
Problems for Postfoundationalists: Evaluating J. Wentzel van Huyssteen's Interdisciplinary Theory of Rationality*

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Christian thinkers throughout history have turned to philosophy to articulate reasons for the validity of theological knowledge, even when calling philosophical knowledge itself into question. Particularly in recent decades, theologians have attempted to respond to the contested status of theology and understand the ways in which theological inquiry has been shaped, positively or negatively, by Enlightenment debates about reason and religion. A current theologian whose work is characterized by sustained engagement with such larger philosophical questions is J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, the James I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science at Princeton Theological Seminary. Van Huyssteen delivered the Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology in 2004 at the University of Edinburgh, and his work has particularly influenced that of other scholars in the areas of “science and religion” and “theology and science.”¹

A distinctive feature of van Huyssteen's work is his contention that a proper response to philosophical critiques of religion should do more than point out any unjustified assumptions they may contain. Rather, one must articulate a more plausible theory of rationality than is assumed by those philosophers, a theory that does justice to the basic convictions of the Christian theological tradition while also being conversant with recent philosophical debates and work in the sciences. Addressing the problem of the status of theological knowledge thus requires all the interdisciplinary resources one can muster. The payoff for such efforts is legitimacy. In the postfoundationalist model, theology “emerges as a reasoning strategy on

* I would like to thank Wesley Wildman and Kirk Wegter-McNelly for their invaluable help in the development of this article. Thanks also to Palmyre Oomen and the anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

¹ For essays that discuss van Huyssteen's influence and importance, see F. LeRon Shults, ed., *The Evolution of Rationality: Interdisciplinary Essays in Honor of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

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par with the intellectual integrity and legitimacy of the natural, human, and social sciences, even as it defines its own powerful domain of thought that in so many ways is also distinct from that of the sciences."² In other words, the postfoundationalist model promises to dissolve Enlightenment doubts about the rationality of religion.

This article presents and evaluates van Huyssteen's postfoundationalist model, drawing especially upon his definitive work on the topic, *The Shaping of Rationality*. Although I find van Huyssteen's general outline of the evolutionary roots of human rationality to be compelling, I argue that it offers little hope for adjudicating the rationality of theological claims or providing warrant for theological participation in public debates. Van Huyssteen faces the trade-off encountered by any general theory of the postfoundationalist kind: the more accurately it identifies broad principles of human rationality, the less useful it becomes for deciding, in particular cases, what is rational for a person to believe. And conversely, the more narrowly postfoundationalism constrains the operation of human reason for the purpose of sifting the rational from the irrational, the less it resembles what it purports to describe. For all the complexity and nuance of the descriptive portions of the postfoundationalist position, I will argue that there are nevertheless strong reasons to doubt that van Huyssteen's broader aspirations for theological legitimation can be met by a theory of rationality.

MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

At its most basic, van Huyssteen's project presents a new epistemological model—postfoundationalism—as a response to the errors associated with the cultural movement known as modernity. While van Huyssteen does not minimize the complexity of modernity, he argues that modernist conceptions of rationality are typically rooted in the epistemological theory of foundationalism, which can be seen in the way foundationalism expresses three central characteristics of modernist thought.³ First, foundationalists accept an individualist conception of knowledge, because they hold that the testimony of others is not indubitable or deducible from basic beliefs. They also hold to a universal conception of rationality, because they consider basic beliefs and the laws of logic to be unequivocal and indifferent to one's cultural background. Finally, foundationalists endorse the view that there is such a thing as objective knowledge, because a strict chain of inferences from indisputable starting points leaves no room for the intrusion of personal bias. A close association between modernity and foundationalism would give van Huyssteen a more manageable target for his critique; he would need to show only that foundationalism is untenable in

² J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*, Gifford Lectures, 2004 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

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order to undermine modernist assumptions about the relationship of rationality and religion.

Van Huyssteen also argues for the close alignment of postmodernism and nonfoundationalism, because postmodernity is best characterized by its rejection of modernity.⁴ Nonfoundationalists reject the idea that there can be fixed foundations for knowledge and offer, instead, a picture of knowledge as a web of beliefs shaped by their social location. They contend that claims about truth depend on context and that there is no common measure to allow for the adjudication between differing truths and rationalities. Nonfoundationalism, for van Huyssteen, is a form of relativism that undergirds the postmodern celebration of the fragmented and pluralistic nature of human reason.

Van Huyssteen supplements his general account of modernism and postmodernism with descriptions of how these arguments have influenced debates within the philosophy of science and Christian theology: modernist assumptions have shaped the philosophy of science because the latter inherited from the former a larger cultural metanarrative about scientific progress. Philosophers believed that science is constituted by objective and value-free knowledge gained from methodological examination of the evidence and that, in contrast, theological beliefs are speculative and ideologically contaminated. The modernist view of science reached its apex in logical positivism, which held that science progresses through the accumulation of empirical facts that are uninterpreted, indubitable, and fixed in meaning, but this view is still common today, as seen, for example, in the work of the biologist E. O. Wilson (34).

Despite the continuing influence of this modernist view of science in Western culture, there has also been a move since the middle of the past century toward postmodern or nonfoundationalist views of science that question dominant cultural assumptions about the objectivity and intellectual superiority of science. The postpositivist philosophy of science (e.g., in the work of Paul Feyerabend) that developed after Thomas Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is a clear example of the shift, with its emphasis on the theory-ladenness of data, the underdetermination of scientific theories, and the role of value judgments in scientific judgment (34).

Within Christian theology, van Huyssteen argues, fundamentalists rely upon foundationalist arguments in their espousal of biblical literalism: they simply posit the formal authority of Christian scripture rather than making a case for it with probable reasoning in cross-cultural conversation (62). Foundationalist beliefs are also evident in the more sophisticated theologies (e.g., that of Friedrich Schleiermacher) that assert that the religious life is undergirded by unmediated religious experience or self-authenticating

⁴ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 64; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

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revelation. Many philosophers and theologians assert, accordingly, that Christian theology cannot proceed without some foundationalist assumptions, because rational inquiry will always be subordinated to some sort of faith commitment and those committed beliefs will always lie beyond critical scrutiny.

As he does within the philosophy of science, van Huyssteen points within Christian theology to the increasing number of nonfoundationalist approaches, proposed by those wishing to displace the modernist assumptions in the field (69). Narrative theologians such as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Stanley Hauerwas, for example, have argued that the narrative of Christian scripture has an inherent logic and rationality, which is lost when translated into the arguments of modern philosophy. Theologians on this view need not be conversant with modern debates over epistemology to justify Christian belief but need only to internalize the rationale embedded within Christianity's own texts and practices. Nonfoundationalist theologians argue that they should not be forced to submit to standards alien to the rationality inherent in their tradition.

THE POSTFOUNDATIONALIST MODEL

Van Huyssteen argues for postfoundationalism in two general ways, using both a negative and a positive strategy. The negative strategy tries to undermine the persuasiveness of foundationalism and nonfoundationalism by showing how they undercut the very possibility of rational deliberation by allowing one to shield beliefs from criticism. Van Huyssteen argues that foundationalism as an epistemological model is unworkable, for indubitable beliefs that can justify all other knowledge claims do not exist. As postmodernists have shown, social location and tradition shape our own particular vantage point. Despite the universalist intent of foundationalism—that is, the intent to find beliefs that hold true across all cultures and time periods—the practical import of foundationalism is to discourage conversation, because one must dismiss those who deny the self-evident character of indubitable beliefs. If we only recognize that the premise of a universal rationality has been “exploded” by postmodernity, we can avoid falling into a conceptual trap that has no adequate solution (26).

The mistake of postmodernists, for van Huyssteen, is the implication that they draw from the inadequacies of modernity. By deconstructing the claim to a universal rationality, postmodernists typically espouse a view that there are many incommensurable rationalities and truths. The conclusion drawn from the incommensurability thesis is that one need not subject one's theories and beliefs to critical inquiry, because there is no way to adjudicate between competing truth claims. But this leads, says van Huyssteen, to a situation that is far worse than that of foundationalist epistemology—for now the entire network of beliefs is shielded from proper scrutiny, not just

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those beliefs deemed to be basic. Nonfoundationalist narrative theologians, for example, forswear the need to justify their beliefs and therefore lack a way to distinguish between good and bad ways of interpreting their tradition or assessing the truth of beliefs. Van Huyssteen says, “What nonfoundationalist theologians therefore confidently see as the logical integrity of theology is thus (epistemologically at least) rather easily revealed as a first-rate isolationist move, a protective strategy in which the belief, worship, and the practice of the Christian tradition is seen as sufficient to internally justify its own theological claims” (78). Postmodernism thus gives comfort to those religious communities who would isolate their beliefs from outside criticism. Having personally experienced the injustice that this type of isolationist move helped to produce in certain forms of South African Christianity, van Huyssteen finds this conclusion to be intolerable.⁵

Van Huyssteen’s positive argument for postfoundationalism is that his model incorporates the best arguments from both foundationalism and nonfoundationalism. Much of the plausibility of van Huyssteen’s position comes from the way he situates it as a sensible one that “splits the difference” between modernism and postmodernism. Accordingly, he must strike a delicate balance. The postfoundationalist model affirms that the rationality of particular beliefs and actions is “person- and situation-relative,” even though rationality is “universal in intent” (155). A postfoundationalist holds that “a weak notion of objectivity” is still epistemically important but that rationality does not imply that one’s beliefs are “closer to the truth” than another person’s (160, 158). Finally, postfoundationalism yields a “cognitive parity” between religion and science, even though there are important differences in “epistemological focus, the experiential resources, and the heuristic structures of different disciplines” (172, 187). Van Huyssteen repeatedly argues that postfoundationalism is able to chart a third way between differing intuitions about the nature of human rationality.

Evolutionary Origins of Rationality

Van Huyssteen’s search for a plausible middle ground leads him to evolutionary epistemology in order to ground his model, revealing the interdisciplinary nature of his work. He says, “The basic assumption of evolutionary epistemology is that we humans, like all other living beings, result from evolutionary processes and that, consequently, our mental capacities are constrained and shaped by the mechanisms of biological evolution” (4). Where other Christian scholars—most notably Alvin Plantinga—think that evolutionary epistemology most clearly reveals the errors of the naturalistic worldview, van Huyssteen finds instead a place to establish common ground

⁵ Kenneth A. Reynhout, “The Evolution of van Huyssteen’s Model of Rationality,” in Shults, *The Evolution of Rationality*, 2.

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with religious skeptics. Intelligence and rationality are keys to the survival of human beings within the evolutionary process, because we need rationality to cope with and understand our environment and one another. In this general sense, rationality is a ubiquitous feature of our lives and a defining characteristic of our species, for intelligence is required on a daily basis if we are to thrive in the world. The pursuits of intelligibility and optimal understanding are epistemic goals that shape every facet of human behavior.

The ubiquity of rationality means that no particular discipline can lay claim to having the only valid reasoning strategy, for multiple strategies are required to cope with the vastness of our environment. If, for example, scientists were to claim that science is the only valid way of gaining knowledge, they would lose a key framework for understanding how rationality works in the other domains of human experience. The central mistake of scientific positivists is not that they fail to acknowledge the supernatural sources of knowledge (contra Plantinga) but that their position goes against our best understanding of the evolutionary origins of human reason. Scientific reasoning and everyday decision making occupy different locations on the broad spectrum of human rationality that characterizes all goal-directed actions.

Rationality as an Epistemic Skill

Within the broad framework of evolutionary epistemology, van Huyssteen specifies the details of his model. One important characteristic of his account is that rationality is primarily a characteristic of persons and applies to beliefs only derivatively (146). He says this represents a break with modernist assumptions, because modernists have typically endorsed a foundationalist model for epistemology and a view of theory choice as a process characterized by explicit rule following. This has led, in turn, to a singular focus on the warrant for beliefs, since beliefs are easy to place into logical proofs. The abstract nature of logical proof—with its goal of obtaining conclusions of universal validity—led foundationalists to ignore the communicative practices and actions that undergird belief.

A major problem with the modernist model of rationality, for van Huyssteen, is that it is inconsistent with an evolutionary framework. Embodied agents, not abstract beliefs, operate within an evolutionary environment and, so, should be the locus of any theory of rationality. A post-foundationalist identifies the rational agent as someone with “flesh and blood by identifying him or her as someone with an acute self-awareness, someone who is consciously embedded in the concrete, living traditions of our various cultural domains and diverse reasoning strategies” (154). The evolutionary process favors agents who are able to make good judgments in a fluid and competitive environment over solitary thinkers who produce

beautifully reasoned proofs. The postfoundationalist argues that rationality applies in the first instance to persons who can exercise good sense and sound judgment in difficult and complex circumstances. Without a plausible theory of the most common forms of human reasoning, one will be at a loss to explain the most exemplary.

To capture the embodied nature of human reasoning, van Huyssteen follows Harold Brown in arguing that rational judgment is an epistemic skill analogous to a physical skill (144). This analogy has a number of implications, including recognition of the fallibility of rational decision making. We can recognize that just as an expert carpenter may not always strike a nail with absolute precision, so too may the most rational of persons sometimes make a mistake in judgment. Another implication is that fixed rules are only a small aspect of rationality; while physical laborers may sometimes use rules to guide their actions, rule following is not central to their activities. Once one internalizes a skill, one may successfully practice the skill without explicit scripts to guide action. A final implication is the embeddedness of rationality within particular social and historical contexts: whether we are considering a physical skill or a skillful judgment, the transfer of that skill requires personal instruction and is maintained or improved through intersubjective criticism. The close relationship between rational judgments and particular contexts limits rational judgment to persons within those contexts, which means that sometimes the only rational choice open to us is to seek expert advice. Unlike the foundationalist advocating the individualist character of theories of knowledge, the postfoundationalist argues that “rationality indeed requires other people, and not just any people, but people with the skills needed to exercise judgment and deliberate on particular issues within specific contexts” (147).

The Pursuit of Intelligibility

There are, of course, dissimilarities between physical skills and epistemic skills. Whereas the former have to do with engaging and transforming the world on a brute physical level, epistemic skills are about intelligibility and rational accountability (143). In other words, rational persons are ones who pursue the optimal understanding of our world and who provide a strong rationale for holding their beliefs. As van Huyssteen says, “Rationality . . . involves this capacity to give an account, to provide a rationale for what we believe, do, and choose” (132). The emphasis on intelligibility is a central theme of the postfoundationalist project; after abandoning the modernist quest for fixed rules in rational inquiry, van Huyssteen finds rationality in the exercise of responsible judgment based on good reasons.

The reason for the vague appeal to “responsible judgment” and “good reasons” is that van Huyssteen is trying to use terminology flexible enough

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to describe the many ways rationality is inherent in our everyday activities. Most of our everyday beliefs do not pertain to science or philosophy but to mundane facts about our world and the people around us. Indeed, he says, we have no choice but to hold beliefs about such things. The question then is whether or not we will pursue the best reasons. Evolutionary pressures push humanity to answer in the affirmative. In our everyday lives, van Huyssteen argues, the goals of intelligibility and optimal understanding shape the way we interact with others and the world, even if the way we specify our “good reasons” varies depending on the context (143). Rationality represents not only a way to describe certain persons or beliefs but also an epistemic goal that shapes our conduct.

Appeals to a special theory of rationality are not needed to explain science on this account, for scientific inquiry unfolds out of a common human desire to understand the world. Whether our choices are in science or in everyday life, “to be rational we have to believe on the basis of some form of appropriate and carefully considered evidence, which thus makes our beliefs more rational than nonrational or irrational beliefs” (132). This is not to say that science is in no way different from other forms of inquiry—I will say more about how van Huyssteen characterizes their differences below—but to claim that the differences are only a matter of “degree and emphasis” (181).

Theological reflection has a natural place in the postfoundationalist model, because religion reflects the general human need to understand and explain the world. While not minimizing the complexity of religious traditions, van Huyssteen argues that all religions have a cognitive dimension, according to which they “presuppose views of the universe, of the nature of reality, of some form of ‘ultimate reality,’ of human beings, and of the nature of morality” (181). Religious traditions offer a view of life that one can evaluate based on their explanatory adequacy. Theologians of religious traditions must carefully consider the evidence for or against their hypotheses and provide a rationale for their actions and beliefs, pursuing the same epistemic goals—the pursuit of clarity, intelligibility, and optimal understanding—that characterize all rational inquiry. Van Huyssteen’s model therefore argues for the intellectual integrity of theological reflection, freeing theologians to have a public voice in a larger interdisciplinary conversation (73).

Transversal Rationality

In van Huyssteen’s account of epistemic skill and intelligibility, he provides a rigorous critique of and alternative to modernist beliefs about rationality. His attempt to find a theory of rationality in the absence of foundations, however, raises a different question: How does postfoundationalism avoid succumbing to the pluralistic relativism that he finds in postmodernism? If

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the content of our “good reasons” changes according to its context, can rational actors ever agree—since, presumably, no two individuals can speak out of the exact same context?

Van Huyssteen answers this question by appropriating the concept of “transversal rationality” from the philosopher Calvin Schrag (133). Transversal rationality is an attempt to find the middle ground between the modernist search for universality and the postmodernist relativization of all forms of thought and contents of culture. “Transversal,” as used in mathematics and other disciplines, has the related meanings of extending, lying across, and intersecting. Transversal rationality, thus, attempts to describe the way in which the various forms of discourses, beliefs, and actions that emerge in local contexts can connect. Located within a vast assemblage of social practices, the knowing subject learns to practice responsible judgment by learning to critically discern different options, articulate the best possible reasons, and encounter the resistance of the world through the manifold of human experience (134). Although context conditions the judgments produced by these interrelated moments of communicative praxis, it does not fully determine them. Whatever the differences of our language games or cultural spheres, these common features of human rationality bequeathed by our evolutionary history allow for the possibility of common understanding, however fragile and transient that understanding may be. In this way, van Huyssteen acknowledges the inextricable situatedness of our belief and actions while maintaining that the fluid and intersecting nature of rationality can lead to productive transcontextual and cross-disciplinary conversation.

Shaping a theory of rationality that promotes cross-disciplinary conversation is perhaps the most important goal for van Huyssteen. The purpose of postfoundationalism is not to argue for any particular outcome of rational inquiry (for who can predict what transversal connections will be made?) but to provide the opportunity for the performance of human rationality through interdisciplinary conversation. Foundationalist absolutism, whether scientific or religious in nature, creates little openness to other points of view, and postmodernism offers little resources for one to escape one’s own prejudices. Transversal rationality, by contrast, “facilitates a multiperspectival approach to dialogue, where rationality exists in the intersecting connections and transitions between disciplines.”⁶

Comparing Science and Religion

I will conclude my summary by briefly showing how van Huyssteen analyzes the similarities and differences between scientific and theological inquiry. A crucial point of van Huyssteen’s model is that the epistemological over-

⁶ Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World?* 20.

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laps; hence, similarities between science and religion reflect the fact that both draw upon the same resources of human rationality. Scientists and theologians (those who are responsible for the cognitive dimension of a religious tradition) both seek to employ skillful judgment in their quest for intelligibility while attempting to make the best possible choices within a specific context and community. Even though the adoption of theories in theology does not have to be more arbitrary than in scientific decision making, van Huyssteen does not want to say that science and religion are “just like” each other. For one reason, he wants to respect the local and pluralistic nature of rational inquiry: what counts as good reasons will always depend on the local context. As he argues, “Being rational is . . . having the best or strongest reasons available to support the comparative rationality of one’s beliefs within a concrete sociohistorical context” (129). Whether in science or theology, we should thus have a “general trusting attitude” toward decisions made within local contexts by epistemically responsible persons (i.e., experts). The attempt to eliminate the differences between science and theology reflects a modernist impulse to impose a single standard of reason on a wide variety of different disciplines.

Despite these qualifications about the local character of knowledge, van Huyssteen is willing to offer some generalizations, arguing that theology and the sciences have different scopes, experiential resources, and heuristic structures (129). By scope, van Huyssteen is referring to that aspect of experiential reality to which a discipline gives attention. Scientists focus on the structure and behavior of physical, chemical, and biological systems through controlled observation, experiment, and measurement. The systematic pursuit of evidence in science allows van Huyssteen to claim that science is “still the clearest example of cognitive rationality at work,” even while rejecting claims for the “superiority” of scientific rationality (162). Experiential resources and heuristic structure, according to van Huyssteen, refer to the data or phenomena to which a discipline appeals when reaching and justifying its conclusions. The Christian believer, for example, will often appeal to religious experiences that are revelatory of something beyond experience. Scientists should not and need not appeal to personal experience in this way. Such differences between religion and science make it difficult to achieve interdisciplinary communication, yet postfoundationalism encourages the search for transversal connections, challenging intellectual traditions “to transcend the intellectual coma of fideism and foundationalism” (111).

EVALUATION OF POSTFOUNDATIONALISM

Having given an overview of the major themes of the postfoundationalist project, I think it is only fair to acknowledge that it is impressive in its complexity and nuance. The postfoundationalist emphasis on evolution

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rightly draws attention to the embodied nature of human rationality, arguing that scientists and theologians are more than a network of beliefs. Van Huyssteen's model is also attractive because he engages more than just philosophers of science in constructing his model of inquiry, avoiding the narrowness that sometimes characterizes debates within that field. Because I am generally persuaded by his description of the evolutionary origins of human rationality, my evaluation will focus on the normative part of the project: has postfoundationalism dispelled Enlightenment doubts about the legitimacy of theological reasoning? I will outline two weaknesses in postfoundationalist theory that cast doubt as to whether it has decisively answered Enlightenment challenges to religious belief.

What Is Enlightenment?

The first problem concerns van Huyssteen's characterization of the Enlightenment. Central to the postfoundationalist position is the assertion that modernity and foundationalism are closely associated, because modernity's most salient feature (i.e., its quest for certainty) is typically expressed in foundationalist terms. He also argues that nonfoundationalism and postmodernism are interchangeable, because both endorse relativism, the view that there is no way to adjudicate between rival conceptual schemes. Both assertions are problematic and suggest that postfoundationalism has not fully articulated or overcome Enlightenment skepticism toward religion.

There are good reasons to object to characterizing the essence of modernity as foundationalist. For one, this claim fails to consider the medieval intellectual viewpoints to which early moderns were responding. While the diversity of medieval thought should not be underplayed, the belief that knowledge must be certain was widely shared, especially for those who aspired in their respective disciplines to meet the Aristotelian standard of *scientia*, demonstrative knowledge of a theoretical kind.⁷ Scholastic natural philosophers, for example, couched their explanations in deductive form, with universal and indubitable premises for its axioms, in order to produce knowledge that it is demonstratively certain.⁸ Theologians also often endeavored to show that once first principles had been established through revelation, theology could proceed as any other science.

To be sure, debates relating to certainty took many different forms and changed over time. Debates about Aristotelianism raised questions about

⁷ Steven P. Marrone, "Medieval Philosophy in Context," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. S. McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 33; Peter Dear, "The Ideology of Modern Science," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science, Part A* 34 (2003): 821.

⁸ Peter Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences: European Knowledge and Its Ambitions, 1500–1700*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 10–29.

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the autonomy of natural philosophy with respect to divine revelation.⁹ Debates over universals and human cognition raised questions about the security of human knowledge.¹⁰ Debates in the Reformation raised questions of biblical interpretation, the place of tradition, and the role of the Holy Spirit in obtaining knowledge.¹¹ As Susan Schreiner argues in her recent book on certainty in the Reformation period, “the crisis of certainty and the ‘quest’ for certitude were dominant themes in the early modern period stretching from the fourteenth through the sixteenth century.”¹² In these and other debates, medieval and Reformation thinkers often addressed how their positions contributed to the achievement of certainty in ways that rivals did not.

Moreover, one can plausibly read seventeenth-century philosophers—those thinkers whose failings van Huyssteen is attempting to pinpoint—as initiating a flight away from foundationalism rather than toward it. The early modern period, as Peter Harrison has argued, is better characterized as one of rising epistemological skepticism than one of triumphant certainty.¹³ The Reformers rejected the more optimistic views of human nature that were prevalent in medieval learning. Whereas Aquinas had argued that the “light of natural reason” remained after Adam’s original sin, Luther argued that “it is clear that the natural endowments did not remain perfect, as the scholastics rave.”¹⁴ In the realm of natural philosophy, one can plausibly read the new approaches to studying nature—above all, those associated with Descartes, Bacon, and Locke—as attempts to reform the study of nature in light of the depraved human condition. The common concern was not to find certain knowledge (though some tried) but to establish the sources of cognitive error and the ways they can be avoided or cured, which is why the themes of evacuating, purging, and mortifying the mind become a recurring motif of seventeenth-century epistemology.¹⁵ As rivals to Aristotelian natural philosophy began to emerge, natural philosophers in this period began to doubt whether knowledge obtained from nature could ever meet the old ideal of certainty. Indeed, the very idea that there could be such a thing as probable knowledge began to appear only in the seventeenth century.¹⁶

⁹ Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210–1685* (Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 2006), 59–83.

¹⁰ Susan Elizabeth Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15–23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chap. 2.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther, quoted in Peter Harrison, “Original Sin and the Problem of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (2002): 245, 249.

¹⁵ Lorraine Daston, “Scientific Error and the Ethos of Belief,” *Social Research* 72 (2005): 9.

¹⁶ Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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The claim that modernists always required certainty would be a mischaracterization, even if restricted to the philosophy of Descartes alone, when placed in its proper context as an attempt to replace Aristotelian science.¹⁷ The conventional way of interpreting Descartes is that he required all knowledge to meet the standard of hyperbolic doubt, which meant that his natural philosophical conclusions were deduced from absolutely certain sense data.¹⁸ But in the judgments of recent historians, the archetypal foundationalist used hyperbolic doubt only as a way to establish his metaphysical system, leaving a significant role for experimental reasoning. Descartes says in multiple passages in his work that hyperbolic doubt is not a way to pursue natural philosophy, primarily because of the profundity of his metaphysical principles.¹⁹ There are any number of possible ways of constructing the world to render it compatible with a mechanistic cosmology, just as there are any number of ways to construct a watch.²⁰ Descartes thus offers micromechanical hypotheses about physical phenomena, which prevents him from being deductively certain about the movement of the particles that undergird his explanations. Against those who still demanded Scholastic demonstration, Descartes recognized that it is not possible to realize the same sort of certainty in physics that can be attained in mathematics or metaphysics.²¹

Whatever the value of van Huyssteen's account of evolutionary epistemology, he fails to connect it in an adequate way to Enlightenment debates about religion and natural knowledge. It is anachronistic and misleading to use foundationalism as an interpretative category to characterize that period—and, indeed, suggests that van Huyssteen has met the challenge of the Enlightenment too easily. If the Enlightenment challenge to religion is interpreted differently—if instead of asking, What can I know with certainty? it asks something like, Why should I believe in supernatural beings and powers? or Why should I believe in the testimony of religious authorities?—then it becomes less obvious what help van Huyssteen's evolutionary epistemology can provide the theologian when answering skeptics.

Van Huyssteen's lack of nuance in rendering Enlightenment debates over religion is paralleled by a misdiagnosis of current positions that are said to display Enlightenment assumptions. He strives to portray rival po-

¹⁷ Daniel Garber, *Descartes Embodied: Reading Cartesian Philosophy through Cartesian Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2; Dennis Des Chene, *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelian and Cartesian Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 2.

¹⁸ Gary Hatfield, "Science, Certainty, and Descartes," *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* 2 (1988): 249.

¹⁹ Gaukroger, *Emergence of a Scientific Culture*, 214; Hatfield, "Science, Certainty, and Descartes," 257.

²⁰ Hatfield, "Science, Certainty, and Descartes," 259.

²¹ Desmond M. Clarke, "Descartes' Philosophy of Science and the Scientific Revolution," in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 282.

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sitions as foundationalist and nonfoundationalist, as he uses the terms, even where there is strong evidence to support a contrary interpretation. Again, it appears that the evidence has been slanted to fit the postfoundationalist framework.

For example, van Huyssteen says that biblical literalists are epistemological foundationalists: they simply posit the authority of scripture as an indubitable belief. It is telling, however, that van Huyssteen offers no examples of biblical literalists of this sort. The biblical literalists of American evangelicalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the historian E. Brooks Holifield has shown, embraced biblical inerrancy with notable probabilistic arguments.²² American Evangelicals of this period cast themselves as Baconians, arguing that fulfillment of biblical prophecies made it extremely probable that Christian scripture was of divine origin. Despite van Huyssteen's warning against abstract theories of rationality, he provides the reader with little historical specificity to substantiate his claims about the prevalence of foundationalism in American evangelicalism and Western culture.

In a similar manner, van Huyssteen shades his interpretation of nonfoundationalism so that it might be more vulnerable to the postfoundationalist critique. For example, van Huyssteen's main example in *The Shaping of Rationality* of a relativist nonfoundationalist is Ronald Thiemann. Thiemann describes the intent of his own project in terms remarkably close to those of the postfoundationalist project—that is, to show how Christians can regain a public voice in a pluralistic culture, even as members of a theological community distinctively shaped by its own scriptural narrative. Nevertheless, van Huyssteen argues that Thiemann postulates his Christian faith as a “starting point”; this has the effect of shielding his most basic convictions from scrutiny or the need for justification. Thiemann's hesitancy to translate the Christian faith's own internal logic into epistemological terms that would satisfy modern philosophers is seen by van Huyssteen as an attempt to assert Christian convictions without a rational argument. Thiemann, then, may be viewed as a crypto-foundationalist (76).

A sympathetic reading of Thiemann's work reveals the shortcomings of van Huyssteen's interpretation. In the introduction to Thiemann's *Constructing a Public Theology*, a work from which van Huyssteen quotes, Thiemann says, “Any appeal to hidden or private sources of authority or justification is inappropriate for a genuinely public theology. The structure and logic of theological argument must be available for examination by any reasonable inquirer.”²³ Thiemann's reason for embracing nonfoundationalism is the conviction that all beliefs must be open to critical scrutiny.

²² E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 6.

²³ Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 20.

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He argues that the theologian must always critically reflect on Christian practice in dialogue with those inside and outside the community. Judging from the similarities between the two theologians, it is surprising that van Huyssteen finds Thiemann's work objectionable and that he does not try to find a nonfoundationalist theologian whose work more clearly reveals the relativism that is said to be characteristic of that position.

Perhaps the reason is that most nonfoundationalists are closer to Thiemann's view than to the position that van Huyssteen attributes to them. While the *reductio ad relativism* argument is one of the most common rhetorical strategies in debates over reason and rationality, it rarely leads to charitable interpretations of other positions. Van Huyssteen argues, for example, that nonfoundationalists accept the "contextual principle," which says that what is to be regarded as rational or irrational can be determined only from within a practice or context, making it impossible to adjudicate claims between alternate rationalities (79). Yet there is an important difference between claiming that there is no neutral way to adjudicate a claim between rival rationalities and claiming, more strongly, that all comparison is impossible. The former position is consistent with postfoundationalism, because it allows for rational debate, since rival traditions can argue for inconsistencies in another tradition's argument. It also allows for the possibility of one's becoming proficient, through hard work, in foreign rationalities. Only the latter position is inconsistent with postfoundationalism, because it argues that all discussions with those outside one's epistemic community are futile. It is a typical move for opponents of nonfoundationalism to accuse someone of holding the latter position when often that someone intends the weaker view. But nonfoundationalists typically endorse the weaker view in order to make an important point that van Huyssteen himself expresses so well: interdisciplinary conversation is a difficult and fragile process, one in which consensus often is not possible.

To sum up the larger point, the persuasiveness of postfoundationalism's answer to the Enlightenment skepticism toward religion comes from the artificial way that van Huyssteen constructs the problem. His account of other positions too often reflects his own interpretative framework more than the positions he is describing. Without a more convincing link between modernity and foundationalism or nonfoundationalism and relativism, postfoundationalism obscures more than answers the challenges of the Enlightenment.

Postfoundationalism and Theological Legitimacy

The second criticism concerns whether or not postfoundationalism is successful in establishing the intellectual integrity of theological reasoning. If we assume for the moment that van Huyssteen's characterization of the Enlightenment is unproblematic, would postfoundationalism then be

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successful in its rebuttal of Enlightenment skepticism toward religion? I argue that it would not be. Although van Huyssteen's split-the-difference approach often serves him well, some differences between accounts of rationality that he attempts to integrate are irreconcilable. I am referring especially to the tension between "local" accounts of rationality, in which one cannot identify who and what is rational in the absence of context, and van Huyssteen's general declarations about having proved the intellectual legitimacy of theology.²⁴

Van Huyssteen in many places advocates for a local account of decision making. As I have summarized above, he argues that there cannot be a single standard of reason that applies across disciplines and traditions, for standards must reflect particular situations. He says, for example, "Standards of rationality cannot be formulated properly without stating who the rational agent is, and what her or his concrete situation is" (202). Postfoundationalism, on this interpretation, does not offer universal criteria for theory choice, for this fails to respect the flexibility and fluidity of human rationality and decontextualizes arguments from their context. While still being optimistic about human rationality and interdisciplinary dialogue, postfoundationalists recognize the failings of methodological schemes that have been prevalent since the seventeenth century.

But in other places, van Huyssteen's desire to establish a postfoundationalist theology as an "equal partner in a democratic, interdisciplinary conversation" gives postfoundationalism a much stronger prescriptive dimension with respect to theory comparison (86). He approvingly summarizes the philosopher of science Larry Laudan: "Unless we can somehow articulate criteria for choice between research traditions, we neither have a theory of rationality, nor a theory of what progressive knowledge growth in knowledge should be" (266). In other words, postfoundationalism must suggest some sort of criterion—however rough—for demarcating proper and improper employment of human reason in order to warrant our theory choices. Without such a criterion, van Huyssteen would either have to make the puzzling claim that postfoundationalism legitimates all uses of human reason as worthy of public respect or have to drop the assertion that he has shown why one tradition in particular (i.e., Christian theology) is rational.

The need for making reasoned choices between different theories leads van Huyssteen to stress the importance of research traditions for rational inquiry. Rational inquirers are always located in particular epistemic communities, each with its own histories and ontological assumptions. Research traditions thus provide the specific context for solving problems, as we make choices for theories that have the greatest theoretical and experien-

²⁴ My description of "local" philosophies of science is taken from Nick Huggett, "Local Philosophies of Science," *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000): 128–37.

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tial adequacy (256). But this alone is insufficient, because traditions evolve under pressure to solve new and existing problems. The ever-constant pressure for traditions to adapt provides some means for comparing them against one another. Van Huyssteen follows Laudan in arguing that it is more rational to choose a tradition based on both how well it solves problems and whether its problem-solving effectiveness has increased or decreased over time in comparison to its rival traditions (281). Despite the role of research traditions in contextualizing inquiry, van Huyssteen argues that we still have the ability to make reasoned choices for or against traditions.

Unfortunately, van Huyssteen's criteria for theory choice are much too vague to be useful when the chooser is faced with a concrete situation. To see this, consider how the postfoundationalist might explain the transformation in natural knowledge that normally goes under the label of the "Scientific Revolution." Because van Huyssteen calls science one of "our clearest examples of cognitive rationality" (124–25), how might postfoundationalist theory help explain its emergence over rival conceptions of natural knowledge? Drawing upon the principles of experiential adequacy and superior problem-solving ability, van Huyssteen would assumedly say that seventeenth-century natural philosophers produced theories that accounted for a wider range of experience and solved a broader array of problems. By learning to restrict their focus to a narrow range of human experience, natural philosophers were able to produce results of global significance.

The problem with this explanation is that it does not fit with recent historical scholarship on the Scientific Revolution. Historians have shown that experiential adequacy and problem-solving ability are not timeless categories for theory evaluation but were radically reconfigured during the seventeenth century. The historian Peter Dear has shown that the term "experience" in Scholastic natural philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries referred to a universal statement of fact.²⁵ The universality of a knowledge claim is what allows it to serve as a deductive premise in a logical scientific demonstration. The rise of the experimental tradition, encouraged especially by Francis Bacon, emphasized instead the role of experiments in producing behaviors never seen before. Experience in the "new philosophy" was viewed as having a particular character, referring to what happened in specific times, places, and circumstances rather than to what always happened in nature. It is therefore difficult to apply experiential adequacy as a criterion for theory choice in comparing the Scholastics and their rivals when the concept itself was at stake in the controversy.

In the same way, Scholastic natural philosophers addressed different problems than their successors did. Scholastic philosophers were primarily

²⁵ Peter Dear, *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11–15.

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concerned with explanation and tried to understand nature by observing and contemplating its natural motions rather than interfering with its normal course of action. Experimental philosophy, by contrast, placed a premium on discovering new things and, in the process, criticized medieval natural philosophers for not seeking discoveries and knowledge that might ameliorate the state of humankind. The protracted intellectual struggle between these rival philosophies of nature was not over which system was more effective at solving problems but over which problems were worth pursuing. Crudely put, was the goal of natural philosophy to understand nature or to control it? Again, to explain the Scientific Revolution using the principle of problem-solving effectiveness leaves unexplained the reorientation that occurred in natural philosophy in the seventeenth century.

Without the principles of experiential adequacy and problem-solving ability, postfoundationalism provides no other rationale to account for the emergence of early modern science. My point here is not to deny that a satisfying account of the emergence of science can be formulated but to point out how shallow the postfoundationalist principles appear when compared to an actual episode in the history of science. By offering only vague guidance for choosing some theories over others, postfoundationalist principles lack explanatory power.

The problem of vague guidance on theory selection can also be seen in considering current theological controversies. Consider creationism, an intellectual tradition that is almost unanimously held within the modern university to be irrational. What help can postfoundationalism offer in settling this dispute? Creationists consider themselves to be meeting the highest standards of science, drawing especially upon the distinction between theories and facts made by Baconian philosophy of science, which is why they claim to deserve a place in the science curriculums in public education classrooms. But it is easy to imagine such creationists drawing instead upon postfoundationalist categories in their arguments against evolution. Surely creationists think their theory has better experiential adequacy than does Darwinism—and that Darwinism lacks the ability to solve basic problems about the emergence of life and complexity. It is also easy to imagine creationists using the rhetoric of “responsible judgments” or “good reasons” to support their claims. Of course, they would need to modify the evolutionary origins story that van Huyssteen offers, but it is unclear how embracing postfoundationalist themes (e.g., epistemic skills, pursuit of intelligibility, transversal rationality) would make any significant difference for the content of their beliefs.

In response, van Huyssteen might argue that postfoundationalism could make a difference in that it requires research traditions to be accountable to other epistemic communities. And so while postfoundationalism may not offer an unambiguous way to adjudicate between theories, it does counsel openness to epistemic experts in other research traditions. But this

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helpful point is undermined by van Huyssteen's embrace of epistemic pluralism. Postfoundationalism does not penalize a viewpoint if it radically differs from that of the rest of the community, because "communal consensus is neither a requisite for nor a consequence of rationality" (99). As long as one seeks dialogue with those outside one's own community, postfoundationalism gives comfort to any belief that survives to the end of an interdisciplinary encounter. Again, we could easily imagine the members of any research tradition wrapping themselves in the cloak of postfoundationalist rationality with little or no change in the content of their beliefs. Rationality may exist, but without reliable indicators such as consensus to indicate its existence, how do we know when it has been found?

To summarize this section, let us grant to van Huyssteen that he has made a compelling case that rationality exists. If he wants to demonstrate the rationality of theology, however, he must explain why irrationality exists or how to tell the difference between rationality and irrationality. Successful instances of human rationality swim in a large pool of failure; the same species that produced the most elegant of theories in physics still regularly consults horoscopes. To put the point in postfoundationalist terms, astrologists share the same rational resources as scientists and theologians do. Only with a theory of demarcation could one be confident in claiming that an entire tradition or discipline falls on the rational side of the divide. But here the local rationality position is more compelling, for many of the reasons that van Huyssteen identifies: philosophers have mostly abandoned the demarcation project, localism respects the range and diversity of human reason, and rationality is always inextricably embedded within particular social and historical contexts. The price one pays for accepting a local theory of rationality, however, is abandoning the hope that a theory of general scope can be used to legitimate the cultural authority of some forms of inquiry.²⁶

CONCLUSION

Van Huyssteen's postfoundationalist position helpfully illustrates both the promise and the perils of interdisciplinary work. On the positive side, van Huyssteen provides another example of a theologian engaging in cross-disciplinary conversation at the highest level. The postfoundationalist project represents one of the most sophisticated attempts to delineate the nature of theological rationality in the literature and deftly engages issues of evolutionary epistemology. Such engagements make good on the widespread theological conviction of the interrelated nature of knowledge, showing how theological knowledge coheres with work produced in other

²⁶ Joseph Rouse, *Engaging Science: How to Understand Its Practices Philosophically* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 69.

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disciplines. The postfoundationalist project also provides the opportunity for theologians to consider new perspectives and a better position from which to criticize antitheological views that are prevalent in the sciences.

Nevertheless, postfoundationalism also demonstrates the vulnerabilities that are common to the various forms of interdisciplinary work. One vulnerability is that new perspectives and approaches are always available that one has not considered. For example, it is clear that van Huyssteen did not engage early modern intellectual history with the same attentiveness he gave to evolutionary epistemology. Although he repeats common ideas about the early modern period and its significance, van Huyssteen fails to connect his theory in a plausible way to Enlightenment debates. A further vulnerability is that theologians can approach interdisciplinary dialogue with an agenda that leads them to interpret data in implausible ways. In this case, van Huyssteen clearly began his interdisciplinary engagement with the desire to demonstrate the intellectual integrity of Christianity. But as much as theologians would like a universal tonic for Enlightenment skepticism toward religious belief, a plausible theory of rationality that respects the importance of local context is unable to make universal pronouncements about a certain class of beliefs in this way. Theological legitimacy will need to be established on a case-by-case basis, which is a conclusion that I believe is supported by the best aspects of postfoundationalism.

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