

On the Importance of a Theory of Concepts to NT Wright's Natural Theology

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Like the other presenters here, I am grateful and honored to be asked to participate in this exchange with so eminent and formidable a scholar as Professor Wright. His work has influenced my own in countless respects, and so, I hope that the critical points I have to offer him here are understood in their proper context; namely, as aimed at promoting constructive dialogue with a work that already amounts to the status of great admirability.

Allow me, then, to begin my reflections on Professor Wright's 6th Lecture, *A New Creation: Resurrection and Epistemology*, with a brief note as to its place as epistemology. For anyone familiar with recent work in analytic epistemology (and of course, I use the term 'recent' very loosely here), they will not be struck, upon reading this lecture for the first time, by the clear relevance of the lecture for the field of epistemology. A Bayesian epistemologist might get excited at the final sentence of the introduction, where Professor Wright mentions the importance of history, including its "attention to evidence, abductive essays in hypothesis, and verification through narrative proposal," but while appropriately setting aside the logical positivist/empiricist baggage of words like 'verification', they will be disappointed in Professor Wright's lack of interest in establishing the coherence of this statement as a principle. Can it be stated as a principle? And will it survive its own normative standard for whatever epistemic goal Professor Wright has in mind such that if it's true we might rationally endorse it? Professor Wright, it seems, does not have time for such a project in this lecture.

Let us move beyond the desire for epistemic principles, however. A different request I have for Professor Wright would be to *clarify the epistemic goods he thinks are relevant to his project*. Among these goods we have such things as knowledge, understanding, epistemic justification, rationality, etc. I have to admit that it is not always clear to me which epistemic good Professor Wright has in mind at various points in his lecture. Take the word 'knowledge', for instance. There is *propositional knowledge*, that is, knowledge *that* something or other is the case. In addition to this, there is *personal knowledge*, that is, the sort of knowing that, in paradigmatic instances, includes propositional knowledge but also goes beyond it and carries in addition some sort of non-propositional content. To give just one example of the difference between propositional and personal knowledge, consider the knowledge one might gain from reading Professor Wright's Wikipedia page (e.g. that his wife's name is Maggie or that he wrote *Paul: A Biography*). Surely the knowledge one gains by memorizing Professor Wright's Wikipedia page falls short of knowing him as a person; that is, knowing what it's like to interact with him personally. But with just this distinction between *propositional* and *personal knowing*, we already find a disconnect between Professor Wright's project and the traditional project of natural theology, for when I, as a natural theologian, investigate the *arguments of natural theology*, I am assessing propositions. Why is this? Because arguments *just are* sets of propositions, where one of the propositions is singled out as the conclusion and bears some relation of logical support or entailment to the other propositions. If we take Professor Wright's description of love as "the highest mode of knowing" into account, however, we seem to no longer be dealing with propositional knowledge. And from this it seems to follow that we are no longer doing natural theology either.

These are at least two heavily critical challenges I've put to Professor Wright's project. He claims to be doing epistemology and natural theology. I'm claiming that it's not clear he's doing either.

Now I want to temper these criticisms a bit with a suggestion of how to reorient our thinking when assessing Professor Wright's natural theological project. To do this, I suggest we begin with some brief reflections on competing theories of concepts.

Let us take the concept referred to by 'Messianic Victory', the sixth of Professor Wright's mutations, as an example. According to *the classical theory of concepts*, **messianic victory** refers to a complex concept that exhibits an internal definitional structure, such that *simpler* concepts (e.g. promise, lineage, being-the-son-of, battle, etc.) compose it. This theory of concepts has a robust history and is appealing to philosophers, especially given the proclivity of philosophers to engage in conceptual analysis, which fits easily with such a theory of concepts.

The classical theory is not Professor Wright's theory of concepts. This is not an objection for sufficient reasons exist to reject at least a naïve version of the classical theory (among those reasons being its inability to explain the actual practice of classification in which human agents are engaged). But then we might wonder: *What is Professor Wright's theory of concepts?* It is getting clear on the answer to this question that I think we begin to understand why we might classify this lecture as epistemology, as well as a corrective to traditional natural theology.

So I ask you now to indulge me as I introduce a historical figure whose theory of concepts I think most closely matches Professor Wright's own theory of concepts. That figure, who was first introduced to me in a philosophy of science course in the spring of 2010, was Thomas Kuhn, the famed author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In that book, Kuhn proposes a new framework for understanding the history of science as composed of a number of movements he calls scientific revolutions. Such revolutions are to be identified with scientists who *shift* from one paradigm to another in response to recalcitrant experimental data (i.e. anomalies) that usher in a crisis. According to Kuhn, each paradigm consists in a number of words that remain across paradigms but which come to refer to radically incommensurable concepts within new paradigms. For instance, 'gravity' refers to a force in a Newtonian paradigm whereas it refers to a distortion of spacetime in an Einsteinian one. Such a radical conceptual shift, thought Kuhn, renders meaningful conversation between members of these different paradigms practically impossible.

Something like Kuhn's theory of concepts seems to govern how Professor Wright thinks about his seven mutations, including Kingdom of God, Exile, Forgiveness of Sins, Sabbath, Temple, Messiah, and YHWH's Return. The *words* by which these concepts are referred to remain constant between two paradigms; namely, a Pre-Easter and a Post-Easter Paradigm. So how, according to Professor Wright, do we move from a Pre-Easter Paradigm to a Post-Easter one? It seems that we must move as the scientists do; that is, by becoming faced with recalcitrant data that forces a complete reconceptualization of the relevant parts of our worldview. This recalcitrant data (or datum) is, of course, the resurrection.

The above Kuhnian interpretation of Professor Wright's project illustrates that (i) it should be understood as modeled on a sort of applied scientific epistemology where philosophy of mind/language are much more prominent and (ii) that just as presenting propositional arguments across paradigms would be a waste of time for Kuhn, so traditional natural theology, which focuses on such propositional arguments exclusively, should focus on the recalcitrant data for a Pre-Easter paradigm instead (i.e. again the resurrection).

Suppose I'm correct in this reinterpretation of Professor Wright's project. Then I am immediately worried that he will inherit traditional objections to a Kuhnian theory of concepts. First, on such a theory, it's difficult to explain on what basis people from opposing paradigms *disagree* with one another. Pre-Easter paradigm members deny Jesus is the messiah, but what they *mean* by messiah seems to imply that they're right. Jesus isn't the messiah *in that sense*. That's why we need the paradigm shift. But surely we don't want to endorse a theory on which such disagreements are dissolved to semantics. Second, on such a theory, how might Professor Wright respond to the Quine-Duhem problem; namely, the problem that anomalies can be *rationally* dealt with in ways other than shifting paradigms? What epistemic failing does he envision characterizes those who do not shift to the Post-Easter paradigm? Perhaps he would say that they've failed to get the truth, and that's enough. But failing to get the *truth* doesn't entail that one has failed epistemically as Descartes' evil demon cases clearly show. So again, I ask, where is the epistemic mistake?

Lastly, I want to offer a brief observation concerning Professor Wright's discussion of the resurrection leading to an epistemology of love. In it, he targets what he calls the rationalist and romantic conceptions of knowledge and charges them with an inability to accommodate love as a feature of epistemology. Professor Wright may very well be correct in this assessment, but it's worth noting that, for me at least, there are very few epistemological theories incompatible with his *epistemic theses*. Reliabilism claims that one knows *p* iff one forms a true belief that *p* on the basis of a reliable cognitive process. Evidentialists about knowledge claim that one knows *p* iff one forms a true belief that *p* on the basis of evidence that is sufficient to justify *p*. Both theories can go on to say that cognitive processes, including the practice of gathering evidence, are whole-person, communal activities that can lead to oppressive power dynamics and must be redeemed by love as a result. I don't deny Professor Wright's claim that such theses are true. Rather, I want to press the point that it is not by recognizing New Creation's breaking into the Present Age that we recognize knowledge should be characterized by love in this way. Most epistemologists are not Christian, yet they likely would (in the case of the first four epistemic theses) and could (in the case of the fifth) accept Professor Wright's theses as true. If so, then it's unclear what work invoking resurrection and new creation does for establishing those theses. I look forward to learning from Professor Wright's insightful response.