the real god. The prophets of Baal agreed with Elijah's protocol and set up an altar with its wood and sacrifice. Then the prophets of Baal worked all day using extreme methodologies to get the experimental outcome they desired. As they worked Elijah taunted them, "Shout louder...perhaps he is traveling...maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27). At the end of the day the prophets of Baal were unsuccessful and it was Elijah's turn to conduct his portion of the experiment. Instead of sticking with the agreed upon protocol Elijah poured more than four gallons of water on his pile of wood and then began to pray. The test results could not have been more conclusive as "the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench" (1 Kings 18:38).

Case closed. The real God had been demonstrated through experiment. That was certainly the position of those observing the experiment because they "fell prostrate and cried, 'The LORD –he is God! The LORD –he is God!'" (1 Kings 18:39, NASB). But what about those not watching the demonstration of God's power? What about us today? What if we have questions about who is the real god? Can we follow the same protocol and end up with the same results? If we come up with different results does that mean there is a new god now, or maybe no god at all?

Variations of Elijah's protocol have been tried by people of all times and places. The general format of the protocol is: if god will do A then I will do B. For every god where A resulted, does that prove that god's existence? For every god where A did not result, does that disprove that god's existence? These are tough questions that are not usually addressed when we communicate only with like-minded people. One can imagine that all religions have some story with the Elijah protocol that proves the existence of their god and that each religion will claim their text is accurate and thus their god should be worshipped or feared or loved or hated or followed or at least acknowledged.

This essay addresses the relationship between scientific inquiry and the existence of God. Is the Elijah protocol in the form *if god will do A I will do B* scientific? Can the existence of God be proved through scientific inquiry?

Science

Scientific Method

Science is the process and results of learning about things we can observe. Modern science combines observation, hypothesis forming, and experimentation in an effort to generate new knowledge. There are two common myths though. First, that science is defined and explained by the scientific method and second, that the boundaries of scientific knowledge are defined by the scientific method (Bauer, 1994).

The scientific method is a well-defined linear approach to scientific inquiry. However, there is not a single agreed upon set of steps in the scientific method, meaning that you will find some sources that list four steps in the scientific method and some that list up to seven steps. Here is an example of the steps in the scientific method (Biggs, et al., 2002).

1. Observation
2. Hypothesis forming: “A hypothesis is a testable answer to a question” (p.19).
3. Data collection
4. Publishing results
5. Theory forming: “A theory is a hypothesis that is supported by a large body of scientific evidence” (p.19).
6. New hypothesis forming
7. Theory revision

Even though the scientific method is applied in varying number of steps the scientific method is well defined and has as its central purpose that science be based on what can be observed rather than on opinion or assumption. However, the myths associated with the scientific method remove the human element from scientific inquiry. People, real people with real opinions, biases, preferences, beliefs, dislikes, agendas, and inadequacies conduct science. Thus, the results of science are something much less than the mythical ideal associated with the scientific method.

The mythical ideal paints science, scientist, and scientific knowledge as pristine, absolute, and pure because of the scientific method. The myth purports that as long as real people follow the scientific method science, scientist, and scientific knowledge will remain pure. But science and the scientific method, like all other human endeavors, are influenced by the nature of mankind. This means that sometimes people choose the wrong path out of personal gain, through ignorance, or because it is the wrong path. The result is that some scientific knowledge of today will be replaced by new scientific knowledge tomorrow. Thus, some of our scientific knowledge today is wrong. In fact, science has often been wrong. The classic example of this is the phlogiston explanation of burning recognized for around 100 years as scientific knowledge. In this explanation combustible substances contain phlogiston that is released when the substance is burned (Bauer, 1994). Today we know that phlogiston does not exist and that oxygen plays a key role in the burning process.

The mythical ideal also claims that the boundary between what is and what is not scientific knowledge is established entirely by the scientific method. This is just not true.

The division between scientific knowledge and pseudoscientific knowledge is made by group consensus, meaning that those inside the scientific community determine who and what is included or excluded. Once again, like all other human endeavors, this consensus boundary is influenced by the nature of mankind resulting in a boundary that is sometimes established by personal gain, ignorance, or willful deception. Thus, some knowledge can migrate into or out of the consensus boundary without regard to anything associated with objective observation or the scientific method. For example, how is it that listening for radio signals from outer space in order to search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI, 2006) is an acceptable scientific endeavor producing scientific knowledge while searching for unidentified flying objects (UFOs) for the same purpose is considered outside the boundary of scientific endeavors (Corbett, n.d.)?

Recognizing the myths associated with the scientific method is not the same as throwing out scientific inquiry and knowledge. Rather, recognizing the myths is to be aware of the human frailty of science and given the human frailty of science it is beneficial to consider science through metaphor.

Science Metaphors

Science is a jigsaw puzzle. Therefore, the work of scientists is to put together the jigsaw puzzle. For the most part the work is conducted in the open, meaning that everyone working on the jigsaw puzzle can both observe and benefit from the ongoing progress. Central to this metaphor, which is attributed to Michael Polanyi (Bauer, 1994), is the idea that there are pieces that fit and pieces that do not fit. Yet, a piece that does not fit may mistakenly be thought to fit and will remain placed in the wrong location until someone discovers the correct piece for that location.

Science is a map. Therefore, the work of scientists is filling in the details of the map. “Finer and finer details are explored; and one can see no end in sight to further exploration”(p. 68, Bauer, 1994). Yet the map is not the real world; it is simply a guide to the real world. As a guide the map is able to show us around while missing much detail and without being 100% accurate on the detail that is included.

Science is a filter. Therefore, the work of scientists is filtering ideas to discover knowledge. The results of science are delivered through a knowledge filter that takes in subjective unreliable knowledge and over time preserves mostly objective reliable knowledge (Bauer, 1994). The knowledge filter has multiple filtering stages with increasingly tighter constraints. Anything can be placed into the filter, but most things will eventually be removed over time through the different stages of frontier science, primary literature, secondary literature, and textbook science. These stages involve significant peer involvement through reviews, duplication of tests, debates, and correction. While this metaphor leads to a better understanding of scientific inquiry than the myths of the scientific method it only does so if the realities of human involvement in the process of filtering are considered. The filter is a human filter so the objective reliable scientific knowledge output from the filter is neither 100% objective nor 100% accurate.

Study of Nature

The metaphors of science as a jigsaw puzzle, a map and a filter add to our understanding of the nature and role of science. Permeating all of these metaphors is the

idea that science is the process and results of learning about things we can observe. Recognizing that the boundaries of scientific knowledge are established by consensus within the scientific community we must acknowledge that mainstream science defines “things we can observe” as natural things, things in nature. Thus, science is the study of nature.

Although science is the study of nature, it need not be based on the philosophy of naturalism, which claims that only things that can be explained by science exist. Naturalism is a godless religion adhered to by many scientist and academicians and is in direct opposition to the truths of Christianity. Those who hold to naturalism regard naturalism as an integral part of scientific inquiry and even contend that Christians are incapable of conducting science because Christians believe in the supernatural (Schafersman, 1997). In spite of naturalism, science as the study of nature does not preclude the supernatural. But it does preclude proving or disproving the supernatural.

God

God is the creator of the universe; therefore God created everything that falls within the scope of scientific inquiry.

I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7, NIV)

My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens. (Isaiah 48:13, NIV)

With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. (Jeremiah 27:5, NIV)

I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself. (Isaiah 44:24, NIV)

Because God created nature he created the picture and patterns of the jigsaw puzzle of science, the real world from which the map of science is being made, and the scientists who filter ideas to discover knowledge.

Can the existence of God be proved through scientific inquiry? Can playing the board game Monopoly prove whether Charles Darrow or Lizzie Magie invented the game? Can assembling a puzzle of the Mona Lisa prove the existence of Leonardo da Vinci? Can following a map of the Guggenheim museum prove that Frank Lloyd Wright was the architect? No. The inventor of Monopoly, the painter of the Mona Lisa, and the architect of the Guggenheim museum are outside the scope of proof of the respective game, puzzle, and map. In like manner God is outside the scope of proof, or disproof, of scientific inquiry. If the Elijah protocol could be followed in scientific fashion every Christian would carry around a well-charred walking stick. Upon meeting an unbeliever the Christian would simply douse the walking stick with as much water as possible and

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