

**RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND MEANING:  
Rejoining Meaning (Religion) and Knowledge (Science) – The Final Synthesis (C-q)  
By Arthur Jackson -- Copyright 5/23/08  
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I'll begin with a quote from British logical positivist philosopher, A.J. Ayer: *There is no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give.*

In this talk I will attempt to prove the validity of Ayers' previous statement by demonstrating that all religion has a naturalistic foundation which requires that it be moved into the realm of science. I certainly won't have time to develop all the points this brief talk raises, but I hope to plant the essential seed within your mind so it might grow and flower over time. What I'm talking about involves every human being and would be transformational for all who "get it." They would in truth be born again!

However, I have to be realistic about my hopes. I sent a copy of this to my son, Jared, and this was his response: "I read your paper and I just don't get it. Maybe I'm stupid. What are the chances of you making it less erudite and easier for us laymen? I think you would get a better response if more of the general population could grasp what you are trying to say. We aren't all scientists you know."☺ And of course he has it right. If I can't write so you can understand what I'm saying the fault is with me. Therefore, I depend on your feedback to guide me when I have failed.

I will start by exploring the relationship between science and religion, how that has changed over time, and where I think this connection needs to go in order to maintain and develop the human species because that is what both of them are really about. In this talk I define science as the search for congruency. And religion must be seen as the part of the scientific endeavor that guides all persons in finding a meaning for their life – a sustainable feeling that their life has meaning.

Here is my story! After our ancestors achieved symbolic language (that is, human language with grammar and syntax) and thereby became *Modern Humans* like us, our tribal groups depended on their religions to maintain and direct them. Their religions were the reservoirs of the wisdom the tribe had accumulated over its lifetime necessary for survival in a harsh environment. Religions provided the ideas and experiences that helped them maintain their life, and provided the reason for doing so. I call this having a meaning of life.

In the beginning all the wisdom of the group was stored in the realm of religion. Religion provided the answers – correct or incorrect – about how the world works, humanity's place in the world, and the things a tribe member needs to know to live in their society. Custom and authority provided the guidance, and this all happened within the domain of religion.

A breakthrough in human progress began when the ancient Greeks developed philosophy as a rational, alternative way to explain the fundamentals of human life and the world in general. Philosophy applied the group's "wisdom" potential made possible by symbolic language. In the realm of philosophy unlike in religion ideas could be questioned and new answers adopted. This may have begun in Ancient Greece because ruling citizens there had an unusual degree of leisure

time, education based on rhetoric, and independence from social control which probably came out of their unique religion.

These ideas eventually reached Western Europe where, over the course of time, thoughtful individuals separated philosophy into two parts: 1) traditional speculative philosophy based on reason to answer questions of interest, and 2) natural philosophy based on an empirical, more rigorous study of the world from a naturalistic perspective independent of the gods and other supernatural agencies.

In the fifteenth century natural philosophy became known as science and the differences between naturalistic science and supernatural religions became increasingly more obvious. At the same time the understanding of how things work moved more and more out of the realm of religion into the realm of science. Physics was the core of natural philosophy and provided the model used to apply science to the things being studied. This approach moved astrology to become astronomy, and alchemy to become chemistry. Geology, biology, and the other early sciences were formalized. In addition practical applications of science became increasingly important as this knowledge began to be used to support commerce, industry, and personal well-being.

There were many factors that helped produce the foregoing changes. Underlying this process was an empirical attitude that permeated Western societies. There was a widespread interest in studying the things of the world to understand how they actually worked. The findings and tools of the craftsman were valued and utilized rather than being shrugged off as vulgar and irrelevant as had been done by the Greeks who also under appreciated empiricism. An additional motivation came as a response to the fanatical, repressive, inadequate explanations Christianity then provided. Some changes were favored because societies existed as small, separated cultures such that persons oppressed in one place could find shelter elsewhere. These separate, but communicating cultures also promoted cross-pollination of ideas that increased the speed of the search to find how the world worked. This knowledge about the things of the world slowly accumulated over time and was recognized by some thoughtful people as conflicting with the answers provided by their religion.

However, in spite of the widespread recognition of the critical value of the scientific method in solving problems and answering questions, one essential domain -- the realm of "meaning" -- remained firmly within the grip of supernatural religion primarily because religion then had the power to censor, restrain, and kill. Philosophers said, and scientists agreed, that science was restricted to clarifying how things happen, not why they happen in some teleological sense. And ultimate answers were still considered to be attainable, particularly by religions. And, this was the realm to which meaning was assigned.

There was no thought that "meaning" actually exists in the natural realm and can therefore be described naturalistically; e.g. "meaning of life" might be defined as having beliefs that sustain an individual's life. That when people have this meaning of life they want to live. When individuals don't have this they want to die, or at least they live in a state of despair, depression, or denial -- neglect their health, take addictive drugs, and do other self destructive things. However, Baruch Spinoza (in the mid-1600s) got close to bringing meaning of life into the natural realm with his concept of *conatus* [ko-na'-tus] (the relentless endeavor of each individual to preserve itself).

Because “meaning” was taken to come from some supernatural source it was banned from the realm of science and by those looking for naturalistic answers. And it wasn’t until the arrival of Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution by natural selection that concepts became available to move “meaning” from the world of the supernatural to the natural world. Progress since Darwin has been very rapid. Over the past several decades all fields of knowledge, but especially evolutionary psychology have been developing the evidence that will make possible not only the recognition of what needs to be done, but how to do it. A primary tool for replacing the supernatural model of religion with a naturalistic one must be the understanding of the meaning of meaning from a naturalistic perspective; that is, that it comes out of what human beings are as creatures evolved in the natural world shaped by evolutionary forces.

However, the final hurdle that has retarded achieving the foregoing relates to a basic assumption that grounded early science – that science like religion gives us Truth in some objective way independent of the observer. Niels Bohr corrected this error when he said -- “It is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out how Nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about Nature,” – which my friend Alan Wright interprets, I think correctly, to be: “Our descriptions of nature are always incomplete and inaccurate to some degree.” However, Bohr’s answer is not widely known in our society, even among educated and thoughtful people.

When enough individuals understand Bohr’s point and its *relevance* it will then be possible to develop a discussion based on the recognition that “meaning” exists in the natural realm because it is a physiological state within a person made possible by our evolution. It will at this point be possible to move religion into the domain of science and create a Science of Religion. This would enable people to understand the meaning of their life in a way that would help them achieve their full positive potential. This would happen because a Science of Religion would develop step-by-step answers to help individuals increase their odds of achieving a sustainable feeling that their life has meaning. (Sustainable here meaning living in harmony with reality and supporting others in achieving this state.)

A core assumption of this approach is that there is only one universe – the natural world open to study through human efforts and not dependent on revelation or any other process not available to others. This means religion and science can both be understood to exist only in the natural world. However, the key problem delaying the foregoing step involves current assumptions about “meaning;” either that it’s a meaningless word, or is only provided within the realm of traditional religions. And that is why it has been stated that there are two magisteria – that of science and that of religion.

I hope the foregoing makes clear why it is essential to bring the meaning of human life into an expanded domain of science. Up to this point individuals have been left on their own to understand the nature of human life and the functioning of their own body relative to this issue. This is like asking people to discover calculus or the periodic table of elements on their own. These circumstances have allowed “post-modernists” to claim that everything is relative – implying that there is no way to interpret meaning of human life in some way universal to all people. And, even though the foregoing has appeared to be true my thesis is that it is not true. A proper understanding of meaning of life gives it an objective studyable aspect; an approach that fits

**within the realm of science. Up to this point we have lacked an underlying principle to use in gathering, interpreting, and using the experiments and data in general from the human centered sciences – psychology, sociology, anthropology, medicine, and let me add religion – to understand and promote the achievement of a meaningful life for everyone.**

**Because the importance of bringing religion into the domain of science has not been recognized, critical areas of human and social life have been out of reach to scientific study. This is the underlying cause of all social problems – war, crime, poverty, despair, drugs, delinquency, rampant materialism, etc. These are all behaviors that come out of individuals who lack a sustainable feeling that their life has meaning. The Science of Religion would provide the grounding theory – meaning of life – models, experiments, and other data gathering procedures leading toward ways for individuals to achieve a sustainable feeling that their life has meaning.**

**In my model churches would be similar to hospitals in that they would develop the necessary structures to be the places where the discoveries, observations, and solutions uncovered through scientific efforts would be applied to achieve the fundamental goal of helping all people achieve a sustainable feeling that their life has meaning. And like with medicine there would undoubtedly be different approaches and each measured in terms of its effectiveness.**

**Until the meaning of human life is discussed from a naturalistic perspective, meaning will either be ignored, or relegated to the domain of supernatural religion and this will leave us in our current state of being overwhelmed by seemingly unsolvable problems. An understanding of human evolution provides all the guidance we need to develop a Science of Religion and bring meaning into the realm of science which can be as easily done as when energy, work, force, and matter were defined to fit within the empirical realm of science.**

**However, as indicated at the beginning of my presentation this *will* require expanding the understanding of what science is and what religion is. Science needs to be seen as the search for congruency. Religion must be seen as the component of the scientific endeavor that guides all persons in finding a meaning for their life – a sustainable feeling that their life has meaning.**

**This definition of religion may be difficult for many to accept because religion is usually thought of in terms of its secondary features (that is those culturally unique things that help fulfill the underlying purpose). Examples of these secondary features are: belief in God/god/or gods, or other supernatural elements; morality; fear of death; support in times of stress; etc. Unfortunately its central naturalistic purpose (meaning of life) is ignored.**

**With a clear naturalistic principle to build on – meaning of human life – a Science of Religion could be assembled and structures developed to help all participants live their lives so as to achieve a sustainable feeling that their life has meaning which requires helping the rest of humanity to achieve this, too. This is the unrecognized goal that humanity has been struggling toward since the evolution of symbolic language. And which only becomes possible when we realize that science and religion exist in one domain and must be rejoined in order to fulfill their purposes.**