

Paul Draper, Cornel West and a Pragmatic Critique of Natural Theology

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Abstract:

Paul Draper has expressed concerns regarding the current state of the philosophy of religion. Based on insights from Cornel West, in this article I will be giving a pragmatic response to Draper's article "Partisanship and Inquiry in Philosophy of Religion". More accurately, this article will be presenting what Draper calls "philosophy of theism" as a pragmatic tool for overcoming partisanship in the philosophy of religion. Ultimately, philosophy of theism is commendable insofar as it can overcome partisanship better than the alternative.

Keywords: Paul Draper, Natural Theology, Philosophy of Theism, Cornel West

1. Introduction

Both Paul Draper and Cornel West have lamented the current state of the philosophy of religion. Though Draper and West have different reasons for drawing their conclusion, I find it interesting that two philosophers with such differing backgrounds come to a similar conclusion, and that both are so passionate about coming to a reasonable resolution to the problem. Based on insights from West, in this article I will be giving a pragmatic response to Draper's article "Partisanship and Inquiry in Philosophy of Religion". More accurately, this article will be presenting what Draper refers to as "philosophy of theism" as a pragmatic philosophy.¹ From the pragmatic perspective, the philosopher of theism is guided by the principle of overcoming partisanship in the philosophy of religion. The philosopher of theism makes certain assumptions about *how* one ought to investigate the existence of God. Those assumptions are not right or wrong, but either conducive or not conducive to overcoming partisanship. Ultimately, philosophy of theism is commendable only in so far as it can overcome partisanship better than the alternative—viz. natural theology.

I believe that a pragmatic understanding of philosophy of theism is warranted for two reasons. First, the criticisms that Draper raises against natural theology are just the kind that a pragmatist would raise. Second, the reasons that Draper gives in support of philosophy of theism are just the kind a pragmatist, like West, might give.

I will first examine Draper's criticism of natural theology and explain why I think they are pragmatic criticisms. I will then explain in more detail why I believe that philosophy of theism is best understood as a pragmatic tool as opposed to a philosophy that seeks to give an *objectively true* understanding of the existence and nature of God.

2. Draper and West on natural theology

Draper claims that there are four issues that make the position of the natural theologian problematic. Together, these four points give rise to much of the partisanship that occurs in the philosophy of religion. First, the natural theologian performs a special function in his/her religious community. Second, religious authority greatly influences the position of the natural theologian. Third, the natural theologian does not engage in genuine inquiry about God's existence. Fourth, natural theology is relatively safe because the natural theologian is unlikely to change his/her religious beliefs.

These four points that Draper raises are all related. Draper maintains that natural theology is a branch of apologetics. As an apologist, the natural theologian is responsible for "defending the beliefs of the community against outside challenges, [...and] convincing other's that the community's beliefs are true" (Draper 2006, 9). Because the natural theologian is an apologist he/she must be careful not to offend the religious authorities who establish the dogmas of the community. In fact, the religious authorities and the dogmas of the community set limits on how the natural theologian can even conceive of divinity thus inhibiting genuine inquiry into God's existence. Finally, because the natural theologian's philosophical investigation is limited by religious authority and by the community of which he/she is a member, the natural theologian is not in danger of being forced to give up some cherished beliefs.

Cornel West comes to a similar conclusion. West would claim that the natural theologian is guilty of succumbing to religious realism.

[R]eligious realism is an intellectual strategy adopted by those who accept the authority of particular ecclesiastical (or personal) interpretations. The purpose here is to convince one's self and others that these interpretations are true *regardless of their role and function in one's life*. [... However, t]he truth-claims of religious communities are inseparable from the aims and purposes of those communities (West 1993, 269).

What Draper has implied, and West has made explicit, is that the claims of the natural theologian, as a member of a religious community, are constrained by, and relative to, the beliefs, values and goals of the community to which the natural theologian belongs. Further, not only are the natural theologian's claims constrained by, and relative to, the beliefs, values and goals of the community, but often times the natural theologian acts as though—or more likely truly believes—the claims are not so constrained.

By failing to realize the constrained and relative nature of his/her claims, the natural

theologian naturally falls victim to the partisanship that Draper maintains negatively impacts the philosophy of religion. The partisanship occurs because the beliefs, values and goals of the community put blinders on the natural theologian preventing him/her from free and open inquiry. The beliefs, values and goals then become self-justifying and self-supporting. For a religious realist, the beliefs, values and goals of the community are already held to be true because they are held by the community. Therefore, to question those beliefs becomes impossible. Further, unless two separate communities share a certain number or kind of beliefs, values or goals, there is not the possibility of meaningful dialogue between the two communities, because there is no common ground from which dialogue could begin.

Ultimately, Draper is concerned with the overall state of the philosophy of religion. Draper states: "I cannot [...] ignore some flashing neon signs that not all is well in my discipline [philosophy of religion]" (Draper 2006, 1). Draper argues that part, and perhaps most, of the problem is the degree of partisanship. Further, Draper believes that the partisanship is due in large part to the prevalence of natural theology in the philosophy of religion. I have suggested above that the partisanship is an outcome of the nature of natural theology. More specifically, because the natural theologian serves a particular role in the community any claims or arguments that the natural theologian presents are constrained by, and relative to, the beliefs, values and goals of the community to which the natural theologian belongs. Due to the limiting nature of the community's influence the natural theologian cannot be anything but partisan.

I am suggesting that Draper's criticisms are pragmatic because what Draper is drawing attention to is that the metaphysical speculations of the natural theologian are all relative to the natural theologian's role in a particular religious community. As such, the metaphysics and ontologies of the natural theologian are good or bad only in so far as they promote the beliefs, values and goals of the community. However, when looked at from the perspective of reducing partisanship in the philosophy of religion, the metaphysics of the natural theologian are to be rejected because, as suggested above, the natural theologian cannot be anything but partisan. So, while it might be the case that one could reject natural theology because it gives an inaccurate conception of divinity, what is more important is that Draper has shown that natural theology is to be rejected because natural theology fails to overcome partisanship.

3. Philosophy of theism as pragmatic tool

I turn now to explain why philosophy of theism is best understood as a pragmatic tool used to solve the problem of partisanship in the philosophy of religion. There are two reasons I believe philosophy of theism should be understood pragmatically. First, the strengths that Draper gives in favor of philosophy of theism are best explained relative to the goal of reducing partisanship in the philosophy of religion. Second, if philosophy of theism is not understood pragmatically then the philosopher of theism might run into some of the problems that arise for the natural theologian.

The activity of the philosopher of theism is primarily focused on the question of whether or

not God exists. Draper suggests that the way the philosopher of theism engages this question is by trying to give equal time to arguments both for and against God's existence. Further, because the philosopher of theism is uninfluenced, or at least less influenced, by religious communities and religious authority there are arguments available to the philosopher of theism that do not even occur to the partisan natural theologian. Finally, the philosopher of theism is engaging in a risky activity. By directly questioning God's existence and engaging in relatively free and open inquiry regarding God's existence the philosopher of theism might have to give up cherished beliefs about the nature and status of God.

Draper sees the above—directly questioning God's existence, engaging in free, open and balanced inquiry, not being influenced by religious authority, and facing the existential risk of giving up cherished beliefs—as four points that commend philosophy of theism. It seems to me that the four points only commend philosophy of theism for a pragmatic reason. The four points are valuable when viewed from the perspective of reducing partisanship in the philosophy of religion. In and of themselves, I do not see what would make the four points superior to their alternative. However, I will admit that there could be other pragmatic reasons, besides dealing with partisanship that would give one good reason to accept the four points and thus justify accepting philosophy of theism.

As with the criticisms Draper raised against the natural theologian, the four points in favor of philosophy of theism are all interrelated. I will focus on the fact that the philosopher of theism engages in free, open and balanced inquiry regarding God's existence—for brevity I will refer to this as simply free inquiry. I will focus on free inquiry because it seems to me that it is the central feature of the activity of the philosopher of theism, the other three points either result from, or enable, free inquiry.

Free inquiry, as Draper conceives it, involves spending equal time constructing good arguments both for and against God's existence. Further, when

confronted with an argument for or against God's existence [free inquiry requires spending] roughly equal amounts of time trying to construct serious objections to that argument and trying to strengthen the argument either by revising it or by defending it against objections (Draper 2006, 10).

Draper contends that free inquiry is what it takes to objectively seek the truth about God's existence. However, I am presenting philosophy of theism pragmatically, as such, free inquiry is valuable not because it is "objective" but because it allows the philosopher of theism to avoid falling into the traps of partisanship.

Free inquiry, in itself, does not guarantee that the conclusions one comes to are *true* from an ultimate perspective, this is so for two reasons. First, there is no stopping point to free inquiry. Therefore, one can never arrive at the *true* answer because there are always more arguments that could be made or refuted. Second, if one were to assume that there is a correct and true answer regarding the existence of God, one would have to give good reason why unbalanced inquiry cannot come to truth, beyond just saying that it is not free inquiry. Thus, it is simpler to give a pragmatic justification for accepting free inquiry.

Therefore, philosophy of theism is valuable, good, right or true because it engages in free inquiry. Free inquiry is valuable, good, right or true because it helps avoid partisanship in the philosophy of religion in a way that the natural theologian cannot because the natural theologian does not engage in free inquiry. Free inquiry avoids partisanship because it removes the blinders established by religious authority and religious communities; therefore no belief is immune from questioning. Further, if a group of individuals are all engaged in free inquiry, then there is already common ground between them, thus allowing dialogue to occur in a way that it is not possible for a group of natural theologians who all come from religious communities with irreconcilable beliefs, values and goals.

Finally, understood pragmatically, philosophy of theism through free inquiry can come to intersubjective agreement regarding the existence of God. This intersubjective agreement might not appeal to some; however it does have something to commend it. Primarily, it helps avoid, or at least deal with, the partisanship that seems to be undermining the discipline of the philosophy of religion.

I will now briefly discuss some problems that arise for philosophy of theism, if not understood pragmatically. The first problem is that it removes at least some rational reasons for accepting the metaphysics of the philosopher of theism. The second problem is that the philosopher of theism may run into the same type of problems that arise for the natural theologian. Cornel West maintains “that background prejudices, presuppositions, and prejudgments are requisite for any metaphysical or ontological reflections” (West 1993, 267). If West is correct, then any metaphysics—and questioning whether or not God exists is clearly a metaphysical position—is “always relative to specific traditions, theories, and particular sets of social practices” (West 1993, 267).

An individual can accept the metaphysics of the natural theologian because the beliefs, values and goals of the religious community, to which the natural theologian belongs, appeal to that individual. They could be appealing because it helps the individual make sense of his/her life, or to cope with existential crises, or a variety of other reasons. It can thus be rational to accept a particular metaphysics, not because the metaphysics by itself provides good reason to accept it, but rather because one could have good reason to accept the traditions, theories and social practices that undergird the metaphysics. With philosophy of theism, it is unclear what traditions, theories and social practices ground the metaphysical speculations. Therefore, it removes potential good reasons for the rational acceptance of philosophy of theism’s metaphysics.

Not acknowledging the traditions, theories, and particular social practices that shape the metaphysics of the philosopher of theism leads to a further problem. As was shown above with the natural theologian, the beliefs, values and goals of the community can unwittingly blind the natural theologian’s metaphysics resulting in partisanship. Likewise, the philosopher of theism could be blinded by certain unacknowledged values and presuppositions and partisanship would remain. Draper gives an excellent example of failing to recognize unacknowledged values and presuppositions when he discusses John Schellenberg’s argument from divine hiddenness (Draper 2006, 16-17).

The philosopher of theism might be able to avoid the above two criticisms but only by falling prey to what Cornel West (1993) calls an Archimedean objectivism (263). Archimedean objectivism

maintains that Reality serves as an ultimate court of appeal, and philosophy of theism is appealing to this ultimate court to adjudicate. The problem with this position is that, as Kuhn, Quine and others have shown, “reality-claims are theory-laden, that is, our truth-claims are mediated by our theories” (West 1993, 269). Therefore, there are no ultimate courts of appeal, and “[e]very penultimate court of appeal is linked to a particular description, version, or theory of the self, world, and God” (West 1993, 263). Therefore, one returns to the first two objections raised against interpreting philosophy of theism non-pragmatically.

4. Responding to some possible concerns

Before concluding, I will look at a couple of objections that could be raised against a pragmatic approach to the philosophy of religion. The first objection is that philosophy of theism—understood pragmatically—is merely some type of idealism. The second objection is that philosophy of theism would be reduced to some sort of vulgar relativism.

Philosophy of theism, understood pragmatically, does reject Reality as a final court of appeal to adjudicate between conflicting interpretations of reality. However, “to reject Reality as the standard by which we accept theories of reality is not the same as rejecting the existence of Reality *per se*” (West 1993, 269). The philosopher of theism can still hold that sense-independent objects do in fact exist, however one’s understanding of those objects are always mediated by one’s theories.

Philosophy of theism is also not some sort of vulgar relativism that denies the existence of any rational standards. In fact, philosophy of theism depends on some type of rational standards, that is part of what makes free inquiry work. However, being pragmatic, the philosopher of theism acknowledges that those standards are relative to a common goal. In the case of philosophy of theism, that goal is to reduce or remove partisanship in the philosophy of religion. Certainly, by removing an objective concept of Reality as the arbiter between differing positions, intersubjective agreement becomes the standard. Yet, “[t]his does not mean that Reality is simply what people can agree on. Rather, it means that common aims and purposes are required if there are to be rational standards which help determine acceptable and unacceptable theories and interpretations” (West 1993, 269).

5. Conclusion

I have presented philosophy of theism as a pragmatic tool designed to adequately deal with the problem of partisanship in the philosophy of religion. The philosopher of theism, aided by free inquiry, directly engages the question of whether or not God exists. Free inquiry requires that the philosopher of theism remains self-critical and ever mindful of the external beliefs, values, and goals that might be shaping his/her metaphysical speculations. If done well, the philosopher of theism can engage with other self-critical interlocutors to come to an intersubjective and philosophically rigorous concept of divinity.

I have shown that natural theology cannot be anything but partisan. Therefore, if partisanship will ultimately be detrimental to the continued flourishing of the philosophy of religion, then natural

theology should be rejected as a dominant voice in the philosophy of religion. I will, however, add that this does not mean that natural theology should be rejected itself, just that its limitations within the philosophy of religion should be acknowledged. Natural theology will remain important within the religious communities in which the natural theologian resides.

“There is no doubt that metaphysical and ontological reflections should continue” (West 1993, 267). A pragmatic understanding of philosophy of theism allows this metaphysical and ontological reflection to continue in the philosophy of religion. But, unlike the alternative, natural theology, philosophy of theism can overcome partisanship. Insofar as philosophy of theism remains guided by the principle of free inquiry, with the goal of alleviating partisanship in the philosophy of religion, philosophy of theism is to be commended.

Endnotes:

1. Here, and throughout the article, I am using “pragmatic” somewhat more broadly than the more technical understanding of the pragmatist tradition of Peirce, Dewey, and West himself.

References

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