



Theology and Relaxed Forms of Metaphysics: A Constructive–Critical Evaluation of Michael A. Mørch's Proposal

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In this contribution, I develop five questions regarding Michael A. Mørch's approach: (1) To what extent does Mørch's research question depend on his analysis of historical developments in the modern era? (2) Is Mørch's option for public rational scientific discourse itself a rational or contingent historical decision? (3) What is the status of logic, coherence, and consistency in his account, and how can we argue for a rational foundation of rationality? (4) Do the credibility and justification of the Christian faith really depend on a commonly acceptable theology, which in turn depends on successful metaphysics? (5) What consequences would Mørch's vision of systematic theology have for the notion of God? Finally, I advocate an understanding of knowledge that brings God into play not primarily as the content of knowledge but as the condition of the possibility of knowledge against human ignorance.



I am grateful for Michael A. Mørch's engagement with the issue of the formation of a scientifically sound systematic theology that would contribute public discourse and his nuanced analysis. He takes up prominent German thinkers like Wolfhart Pannenberg and Lorenz Puntel and, being an academic systematic theologian at a German university myself, makes it easy for me to relate to his approach. Thus, I do take his carefully developed concept, and, even more, the objectives it tries to pursue, very seriously. However, as a systematic theologian with a focus on dogmatics, philosophy of religion, and the dialogue between religion and science, I also feel a certain unease with the approach as presented so thoroughly by Mørch. I take this commentary as an opportunity to share some concerns with him from my perspective, eager to engage in a deeper exchange on the future of systematic theology as a field of study and research at our universities. I must admit that I have taken the liberty of concentrating on those issues I find problematic, leaving aside so many things I agree with and find enlightening, and often inspiring. I have arranged my critical considerations along five points and close with final thoughts under point six.

1. In his introduction, Mørch (2023, 20) unfolds the research question of his book and puts it into context: "How can systematic theology best be construed as a scientific discipline?" However, in order to make sense, this question presupposes that there *is* a discipline called systematic theology to which this question is addressed. Consequently, he starts his book by stating that it "investigates the discipline of systematic theology" (Mørch 2023, 17). Later, in chapter three, he provides a definition for this discipline and a comprehensive presentation of his understanding of the discipline as structured by the three levels. I will come back to this later. Very broadly, Mørch (2023, 17n1) sketches systematic theology as referring to "a defined field of scientific study" dedicated to "the description, discussion, and construction of Christian doctrines." He reflects on how systematic theology can best be construed as a scientific discipline.

Mørch's research question implies that systematic theology as a scientific discipline (presumably in the broad sense of the German *wissenschaftliche Disziplin* [scientific discipline]) is not doing well at the moment. This is briefly sketched in the introduction and the overview of the historical background of the book (chaps. 1 and 2). As the background for his research thesis, he identifies the current crisis of Christian theology, which is often denied the status of an academic discipline at research universities. The emphasis seems to be solely on "research" universities, since in many European countries as well as abroad, confessional systematic theology is only a discipline at private (e.g., church-run) universities dedicated mainly to education for ministry and only in some cases significant scientific research.¹ Mørch (2023, 18–19) very briefly sketches the developments in Western Europe that eventually led to the situation at the beginning of the twentieth century wherein "all metaphysics, including theology" were accused

“of being cognitively meaningless.” I note that he subsumes theology under the label of metaphysics right from the outset—a premise that must not be taken for granted. According to his account, the natural sciences (especially evolutionary theory) had contributed to such a loss of scientific credibility. He then adds factors external to the university such as a growing secularization, decline in church membership, lack of public awareness, etc. as reinforcing these developments as well as philosophical debates that shaped scientific discourse inside the university.

This crisis, however, is understood as a crisis not only of Christian theology as such but of metaphysics and God-talk as a whole, and it is understood as a consequence of certain developments of modernity. This leads me to my first question: To what extent does Mørch’s research question depend on his analysis of developments in the modern era? Is the answer to the crisis of metaphysics and academic theology in modernity the improvement and adjustment of a metaphysical framework as Mørch finds it in Lorenz Puntel’s systematic philosophy of being? Will a certain form of metaphysics help theology “be justified as a scientific discipline in the university” (Mørch 2023, 19)? Or is the challenge more complex, more fundamental, or of a different nature, so that a revision of metaphysics will not suffice?

2. To lay my cards on the table: I am hesitant to agree with Mørch’s approach that the answer to the present crisis of systematic theology at the university in the wake of the success of the natural sciences is “successful” metaphysics—whatever that may mean. Rather, I am tempted to take the background of his research question more seriously and as more relevant to his approach than he himself seems to think. A few historical remarks from my German perspective might help illustrate my point. Part of the actual challenge Mørch’s project attempts to address is the question of how, given increasing secularization, as a result of which less and less theological expertise is required, a systematic theology can still be justified at universities that no longer serve the purpose of professional qualification for church ministry. At one point, Mørch casually mentions the founding of Berlin University under the aegis of Wilhelm von Humboldt as the culmination of a development in which the scientific status of academic theology was increasingly compromised due to the secularization of the university (Mørch 2023, 41). However, it was theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher who inspired the Humboldtian reform university and shaped and secured its theological faculty. Together with others, he designed the university as a mixed body of education plus research and vocational training. This was founded on three significant presuppositions: (1) Such a mixture implies that there must also be room for students attending an academic education for the sake of vocational training who are only moderately interested in, or even untalented for, doing scientific research. Not only can such students become even better doctors, lawyers, farmers, or pastors than researchers, but conversely,

by insisting on the practical orientation of science, they can stimulate and ground actual research. (2) Not only for theology but for many fields of study at the university, Schleiermacher saw this not as an unfortunately unavoidable hindrance to the actual research purpose of the university but as a necessary formation of such an institution. Modern universities must be dedicated to establishing the opportunity of education (*Bildung*) as a comprehensive process every human being has the right to participate in based on their personal and individual potential, and which always takes place within a community of diverse individuals, indeed constitutes that community in the first place. (3) Such a process of individual and communal education must find its coherence in the idea of a unity of science as *Wissenschaft* (see Mørch 2023, 26, where Mørch aptly describes this German concept) comprising the whole range of human knowledge and expertise. This actually leads to a very broad understanding of science in the sense of *Wissenschaft*. The German constitution in article 5(3) grants freedom of *Wissenschaft* (academic freedom), and in 1973, the German Federal Constitutional Court defined *Wissenschaft* as “any activity which, according to its content and form, is to be regarded as *a serious planned attempt to discover/determine the truth.*”² The court even links this broad and open definition to what it calls the “principle incompleteness of any scientific knowledge”³ (Bundesverfassungsgericht 2023, my translations).

This seems to me the real issue: that—partly as a result of developments generally described as secularization—the current understanding of education and research, of vocational training, and of the social significance of science in a very broad sense, has entered a crisis. This crisis, as Mørch quite rightly points out, affects not only theology nor metaphysics but the humanities as a whole (see Drees 2021), including philosophy. Even the natural sciences are affected insofar as their contribution to a deeper understanding of reality and the human situation is concerned. Higher education as such is in a crisis, and often, academia and the sciences have a controversial reputation in politics, the media, and public discourses. While there are indeed many who seek guidance and orientation in science—as evidenced by the high number of subscribers to science channels—others, and maybe even a greater number, indulge in narratives that view science with suspicion and tend to associate it with a dubious establishment. Universities and institutions of higher education change rapidly and have become pawns of political decisions. All will be amplified by developments through which education and personal formation will take on new forms. Not only is the internet a gigantic repository of both human knowledge and human ignorance, artificial intelligence and generative language models that draw on all possible information in digital form require the development of new skills for knowledge acquisition and knowledge management. An accelerating globalization has raised questions about power structures in the sciences and

the humanities, and the founding statutes and social implications of Western academic education are often viewed with suspicion. Economic and political interests also press research in the natural sciences into lucrative applied and technologically productive projects. Reflectiveness, hesitancy, and reservations are often considered obstacles to the progress of science. As far as I can see, there is no longer any effective concept of a unity of knowledge in today's academic research institutions. With this, we have also lost a generally accepted idea of education as a comprehensive, integrated personal and communal formation.

Thus, the crisis of theology as a scientific discipline might have to do with the fact that during the nineteenth century it was still embedded in a shared project of education that encompassed the whole person and was supposed to constitute communities. It was no coincidence that Schleiermacher (1893) appealed to the cultured among religion's despisers in his speeches on religion. This framework, which underpinned academic education not only in Germany, has disintegrated in the twentieth century alongside a general decline of religion and faith-based communities.

In the 1940s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had already observed a general dissipation of religious belief (Green and DeJonge 2013, 777) but offered a positive theological interpretation: this is a feature of a world that has come of age but is even closer to God because it renounces problematic religious consolation and the illusion of a *deus ex machina*, a "god of the gaps," who mysteriously acts in the world to the advantage of his favorites. Bonhoeffer was very skeptical that theology and Christianity could regain their reputation through an improved form of "God" as a working hypothesis. Against the backdrop of my brief sketch of the current crisis in theology, I understand Bonhoeffer's objection to mean that it is important not to make theology more scientifically respectable, or even superior in its explanatory power, but rather to cultivate discourse within theology and in public discourses with all disciplines about what actually deserves to be called knowledge, education, community, individual, etc. The approach Mørch proposes reminds me of a strenuous attempt to counter the conflict model, according to which science has flourished at the expense of religion, by trying to regain ground through increased intellectual effort, thus, paradoxically, confirming it. I am not arguing that Bonhoeffer is right (he probably is not, at least not in all respects), but I am asking how Mørch would argue for his approach against the backdrop of the developments described. Can there be a (rational?) discourse on why theology must be shaped as rational discourse? Is Mørch's option for public rational scientific discourse itself a rational or a contingent historical decision? His intention, which he shares with others like Alister McGrath and Wolfhart Pannenberg, is to overcome fideistic, subjectivist, tribalist, or just pragmatic justifications for theology. But is his own starting point not highly positional? As an academic publication, his book is

a rational public discourse on theology. However, it is not simply executing systematic theology as rationally justified public discourse but arguing for it against the background of the crisis sketched earlier. Is his book itself a second-order reflection? Is he unfolding the prolegomena of a discipline, or is he already performing and demonstrating it? Or does such a distinction between the foundational discourse and the discipline itself make no sense because there is no such thing as a rational foundation for rationality?

3. In any case, Mørch's (2023, 64) claim is that theology should "meet commonly accepted criteria," and for that purpose, he wants to do systematic theology within the framework of a sound theistic ontology. That raises the question of whether metaphysics and ontology are actually able to successfully establish commonly accepted criteria. In modern history, metaphysical debates have shifted quite significantly and contingently from the rationalist metaphysics of the seventeenth century based on the principle of sufficient reason (Christian Wolff) to transcendental criticist metaphysics (Immanuel Kant), from empiricist skepticism (David Hume) to historico-dialectical ontotheology (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel), from process cosmology (Alfred North Whitehead) to the meditative reflection of *Dasein* (Martin Heidegger), from a phenomenology of *Lebenswelt* (Edmund Husserl) to the attempt to overcome metaphysics through logical analysis of language (Rudolf Carnap), from the proclamation of the final end of metaphysics and its transformation into pragmatist ethical discourse (Jürgen Habermas) to a new union of metaphysics and analytical philosophy (Alvin Plantinga).

Alasdair MacIntyre (1988) asked *Which Rationality?* and pointed out that there is a whole range of competing rationalities, especially with regard to their practical forms. If I understand correctly, Mørch attempts to address this problem not by proposing an explicit theory of rationality but by developing a scalar understanding of possible metaphysics resting on significant presuppositions. He places the criterion of coherence at the center of his approach, which he takes from Nicholas Rescher. This, he claims, makes it possible to evaluate different theoretical frameworks in relation to a scalar concept of coherence and label them as relatively superior or inferior without having to associate this with an absolutization of certain metaphysics. Thus, Mørch argues for rationality not along the lines of a rationalistic understanding of given reason as a primary source of knowledge but along the more formal lines of coherence implying classical logic (to which extent?). He assumes that such coherence is not created but "an inherent quality of Being that we *discover*" (Mørch 2023, 114; emphasis added). On the other hand, he repeatedly writes that every theoretical framework is assigned a specific language (syntax), logic, ontology, etc. (see, e.g., Mørch 2023, 99), thereby implying that logic and ontology should be understood relative to the theoretical framework.

That leads me to the question the status classical formal logic, including a concept of coherence, has in Mørch's account. On the one hand, he maintains that the concept of coherence implies consistency in the sense of classical logic (Mørch 2023, 114). With Puntel, he understands classical "pure" formal logic as structural only and "without positive content" (Mørch 2023, 133; on page 238, he adds mathematics to it). Accordingly, the syllogistic form of *modus tollens* is presupposed when Mørch (2023, 140) deals so extensively with possible objections to his proposal. But these prerequisites seem to conflict with the six conditions Mørch adopts from Rescher's theory of coherence. The sixth item states that "the Law of Bivalence and of Excluded Middle can . . . be maintained only in a restricted, weakened form, and not their classical strong versions" (Mørch 2023, 131). That leads to the further question of how Mørch sees the relation between different concepts of logic relative to a given metaphysics and pure formal (classical?) logic as implied by the concept of coherence itself and as presupposed by the logic of his general argument. Is logic discovered or a necessary condition that makes the discovery of coherence possible in the first place? In other words: How much transcendental logic is Mørch prepared to concede for his own approach?

4. I am also concerned about Mørch's distinction between three levels of systematic theology, which follows concepts developed by Niels H. Gregersen. On level one, the systematic theologian "seeks to explicate the semantics of the different Christian practices" (Mørch 2023, 72) such as liturgical elements, sacraments, worship etc. The objective is an explanatory description with the best possible degree of coherence, which includes authenticity in relation to the beliefs of a community and an appropriate selection of data. Interestingly, on this level, Mørch does not see much value in making use of doctrinal or propositional content like creeds. Only on level two does the systematic theologian develop what is traditionally called dogmatics. The focus is on internal coherence, on grammar and semantics, while biblical material as well as other external "data" (like cosmology) are reflected. On level three, "public rational discourse" comes into play. The systematic theologian engages in external coherence by constructing and comparing Christian semantics with non-Christian understandings of reality. She does so with an apologetic intention "to show the legitimacy of this discourse about God in comparison with relevant alternatives" (Mørch 2023, 86). For Mørch, this implies developing theories of normative ontology or metaphysics or, as he puts it following Puntel, developing an understanding of Being as such and as a whole.

I find these distinctions helpful and a good way to analyze different aspects of the field of systematic theology. However, I question the relations by which Mørch connects these three levels. For him, "theology 3" is dedicated to providing coherent theories about the possible existence of "God" and thus

“lends credence to the scientific status of the work in systematic theology 1 . . . and systematic theology 2” (Mørch 2023, 135). If theology 3 succeeds in developing convincing theories about the possibility of the existence of God, “belief in God is not wholly fideistic” (Mørch 2023, 87). As I pointed out earlier, scientific research is not accessible to everyone. Should the faith of all those for whom such an understanding of Being as such and as a whole is and remains inaccessible be regarded as incurably fideistic? Would that not then have to be extended to basically all biblical protagonists (e.g., the apostle Paul), that they believed “fideistically” without proper justification? Or, to adopt Schleiermacher’s words: Is the most perfect master of Christian metaphysics always likewise the most enlightened Christian (cf. Schleiermacher 2016, 9) who really understands that which she believes is true? Are all other believers to be considered as just practicing religions with an implicit faith (*fides implicita*) resting on external authority and without authentic knowledge?

That Mørch’s (2023) argument might be problematic in this respect is shown by a statement found on page 111: “If ‘Being as such’ is a convincing notion, then God is a convincing notion. If not, God is also compromised.” This implies logically that if, and only if (!), “Being as such” is a convincing notion, God is a convincing notion. Thus, the credibility of the notion of God directly depends on the success of metaphysics.

5. My own view is that theology on all its levels presupposes God’s existence as a very special subject matter that simply cannot be mastered through intellectual effort, yet at the same time is understood to be of ultimate concern to human beings (Tillich 1951, 11–14). My fifth question is whether Mørch’s proposal does actually do justice to a theologically and philosophically sound notion of God when he makes its credibility dependent on successful metaphysics. The peculiar history of metaphysical thought in the West, which meanders so significantly between the rigor of rationally undisputable arguments and the irrefutable insight into the elusiveness and incomprehensibility of the divine (negative theology as the alter ego of Western metaphysics), between self-confident syllogistic artistry and mystical silence, cannot and must not provide foundational warrant for “scientific” systematic theological reflection. That is also represented in the fact that the introduction of the word “God,” according to Puntel, is only possible after a certain point in developing a theory of Being as a whole (see Mørch 2023, 123). But where do we get the word “God” from? Is it necessitated by the requirements of that theory? If not, on which grounds does it come into play? Do we not in the case of “God,” at least from a Christian perspective, have to consider the fact that “God is known through only God” (Tillich 1969, 154)? Is the “God” of Western metaphysics a chimera, and if not, on which level and by which means can we deal with this question?

6. I do not have the illusion that a normative theology that remains stable through changing times can be developed out of original revelation. On the contrary: the historical contexts in which systematic theology is practiced continuously change the form, content, and method of theological reflection. This means that systematic theology must not only engage in public discourse but must also be discursive in itself and reflect in form, content, and method that it is dependent on the fact that God is known only through God (see the earlier quotation from Paul Tillich). Christian systematic theology as the reflective self-explication of Christian faith existed before there were universities, for example in the form of *sacra doctrina* with Augustine. Since the twelfth century, the contexts of universities have shaped specific academic forms of theology, and with the changes in the university, these have developed over the course of history into a complex discipline encompassing historical, systematic, and practical perspectives. Indeed, theology not only deals with actual belief and lived faith as data like in religious or cultural studies, but it also engages in “the constructive-critical self-examination of the Christian church with regard to the content of its distinctive discourse on God” (Barth 1985, 1; my translation). Rather than employing “God” as part of a comprehensive and coherent theory of everything, it asks about the Christian nature of Christian (and non-Christian) practices and beliefs, considering God’s presence in reality as understood and experienced by Christians today, both as individuals and as communities. And like all academic disciplines, academic theology depends on the academic setting allowing it to develop its task with reference to its unique subject matter. Today, it must certainly be developed beyond historical and doctrinal, but also conceptual, limitations. As a critical exploration and thoughtful public reflection of the Christian faith lived out in denominational diversity, it must reflect this diversity. And it must reflect the challenging and ever accelerating developments of the modern world in the light of what Christianity believes it has received as a gift entrusted to it by Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit in order to share it with others. For this purpose, it must seek fruitful, critical, and constructive dialogue with the natural sciences, with all forms of the humanities, and with the world or religions Christianity participates in. But it should not do so by making itself dependent on the success of “God” as a working hypothesis in comprehensive theories of Being as such and as a whole. As an ingredient of metaphysical theory or as a supreme being necessary to complete potential ontologies, “God” does not designate God, at least not in a Christian sense.

Christian theology is under pressure in our academia, and it may even have to reinvent itself. I agree that systematic theology cannot refrain from reflecting categorical questions of existence and thus engage in metaphysics. And it is indeed extremely helpful when this is done in such a thoughtful and thorough manner as Mørch has presented it. But even then, ever new questions

will arise about the possibilities and limitations of such an undertaking. Metaphysical–theological reflections will always lead to new expositions of the limits of our experience, understanding, and reason, as well as insights into the significance and limits of empirical sciences. They are very much dependent on the context in which they arise and to which they try to make an impact. Furthermore, they must also take into account the indispensable and critical dimension of education as a practical means to develop and maintain individual and communal orientation today. For that purpose, they must take on relaxed forms of discourse on metaphysics (Dalferth 2017), always ready to question themselves, adapt to different contexts, appreciate alternatives, and respect and uncover the different semantics of the word “God,” which all fall short of what God actually means. With reference to the natural sciences, theological reflection should be able to respect and positively value their methodological chastity in explaining the phenomena of this universe *etsi deus non daretur*, as if there were no “God.” I would recommend systematic theology *not* present “God” as an (necessary?) ingredient of a theory of Being as such and as a whole. God is not part of what we understand of reality. God is also not part of the comprehensive frame of what we understand as reality. Rather, God is essential and crucial to how we understand ourselves within reality in the richest and most responsible ways possible, which are shaped by grace and love. Rather than finally presenting a superior or at least respectable metaphysics in scientific form to astonished academia, important contributions of theology to broader public discourse would be constructive interventions, critical hermeneutics, and attentive, mindful hesitation in overly confident rational and metaphysical thinking, insofar as it tends towards ideological or even imperialistic forms. Only then can theology demonstrate its competence in addressing God in the everyday context of concrete practices of education and historically shaped understandings of “God.” That could be one of its services to rational public discourse around the significance of science and evidence-based world views, and maybe one that is urgently needed in our present situation at universities, in churches, and in politics.

Notes

- ¹ An illustrative historical example is the system of *duplex ordo* in the Netherlands. This refers to a dual system for theology at state universities, established by the 1876 Higher Education Act, that separated state-funded theological education into a neutral, public “state” part and a confessional “church” part within one faculty. Systematic theology in the form of dogmatics together with practical theology was part of the ecclesiastical training program linked to the church. This separation was supported and shaped by “the liberal theology prevailing in these *duplex ordo* faculties” (Platvoet 1998, 115). This system was abolished in 2010, after the Dutch Reformed Church in 2007 founded its own institution, the Protestant Theological University, with an emphasis on dogmatic and practical theology. However, this institution is state-funded and has a considerable research output (Molendijk 2017, 12).
- ² Emphasis added. In German: “[A]lles, was nach Inhalt und Form als ernsthafter planmäßiger Versuch zur Ermittlung der Wahrheit anzusehen ist.”
- ³ In German: die “prinzipielle[,] Unabgeschlossenheit jeglicher wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis.”

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