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On Epistemic Distance and Faith

Victorino Raymundo T. Lualhati
De la Salle University-Manila
Victorino.lualhati@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract: This paper presents a philosophical analysis of John Hick's notion of epistemic distance. Acknowledging that this universe can be investigated by the natural sciences as though no God exists, Hick asserts that the epistemic distance between God and man makes possible human autonomy which is required to establish a genuine relationship with God through faith. In this religious hypothesis, the world remains religiously ambiguous, and people are left with a choice to see the world in purely naturalistic terms or as created and sustained by God. This hypothesis seems meritorious because indeed genuine faith necessitates freedom. However, we can identify three reasons for rejecting this hypothesis. First, it rests on a presupposition that there is a God who created us in a way that we will be free to either believe in Him or not. This is acceptable only to those who already profess religious convictions, and is therefore circular. Second, the notion of epistemic distance lacks agreement with much of Christian theological tradition that teaches that God can be known with certainty, on the basis of His works. Third, using the absurd counterexample method of attacking faulty reasoning, it can be shown that the pattern of reasoning used to present the case for epistemic distance and faith, when applied to another act of commitment, namely, love, would lead to a faulty conclusion that a child's love for his parents would not be free, and hence, inauthentic, given the presence of evidence of his parents' love.

Key Words: Epistemic distance; John Hick; philosophy of religion; faith; God

1. INTRODUCTION

Amidst the various scientific accomplishments of the natural sciences, a theist encounters an onerous task of justifying his epistemic commitments that are religious in nature. This task appears to be nearly impossible to accomplish given the autonomy of the natural order from religious interpretation. "Nature can be studied without reference to God.... The universe investigated by the sciences proceeds exactly as though no God exists." (Hick 1990:36) This pronouncement comes not from an atheist but from John Hick, a renowned figure in the field of

philosophy of religion who professes theistic beliefs. Granting that there's a genuine possibility that this statement is true, we still have to ask: Can we still provide good reasons for maintaining one's religious faith? On what philosophical ground can we base the rationality of theistic beliefs?

This paper philosophically analyses John Hick's proposal to entertain the possibility that while the world can be studied without reference to God, we can possibly ground religious faith in terms of the notion of epistemic distance.



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2. EPISTEMIC DISTANCE

John Hick (1922-2012) made significant contributions in the field of philosophy of religion primarily on areas of theodicy and religious pluralism. I find it more theoretically striking, however, when in the few and separate instances that he mentioned or implied “epistemic distance” (See *Evil and the God of Love* and *Philosophy of Religion*), he appears to have responded directly to the scientific, empiricist and naturalistic challenges to Christian faith.

Epistemic distance takes off from the view that it is perhaps possible that the universe is created as a “neutral sphere” in which there is a sufficient degree of autonomy on our part that enables us to enter into a freely accepted relationship with our Maker (Hick 1990:37). Perhaps God maintains a “certain distance from us, a certain margin of creaturely independence which is adequate for our existence as responsible persons” (1990:37). This distance is epistemic rather than spatial, hence, the term, epistemic distance. Simply put, epistemic distance can be taken to mean as a distance in knowledge or awareness.

In this religious hypothesis, the world would remain “religiously ambiguous”, that is, there is no conclusive evidence for or against the existence of God. People are left with a choice. It is possible for us to see and explain the world in purely naturalistic terms or to see the world as created and sustained by God. We have the freedom to decide for ourselves which position to take.

It is only within this framework of epistemic distance that it is possible for humans to genuinely have free will to exercise faith. For indeed, if God’s existence were undeniable, then faith would mean nothing and people would have no choice but to believe. Human persons cannot be free unless “placed at an epistemic distance” (Ward 1969: 249).

In the same vein, if God created human persons in such a way that we cannot *but* love Him, there would be something “inauthentic about the resulting trust, love, or service” (Hick 1978:273). A person’s effort to really love God becomes meaningful only in the context of an actual distance between the

infinite and the finite so that man will sense no pressure to love God. The distance, however, is not total, as it is possible for man to know God in some way, but this mode of knowledge involves personal freedom on man’s part. This response consists in an “uncompelled interpretative activity whereby we experience the world *as* mediating the divine presence” (1978:281).

It comes as no surprise that, after centuries of debate, equally intelligent, well-informed and well-meaning thinkers continue to disagree about the evidence for and against God’s existence. Here we are talking about evidence discovered in the same “neutral” or “ambiguous” environment. Hick (1989: 124) makes a further claim that this ambiguity is “systematic” and must serve as the starting point for any defence of the rationality of religious commitment.

What is being asserted here is that the natural order possesses its own autonomous structure. It is confirmed and affirmed by taking cognizance of how the sciences proceed and advance over time. But the point is, it offers no contradiction to religious faith. “All that can be said about the bearing of scientific knowledge upon this religious claim is that it does not fall within the province of any special sciences: science can neither confirm nor deny it” (Hick 1990:37). There is religious ambiguity in this sense: our universe “is capable from our present human vantage point of being thought and experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways” (Hick 1989:73). This can be compared with the view that states that under our rational empiricist evidential practice, our evidence leaves it open whether or not the classical theistic God exists. In any case, this “ambiguity” or “neutrality” arising from epistemic distance supports the possibility of voluntarily turning to God by a genuine act of faith.

3. COUNTERARGUMENTS

Since no philosophical position ever gets a free pass to the domain to acceptability, the next task will be to present our evaluation of the coupling of notions of epistemic distance and faith in the form of philosophical arguments.

First, upon analysis it appears that there is epistemic circularity involved in this stream of



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thought. The introduction of the religious hypothesis of epistemic distance rests on a presupposition which is acceptable only to those who are already convinced of their conclusions. Epistemic distance is possible only if it is presupposed that there is a God who created us in such a way that we are given freedom to either believe in Him or not, which is possible only if there is epistemic distance between us the Maker. Only those who already profess religious convictions *can* accept this position.

Second, the notion of epistemic distance lacks agreement with much of Christian, primarily Catholic, theological tradition. We find in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Part I, Section 1, Chapter 1, number 36) that the Church teaches that God, as the first principle and last end of all things, can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason. And by natural reason man can know God with certainty, on the basis of his works (Chapter 2, number 50).

In one of the most popular and authoritative texts of Christianity, *Summa Theologiae, I, Q 12, A 12*, St. Thomas Aquinas argues that since our knowledge begins from sense, our mind cannot be led by sense to see the essence of God. However, since sensible things are His effects and depend on God as their cause, we can know that God exists and what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things. If Hick is right, then any success gained in demonstrating God's existence and some of the Divine attributes would actually count against the authenticity of faith.

The third objection makes use of the absurd counterexample method of attacking faulty reasoning (Damer 2009:54). There are several steps involved in the absurd counterexample method. First, one must formulate a parallel argument which has the same form or pattern as the argument to be refuted. Second, it must be clear that it leads to an obviously false conclusion. Third, one has to point out that there is no essential difference in the pattern of reasoning exhibited in both the original and the parallel argument. Since the two structurally similar arguments have the same defect, there is a compelling reason for rejecting the merits of both the original and the parallel arguments.

The error in reasoning exhibited in arguing for epistemic distance and faith becomes clear when the structure of argument is applied to another act of commitment, namely, love. Hick's position can be reconstructed as follows:

Epistemic distance is a necessary condition for genuine faith. Without epistemic distance, (that is, if God had made himself known in some manifest way), faith would not be genuine faith.

Notice how an obviously false conclusion is arrived at using the same argument structure.

Epistemic distance is a necessary condition for a child's love for his parents to be genuine. Without epistemic distance (that is, if a child loves his parents because there is evidence of their love for their child), the child's love would not be genuine love.

If both arguments are to be accepted, the authenticity of each child's love for his parents will be suspect because his love would not be genuinely free in the presence of evidence. This line of reasoning would lead to a totally unacceptable recommendation for parents: "Parents, if you like your children to love you genuinely never show your love for your children." Likewise, imagine yourself saying this to your child: "My child, your love for us is worthless, because we, your parents loved you first, and you know it." I do not contest the possibility that a child may love his parents despite the absence of evidence of his parents' love for him. The objection targets what is manifested in ordinary experience: a child knows and experiences that his parents love him, and such knowledge does not make his love less authentic.

4. CONCLUSION

The religious hypothesis built around the notion of epistemic distance is a well-thought and brave attempt to address the need to provide rational grounds for theistic faith, which as we have seen, necessitates a certain degree of autonomy to achieve the status of authenticity. Hick's proposal, however, does not appear to be strong enough to withstand philosophical objections against it.



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