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CRITICAL REALISM AND THE THEOLOGICAL SCIENCE OF WOLFHART PANNENBERG: EXPLORING THE COMMONALITIES.

James Smith Page

Abstract

The commonalities between critical realism and the theological science of Wolfhart Pannenberg are examined. It is suggested that the commonalities exist in the following areas: 1) the programme of revelation-as-history and the implications of this for a philosophy-of-history, 2) the view of the resurrection of Jesus as event, 3) the approaches to understanding Jesus in history, 4) the relationship of theology to philosophy-of-science, and 5) the understanding of God as the all-determining reality. It is suggested that within the theological science of Wolfhart Pannenberg one might find some theological foundations for critical realism, or at least some scope for future dialogue.

Article

In the context of the history of ideas, one might naturally expect that there would be something of a dichotomy between the discourse of critical realism and religious discourse. Writers of an avowedly materialist philosophical orientation have tended to be decidedly non-theistic and non-religious. One only needs to think of the influential work of Ludwig Feuerbach. However, this is not the case with critical realism. There has been a continuing religious interest in critical realism (Barbour 1974, 1984; Drees 1996, Durant 1989; Knight 1995; McGheee 1995; McGrath 1999; Murphy 1989; Peacocke [71/72] 1984, 1990, 1991; Peters 1996; Robbins 1999; Russell 1985; Shipway 2000; and van Huyssteen 1989, 1993, 1998 1999) and this interest has centred very much upon the interplay between religion and science. Indeed, one writer (Robbins 1999: 656) has suggested that "if there is such a thing as orthodoxy in the religion-and-science field, then critical realism is a dogma." Interestingly enough, there has been a corresponding trend for philosophers generally identified with critical realism becoming more interested in religious and mystical issues. Perhaps the most significant instance of this is the development of what is known as transcendental critical realism, especially as demonstrated in the more recent work of Roy Bhaskar (2000).

There is thus much discourse on critical realism and religion. Some writers refer to a critical theological realism (Soskice, 1985) or a theological critical realism (Shipway, 2000) to identify the interchange between critical realism and religious thought: the former refers to theological thought informed by critical realism, and the latter refers to critical realist philosophy informed by theological discourse. It would appear to be an arbitrary distinction, although the terms are an indicator of the theological interest

in critical realism. However, despite this interest, one important lacuna in current debate has been the failure to date to develop or demonstrate the links between any systematic or philosophical theology and critical realism. This essay attempts to address this problem, outlining in particular the potential linkages between critical realism and the theological science of the influential German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg.

Prior to this analysis, however, it is perhaps appropriate to attempt a provisional definition of critical realism. Critical realism has been a major philosophical school of thought throughout the past century, and in recent decades has been undergoing something of a renaissance, much of this centred on the work of Roy Bhaskar. [72/73] Critical realism can be described as a philosophy that emphasizes the importance of mind-independent reality, although recognizing that this mind-independent reality is mediated through individual and cultural perception. Some eighty years ago, Roy Woods Sellars (1922:15) suggested that the defining characteristic of realism is “the acknowledgment of realities not dependent for their existence upon the minds which know them.” Critical realism suggests in addition to this that knowledge of these realities is never direct, but always culturally mediated. Critical realism can be said to emphasize the recovery of some form of ontology, an interest in interdisciplinarity (or perhaps more accurately transdisciplinarity—moving from one discipline to another), an interest in wholism, that is, having a total understanding of reality and our perception of reality, an interest in evolution and the evolutionary origins of human knowledge, an interest in unity of method for the social and natural sciences, an acknowledgment of the provisional or incomplete status of our current state of knowledge, and an acknowledgment of the cultural context of human knowledge.

The method of the cross-disciplinary comparison must be by size and scope of the task a method of overview. By this I mean identifying the major themes within the work of Pannenberg and examining how these correlate to the major emphasis within the philosophy of critical realism. The nature of this cross-disciplinary comparison does not allow for a detailed investigation of the work of Pannenberg nor for any detailed examination of the important issues raised. To use an expression used both within critical realism and within the work of Pannenberg, the connections identified are of a highly provisional nature. Herewith then follows the analysis of the potential linkages between critical realism and the theological science of Wolfhart Pannenberg. [73/74]

At the outset, the primary area of commonality between critical realism and the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg might be identified as being within is in the area of philosophy-of-history, and in particular within philosophy-of-history implicit within the programme of revelation-as-history as developed by Wolfhart Pannenberg and collaborators (1961). The programme consisted of a series of theses concerning the self-revelation of God. What makes such a programme such a radical point of departure from traditional Christian theologies is that the self-revelation of God is not identified as occurring within a particular limited segment of salvation history, a limited segment that can be identified as either the time of Jesus or the time of the New Testament. Neither does the revelation of God occur within the private world of the believer. Rather, within the programme of revelation-as-history, it is posited that the self-revelation of God occurs through the totality of human history and the totality

of human experience. It is a revelation that can be understood fully only at its completion, that is, at the end of history.

The conception of revelation as history and as the totality of history is something which has much in common with an evolutionary approach to human knowledge, and much in common with the emphasis on evolutionary epistemology within the discourse of critical realism. Quite simply, the programme of revelation-as-history represents an acknowledgment that concepts, including religious concepts, evolve. This can be seen both from a personal perspective and from the perspective of history of religions. The corollary of the notion that revelation occurs at the end of history is that all of our current knowledge must be incomplete. Our current knowledge must always be provisional. This is also an important theme within critical realism. The programme of revelation as history at the same time pre-supposes some external or mind-independent reality, otherwise there would be nothing upon which to build knowledge. In other words, within [74/75] the revelation-as-history programme there is an assumption that there is some extrasubjective or mind-independent happening upon which our conception of history is constructed.

The second area of potential commonality between the discourse of critical realism and the theological science of Wolfhart Pannenberg is in the concept of the objective resurrection of Jesus. Pannenberg quite expressly interprets the death-resurrection of Jesus as an external event. This event can only be properly understood in the context of the whole of history and from the context of end of history. Nevertheless, the resurrection of Jesus is something that is a mind-independent reality. Pannenberg asserts the resurrection of Jesus to be a public event, and not something that existed (or exists) merely within the minds of the earliest followers of Jesus or within the minds of Christian believers. There was an out-there quality of the resurrection event, in that the event did occur some two millennia ago: it is an objective resurrection of Jesus, the evidence for which can be located in the diverse empty tomb and appearances traditions within the New Testament documents. Such an understanding represents a contrast with other theological interpretations, such as that of Rudolf Bultmann, who has emphasized the importance of personal faith in the understanding of the resurrection event.

One implication of a resurrection theology as articulated by Wolfhart Pannenberg is that there is an external reality that is apprehensible (although only gradually and partially) to human consciousness, and apprehensible ultimately to all humans. Quite simply, we know there is an external reality, as this (according to Wolfhart Pannenberg) is the only possible explanation for what took place in the resurrection of Jesus. In a sense one could argue that the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg pre-supposes a critical realist epistemology, and also provides a demonstration of the existence of that extrasubjective or [75/76] mind-independent reality. One might also suggest that the resurrection theology of Pannenberg undercuts traditional disciplinary differences, and underscores the importance of interdisciplinarity. One of the implications of the resurrection theology of Pannenberg is that there is ultimately no difference between a theological and a historical approach to Jesus. In a sense, Pannenberg is one of the most non-theological of theologians, in that the implication of his work is that there should be no special theological way of understanding the life-resurrection of Jesus, or indeed of reality.

A third area of linkage between critical realism and the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg is within the Christology of Wolfhart Pannenberg (1964). In some ways the Christology of Pannenberg is an extension of the resurrection theology. Pannenberg argues the importance of differentiating a view of Jesus from above (a view that presupposes the concepts of Logos Christology and the Trinity) and a view of Jesus from below (a view which concentrates upon the historical Jesus). For Wolfhart Pannenberg what is determinative is understanding the historical Jesus, and from this starting point we are to put notions of Logos Christology and the Trinity in proper perspective. It should be mentioned that the notion of commencing Christology with a view from below or with the historical Jesus is not a new one. This was a strong emphasis within nineteenth-century liberal theologians. However, the differentiating point for Wolfhart Pannenberg is that he does not necessarily preclude the unique within the historical Jesus. One of the themes of Pannenberg is that although natural science can predict events through laws of nature, natural science must necessarily remain silent about unique events (1964). Jesus is for Wolfhart Pannenberg such a unique event.

Notwithstanding this recognition of the unique, what is noteworthy about Wolfhart Pannenberg is that the starting point for [76/77] looking at Jesus is simply historical reality. It is not personal faith or personal commitment. Moreover, what is presupposed within the methodology of Wolfhart Pannenberg in dealing with how we interpret Jesus is that there is an extra-subjective reality. This is not to say that this extrasubjective reality can necessarily be equated with the content of traditional Christian statements of dogma: statements regarding Jesus of Nazareth need to be made cognizant that our understanding of reality is a contextual one. There is an ongoing hermeneutical task of understanding the evidence and testimony concerning Jesus of Nazareth from its original context. As was indicated at the commencement of this essay, the thrust of critical realism is that there is a mind-independent reality, although this reality is perceived within an individual and cultural context.

The fourth area of commonality between critical realism and the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg is within the area of philosophy-of-science, and in particular from the 1973 work by Pannenberg dealing with theology and the philosophy-of-science. Within this work Pannenberg argues against theology as being a private domain of personal faith, but suggests rather than theology should be thought of as a science. Thus, we can refer to theological science and theology as the science of God. It is not surprising, therefore, that the programme of revelation-of-history was formulated in the scientific language of theses. Wolfhart Pannenberg is highly critical of any view that tends to place religious knowledge in some privatized domain. Thus, it is also not surprising to note that in a 1975 work by Pannenberg, ostensibly dealing with faith and reality, there is an extended discussion on reality, and comparatively very little attention directed toward faith. The 1973 work on the philosophy of science was also written as a response to challenges to the role and status of theology within the contemporary university. However, the importance of the 1973 work is that in many ways it summarized [77/78] aspects of Pannenberg's earlier theology and assists to place the work of Pannenberg more precisely within a philosophical context.

When one examines the philosophy-of-science expressed by Pannenberg, it becomes evident that Pannenberg feels much empathy for critical rationalism, especially as

articulated by Sir Karl Popper. Critical rationalism as a philosophy-of-science holds much in common with critical realism: both philosophies emphasize the ephemeral nature of human knowledge (and thus the critical element within both philosophies). Humans are by nature fallible and therefore all knowledge should be open to falsification. Within the discussion on theology and the philosophy-of-science by Wolfhart Pannenberg, the importance of interdisciplinarity becomes important. Pannenberg suggests the need for a theology of the history of religions, an interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion, although an approach which does not exclude the possibility of the existence of a deity. It is interesting that within the 1973 work Wolfhart Pannenberg admits that it is possible to have the study of church history and biblical studies within a non-theological disciplinary context. He must do this, as it follows from his understanding of Christian theology reflecting external reality. The paradox is that Pannenberg seeks to defend theology as a discipline and a science, and yet ultimately it seems that he must support the importance of a non-disciplinary approach to the study of religions.

The fifth area of potential commonality between critical realism and the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg is quite simply within the definition of God (1973). Arguably the task of defining God is the ultimate task for any theologian, and yet in defining God one is obviously attempting to define the indefinable. All definitions as such must be tentative. The answer to this problem of our knowledge of God is (for Wolfhart Pannenberg and others) ultimately eschatological in resolution. This comes from the conception of revelation as history, including the notion that [78/79] revelation occurs in the totality of history and that totality can only be understood as the end of history. However, having said that, the way Wolfhart Pannenberg seeks to define God, at least within our current limited experience, is to describe God in quintessentially realist terminology, namely, as the all-determining reality (*alle bestimmende Wirklichkeit*).

The definition of God as the all-determining reality, as suggested by Wolfhart Pannenberg, is perhaps important for what it does not say. Unlike existentialist theologians, such as, say, Paul Tillich, Wolfhart Pannenberg does not describe God in terms of human experience. God is not defined as the area of ultimate human concern. The definition of God by Wolfhart Pannenberg is quite profoundly extrasubjective. The very fact that Pannenberg seeks to describe God as the all-determining reality also points to fundamental commonalities between the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg and the philosophy of critical realism. In a sense Pannenberg underscores critical realism through suggesting that the ultimate reality, the all-determining reality, is God. The theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, if indeed we accept the propositions put forth by Pannenberg, can thus possibly provide theological foundations for critical realism. At the very least we can say that Wolfhart Pannenberg is working from the same set of propositions as the philosophy of critical realism, namely, that there does exist a mind-independent or extra-subjective reality.

The purpose of this essay has not been to *prove* critical realism, as such, through a theological application. Attempting such an approach is to relapse into positivism. However, critical realism is a contemporary philosophy that above all emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinarity, and there does seem to be much common ground and scope for dialogue between critical realism and formal theology. An examination of the theological science of Wolfhart Pannenberg hopefully provides a starting point

for just [79/80]such a dialogue. Perhaps also such dialogue may also be seen as establishing some theological grounds for a critical realist philosophy. [80/81]

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