

**Preface: Does Huston Smith Matter?**

In the last few months, after a friend pressed a copy of this work into my hands insisting that I should read it, I have wondered whether it is worth the time and energy to attempt to address the work’s numerous failings. However, Huston Smith is regarded by many as an authority on the world’s religions. Given his influential public standing, and the fact that a central theme of *Why Religion Matters* is science and religion, it does seem important to bring attention to the flaws of this work, as it will reach a wide audience.

Untangling any one instance of Smith’s misrepresentations can entail more in explanation than the original. The following, therefore, examines a few instances in depth, intended to be indicative rather than comprehensive.

**Introduction**

*Why Religion Matters* is best approached not as a contribution to the dialogue between science and religion, but as a work of prophecy. Like all prophets, Smith is criticizing contemporary culture. But this work is more specifically prophetic as he employs the narrative structure of Biblical prophecy—the people have fallen into sinful ways, led from the true path by false prophets, and if the people do not reform themselves, their doom awaits them. Indeed, Smith opens with a prophet-like cry, “The crisis the world finds itself in as it swings on the hinge of a new millenium…” (p. 1).

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In Smith’s prophetic narrative science plays the role of the false prophet. It has led people away from the absolute truths of religion. As in previous works, he claims that he is not opposed to science per se, but rather to scientism—“Science is on balance good, whereas nothing good can be said for scientism” (p. 59). By “scientism” he means claims that the scientific method is the exclusive means for determining valid knowledge, and the corollary, that scientific knowledge is the only valid body of knowledge. However, this book contains a new twist. In the middle science itself becomes the problem. Here Smith has adopted Bryan Appleyard’s analysis that “science has shown itself unable to coexist with anything” (p. 68’). Thus, despite his claims in this work and elsewhere that his concern is scientism, he now seems to be convinced that science is the real culprit in his prophetic narrative.

Throughout the work, I found myself wondering whether Smith was ignorant of the subject despite his authoritative tone, sloppy in his presentation—perhaps believing that one doesn’t need to be careful or accurate when addressing a general readership—or purposely misleading his readers in order to convince them. The following first examines selected examples of his mis-treatment of science generally, then physics, evolution, cognitive science, logic and finally contemporary philosophy. These selections allow us to discuss many of the problems with this work, ranging from errors of fact, logic, and interpretation, to misleading rhetorical strategies and simple rhetorical tricks.

1. Science

Smith’s terminological sloppiness consistently interferes with evaluating his argument. Symptomatic of this problem is his claim that “the only definition of the word

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[“science”] that I take to be incontrovertible [is] that science is what has changed our world” (p. 59). While provocative, this is not a particularly useful definition. It only makes sense as part of a rhetorical strategy conjoining science and modernity, allowing Smith to claim that science is the direct cause of all the problems he (prophetically) sees with modernity, devaluing the modern world in favor of a nostalgic, primivist fantasy of an idealized premodern past. By avoiding the continuity and complexity of both scientific and societal development, Smith enables himself to promote a view that reduces the actual situation to a simplistic opposition.

Smith also distinguishes sharply between science and all other forms of knowing. For him (modern) science is delimited by controlled experimentation. While polemically this may be a good strategic move, it does not reflect actual science. Despite the importance of experimentation and controlled experimentation, Samir Okasha emphasizes that “Not all sciences are experimental though—astronomers obviously cannot do experiments on the heavens, but have to content themselves with careful observation instead. The same is true of many social sciences.”

Smith, however, insists on restricting science “to what must be believed” (p. 192, emphasis in original) on the basis of controlled experimentation, rejecting the alternative understanding of science as “suggestions backed by sliding scales of reasonableness” (ibid), arguing that “suggestions could not have created our technological, industrial society” (ibid). First, this is counter to the importance of probability, statistics and induction in establishing knowledge, and to the understanding that scientific knowledge is never final or absolute. Second, Smith justifies his choice not on epistemology, but rather because the alternative

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“contravenes our public understanding of the enterprise” of science (ibid). Third, this allows Smith to treat all other aspects of science simply as matters of opinion, and therefore debatable on a par with religion.

The claim that technological success establishes that science must be defined only in terms of absolutely certain knowledge created by controlled experimentation demonstrates the problems created by his terminological inadequacy. The technological successes of the Wright brothers—accomplished before aerodynamics was fully established by controlled experimentation—demonstrate that suggestions have indeed “created our technological, industrial society.” Having chosen public opinion over epistemology and the philosophy of science, and confused technological accomplishments and scientific knowledge, Smith then asserts that of the two ways of thinking about science—absolute knowledge deriving from controlled experimentation, or suggestions backed by sliding scales of reasonableness—“Mine is the option that renders clear thinking about science possible” (ibid).

Further, Smith fails to delineate between several importantly different uses of the term science. As a result science becomes a single monolithic category encompassing scientific method (epistemology), scientific knowledge (body of information and theories), scientific institutions, scientists, technology, and scientism.

One of Smith’s rhetorical tricks is to be dismissive, belittling or condescending, as for example the comment that “In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Europe stumbled on a new way of knowing that we refer to as the scientific method” (p. 12). Describing the rise of modern scientific method as something “Europe stumbled on” hardly makes science sound like an important intellectual achievement.
Similarly, he characterizes evolutionary theory as “Darwin’s onward-and-upward biology” (p. 46). This is, of course, a common mis-interpretation of natural selection as progress. In addition to the condescending tone, Smith does nothing to dispel this misinterpretation, but seems to purposely foster it.

He also actively misrepresents science. In one instance, he equates the scientific worldview with myth, an argument that others have made, and for which there are grounds for serious consideration. However, what Smith says about this equation is that “The entire scientific worldview has been spun from a relatively few crucial experiments, which can be likened to the numbered dots in children’s puzzles that (when they are connected by a line that is drawn through them sequentially) produces the outline of a giraffe or whatever” (pp. 29–30). This ignores the thousands of complementary experiments that constitute the gradual accumulation of supporting evidence. Mendel’s spectacularly pivotal experimentation on peas hardly exists in isolation, like dot number 17 in the outline of a giraffe.

Also important to his characterization of science and its relation to religion is his repeated call for facts. Smith’s is a (purposely?) naïve conception of fact as an ahistorical, theory-neutral entity. This is consistent with his reduction of science to the facts established beyond doubt by controlled experimentation. If one considers, however, the idea of a fact in isolation (were such a thing possible) it is clear that it would be meaningless. Facts are only meaningful in relation to a theory which determines how they can be meaningfully put together to form a pattern, and the significance that they play in that pattern—for, contrary to the example Smith uses regarding the formation of the scientific worldview, the world
does not come with the pattern already in place like a connect-the-dot puzzle, each dot numbered and ordered so as to form a meaningful picture when completed.

Smith’s definition of science and his focus on facts complement one another in his representing the scientific worldview as devoid of any spiritual value. Reducing science to controlled experimentation, and scientific knowledge to “the body of facts about the natural world that controlled experiments require us to believe, together with logical extrapolations from those facts, and the added things that scientific instruments enable us to see with our own eyes” (pp. 191-2), it is hardly surprising that the scientific worldview of modernity and postmodernity should appear to Smith as “stunted.”

Nowhere in his definition of science is there room for wonder, awe and a personally fulfilling spirituality as presented by authors such as Ursula Goodenough (discussed infra) and Richard Dawkins. By sharply opposing science and religion, and reducing science to a few handfuls of bare, cold facts, any personal sense of spirituality must by necessity be located on the religion side of the divide.

2. Physics

Smith’s treatment of contemporary physics is particularly odd. He draws a distinction (one I doubt any working physicist would recognize) between modern and postmodern physics. Modern physics he identifies with “Copernicus, Newton, Maxwell, Planck, Einstein, Heisenberg, Bohr, Schrödinger, and Born” (p. 14). Postmodern physics, by contrast, is identified with “Stephen Hawking, Fred Hoyle, John Wheeler, Freeman Dyson, Steven Weinberg, and their likes” (ibid.). While divisions in the history of science can be Payne, review of H. Smith, *Why Religion Matters* p. 6
drawn according to different criteria, Smith gives no rationale for clustering Copernicus and Newton together with the discoverers of relativity and quantum physics, while creating a separate cluster that relegates Hawking, et al., to the postmodern. Since this is in no sense a natural division, it is Smith’s responsibility to explain why it is being made and justify its utility—which he fails to do. Particularly since he goes on to inform us that postmodern physics “does not measure up to modern physics in the scope of its discoveries” (ibid.), “that no new abstract idea in physics has emerged for seventy years” (p. 15), and that the discoveries of postmodern physics have only “concerned details and exotica” (ibid.). The only justification given for this dismissive attitude is that they “have produced no discoveries that impact human beings in important ways” (ibid.). These discoveries “have no conceivable connection with human life and can be neither falsified nor checked in normal ways” (ibid.). This is contrasted with the accomplishments of modern physics, “which continue to be used to make space shuttles fly and to help us understand how hot electrons behave in semiconductors” (ibid.).

The phrase “normal ways” qualifying “methods of falsification and verification” of course turns this into a petitio principii fallacy. More substantively, would Maxwell’s discoveries ca. 1862 have at that time been considered to simply concern “details and exotica,” having “no conceivable connection with human life,” and inaccessible to verification or falsification in “normal ways.” With over a century’s hindsight things look a bit different. At the turn of the twenty-second century, will people wonder how they ever got along without “braneworld transfers”? At this point, we don’t know, and it is historically
anachronistic and epistemologically presumptuous of Smith to dismiss the importance of these discoveries on the grounds that they as yet have no practical applications.

In a further odd move, having himself appended “postmodern” to physics, he then takes the claims of “the noisiest postmodernists” regarding the social construction of science, and the role of social power in the acceptance of truth claims, and asserts that these claims further undermine the status of what he has chosen to call postmodern physics. Since he does not explain what he means by postmodern physics, how it applies to Hawking, et al., or its relation to social constructionist postmodernism, the relativism Smith sees in the “noisiest postmoderns” is irrelevant to the question of the validity of contemporary physics.⁴

3. Evolution

Similarly bizarre (ignorant, sloppy, purposely misleading?) is Smith’s characterization of the theory of evolution. Citing Jonathan Wells (intelligent design apologist’), Smith asserts that “Christianity affirms that human beings were created in the image of God, while Darwinism claims that human beings were accidental by-products of an unguided natural process” (p. 180). This is hardly an accurate representation of evolutionary theory. By juxtaposing “accidental” with “unguided” Smith makes evolution sound like a random process—like throwing a deck of cards up into the air and having them fall into a model of the Eiffel Tower. In doing so, Smith has constructed a false dichotomy. Natural selection provides guidance, but from within rather than from without—a distinction Dennett captures nicely in his contrast of skyhooks and cranes. Evolution entails lots of cranes, but does not require any skyhooks.

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Smith then cites several examples from Wells’ *Icons of Evolution*, which “exposes the fraudulence in continuing to include in biology textbooks illustrations that conflict with published evidence that biologists have known for years, with students given no indication that the icons are fraudulent” (p. 181). Smith next makes a logically incoherent leap, claiming that “These and other textbook misrepresentations cast serious doubt on what Darwinists claim as evidence for their theory” (p. 182). As suggested by Kuhn, one would expect high school textbooks to be at the tail-end of the progress of normal science. Their failure to reflect the most recent developments and repetition of already outdated information is hardly evidence for the falsehood of the theory of evolution.

One rhetorical strategy employed by Smith allows him to appear quite reasonable in asserting that intelligent design is scientific. The strategy entails two moves: first, Smith is only being reasonable in suggesting alternatives to established scientific ideas, and second, scientists are unreasonable when they fail to consider these alternative ideas. This “more reasonable than thou” strategy is not, however, original with Smith.

Michelle Goldberg has noted this same strategy among other intelligent design proponents: “They don’t want to be associated with the medieval persecutors of Copernicus and Galileo. Instead, they try to present themselves as heirs to those very visionaries, insisting that dogmatic secularists desperate to deny God are thwarting their open-minded quest for truth.” This rhetoric of open-mindedness not only obscures the fact that the conclusion has already been drawn, but precludes opposition because of the value placed on being open-minded.
4. Cognitive Science

One of the most incoherent claims that Smith makes is found in his critique of Dawkins and Pinker’s distinction between “spirit as zest,” which they say science has not slain, and spirit as “a homunculus located in the head,” an idea they consider has indeed been laid to rest. Suggesting that there should be a religious watchdog guarding against scientism, Smith asserts that this watchdog should bark “at the cheap shot in the allusion to homunculae and go on to note that empirical studies are methodologically incapable of determining whether extra-epiphenomenal invisibles do or do not figure in the workings of the brain” (p. 203).

This claim strikes me as singularly and breath-takingly inane. Whatever an “extra-epiphenomenal invisible” might be, it certainly sounds like something that is not subject to empirical observation. Stripped of its obscurantist language, Smith’s claim simply reduces to an assertion that something that is not subject to empirical observation is not subject to empirical observation. It is, therefore, simply a *petitio principii* fallacy.

But let us consider this claim more closely. Smith apparently intends that spirit is an “extra-epiphenomenal invisible.” Presumably he means spirit cannot be seen (perhaps intended metaphorically—“invisible” as “not empirically observable in any way”) and is something other than (“extra-”) a mere epiphenomena of brain activity, as some theories of consciousness would have it. Now we can consider the two possibilities Smith offers—that spirit does “figure in the workings of the brain” and that it does not.

If spirit does “figure in,” then there must be something going on in the brain that cannot be explained by other, known, observable factors. In other words, elimination of all

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known factors would leave some brain activity unexplained—except as resulting from spirit. However, the effects spirit has on the brain’s activities would make it indirectly empirically observable—though one may not observe something directly, one may still indirectly know about it by observing its effects.

The other possibility is that spirit does not “figure in the workings of the brain.” While an “extra-epiphenomenal invisible” that does not “figure in the workings of the brain” and is not empirically observable may be titillatingly mysterious, it is irrelevant to discussions of consciousness.

5. Logic

Whatever their rhetorical effectiveness, many of Smith’s arguments are logically flawed. For example, one of his arguments, reminiscent of Anselm’s ontological argument (p. 3), is an argument by analogy:

1. Food, light and God are all alike in that they are sought after.
2. Food and light exist.

∴ God exists.

Even discounting the weakness of arguments by analogy, this particular argument has problems. Arguments by analogy depend on establishing similarity between the terms of the argument (food, light and God), and on the relation between the characteristic in which they are similar (“sought after”) and the characteristic being attributed in the conclusion (“existence”).

Smith claims that being “sought after,” the three are similar. However, what it means to be “sought after” is only metaphorically the same. How is “seeking light” by sunflowers

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(Smith’s example) the same as “seeking God”? Next, the similarity of the terms (“sought after”) should be relevant to the characteristic being attributed in the conclusion (“existence”). But that something is sought for does not mean that it exists. (As a child I at least briefly sought the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.) Smith’s argument has an additional problem. The characteristic being attributed in the conclusion should actually be the same as the characteristic identified in the second premise. However, the “existence” attributed to food and light on the one hand, and to God on the other are in Smith’s own understanding distinct kinds of existence.

The inadequacy of Smith’s grasp of logical fallacies is evidenced in his critique of Ursula Goodenough’s *The Sacred Depths of Nature.* He accuses Goodenough of the pathetic fallacy, which he defines almost accurately as “the fallacy of imputing feeling where there is none” (p. 39). More adequately, it is “The mistake of attributing human aspirations, emotions, feelings, thoughts, or traits to events or inanimate objects which do not possess the capacity for such qualities.” It is, however, Smith’s accusation that is mistaken, for Goodenough does not attribute emotion to the natural world—as she would have were Smith correct. Rather, based on what she recognizes as her own emotional response of awe and reverence to the natural world, she ascribes sacrality to it. It seems that the fundamental issue is Smith’s disagreement with Goodenough’s theology. Because Smith’s metaphysic is dualistic, the sacred is necessarily transcendent, absolute, and supernatural, while Goodenough finds the natural world to be sacred. Apparently Smith cannot simply disagree, but feels compelled to make Goodenough wrong as well.
6. Contemporary Philosophy

As with science, Smith employs a dismissive and condescending rhetoric toward contemporary philosophy. Discussing postmodernism and deconstruction, for example, he says:

In the game of name-that-song (or that age, or century), *postmodern* is the best that historians have been able to come up with as a label for the second half of the twentieth century and what follows. Pointing (as the word does) to no more than a stretch of time, it has no positive content of its own, but deconstruction stepped in quite early to mend that lack (p. 89).

Striking a dismissive stance toward postmodernism, Smith not only reassures his readers that it need not be seriously considered, but actively encourages them to share his dismissive attitude.

Smith’s discussion of modern philosophy is also laden with misleading rhetorical flourishes and intellectual confusions. Consider his claims regarding the place of metaphysics in modern philosophy—

Assuming without argument that worldviews necessarily oppress, and overlooking the fact that even if that were the case, they cannot be excised from human knowing, philosophers have tried to manufacture a metaphysics-less world, an oxymoron if there ever was one (p. 49).

First, note the assertion that the idea that “worldviews necessarily oppress” has been assumed “without argument.” This is, however, perhaps the single most hotly contested issue in

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modern philosophy since at least the time of Heidegger, something Smith either chooses to ignore or is ignorant of.

Second, conflating worldviews (which everyone necessarily has by virtue of being human) with metaphysics (philosophic discourse concerned with the nature of things “beyond the physical”), Smith confuses the philosophic question of whether there are metaphysical absolutes with the psychological question of how humans orient themselves in the world. That everyone is an incipient metaphysician may well be the case, but that does not mean that purposely conflating worldviews and metaphysics is useful.

More broadly than his dismissive attitude toward contemporary philosophy and his errors of logic, Smith reveals a rather nasty and petty anti-intellectualism, pandering to his readership with a populist reverse-snobbery. Discussing the hermeneutics of suspicion he cites a story from Steven Weinberg in which an elderly friend’s only consolation from the thought of his approaching death is “that when that event arrives he will never again have to rush to his dictionary to look up what the word hermeneutics means.” Smith goes on to assert that hermeneutics “means interpretation, but hermeneutics sounds more imposing” (p. 90). Not only does this reinforce the popular prejudice that intellectuals use big words to intimidate their audience, but it is inaccurate. Hermeneutics does have a specific meaning—the theory of interpretation—and, used properly, is not simply a synonym for interpretation.

**Summary**

In the end, however, Smith is himself unable to escape the postmodern condition. He concludes that the relation between traditional and scientific worldviews is simply a matter of choice: “Two worldviews, the traditional and the scientific, compete for the mind of the

third millenium. … If we had our choice, we would prefer the traditional worldview; and we do have that choice, because neither of them can be proved to be truer than the other” (p. 193). But, this is a false dichotomy. We cannot in fact choose between an exclusively scientific worldview or an exclusively traditionalist (pre-Kantian, pre-Copernican) worldview, because we of course have both. This is the postmodern condition, a plurality of interacting, overlapping worldviews. ⁹

¹ Although presented as a direct quote from Bryan Appleyard, Understanding the Present: An Alternative History of Science (1992. Reprint. London: Tauris Park Paperbacks, 2004), Smith gives no citation, and I have been unable to locate a specific match. It may be a paraphrase.


⁴ Indeed, one finds for example Richard Dawkins’ attitude toward postmodernism to be equally as disdainful as Smith’s, see idem., Unweaving the Rainbow, p. 41.


⁶ Ibid.


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Although not directly related to the issues of science and religion, we note an instance of plagiarism. Discussing the tunnel metaphor that structures the first half of *Why Religion Matters*, Smith refers to William Gass’s *The Tunnel*. He describes the protagonist and summarizes the plot:

A middle-aged professor of history at a midwestern university, he takes to going down into the cellar of his big middle-class house to escape from his unloved, undesired, and unloving wife. He starts tunneling down through the floor and out beyond its foundations, lying on his fat belly and squirming past trowelfuls of clay and dirt and dust on his way out. He is trying to escape from his life and from our times, which his horrible home symbolizes (p. 45).

Compare this to Robert Kelly’s review of Gass’s novel:

A middle-aged professor of history at a Midwestern university takes to going down into the cellar of his big middle-class house, away from his unloved, undesired, unloving wife. He starts tunneling down through the floor and out beyond the foundations, lying on his fat belly and squirming past trowelfuls of clay and dirt and dust on his way out. He is escaping from his life (*The New York Times*, February 26, 1995; [http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/01/specials/gass-tunnel.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/01/specials/gass-tunnel.html), accessed Wednesday, June 7, 2006).

Probably unintentional, this indicates the lack of care that went into the writing.