

EXPLANATION-JUSTIFICATION: A RUNG FOR SHARPE'S LADDER

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[Address in response to Kevin Sharpe's From Science to Adequate Mythology for Ralph Burhoe's and Philip Hefner's Advanced Seminary on Science and Religion at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, April 15, 1986.]

1) I have been so encouraged by Kevin Sharpe's From Science to an Adequate Mythology – and I thank my colleagues Ralph Burhoe and Phil Hefner for having made me read it – that I am not going to limit my remarks here to a book review, a mere catalogue of the book's strengths and weaknesses. Least of all do I plan to summarize the book, seeing that most of you have already read it and have discovered that the book provides the reader with its own periodic, helpful summaries along the way. Instead what I should like to attempt, the book itself having emboldened me to this audacity, is to pick up where Sharpe leaves off and to try my hand at accepting his challenge. Obviously he bears no responsibility for the outcome, though I would be flattered were he to find it at least promising.

2) What I have in mind as Sharpe's challenge is not only that he calls for a synthesis between science and Christianity as mythologies, and not only that he wants these mythologies joined by something more than common metaphysical assumptions, namely, by their both being forms of cognition in their own right and hence potentially unifiable into a common body of knowledge. All that would already have been challenge enough. Beyond that, however, and more specifically, Sharpe recognizes that Christianity, certainly Christian theology, has in common with science also this feature, that both of them are explanatory

enterprises. It is that common characteristic, that they are both of them ways of explaining, and that that may suggest a way of synthesizing them, which I am here going to pursue. Actually, I began that pursuit in some modest writing and publication a few years ago, also in company with some of you in this very seminar. But the reading of Sharpe's book has now served to reactivate those earlier juices.

3) At times Sharpe may sound as though explanatory functions have been monopolized by science and that Christianity has to settle for "other functions which have little to do with explanation. For instance, he distinguishes between "the rational, explanatory aspects of science, and the life-orienting, meaning-giving aspects of Christianity." (p. 85) But then only a few pages later the author explicitly ascribes explanatory functions – explanatory and directive functions – to science and theology both. The difference between them is in the kinds of "experience" and the kinds of "concepts" in terms of which they make their respective explanations. But explain is something they both do. Theology "attempts to explain and direct reality and, in particular, human existential experience, mostly in terms of 'theistic and person-involving' concepts, and [science] attempts to explain and direct reality and, in particular, human sense experience, mostly in terms of 'impersonal and objective' concepts." (p. 89)

4) In the biblical picture of the human creatures' relation with the Creator, the whole process of explaining takes an interesting twist. In that relationship the one who seeks an explanation is first of all the Creator, not the human creatures. And what the Creator demands to have explained is the human creatures, though not their creatureliness but their distressing sub-creatureliness, their fallenness. It is not that the Creator does not know why and how these creatures have come to their present sorry state. The Creator understands that all

too well, whether or not the creatures themselves do. Whether they do or not, the Creator nonetheless insists that they must explain themselves, and that they must do so quite publicly, before God and the whole creation, both of which they have had a history of profaning.

5) And sure enough, this divine insistence that human creatures explain themselves to their Maker does indeed surface quite empirically in their universal compulsiveness to accuse and excuse themselves and one another. Everywhere and always they are engaged in trying to justify themselves, to show cause for being regarded as right, to adduce evidence entitling them to life and its benefits. This self-justifying activity, engaged in by whole groups as well as by individuals, may more often than not be an attempt to evade the divine interrogation, though without success. Sooner or later, ironically, the self-justifying becomes the opposite, self-incrimination. While Christianity denies that such incrimination is the only or final option, it does not deny but affirms that this option too is real and mortally serious. The intensely human drive to give an account of one's stewardship, the constraint to cite reasons for why our assertions and we ourselves are right and are eligible for life and its rewards – that constraint, however much we may abort or distort it in practice, is not illusory but comes on the highest initiative.

6) True, the book by Sharpe does not say much about this theological version of explanation, where explanation functions as justification – justification, that is, of the explainers themselves – or at least where explanation functions as human accountability. Yet I think that this Christian insight into human explaining might help construct an important rung in Kevin Sharpe's "ladder," connecting the ladder's two vertical members, the myth of Christianity and the myth of science, and might connect them through something they both know, that is, as

overlapping cognitive contents.

7) At the scientific, non-theological end of the rung, the justificatory accountability character of explanation is also coming to be recognized. And the literature on that subject includes pieces which you and I in this seminar have read together two years ago. Remember, for instance. Alvin Gouldner's The Future of Intellectuals and The Rise of the New Class, in which Gouldner describes what he calls "CCD." the culture of critical discourse, an ascendant culture in our day which operates on the linguistic "capital" of justification. Or recall our earlier reading of Stephen Toulmin's "Reasons and Causes, with its thesis that all behavior is explainable and some actions are also justifiable – this, from a volume entitled Explanation in the Behavioral Sciences.

8) I picture the explanatory rung as a continuum which at its scientific end concentrates more on the identifying of causes and at its theological end concentrates more on the giving of reason though neither of those accents is absent at either end. In fact, if truth be told, I have a sneaking hunch that explanation-justification is not so much a rung joining two mythic bodies of cognition as it is a common structural feature vibrating within the two vertical members themselves, originating in the ground of reality on which the ladder rests. But now we are beginning to over-tax Sharpe's model of the ladder – which, I must confess, I at times find a bit wooden.

9) If the kind of explaining which even the physical sciences do is indeed continuous with what in the human sciences, the Geisteswissenschaften, is called explaining oneself, accountability, justification, giving reasons, then that suggests another important feature in common between science and Christianity, their criticalness, and through their common criticalness, suggests a way of further penetrating the old

positivist barrier between so-called judgments of fact and judgments of value. Sharpe, I think, could have made more than he did of knowledge as criticism. He did titillate my curiosity by his references to a collection of works by I. Lakatos (a name which was unknown to me until Nancey Murphy mentioned him last week.) The collection, I notice, is entitled Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge. I am only guessing when I surmise that Lakatos uses the word “criticism” in much the same way that Popper does, but I am reminded that even Popper’s use of that word has been turned to a more inclusive meaning by his opponents, critical theorists like Jurgen Habermas. And if “criticism” is linked by Lakatos himself to the “growth of knowledge,” that provides at least a remote analogy – though probably over Lakatos’ dead body – with what Christianity has had to say about the Creator creating by the very means of criticism – creating by means of criticism but also negating and liquidating by means of it.

10) As I have already intimated, the Creator’s critical process, for all its importance in Christianity, is not the last word. What is the last word is forgiveness, mercy, resurrection. But even these are achieved not by ultimately circumventing criticism but exactly by submitting to it by God’s undergoing God’s own critical process and only thereby superseding and obviating it. One is reminded of Gerd Theissen’s observation: the problem is not that religion has been criticized too much but that it has not been criticized enough, Christianity included and, if you will, Jesus himself. Is it not one of the Christian claims that Jesus the Christ can take the most unsparing criticism? If as the Christian movement holds, he is the human embodiment of the Creator-God, the critical Creator, then his suffering and surviving the ultimate critique is itself the Good Word beyond the critical word. But that is also, for Christians, sufficient warrant for not having to shirk or dodge

or spare the critical enterprise.

11) Perhaps by pursuing to such heights (or depths) the direction in which Kevin Sharpe has provoked me I have elongated his ladder into an extension ladder. What is worse is that the ladder's extension is held in place by a ratchet. Once out, it will not easily retract.

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[Explanation-Justification: A Rung for Sharpe's Ladder \(PDF\)](#)