

Jason Morgan

The Realist Guide to Religion and Science
by Paul Robinson*

I had not been in graduate school in the United States for too long before I discovered that intellectual faddishness had taken the place of being fastidiously intellectual, and that the pursuit of political correctness had won out over the pursuit of truth. Most people in the American academy, regardless of what they profess to study, are little more than makeshift sociologists, nervously checking to see where the surrounding herd is headed before making any pronouncements in their own field. Anything judged not in keeping with the ever-shifting standards of conformity to received opinion is rejected as unscientific or anti-intellectual and ignored.

Frustrated with this state of affairs, I remarked one day during seminar that in the Middle Ages universities had been places where truth was sought. I said I wanted to return universities to their medieval orientation of honest, freewheeling debate. Needless to say, the professor assumed a pained, frozen smile while the other graduate students snickered and sneered.

Since that experience, my resolve to restore truth-seeking to American intellectual life has only increased. I also learned that many share my desire to reform the academy in this radical way. Little by

Jason Morgan — Reitaku University, Chiba, Japan
e-mail: jasonmorgan@holypostles.edu ▪ ORCID: no data

* Paul Robinson, *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science* (Leominster, Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2018), xxvii+527 pages, ISBN 978-085244-922-6.



little, a clear vision for renewing the life of the mind through the rededication to truth becomes visible in the West.

Paul Robinson's *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science* is therefore a very welcome addition to the growing, and increasingly activist, remnant of truth-seekers who want to do more than fritter away their intellectual dhimmitude on the margins of post-modern and Marxian anti-scholarship. More than a call to action, *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science* is a plan for it, as well as a rallying cry to go on offense in taking back the academy for purposes higher than identity politics.

Divided into three parts—Reason, Religion, and Science—Robinson's book is a double-hearted adventure. On the one hand, Robinson, a Kentucky native and Catholic priest currently teaching in Australia, patiently and methodically rebuilds our capacity for knowing and loving truth by returning to Aristotelian and Thomistic principles and insights, showing how *realism*—Robinson's term of art and the keystone of this book, on which more below—is the approach needed for the human mind to look for, know, and delight in what is objectively true. On the other hand, *The Realist Guide* is a ruthless dismantling of the various false edifices and untenable ideologies that thicket the modern academy. Going down the list from *pagan pantheism* and *Protestant biblicism* to the thoroughly unscientific claims of Richard Dawkins, Lawrence Krauss, and Daniel Dennett, Robinson does not attempt to find common ground with the enemies of truth. His objective is to annihilate their falsehoods forever. *The Realist Guide* is a bracing frontal attack on every idol of the age, and in section after section Robinson picks apart the enemies' defenses with all the confidence of a seasoned combat veteran.

Like the soldier fighting for love of country, Robinson's cut and thrust blossoms forth from a very simple notion, namely, that truth exists, and that the human mind was made to know it. From this starting

point, Robinson's thinking, and his book, follow. As Robinson asserts in the preface:

This book sets forth a general principle about human knowing, and then illustrates that principle by looking at the history of religion and science, as follows:

– General principle—realism is the human way of relating to reality and so is the default basis for all the knowledge of it that humans acquire.

– Religion as example of principle—religion is reasonable when realist and becomes irrational to the degree it is not.

– Science as example of principle—science is reasonable when realist and becomes irrational to the degree it is not.

These three bullet points correspond to the three sections of the book. First, we have to know reality using realist eyes; second, we have to see how religion is reasonable when realist and unreasonable when not; third, we must do the same for science.¹

Robinson's *realism* is thus the organizing principle of his thinking and of the volume under review.

But what exactly does Robinson mean by the term? For many philosophers, *realism* is not cut and dry. Basic realism, of course, is simply the assertion, assumption, or even belief that the world and its attributes exist independently of the mind. Beyond this, though, there are many different branches: semantic realism, platonic realism, mathematical realism, epistemological realism, and so forth. Robinson's *realism* seems to borrow aspects from many of realism's subsets. For example:

Truth occurs, in its essence, when the mind affirms a correct proposition about reality, aptly joining a subject and predicate by the concept 'is'. 'Is' expresses real being; it is the assertion of something really existing outside the mind. When the mind says

¹ Robinson, *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science*, xxv.

‘Mountains are high’, reality has not just connected with the mind; the mind has also connected with reality.²

This reference to the copula as indicating reality may lead some to think that Robinson is espousing a kind of semantic realism. Elsewhere, Robinson affirms that his realism is epistemological, too, as when he follows up on a Joseph Pieper quote about the spirit being part of the perfection of the human intellect to state:

Realism does not just affirm the ability of the human intellect to acquire knowledge from reality; it also affirms the intellect’s ability to know that it knows, and so also the ability to say what reality is. . . . [Furthermore,] the senses know what is particular, the intellect what is universal[, and] the intellect’s highest act is the attainment of truth by the formation of a correct intellectual judgement about reality.³

Robinson’s realism, then, is a synthesis of many of modern realism’s disparate strands. But it is much more, too. As readers will likely already have guessed, Robinson’s realism is human, alive, robust, the very nature of our intellects—it is, in two words, Aristotelian and Thomist.

The citation footnoted in the above quotation gives it away, for when Robinson speaks of the senses knowing what is particular and the intellect what is universal, he is drawing from St. Thomas Aquinas’s *De Anima* (book 2, lesson 5, no. 6), but also from the grand tradition of the West, the insights by Aristotle, St. Thomas, and their many students across the centuries that the world is real and we can really know it, and also that, ultimately, as St. Thomas taught in light of much of what he learned from Aristotle, we are made to know and love God.

Robinson’s realism is, therefore, much more than one more gear in the secularist philosophical transmission. Robinson is not locked into

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

the usual logic-chopping debates of the modern professors. By openly embracing God, Robinson raises the stakes of his project infinitely. He is not trying to play inside the boundaries that the secularist philosophers maintain—he is turning the tables on the secularists and insisting that metaphysics not be lopped off of philosophy, but that philosophy recover its sanity by proceeding from Aristotle’s First Cause and acknowledging St. Thomas’s “proof for the real distinction between essence and existence propounded in chapter 4 of his *De Ente et Essentia*.”⁴ As Robinson pithily remarks, it’s “first cause or bust.”⁵ Robinson’s book is thus a full-on rejection of half-measures and intellectual compromise. This book plays for keeps, and everything—the legacy of the past 2,500 years of the Western intellectual tradition—is on the table.

That legacy includes the Arabic sources from which our current Aristotelian corpus derives—and by extension the Arabs’ Muslim faith—as well as the Protestantism and scientism that flared up in Western Europe during and after the fifteenth century. Robinson eruditely argues, for example, against a widely-held Islamic view that Allah creates and destroys the universe with every moment, and follows Étienne Gilson in criticizing William of Ockham for equally undermining causality among the Latins.⁶ He then turns to Protestantism, arguing against Luther’s literalism and rejection of reason before turning to more recent Protestants, such as Charles Darwin and the Creationists, who, equally influenced by biblical literalism, either rejected God outright or embraced fundamentalism completely, with equally disastrous results.

In this unapologetically Catholic realism, Robinson’s model is the late philosopher and historian of science Stanley Jaki. Robinson’s

⁴ *Ibid.*, 50–51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 226, citing Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy*, 489.

debt to Jaki is apparent in nearly every section of *The Realist Guide*, and it is a debt that Robinson gratefully acknowledges:

I do not hesitate to state that my inspiration [in writing *The Realist Guide*] came from the writings of the late, great Fr Stanley Jaki, physicist and theologian, herculean researcher, and prolific writer. From the early 1960s until his death in 2009, he applied his rapacious and capacious mind to exhaustive research into the history of science. The sheer volume of first hand sources from the past as well as contemporary works that he read, assimilated, and synthesised seems to justify his magisterial tone, forceful invective, and adamant insistence, all wrapped in a sophisticated and obscure prose. Jaki packs a punch.⁷

As Robinson sees it, “one of Jaki’s main contentions is that realism is needed to do religion rightly and to do science rightly.”⁸ “To do religion rightly,” Robinson continues,

means to provide it with a rational foundation, by means of realist philosophical proofs for the existence of God and His attributes. To do religion wrongly is to base it upon an irrational emotion or a sacred text read irrationally. To do science rightly is to require that its theories match empirical evidence and conform to the world as we know it, that is, that it be realist. To do science wrongly is to cook up theories which do not serve hard fast evidence, but rather serve some preconceived notion of the way that the universe ought to be. What is the mentality behind right religion and right science? Realism. What is the mentality behind wrong religion and wrong science? Either idealism or empiricism.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii–xxiii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiii, citing *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (Port Huron, Mich.: Real View Books, 2005), *A Mind’s Matter* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), *Bible and Science* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), and *Lord Gifford and His Lectures* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986).

⁹ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

This two-hearted book—both reconstruction and demolition—is also double-edged, with realism cutting both ways, through *scientific* and religious empiricism and idealism, to clear the ground for a Jakian return to right reason. Using what he calls an *epistedometer*,¹⁰ Robinson shows how a variety of false creeds, from Daoism to Lawrence Krauss’s generationist nothing-ism, clock in against the realist index.

And yet, even though Robinson’s book is a tour de force of solid thinking and feisty polemics, there is one wrinkle that remains to be ironed out. Throughout the volume, Robinson seems to maintain a distinction between *science* and *philosophy*, using the two terms as meaning two separate things: *science* being the thing people do with beakers and microscopes to find out about the natural world, and *philosophy* referring to thinking about things in this world that the senses cannot necessarily detect. But this is a fallacy, and it cuts at the root of Robinson’s own project. As Robinson knows perfectly well—especially since he occasionally says so, such as on page 324 when he cites Aristotle’s definition of science as knowing causes with certainty—science and philosophy are the same thing. His entire book could be read as in support of this claim, to be sure. But more clarity about the identity of science and philosophy can only help readers more readily overcome the scientism that has made philosophy and science appear separate. Like a straw in a glass of water, what seems to be broken is actually one.

But this is in no way a fatal flaw. Robinson has given us a truly monumental volume and I hope that everyone interested in intellectual history, or intellectual honesty, will buy and read *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science*. Paul Robinson may very well be our next Stanley Jaki. But I have a feeling he may be even more. There is a movement afoot to take back our Christian heritage and realist patrimony, and in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

that sense Robinson's book may be much more than just a work of philosophy.



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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Paul Robinson, *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science* (Leominster, Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2018). According to the author, Robinson's book is a double-hearted adventure. On the one hand, Robinson patiently and methodically rebuilds the reader's capacity for knowing and loving truth by returning to Aristotelian and Thomistic principles and insights, showing how *realism* is the approach needed for the human mind to look for, know, and delight in what is objectively true. On the other hand, *The Realist Guide* is a ruthless dismantling of the various false edifices and untenable ideologies that thicket the modern academy.

KEYWORDS

Paul Robinson, religion, Christianity, science, philosophy, Aristotle, Aquinas, Stanley Jaki, realism, truth, ideology, modern academy.

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Robinson, Paul. *The Realist Guide to Religion and Science*. Leominster, Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2018.