

**A response to William Lane Craig's criticism of scientific anti-realism in his
book *Reasonable Faith***

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In the course of attempting a philosophical presentation of the truths of Christianity, specifically in the chapter on historical knowledge, William Lane Craig took aim at scientific anti-realism of the Kuhnian variety.¹ Thomas S. Kuhn is the famous philosopher of science who posits that science advances in paradigm shifts or revolutions, and that there is a certain incommensurability between the science before and the science that comes after such paradigm shifts.² In his later years, Kuhn stresses the incommensurability thesis, stating the incommensurability can be seen in the scientific language used. Kuhn of course was not the only scientific anti-realist around, and his theories should not be confused with other anti-realist views of science. In this engagement with Craig's views therefore, I will be focused strictly on Kuhn's version of anti-realism.

Craig's focus in the chapter of his book is to show that historical knowledge is possible, against postmodern views that everything is interpretation. But alongside this he has decided that scientific anti-realism is a problem and decided to spend a few pages on it. Craig might have linked scientific anti-realism with historical anti-realism, and while the two are both in some sense "anti-realist," I think that the issues in play here are quite different and therefore such a link is tenuous, if any. In other words, for those reading on philosophy of science, there is no necessary link between embracing scientific anti-realism with any other "anti-realisms" in other fields.

In his criticism of scientific anti-realism which he calls the "*Weltenshauung* analysis," Craig marshals the following arguments, following the philosopher Frederick Suppe: (1) "It is false that there is a different *Weltenshauung* uniquely correlated with each scientific theory"³; (2) the view that "the meanings of terms in theories are theory-dependent" is indefensible⁴; and (3) "there exists a body of evidence which can serve to adjudicate rival theories"⁵ and therefore facts are not theory-dependent. Due mostly to these three reasons, Craig rejects scientific anti-realism here in the book.

Addressing the three arguments

¹ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (3rd Edition; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984, 1994, 2008), 227-230

² See Thomas S Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (3rd Edition; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 1992) and Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure: 1970-1993, with an Autobiographical Interview* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

³ Craig, 229

⁴ *Ibid.*, 229

⁵ *Ibid.*, 230

On the first argument, it is claimed that scientists promoting different theories do not have different *Weltanschauung* because they “clearly understand the competing theory, the observations and evidences that support it, and regularly communicate with one another about such matters.”⁶ This argument betrays a certain naivete about the nature of science and a false view of what a paradigm constitute. Firstly, what counts as “science” and “non-science” is not something agreed upon throughout history. In ancient times, “science” was co-extensive with philosophy, for after all, what is Plato’s *Metaphysics* except something stated literally ‘After’ Physics? During the early modern era, Astrology was considered a science, whereas we now consider it as pseudoscience. In other words, this idea that scientists do not have different paradigms at all throughout history is held by someone who either sees things within a narrow frame of time, or who ignores history. Place someone like Aristotle alongside any modern scientist and see if they can even agree on what “science” is!

The point here is that “Science” as we currently understand it, as per the word in German: “Naturwissenschaft” or “Natural science,” settled into its current meaning rather recently. The modern scientific community has decided that naturalism is its method for example (methodological naturalism), but that was not the practice for most of history. Those who think that science should be about truth include those in the Intelligent Design (ID) community, who are uncomfortable with this seeming axiom of methodological naturalism in science.⁷

These shifting views of what constitutes “science” lies behind part of Kuhn’s anti-realism, and is something not very well appreciated. Only if we focus exclusively on today’s scientific community, where it can be said that almost everyone operates with the same paradigm, can this first argument be maintained.

That brings us to the second problem of the first argument. A paradigm is not a difference in theory. It is not even a different research program. Craig (and I suppose Suppe) misunderstands what a paradigm is (a word I prefer to the German word *Weltenshauung*). There is no unique paradigm necessary for each scientific theory. Paradigms are ways of perception, not theories. Both the Big Bang Theory advocates and the Steady State advocates believe in the same paradigm. It surely must be stated over and over again, but paradigms cannot be mapped onto any scientific theory, or even necessarily a major change in scientific thought. The most recent paradigm shift in history is probably the embrace of quantum physics and relativity, and even that would be considered a minor paradigm shift, since scientists on both sides hold to very much the same views of science.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 229

⁷ Stephen C. Meyer and Paul A. Nelson, “Should Theistic Evolution Depend on Methodological Naturalism?,” in J.P. Moreland, Stephen C. Meyer, Christopher Shaw, Ann K. Gauger, and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 561-92. Stephen Dille, “How to Lose a Battleship: Why Methodological Naturalism Sinks Theistic Evolution,” in *idem.*, 593-631

In contrast, those who promote Intelligent Design are in fact holding, at least in part, to a different paradigm, a paradigm in which science is to be about truth and not about what is natural. The question ID poses is whether the Design hypothesis is true, not whether it is naturalistic. The opposition to ID is that it is not naturalistic, and therefore, as modern scientists deign to do, ID is to be considered not scientific.

If scientists are utilizing different paradigms, the question therefore is not whether they understand the competing theories, and regularly communicate with each other across the paradigm divide. The problem is whether they consider the other side even worth discussing at all. ID for example, or worse, Creationism, is regularly derided by mainstream science who do not care about and misrepresent their opponents. There is no communication because one side deign the other side not even worth the effort to understand, regardless of how scientifically plausible the other side is. That is the case we can see today when there is a synchronous paradigm divide. Across time, scientists gloss over the differences between the past and now, and create a pristine historical record of scientific progress, overlooking and ignoring the differences within. After all, how many biologists have even read Charles Darwin's "Origin of the Species," the seminal text of evolution? Modern science is all about progress, so differences from the past are glossed over or re-interpreted.

Craig's second point is that theory-dependent meanings of terms is an indefensible position, because it "implies that two different theories could not agree or disagree with each other, in which case it makes no sense to speak of them as alternatives between which a choice is made." This argument suffers from the same problem of falsely equating theories with paradigms. Paradigms are not even necessarily mega-theories, but they are ways of perception of science and the world. Two scientists holding to two different theories today can and mostly hold to the same modern scientific paradigm. It is easy to show the theory-dependent (or perhaps we should say "paradigm-dependent") meanings of terms just by looking at the word "motion." What is "motion"? In ancient times according to Aristotelian physics, "motion" is change. God is the "unmoved Mover" because he is changeless ("unmoved") but He changes the word ("Mover"). But "motion" today means something else entirely. In Newtonian physics, "motion" is "displacement over time" and according to Newton's First Law, a thing in motion does not change if it continues being in motion. "Motion" therefore is not change. To call God "unmoved" in the context of Newtonian physics is to state that God is static, not that He is changeless.

Craig's third point suffers from the same problem of equating paradigms with theories. On top of that is the unstated assumption that scientific facts are equivalent to everyday facts. But if you look at the nature of science, "scientific facts" are not the same as everyday facts. It is clear for example that "the world exists" (an everyday fact). But "scientific facts" are interpretations in line with scientific theory and deductions, like "the Earth (as a spherical planet orbiting third from the Sun) exists." This does not make scientific facts false, but it makes them both theory-laden and

paradigm-driven.⁸ Someone can say “the Sun rises in the east and sets in the West,” and that would not be wrong in everyday parlance, but it would not pass muster in science. Therefore, one can be anti-realist about science and scientific facts, without believing they are false or that they have no necessary relation to reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Craig’s three arguments against scientific anti-realism, against at least the Kuhnian variety, do not hold. Kuhn’s anti-realism is anti-realism about science, not necessarily anti-realism about things (ontology), or even knowledge about things (epistemology). Craig regularly conflates paradigms with theories, and thus misunderstands what scientific anti-realism is. It is of course possible that there are some ill-informed anti-realists Craig’s arguments do address who claim Kuhn as support for their positions, but they should maybe follow someone like Paul Feyerabend instead.⁹

⁸ As having taught science in both school and tuition settings before, part of teaching science is to teach students how to express themselves scientifically, not just using everyday language.

⁹ See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (4th Ed.; Verso, 2010)