

NEW DIRECTIONS IN THEOLOGY & SCIENCE: TOWARD INTEGRATION AND COLLABORATION

Research Vision

The research vision for the St Andrews Fellows in Theology & Science is to promote exploration of a new generation of questions at the intersection of theology, religion, and the human and natural sciences. While previous generations have asked methodological questions—sometimes including challenges from scientists that cooperation with religion violates the norms of rationality, and from religious believers that science threatens orthodoxy—we take for granted that serious scholarly study always aspires to interdisciplinary cooperation. To be credible, theology cannot ignore the products of empirical enquiry. To this end, rather than focusing chiefly on methodological questions, we are especially interested in research that brings these disciplines together in productive and creative ways.

MIND, VIRTUE, AND (DIS)AGREEMENT

Some of the most exciting collaborations so far between theological and scientific enquiry emerged from the cognitive sciences, including neuroscience and moral psychology. We seek to build upon these collaborations in three areas. First: the relation between reason and emotion in the mind. Recent neuroscience emphasizes the importance of latter; is this sound, ought theology to concur, and what are the theological implications? Second: religious believers and scientists alike have been accused—though for very different reasons—of closed-mindedness or prideful overconfidence in their own conclusions. What might promote intellectual humility in the face of this? Might cognitive science and theology, working in tandem, provide reasons and resources for fostering critical open-mindedness? Third: can these fields help us overcome the disagreement (often hostile disagreement on morality) that continues to surround us?

Reason and Emotion

1. What role did religion play in the evolution of moral behavior? What, if anything, can the human ‘moral sense’ tell us about the development and practice of religion? Does a sentimentalist (moral sense-based) account of morality have greater prospects for securing consensus than other approaches?
2. How much rational control do we have over our behavior, and can it be improved? Should rational control over behavior be maximized in ways that minimize other contributing factors, like intuition or social pressure? Should emotional responses like repulsion or sympathy be encouraged as guides to our behavior, or are they untrustworthy?

Humility

3. Is it possible to practice the virtue of intellectual humility while nevertheless holding sacred texts to be authoritative? Does the practice of science help foster humility among scientists, or does it lead to prideful self-confidence?
4. What reasons and resources could be developed to help scientists and Christians (for example) be intellectually humble rather than closed-minded? Are there promising techniques for increasing intellectual humility or related virtues like open-mindedness?

Disagreement

5. The methods of science have facilitated agreement on descriptive (what is) questions. To what extent can these methods be used to answer normative (what ought to be) questions, and thereby facilitate consensus on these matters as well? How have recent attempts to approach ethical and meta-ethical questions through empirical means fared, and how might future projects improve upon them?

6. What does the latest empirical research on the relation of reason and emotion mean for religious morality? For example, does this work suggest new ways that religious believers can improve in their devotion to God and others?
7. Can the sciences help us better understand and overcome fundamental disagreements that are rooted in competing religious worldviews or the perspectives of different ‘moral tribes’? If so, how? For instance, might empirical methods offer ways of settling disagreements? Might they provide tools that facilitate more effective discourse on contentious topics?

HUMAN WELLBEING

Both theology and the human sciences make claims about what enhances human flourishing and wellbeing. Sometimes these are substantive claims about wellbeing among humans today, such as whether humans are better off now than in the past, and what caused the change. For example, Pinker’s controversial argument that violence is declining among humans, that this decline is a clear measure of wellbeing, and that its causes are identifiably secular. Another discussion of wellbeing at the intersection of religion and science concerns diverse conceptions of wellbeing, such as across time or cultures. Are there features that pretty much everyone agrees enhance happiness and, if not, how do we account for the diversity, either evolutionarily or theologically? Finally, how might cognitive science contribute to conceptions of wellbeing and flourishing within specific religious traditions, including those traditions that are skeptical of human evaluations of wellbeing. What about those traditions that emphasize the need for every person to consciously and personally encounter God; is there evidence to suggest everyone has a ‘natural’ inclination for this, or not?

1. Are things really getting better for humanity? Are such claims (e.g. Pinker’s) even assessable? What are the theological implications if, as has been argued, the driving forces in things getting better come from outside religion?
2. Some traditions (certain Christian and Jewish theologies, in particular) maintain that things will normally get worse for humans due to the power of sin within history. Can such pessimistic eschatologies, paradoxically, contribute more to our understanding of wellbeing than more hopeful expectations—be those secular or religious? For example, if humans are ‘naturally’ or evolutionarily inclined to violence, greed, and tribalism, that suggests different policies for responding to crime and inequality than if human nature is characteristically benevolent.
3. Numerous religious traditions (most famously Reformed or Calvinist theology) doubt human measures of wellbeing because our conclusions will be biased by the noetic effects of sin, and suggest that we should rely instead on revelation. Is this theological worry in fact analogous to concerns about experimenter bias or the current ‘replication crisis’ in the empirical sciences? Is there any scientific support for the theological view? If there are such biases, how might we work to overcome them within both religious and scientific accounts of happiness?
4. How can consensus about wellbeing, to whatever extent it can be found across cultures, be used as a starting point to overcome wider disagreements or problems? Or is wellbeing, instead, a wedge that drives people apart and is best avoided in contexts of disagreement?
5. How might psychology or neuroscience contribute to our understanding of the nature of wellbeing within some specific religious tradition? (For this question, we are especially interested in proposals drawing on Western religious traditions.)
6. How should we understand the apparent diversity across cultures and history as to what is conducive to wellbeing (including what makes people happy)? Is the kind and degree of variation—individually, culturally, or historically—such that it poses a threat to certain theological or religious accounts of flourishing? What accounts fare best given the available data?

7. Does evidence suggest humans are naturally disposed to religiosity or belief in God? Are *some* people so disposed, but not others? If so, what are the implications for our understanding of what a life of wellbeing entails?

HUMAN DISTINCTIVENESS & HUMAN PURPOSE

Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have traditionally given humans a unique place within the universe, especially distinguishing humans from other creatures; in other religions, this boundary is less pronounced and in some cases even rejected. Technological and biological advances raise questions about this, suggesting that human distinctiveness may need to be reconceived. Some of these are the enduring questions posed since classical times; others are innovative and can sound like science-fiction, including the goal of maximally extending the human lifespan.

1. Are teleological accounts of natural phenomena scientifically viable? If so, is there positive evidence of purpose in the living world? If so, does such evidence suggest that humans have any special place in that purpose?
2. What, if anything, makes humans special? Do different sciences or scientific fields propose different answers to that question? Is there a theological or religious account of human distinctiveness that fares best on the available empirical evidence?
3. Should our growing understanding of the relationship between the brain and the mind influence our view of personhood and divine-human relations? For example, might our knowledge of the cognitive, affective, and motivational effects of mental illness, addiction, autism, or Alzheimer's disease illuminate our view of what it is to be a person, or to relate to God and others?