

# PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY: WHAT QUESTIONS CAN IT ANSWER?

**Meaning and Mechanism:**

**The Boundaries between Science, Philosophy and Theology**



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## **Introduction**

A common problem in interpersonal discussions and academic work is the confusion caused by misunderstanding or misapplication of methods. One of the main reasons for this confusion stems from the failure to correctly identify the questions appropriate to the nature of different disciplines. In particular, the failure to clearly define the boundaries and functions of fields such as philosophy, science and theology leads to serious misunderstandings about the answers expected from these fields. This article aims to address which questions these three fields can answer and common misconceptions about them.

## **The Nature and Limits of Science**

Science works through observation and experimentation based on the principle of objectivity. Understanding the laws of nature, providing explanations for natural phenomena and examining existence through measurable elements are among the basic functions of science. When we look at the history of thought, there have been many ideas and movements that have tried to distance science from metaphysics. One of the most well-known and successful of these has been positivism. Today, naturalism, which we can call the ideological framework of science, has made this separation more apparent. Ideologies such as positivism and naturalism have played important roles in the effort to keep science out of the metaphysical realm. These efforts aimed to clarify the scope of the scientific method and to make science more coherent.

Approaches that do not understand or take into account this limited field of study demand answers that cannot be expected from science. In particular, presenting the subjective interpretations of scientists as objective results of science leads to the spread of misinformation and distortion of the answers expected from science. Individuals who do not understand scientific methodology may misinterpret science and attempt to pull it back into the metaphysical realm. In fact, depending on the question asked, it is not possible to escape from the metaphysical realm, which is the reason for this observed tendency. This attitude also leads to another misconception when viewed from the outside, which is that subjective interpretations are perceived as objective. When this happens, inconsistencies emerge, but the general public is unable to recognize these inconsistencies due to popular culture.

## **Science and the “How-Why” Fallacy**

Some approaches to interpreting the results of scientific studies confuse the questions “How?” and “Why?” in particular. Science can answer the question “How?” in relation to the functionality and mechanism of a phenomenon. However, the questions of “Why?” and “Why?” are about meaning, purpose and value, and are beyond scientific methodology. By its very nature, science can never answer the questions “Why?” and “Why?”, nor can it be expected to. The questions that science can answer are “What?”, “How?” and “When?”. The answers to these questions may not always be certain. It may need philosophy in its descriptions of “What?” and “When?”, it may propose arguments or hypotheses about “How?” by reasoning with the methodologies of philosophy, and none of these answers are certain, they remain as

assumptions. These assumptions may become more solidified or more refuted in the process, or they may disappear altogether.

The question that science can answer most precisely is “What?”. It is a description of what the object it studies and observes is, and it is possible to be wrong even in this area. The rest of the questions other than “What?” have to be approached hypothetically as a result of the evaluation of them as a whole with their connections, and it has to try to answer them with the help of philosophy, not directly in the field of science.

Example:

- **The Big Bang Theory:** This theory can hypothesize how the universe expanded and came into being. But it cannot answer the question “Why does the universe exist?”. This is a metaphysical question. As mentioned above, the answer to the question “How?” is given with the help of philosophy; the same is true for the question “When?” and these are only assumptions.
- **The Theory of Evolution:** It can make detailed assumptions about how evolutionary processes work (natural selection, adaptation, etc.). But the questions “Why does life exist?” or “Why do we evolve the way we do?” go beyond the limits of science. “How?” and ‘When?’ can be answered hypothetically with the help of philosophy.

Efforts to answer such questions often involve ideological approaches and misrepresent science. And even the questions of “How?” and “When?”, which we assume to be within the scope of science, cannot abstract themselves from these ideological approaches. This is why hypothetical subjective interpretations are perceived as objective results of science. This approach, which is common in nontheist ideologies, presents scientific assumptions about the “How?” of the universe or life as definitive answers to the “Why?” of existence. This approach stems from a misunderstanding of scientific methodology and its limits. The confusion of “How?” and “Why?”, as in this example, is observed in all other subjects.

## **The Role of Philosophy and Theology**

Unlike science, philosophy and theology offer a broader perspective, addressing fundamental questions of human existence such as meaning, purpose and value. These disciplines explore the limits of human reason and faith, seeking answers to questions about the ultimate nature of being and the universe. While philosophy makes intellectual evaluations supported by scientific findings, theology relies more on divine realities and interpretations of sacred texts.

The main difference between philosophy and theology is the priority and approach they give to questions:

- Science attempts to answer the questions “What?”, “How?” and “When?” based on observations and experiments. But scientific methodology, by its very nature, cannot answer questions such as meaning and purpose.
- Philosophy deepens the questions “What is it?” and “How?” and provides conceptual and logical frameworks for these questions. In addition, it tries to form rational answers to the questions “Why?” and “Why?” through reasoning. In this respect, philosophy

stands out as a field that questions both the limits of science and the capacity of human reason.

- Theology focuses especially on the questions “Why?” and “Why?”. While it attempts to provide meaningful answers to these questions from a divine perspective, it may also suggest that the individual must find answers through his or her own beliefs and experiences.

Theology deals with questions such as the creation of the universe, the purpose of human existence and moral values based on sacred texts. However, some passages in sacred texts contain information and interpretations on topics that are in the domain of science and philosophy. Scientific explanations, statements about natural phenomena, the formation of the universe or human biology in sacred texts should be evaluated with scientific data. These statements should be viewed as hypotheses or theories. Philosophical approaches, statements in the texts about human moral responsibility, free will or the meaning of life can be discussed with the conceptual tools of philosophy.

Example:

### 1. **Climate Change**

- *“How is climate change happening?”*

The science answer: The earth is warming due to an increase in the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

- *“Why is climate change happening?”*

Science has no answer; this involves the ethical consequences of human behavior and metaphysical meanings of nature.

### 2. **Diseases**

- *“How does a disease occur?”*

Science answers: The immune system is affected when viruses or bacteria enter the body.

- *“Why does disease exist?”*

This question crosses the boundaries of science, focusing on existential causes rather than biological mechanisms.

### 3. **The Beginning of the Universe**

- *“How did the universe come into being?”*

The answer of science: The expansion process that started with the Big Bang.

- *“Why did the universe exist?”*

This is a question that theology and metaphysics seek to answer.

## **What Philosophy and Theology Have in Common**

Philosophy and theology address the same questions in some cases, but the weight and approach they give to them are different. Philosophy is more concerned with rational foundations and logic, while theology focuses on meaning and value. For example, thinking about the purpose of human existence is more of a “search for a rational explanation” for philosophy, while for theology the answer to this question is sought in a divine reality. While theology encourages the individual to find meaning and direction through sacred texts or religious traditions, philosophy evaluates this process within a framework of universal rationality and critical thinking. The interaction of these two disciplines offers the potential to produce more comprehensive and balanced answers to humanity's big questions.

## **Evaluation of Theological Texts according to Fields**

Sacred texts contain a variety of information about different fields and it is important to evaluate this information with the methods of the relevant disciplines in order to understand it correctly:

1. **Scientific Content:** Statements about the creation of the universe, natural phenomena or physical processes should be analyzed using scientific methods. For example, expressions such as “the creation of the heavens and the earth” in a sacred text can be associated with modern cosmology or astronomy. However, the context and metaphorical expressions of the text should be taken into account when making this association.
2. **Philosophical Approaches:** Issues such as human behavior, ethical values and free will fall within the scope of philosophy. Such expressions allow individuals to develop a deeper understanding through rational inquiry.
3. **Theological Approaches:** Issues such as the nature of God, the sacred duties of man, or life after death are the core domain of theology. Such statements take on meaning in the individual's world of belief and require a more subjective evaluation.

Philosophy and theology fulfill an important function in addressing questions that science cannot answer. However, the proper fulfillment of these functions requires a good understanding of the limits and methods of each discipline. In addition, approaches to all issues must be categorical and subject-specific.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the boundaries of philosophy, science and theology is the first step towards a coherent debate. Asking questions appropriate to the nature of each field allows us to avoid misconceptions. The ability to think categorically clarifies the boundaries of the fields and prevents misunderstandings. Developing this skill allows us to reach deeper and more

satisfying conclusions. Thus, both scientific, philosophical and theological discussions can proceed on a more solid ground.

The methodological and conceptual differences between philosophy, science and theology discussed in this article emphasize the importance of understanding the boundaries of these disciplines. While the objective methods of science focus on the physical world and mechanisms, philosophy provides conceptual frameworks that give meaning to these findings. Theology, on the other hand, addresses questions such as meaning, purpose and value from a divine perspective.

Drawing clear boundaries between these disciplines enables discussions to take place on a more coherent ground. However, we see that science is not completely independent, and that it benefits from philosophical approaches even in answering the questions “How?”, “When?” and “What?”. Each discipline should be judged by its own methodology and conceptual tools, and crossing boundaries should not lead to an imbalance between knowledge and belief. Ultimately, these distinctions can contribute to coherent thinking processes not only in academia but also in everyday life.