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## The Problem of Explanation in Theology

**Abstract.** *The main objective of the article is to find an answer to the question about the optimal model of explanation for theology. In order to meet this objective, the author considers four major approaches to explanation: deductive-nomological, erotetic, abductive, and hermeneutic. The investigation leads the author to conclude that deductive-nomological explanations are rather impossible in theology. Three other kinds of explanation can be applied in theology, but there may emerge some practical or methodological problems which require further investigations.*

**Keywords:** *theological explanations, the deductive-nomological model, abductive reasoning, explanation vs. understanding*

In his recent book *Theism and Explanation*, Gregory Dawes<sup>1</sup> both gives an account of the most important standpoints on the issue of ‘theistic explanations’ in the contemporary academia and offers a number of his own analyses of this issue. As Bradley Monton has justly pointed out, *Theism and Explanation* ‘is a competent, nuanced look at the nature and scope of theistic explanations.’<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, there are a number of fundamental questions that either have been omitted or touched upon only in passing in the book. Among such questions are these: What is the relationship between ‘theology’ (an academic enterprise) and ‘religion’ (a system of beliefs intertwined with ritual practices and moral imperatives)? What is the structure of theology as one of the research programmes? Is this structure similar

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<sup>1</sup> G. Dawes, *Theism and Explanation*, Routledge, New York 2009.

<sup>2</sup> B. Monton, *Rev. of Theism and Explanation by G. Dawes*, “Notre Dame Philosophical Review” 2.11.2009 <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24209-theism-and-explanation> [26.02.2015].

to or different from the structures of other research programmes? What notion of testability is to be applied to theological/theistic explanations? Must it be colligated exclusively with a sensual empiricism or is non-sensual experience also allowed as the basis for hypothesis testing?<sup>3</sup> What is the role of the Bible in constructing and evaluating theological explanations?

It is impossible to address all of these questions within the scope of a single article. In this article I am going to focus on a question which lies at the bottom of any investigation into the problem of theological explanation: *What kind of explanation can we reasonably expect from theology?* To answer this question I will consider four major conceptions of explanation: the deductive-nomological conception, erotetic conceptions as developed by Ajdukiewicz and van Fraassen, explanation as abductive reasoning<sup>4</sup>, and the hermeneutic conception of ‘understanding’ (I am going to show that at least some concepts of hermeneutic ‘understanding’ can be seen as varieties of explanation).

My considerations presuppose a distinction between ‘theological explanations’ and ‘theistic explanations,’ the latter being a broader category and encompassing the former. By ‘theology’ I mean here a certain research activity undertaken within the Christian paradigm. I leave aside the question whether what will be said about Christian theology is relevant to theologies developed within non-Christian paradigms or to what extent it might be relevant. This is a topic for another investigation.

## 1. The deductive-nomological model of explanation

The conception of explanation as developed by Carl G. Hempel and Paul Oppenheim is sometimes called ‘classical’<sup>5</sup> and is considered to be most influential.<sup>6</sup> But at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it serves as an ‘ideal type’ in the Weberian sense rather than as a universally applicable model in its ‘canonical’ version. According to this conception, explanation is a form of deductive reasoning where: (i) a sentence stating a law *L* constitutes the first premise (the counterpart of the

<sup>3</sup> One may refer to what Max Scheler distinguished as ‘feeling with one another,’ ‘vicarious feeling,’ ‘fellow-feeling,’ and ‘psychic contagion’ as examples of non-sensual experience – vide *The Nature of Sympathy*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey 2008, pp. 8–36. In his *Method in Theology*, Bernard Lonergan drew upon Scheler’s conception, vide *Method in Theology*, The Seabury Press, New York 1979 [1972], p. 57–59.

<sup>4</sup> In this article I lump together Peirce’s ‘abductive reasoning’ and Czeżowski-Bocheński’s ‘reductive-regressive reasoning.’ I am aware that there are differences between them, but within the framework of this inquiry we can dispense with these nuances.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Salmon, Wesley et al., Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1992, p. 14; cf. also A. Grobler, *Metodologia nauk*, Znak & Aureus, Kraków 2006, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. S. Glennan, *Explanation*, in S. Sarkar, J. Pfeifer (eds), *The Philosophy of Science. An Encyclopedia*, Routledge, New York 2006, pp. 275–276.

*praemissa maior* in the traditional syllogistics), (ii) a sentence describing certain conditions *C* in which the *L* operates is the second premise (the counterpart of the *praemissa minor*), (iii) a sentence stating the occurrence of a certain event (fact) *f* is the conclusion. The first two make up an *explanans* and the third – an *explanandum*. As the appeal to a law is essential here, the model came to be called ‘deductive-nomological’ (DN).

Hempel formulated four conditions which a scientific explanation must meet:

1. It must be a valid reasoning in terms of formal logic,
2. Its explanans must contain a law-like statement,
3. Its explanans must possess an empirical content,
4. Its explanans must be true.

If an explanation meets the first 3 conditions, it is a *potential explanation*; if it meets all four conditions, it is an *actual explanation*.<sup>7</sup>

Can we envision such theological explanation as would fit in with the above model? Gregory Dawes considers the following example (which he borrows from Philip Kitcher):

- (1) God wants it to be the case that *a*.
- (2) What God wants to be the case is the case.
- (3) Therefore *a*.<sup>8</sup>

There seem to be no serious obstacles to take the above set of statements as a potential explanation (of course, provided that in the place of the variable *a* an appropriate statement is put). But in order for the explanation to become ‘actual,’ the truth-status of (1) and (2) needs to be established. But one can hardly expect that scholars would ever come to terms about how to establish the truth-status of such statements. So, the first problem to loom over this kind of explanation consists in that it is doomed to be ‘eternally potential.’ Another problem with the above explanation is the poverty of its empirical content. The hypothesis ‘Whatever God wants to be the case is the case’ is an all-explaining hypothesis. But the hypothesis that explains everything is useless.

So runs the story about the problematicity of theological explanations, at least from the point of view of the ‘classical approach’ to explanation. It is possible to counter such objections in two ways. One can argue that the reconstruction of theological explanation as provided by Kitcher-Dawes is not accurate or that it is not representative. Another way to meet the challenge is to point to some weaknesses or limits of the DN model.

The first strategy does not seem very promising, at least not in the long run. The caveat concerning the representativeness of the Kitcher-Dawes reconstruction seems to be quite well-aimed – professional theologians as well as serious preach-

<sup>7</sup> Vide C. G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*, The Free Press, New York 1965, pp. 247–249.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

ers avoid such simplistic explanations like ‘God willed it so.’ But one cannot but recognise that it is hardly possible to invent a theological explanation that would fit in with the DN model. In other words, even if someone wins in the minor dispute over the Kitcher-Dawes reconstruction, one will hardly win in the more fundamental debate over the question: *is there any theological explanation that would satisfy the requirements of the Hempel-Oppenheim model?*

But the problem does not necessarily reside in theology. The DN model has its own weaknesses and limitations. These weaknesses have become an integral part of any account of the Hempel-Oppenheim conception and can be found in any textbook or encyclopaedia devoted to the major issues of the philosophy of science.<sup>9</sup> Not all of these weaknesses are directly relevant to the issue of theological explanations. I will limit myself to considering a problem which seems to be crucial for our topic. This is the problem of laws. Whereas within the natural sciences the question of laws does not generate any significant difficulties, within the social sciences – it does. There is no consensus as to whether law-like statements *can* be formulated within the social sciences nor whether they *ought* to be formulated there.<sup>10</sup> Hempel believed that in the social sciences, and in historical science in particular, we can and even must construct deductive-nomological explanations. The main reason why such explanations are so rare in historical research is, according to Hempel, that historical laws are very complex. Thus, because of purely practical reasons, historians used to formulate ‘elliptic,’ incomplete explanations.<sup>11</sup> Karl Popper, however, approaches this issue differently. For him, it is not about the complexity of historical laws; it is about their being too trivial and therefore not deserving any particular attention.<sup>12</sup> A number of philosophers of social sciences, such as William Dray, R.G. Collingwood, and representatives of the hermeneutic tradition, deny any possibility of explaining social or historical phenomena nomologically.

## 2. The erotetic conception of explanation

Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz defined explanation in the following way: explaining of a state of affairs expressed e.g. in the proposition *a is b*, is a mental process leading to the solution to problems formulated by questions such as ‘why *a is b*’?<sup>13</sup> A similar

<sup>9</sup> Vide for example *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, pp. 21–3 (on the DN model) and p. 27–29 (on the inductive-statistical model, a variety of the DN); or A. Grobler, *Metodologia nauk*, pp. 105–109.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. P. Sztompka, *Sociological Dilemmas*, Academic Press, New York 1979, chapter III.

<sup>11</sup> I am drawing on the account by Georg Heinrich von Wright (Вригт, Г.Х. фон. *Объяснение и понимание*, in Г.Х. фон Вригт, *Логико-философские исследования*, Москва, 1986, p. 61). Von Wright makes reference here to Hempel’s *Explanation in Science and in History*, in W. H. Dray (ed.), *Philosophical Analysis and History*, Harper & Row, New York 1966, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. K. Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies*, London 1945, chapter XXV, section 2.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Polish Scientific Philosophy: The Lvov-Warsaw School*, ed. by F. Coniglione, R. Poli, J. Woleński, Rodopi, Amsterdam – Atlanta 1993, p. 141.

conception of explanation has been proposed by Bas van Fraassen. For him, giving an explanation means answering a 'why-question.' However, not every answer to such a question will be an explanation. Van Fraassen formulated three conditions under which an answer to a why-question can become an explanation: (i) the presupposition of the why-question must be a true statement; (ii) the 'contrast class'<sup>14</sup> must be identifiable; (iii) the answer must be 'relevant,' that is, convey an essential relationship between the fact stated by the presupposition of the why-question and the fact stated by the answer to this question.<sup>15</sup>

Is it possible to analyse theological explanations using the above conceptions? Let us consider a concrete case:

*Context:* 'Six young people in Bosnia-Herzegovina reported having visions of a supernatural being, namely the Virgin Mary.'

*Report of external observations:*

(R) 'When the alleged vision occurred, they knelt, ceased praying aloud, ceased to respond to external stimuli, turned their eyes towards precisely the same place in the room, moved their eyes in a way that corresponded to their reports of the vision, and then returned to their normal state of consciousness. All the alleged visionaries performed each of these actions at almost precisely the same moment, but without any detectable sign of collusion.'<sup>16</sup>

*Possible explanations:*

(E<sub>1</sub>) What has been described above had occurred due to the will of Mary, Mother of God and with God's permission (or bidding)... [ARGUMENTATION]

(E<sub>2</sub>) What has been described above had occurred due to the manipulative devices of demons... [ARGUMENTATION]

The word 'argumentation' put in square brackets signals that in both cases theologians adduce appropriate arguments, but presenting them here would complicate the analysis of the case.

It seems possible to analyse the above case using the conception of van Fraassen. We can take the report (R) as a conjunction of statements that make up the presupposition. One can try to indicate a contrast class and assess the relevance of the explanation (E<sub>1</sub>) or (E<sub>2</sub>) with regard to (R). However, one would find this task extremely difficult to accomplish. Van Fraassen's conception of explanation was envisaged for cases wherein a question's presupposition is simple enough (can be expressed in a single sentence). But not always can we present explanandum in

<sup>14</sup> By 'contrast class' van Fraassen understood a set of entities that can be opposed to the set of entities indicated in the presupposition of a why-question. E.g. the contrast class for the question: *Why the raven is black?* can be established in two ways: (i) by asking why the raven is *black* (instead of being blue, green or white); (ii) by asking why it is *the raven* (and not, for example, the swan) that is black.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. B. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1980, chapter V.

<sup>16</sup> G. Dawes, *Theism and Explanation*, p. 66. He in turn references to: Laurentin, René, Henri Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies on the Apparitions at Medjugorje* [1985], transl. by Luke Griffin, Veritas, Dublin 1987, pp. 35–36.

a single sentence, not at least without a risk of distorting a primary description. This goes not only for theology, but for the social sciences, too. For example, if anybody asks an expert: ‘Why Ukraine has given up the Crimea to Russia?’ he/she will probably hear the remark that the description ‘Ukraine has given up the Crimea to Russia’ is not accurate. The expert will probably offer a more subtle (and multi-sentence) account of the situation before he/she gets on with explaining it (answering the question ‘Why P?’).

The erotetic concept of explanation<sup>17</sup> has also been criticised on other accounts. Firstly, as Adam Grobler aptly pointed out, not only the why-question can express the demand for an explanation but also the ‘how-question’ can do (e.g. *How did the prisoner get away from the prison?*). Secondly, the interrogative adverb ‘why’ is very ambiguous. The English word ‘why,’ etymologically derived from the instrumental case of the Anglo-Saxon pronoun ‘hwaet’ (what),<sup>18</sup> can convey different meanings.<sup>19</sup> David H. Fischer noticed decades ago: ‘Sometimes it seeks a cause, sometimes a motive, sometimes a reason, sometimes a description, sometimes a process, sometimes a purpose, sometimes a justification.’ The verdict of Fischer is severe enough: ‘[the why-question] should be consigned to the semantical rubbish heap.’<sup>20</sup>

Fischer’s conclusion seems to be too radical and premature. For one thing, he confuses the technical and everyday usage of ‘why.’ For another, at least some of the meanings he lists can be reduced to one another, e.g. the question about a motive and the question about a cause (in the social sciences, motives are indeed sometimes interpreted as causes). Besides, the meaning of ‘why’ can be identified contextually, as it is the case with many other equivocal expressions.

All these things being said, the erotetic conception of explanation can be of some use in the social sciences and theology, but we should not neglect its weaknesses and pitfalls. Anyway, it makes sense to seek further for some other, perhaps more appropriate, concepts of explanation.

### 3. Explanation as a reductive-regressive reasoning

Jan Łukasiewicz defined explanation as a reasoning that consists in proceeding from *what is given* to *what is sought*. Transferred into the field of logic, ‘the given’

<sup>17</sup> Also called the ‘pragmatic-linguistic concept.’

<sup>18</sup> The instrumental case of ‘hwaet’ is ‘hwy.’

<sup>19</sup> The same holds for equivalents of ‘why’ in other languages. The Polish interrogative pronoun ‘dlaczego’ can indicate a question (i) about a cause of something; (ii) about a goal of something; (iii) about a reason for maintaining such or another judgement. The Belarusian ‘чаму’ and Lithuanian ‘kam’ (one of, besides ‘kodėl,’ equivalents of ‘why’) are, in fact, pronouns in the dative case. So, it is feasible to infer that they were primarily questions about the *goal* of some action.

<sup>20</sup> D. H. Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies. Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, Harper Perennial 1970, p. 14.

proves to be a (logical) consequence and ‘the sought’ – a (logical) reason.<sup>21</sup> Since the relation *reason – consequence* can be expressed schematically as a conditional  $p \rightarrow q$ , we can say that, provided that  $q$  is ‘the given,’  $p$  is the explanation for  $q$ .<sup>22</sup> Another Polish philosopher Tadeusz Czeżowski approached the issue in a very similar way. For him, explanation consists in seeking a reason<sup>23</sup> for a state of affairs that is already ‘given’ and recognised as a fact. Czeżowski names the explanation the ‘heuristic’ reasoning as opposed to ‘justifying’ reasoning (testing and demonstration<sup>24</sup> are the instances of the latter).<sup>25</sup>

Józef Maria Bocheński OP drew upon Łukasiewicz and Czeżowski and framed explanation in the following way:

$$\begin{array}{l} A \rightarrow B \\ \underline{B} \\ A \end{array}$$

where  $B$  is the ‘departure point’ (i.e. the statement whose truth-value is already known) and  $A$  is the ‘finish point.’<sup>26</sup> Czeżowski and Bocheński call explanation the *reductive-regressive reasoning*. It is reductive because it presupposes inference from a consequent of a conditional to its antecedent; it is regressive because it proceeds from a consequence to a reason.<sup>27</sup>

The conception of explanation advanced by Łukasiewicz, Czeżowski, and Bocheński reminds one much of Charles S. Peirce’s idea of ‘abductive reasoning.’ The abductive reasoning runs in the following way: (1) there is a ‘surprising circumstance’ which (2) will get understandable if we surmise some factor  $b$ ; thus, (3) we assume that the factor  $b$  took place.<sup>28</sup>

Let us now get back to the case of Medjugorje. We can take the report (R) as the Peircean ‘surprising circumstance’ for which we seek the best explanation. The two explanations, ( $E_1$ ) and ( $E_2$ ), can be treated as two competing hypotheses (surmises) which explain or try to explain (i.e. ‘make understandable’) the facts described in (R).

<sup>21</sup> Łukasiewicz employs the word ‘racja.’

<sup>22</sup> I present Łukasiewicz’s views on the basis of Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz’s account in *Klasyfikacja rozumowań*, in *Język i poznanie*, t. II, PWN 1985, p. 287 and following.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Racja.’

<sup>24</sup> ‘Dowodzenie.’ Authors of *Polish Scientific Philosophy* render it as ‘argumentation,’ but this seems to be misleading.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Polish Scientific Philosophy*, pp. 151–152 and Ajdukiewicz, *Klasyfikacja rozumowań*, pp. 290–291.

<sup>26</sup> J. M. Bocheński, *Współczesne metody myślenia*, W drodze, Poznań 1992, p. 103.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ch. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. v, *Pragmatism and Pragmaticism*, ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1934, § 188–189.

The abductive reasoning is characterised by the fact that it presupposes *comparativity* (the same holds true for reductive-regressive reasoning). An explanation based on such reasoning is ‘best’ only if there is no other explanation for a given case, or if the other explanation is worse. In this connection, a difficult and complicated problem looms in front of us: what criteria are to be used to decide which explanation is better? The purpose of this article is not so ambitious as to get to grips with this issue. Let me limit myself rather to a humble suggestion that the explanation understood as an abductive reasoning (or reductive-regressive reasoning) is one of those kinds of explanation which can be successfully applied in theology.

#### 4. Explanation as *understanding*

It is worthy to consult some views on explanation that emerged within the hermeneutic tradition.<sup>29</sup> Representatives of this tradition generally deny the possibility of nomological explanations of social, cultural, and historical phenomena.<sup>30</sup> They used to repeat after Johann Droysen that it is the distinctive feature of the social (or historical) sciences that they (the sciences) employ a special method, different from that of the natural sciences, namely *understanding* (*Verstehen*).<sup>31</sup> What ‘understanding’ means exactly – a subtype of explanation or something completely different from explanation – is a matter of dispute. Droysen himself most obviously thought that *understanding* and *explaining* are two completely different intellectual operations. But twentieth-century representatives of hermeneutics, such as William Drey, R. G. Collingwood, Peter Winch or Georg Heinrich von Wright, no more deny that there can be strong analogies between ‘understanding’ in the social sciences and ‘explanation’ in the natural sciences. On the other hand, David H. Fischer, a representative of analytic tradition, conceptualises historical explanation in a way that much reminds one of how hermeneuticians conceptualise ‘understanding’: ‘[t]o explain is merely to make plain, clear, or understandable some problem about past events, so that resultant knowledge will be useful in dealing with future problems.’<sup>32</sup>

Many modern theologians consciously draw upon the hermeneutic tradition and take it as their methodological basis. I am not going to analyse the ‘hermeneutic theology’; I will just point to some areas where this type of explaining (or

<sup>29</sup> Sometimes referred to as the *Geisteswissenschaft* tradition.

<sup>30</sup> ‘[A]ll human action has to be “understood”, and is refractory to the nomological type of explanation which characterizes the natural sciences’ – in this way Anthony Giddens summarises views of hermeneutically minded scholars; vide: *New Rules of Sociological Method*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1993, p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> Johann Gustav Droysen maintained that explanation (*Erklären*) is the task of the natural sciences, while the historical sciences are to aim at understanding (*Verstehen*) social phenomena – vide Psyllos, Stathis. *Past and Contemporary Perspectives on Explanation*, in T. A. F. Kuipers, *General Philosophy of Science: Focal Issues*, Elsevier, North-Holland 2007, p. 163.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XV, footnote 1.

understanding) seems to have a fundamental significance. Let us consider the two following explanations of the same event (*F* is for ‘fact’; *E* for ‘explanation’)<sup>33</sup>:

(I) (F) In 587 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians.

*Why* (F)?

(E) Because God was angry with Judea and punished it by allowing the Babylonians to seize Jerusalem and take many Jews into captivity.

(II) (F) In 587 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians.

*Why* (F)?

(E) Because Judea made an alliance with Egypt. Egypt was then a powerful rival of Babylon. The Babylonians wanted to punish Judea for the alliance and weaken Egypt. The Babylonians surpassed the Jews both in terms of their number of warriors and in terms of technical possibilities.

At first glance, these are two competing explanations. But this is not necessarily so. Let us consider two more examples:

(III) (F) The chair is broken.

*Why* (F)?

(E) Because a force of *l* Newtons acted upon the chair and the density of material out of which the chair had been made was *m* kg/m<sup>3</sup>. Whenever a force of *l* Newtons acts upon an object whose density is *m* kg/m<sup>3</sup>, the object gets broken.

(IV) (F) The chair is broken.

*Why* (F)?

(E) Because Michael threw it out from the fifth floor. His wife made him angry and he reacted in this way.

It is obvious that (III.E) and (IV.E) are not competing explanations at all, instead they are complementary. Similarly, (I) and (II) can be viewed as complementary. Of course, someone may call into question the ontological presumptions underlying the explanation (I.E) but it is a completely different problem. What is important here to stress is that the competitiveness between (I) and (II) is just a seeming one.

Do explanations such as (I) have any merit? Within the hermeneutic paradigm – most probably yes. Historical events can be understood as a system of signs liable to a certain ‘reading’ and (I.E) can be one of such ‘readings.’ For the hermeneutician, the explanation (II.E) not only is not competitive with (I.E) but it may prove as an ‘enrichment’ of the interpretative undertaking. The question ‘why?’ in the sense ‘what for?’ ‘what is its meaning?’ can be directed toward the whole content of (II). So:

(V) (F) In 587 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. It happened because Judea made an alliance with Egypt. Egypt was then a powerful rival of

<sup>33</sup> Dawes also considers this example, but from another angle, vide *ibidem*, pp. 67–68.

Babylon. The Babylonians wanted to punish Judea for the alliance and weaken Egypt. The Babylonians surpassed the Jews both in terms of their number of warriors and in terms of technical possibilities.

*The question of the hermeneutician: What is the meaning of what has been described in (F)?*

## 5. Concluding remarks

The objective of this article was to consider which model of explanation was possible in theology and which might be optimal. In the light of the above considerations, I am inclined to claim that deductive-nomological explanations are rather impossible in theology. Three other kinds of explanation – explanation as an answer to ‘why-questions,’ explanation based on the abductive reasoning, and explanation as ‘understanding’ – can be constructed in theology on a regular basis. But analysing theological explanations by using van Fraassen’s conception can be too difficult in practice. Hermeneutic explanation in its turn can raise some methodological misgivings due to the fact that it largely relies on empathy and intuition. The abductive explanation seems to be the optimal type of explanation for theology; but further investigations are needed in order to elucidate various aspects of its practical application.