



[Michael Heller](#) [1]

1996

*The New Physics and a New Theology*, 1996

The universe is the object of the research carried out by the natural sciences. In fact, this statement is tautological in so far as the universe can be defined as that which is studied by the natural sciences. The universe is “given” to the natural sciences in the empirical method they employ and the boundaries of the empirical method establish in this sense the boundaries of the universe. That which exceeds the possibilities of empirical research is by definition beyond the confines of the natural sciences. One of the principal aims of the philosophy of science is to indicate the boundaries within which the empirical method can be applied or in other words to mark off the boundaries of the universe. In a more transparent and more precise way of speaking: all of the results achieved thus far by the empirical sciences can be reduced to attempts to understand what the empirical sciences can achieve and what methods they use in those achievements. This is truly an activity to determine the boundaries, even from one side only, i.e., the side of the natural sciences. The other side of the boundary remains inaccessible to the empirical sciences and also, therefore, to their methodological reflection.

The fundamental theological truth concerning the universe is the statement that establishes its creation by God. It is necessary to state right away the tautology that for theologians the universe is all of that which has been created by God. Clearly the universe of science is only a part of the universe of theology. This is true not only in the sense that the universe of science contains only that which is defined as the “material world”, while the universe of theology goes beyond the domain of the material, but also in the sense that theology can pronounce statements about the “material world” which go beyond the empirical method, that is, which do not pertain to the universe of science. Thus, the material world in the theological perspective is, in a sense, richer than the material world as seen in the perspective of the natural sciences. It is precisely here that the possibility arises for a theology of science. As a reflection of the sciences the theology of science would study the consequences of the fact that the natural sciences explore the world created by God.

Above all else the theology of science should be an integral part of theology and be a part of its peculiar character. If it is correct that science is a great value for humanity, then the theology of science should be considered as a subheading of the theology of earthly values. A specific function of the subheading would be, among other matters, to have frequent recourse to the results of the philosophy of science. The philosophy of science, as we have said, examines the boundaries of the possibilities of the natural sciences, but by its very nature it cannot go beyond them. On the contrary, theology pushes on beyond those boundaries. The awareness that the world has been created by God permits the theology of science to glimpse aspects and dimensions of the world which cannot be reached by modern empirical investigations. In other words the theology of science can look at the boundaries of the empirical domain and, therefore, at the boundaries of the natural sciences, by putting itself in a certain sense on the other side, that is, on the side not accessible to the sciences themselves.

I would like at this time to draw the reader's attention to two characteristics of the world, the authentication of which would allow the theology of science to view the natural sciences from the other side of their methodological boundary. The first characteristic can be expressed in this way: For its existence the world is completely dependent upon the Creator. Traditional theology, following traditional philosophy, usually calls this characteristic the “contingency of the world”. It seems that this thesis of the dependence of the world's existence on the absolute Being (which may be understood in various ways) is an integral part of Christian doctrine of creation. I do not wish to enter here into a discussion as to whether the natural sciences say anything or not about the existence of the objects to be studied. Even if they did, they would certainly not do so in the context of dependence upon the Creator. That is the domain of theology and reflection on the sciences in light of this fact constitutes the purpose of the theology of science.

The second characteristic can be expressed with the following statement. The world is imbued with values. Since the time at least of the Vienna Circle it is well known that the empirical method is not sensitive to values. Expressions of norms and values do not belong to the vocabulary of the natural sciences. Still this does not mean that the material world is not a “vehicle of values”. The creation of the world is the result of a certain plan of God. That plan includes not only all that the natural sciences seek to understand by their own proper method, but also all that in axiology is called the system of values. It is at this point that the traditional treatise on the “purpose of creation” could be inserted. In every rational activity the problem of ends is intertwined with a system of values and the end itself is always a value. An examination of the natural sciences from the point of view of values would also belong to the proper subject matter of theology of science.

We must still make an important remark about methodology. Many modern theologians hold that the characteristic “framework” for all of Christian theology should be derived from a certain kind of anthropological understanding. This comes down in the end to the assertion that the purpose of Revelation was not to teach humans the truth about the world, that is, to transmit to them the information which would satisfy their innate curiosity, but rather to make it possible that the human being could reach salvation. Revelation is above all else existential and not informative. Seen in this perspective it becomes clear that the purpose of the theology of science cannot be to offer additional insight. The purpose of the theology of science is the same as that of all theology, but always with reference to the specific object of a given theological discipline. The theology of science dedicated to a critical reflection on those data of Revelation which allows us to contemplate the sciences as a specifically human activity.

M. Heller, *The New Physics and a New Theology* (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1996), pp. 97-99.

[On Faith and Reason](#) [2]

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