

## The Legacy That Frederick Robert Tennant Left to Theism<sup>[\*]</sup>

### *Frederick Robert Tennant'ın Teizme Bıraktığı Miras*

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**Abstract:** Theism, which means the existence of a transcendent being beyond the material world and accepting its sanctity, often defend the idea that God has an eternal, conscious, universe-knowing and strong personality. In this paper, I outline and discuss how theism is treated and assessed by English Philosopher Frederick Robert Tennant (1866-1957) and which differences and superiority it can provide against other philosophical movements. In addition, it will be emphasized how Tennant attempts to harmonize positive sciences with philosophy and theology.

**Keywords:** Theism, Tennant, God, empirical, rational, evolution, science.

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## Introduction

English Philosopher Frederick Robert Tennant (1866-1957) lived most of his life in Cambridge and taught at Cambridge University for about 40 years. At the same time, he was a fellow of Trinity College and University lecturer in Philosophy of Religion (J. Hick, 1967: 93). Tennant is known to be the best answer to Darwin's theory of evolution during his time with a new approach to teleology. He is more influenced by the thoughts of Kant and J. Ward. The most distinctive feature of Tennant is that science can compromise with philosophy and theology and claims that theism makes the best explanation about the universe compared with other considerations (Broad, 1925: 241). The most important works of Tennant are these: "*The Origin and Propagation of Sin*" (1902), "*The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin*" (1905), "*The Concept of Sin*" (1912), "*Philosophical Theology I-II*"(1928), "*The Nature of Belief*"(1943) (Broad, 1925: 242).

### 1. The Rationality of the World

The concept of theism is generally understood to believe in the existence of a God. By a God, a theist understands like a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe (Swinburne, 1993: 1) In this sense, Christians, Jews, and Muslims are all theists. But the most important thing about theism, on the one hand, it stresses not only God's transcendence over against the world but also God's immanence and activity in the World (D.Z. Phillips, 1994: 17). Theism not only endorses the belief that God is responsible for his own existence, but also that God is the Creator of all extant reality beyond himself. Consequently, God is essentially what accounts for the being of anything beyond God or God is responsible for the being of something rather than nothing. This notion entails not only that God is responsible for the fact that the universe began to exist, but that God's work is also responsible for the continued existence of the cosmos (D.Z. Phillips, 1994: 18).

Tennant has adopted the main claims of theism we tried to explain above. According to him, if we want to interpret the world teleologically,



the theism comes out as a result. Tennant has put forward the supremacy of theism with new approaches, especially to teleological evidence (Tennant, 1930: 51). But before the order and harmony in the world, we find it useful to show what kind of characteristics God and his attributes have in Tennant's mind. For, What sort of understanding of God makes theism more rational and logical?

The principle that Tennant determines as a measure in emphasizing the supremacy of theism arises with the assertion of whether there is rationality in the universe. Human beings can not do without asking these questions: What is happening is that we write a mathematical thing on the paper and understand the nature by using the data of the mathematics or how the basic principles of mathematics can be adapted to the universe? The fact that mathematics is harmonized with the universe implies the rationality of the universe. This shows that the human mind penetrates into the physics by using mathematics. Here, when a man sees that the universe is compatible with the principles of mathematics, he rightly asks the following questions: Is this rationality spontaneous or is there absolute rationality behind it that brings this whole rationality? Because both the rationality of our mind and the rationality in the world seem to be related to each other. Otherwise, if there is no rationality in one of these, it becomes a hardship. For example, we have rationality but not in the universe or rationality in the universe, but our mind is not able to understand it. Then this discrepancy leads us to ambiguity at the point where we know the universe.

There is no doubt that we should not think that the rationality of the world exists only in the living world. Tennant believes that the physical laws that exist in the world cannot exist without rationality behind them. He also expresses that scientific discoveries have contributed to the rationality of our world by being influenced by the rapid change in the science at the moment as he lived. (Tennant, 1930: 52). However, Tennant sees the idea of being open in rationality only with abstract concepts, which is with logical and mathematical operations. According to him the debate of openness or ambiguity, the image or idea of a three-sided, hilly, fragrant, hay-field is less precise than that of a Euclidean triangle, which is merely a shape abstracted from size, color,



etc., apart from one or more of which, triangularity is a non-Actuality. And the clearest ideas, such as those of mathematics, are also the emptiest and the furthest removed from concrete things. On this account they are the more useful as fine instruments of thought, of a special kind; but on the same account they are least capable of figuring as things and agents, phenomenal or ontal. The mass-point, because a clear idea is a nonentity, though it is useful enough as a descriptive symbol (Tennant, 1930: 60).

However, according to Tennant's idea, it is not true that the universe should be reduced to identical components of the same species, geologic explanations, or simply logical and mathematical relations. According to him, the universe has a very reasonable structure, and we do not want to lose it in our own home (Tennant, 1930: 62). In this sense, Tennant thinks that theological beliefs lead some physicists to a plain view of nature, which means that nature is a product of God's mind. From his point of view, everything in God's mind is undoubtedly very simple. Simplicity is defined for us only in our relationship with our limited talents, and it is something we have included with our minds to nature, but out of nature (Tennant, 1930: 60-62).

On the other hand, while Tennant talks about the rationality of the world, he seems to speak of "rationality" in a totally different sense. In other words, rationality here is the causal explanations that are considered to exist more in the world. Because there is no logical ground for a reason. For the causal relationship is not a formal relationship because of this, there is no formal relationship and the causal category for example, if we speak of the living things, belongs not only to mammals but also to human origin. In this sense, Tennant believes that the rationality is not a logical ground but rather a rationality that can be explained by the actions of people. This shows that for Tennant, the world is entirely rational in a formal sense. But the basic principle of science that the world is rational can be interpreted and assimilated, that is, the causal explanation is not based on pragmatic but on logical confirmation evidence, and is similar to teleological explanation up to now (Tennant, 1930: 75).

It is clear from Tennant's ideas that science does not have the task



of approving or approving issues outside of its own interest. To put it briefly, the basis of science is to be measurable. It is understood from the thoughts we have pointed out so far that we must accept that once it is accepted that there is rationality in the scene, it must be a rationality that brings this rationality behind it. Otherwise, if we refuse this idea, we need not talk about order and harmony, but rather confusion and coincidence. Because we know that coincidence and chance do not go on in a systematic way. Yet order and harmony in the world systematically maintain its vitality. But it may be those who understand rationality in a different sense or those who express no rationality in the world. It is natural for us to expect reasonable and logical explanations at this point. Here, Tennant is also aware of this situation, so he draws attention to the causality that exists in the world, and he says that the events we witnessed as empirical are the priorities of logic and mathematical verification.

## 2. The Empirical Approach to Theism

The most important feature that separates Tennant from his colleagues as a philosopher and theologian is his belief that the empirical method can be applied to theology. He tries to do this by staying in the teleological system. So, according to Tennant a theologian with empirical mind approaches to classical evidences about the existence of God in a different way. This theologian evidently thinks more about how the world and the people will be explained. In doing so, his ideas about the world are made up of explanatory and empirical approaches. The main point that Tennant wants to draw attention to with this empirical minded theologian is that this researcher accepts and is not prejudiced about the ultimate entity; infinite, perfect, fixed, supra-human, unconditionally aware of everything and capable of all things in advance. (Tennant, 1930: 78). So here Tennant wants to tell us that the attributes attributed to God will not be distant from empirical reality or contradict empirical foundationalism.

In this context, the most crucial point that Tennant points out is the tendency towards cosmic teleology rather than the order and the aim seen in the individual entities in the world. The primary purpose of Ten-



nant is not to prove the basic claims of religion by looking at the basic structure of the universe as predecessors did, but to try to show that these claims are reasonable. For example, one of the most sensitive points that Tennant puts on is that the former thinkers concentrate only on the extraordinary nature of the organic structure, whereas the fact that the extraordinary dynamism of the inorganic structure is overlooked makes the world a better barrier to understanding. Tennant has taken a different view of the philosophical content of the teleological argument to prevent the theory of evolution put forward by Darwin posing a threat to the teleological argument, and his effort has brought vitality to the argument. This is one of the most important legacies he left to theism.

Undoubtedly Tennant knew that the theory of evolution was in vogue at the expense of the fact that the century he lived in was so fast-paced by science, but he also knew that the progress of this century in science could not prevent people from believing in the existence of God in philosophical terms. According to him, physics cannot say anything about the existence of God, and it is already outside his own field that physics is saying something. In other words, science has no theological conviction (Tennant, 1906: 98). Tennant, in his book “Philosophical Theology”, approaches the issue with an analytical view of the rationality and coherence of the universe, in particular by demonstrating opposition to criticism that Darwin has brought about by the theory of evolution. To this end, he advances the idea of a broader and cosmic teleology instead of specific examples of biology as the eye.

Tennant tries to base the teleological argument on the following six main issues:

1. There is a mutual harmony among knowledge, nature, objects and minds. This marks the harmony between the human mind and the external world.
2. The harmony of living things with the external environment.

Paley made it very clear how he struggled to achieve such a harmony. For example, how do we explain an entire evolutionary process, even if we accept the internal and external adaptations of organisms to be explained by natural selection? Tennant finds it reasonable to seek a



sufficient force behind this formation. According to him, the world itself gives enough clue to the existence of God.

3. The harmony between inorganic structure and organic fields:

The appearance of the biologically organic field is related to the inorganic field. The inorganic field is no longer the world of dead objects. According to Tennant, there is a certain harmony and cooperation between these two fields. This order is arbitrary, that is, with a regulating entity behind which the chance factor cannot be.

4. Our world has an aesthetic value.

Tennant insists that the universe is not only reasonable but at the same time, it has an aesthetic value. According to him, man is the only entity that has the power to comprehend aesthetic beauty in this world.

5. After a man was born, he develops as having a universal moral value under the influence of the surrounding environment. According to Tennant, the universe gives us the opportunity to develop our morals. Even God's existence has been tried to be based on morality.

6. We can not explain the overall progress seen in the evolution process without considering the cosmic teleology (Tennant, 1930: 81-90).

It is evident that Tennant claims that the world has a reasonable plan and life by taking consciousness, beauty and moral values in the center of knowledge with these expressions. According to him, if these qualities are provided, rationality and beauty are realized precisely. Tennant says that the world with these qualities is designed as a goal by a good mind (Tennant, 1930: 91). Swinburne explains this situation more clearly: "*The universe could have a complex look, but fortunately, it was not that shape. If so, we could talk about neither life nor value in the world we are in*" (Swinburne, 2012: 193) According to Tennant, now most people do not appreciate the chance factor in the formation of the world. But the possibility of science to explain cosmic teleology is not yet fully available. Because science does not ask a question about why the world is like this. On the contrary, it only deals with what is present in terms of causality. Tennant thinks that the explanation of religion based on the creative God concept is more reasonable. His effort, in other words, to revive teleological argument has brought a new vitality to the field of theology.



Tennant points out the importance that theism has given teleological argument and that this aesthetic argument will be more convincing when it comes to proving all the assertions and resorting to unreasonable possibilities. For example, when we look at a starry sky even in the ocean with a plant telescope we see that it realizes the beauty and the law of nature. When we try to get to the level of its fineness to enjoy the beauty, the level of education of human beings is different, but the universe emanates aesthetic sensation. The more difficult it is to arrive at this level, the more generous and influential nature is to please us. According to Tennant's view, this is not the case for the atheist. The atheist believes that this process is not pleasing to himself (Tennant, 1930: 91).

Regarding Tennant, the relationship between the world and man is one of the determinants of the relationship between God and the universe. According to Tennant's idea, aesthetic values are often intertwined with ethical, religious values inseparably (Tennant, 1930: 92) In this context, aesthetics based on what is perceivable in one respect on the other hand, to the field of human liberties has often led to its association with metaphysics and religion. The most important reason for this is that religion and aesthetics are united or integrated into the human subject. Because it is a man, who knows something, who calls it beautiful or ugly or uses the choice of believing in something. In short, religion and aesthetics find their own a person.

Behind the claim is to be approached with an empirical approach to theism that world must be identical to the truths or proofs that are proved, not what is given. That is what Tennant wants to tell us is the acceptance of the idea that the world is more or less analytically rational and understandable. It is possible to say very clearly that while Tennant deals with the relationship between man and nature, he explains the nature by likening to a man like a living being. This narrative style should not mean that Tennant is defending naturalism. Because he believes that the claims of theism are more consistent, especially those related to nature, than others. Indeed, Tennant emphasizes that the causal explanation and the teleological explanations are not mutually exclusive alternatives and none fulfills the function of the other.

Clearly, according to Tennant, teleologically, the theism obviously





reveals its own advantage and emphasizes that the universe is designed about the quality and clarity of nature. We can see Tennant as one of the leading advocates of this thought. He sharply criticizes those who claim to have contradicted this thought, especially in the determination of chaos that the non-theological philosophy suggests that the world has realized without any reason. Because for Tennant they are the last phase of irrationality. In response to this attitude, the answer of our philosopher is that our world has given more explanation to people and that many things in nature can only be regulated by an intelligent creator who designs it. If the idea that the world is designed with an intelligent design is adopted, then according to Tennant, the mystery of the world becoming a theater for rational life diminishes and reasonably explains our world in the context of a cause-effect relationship. So we do not need to know more about how the world first came into being (Tennant, 1930: 104-105).

On the other hand, according to Tennant, if this thought is considered to be true, that is, if it is thought that the claim that nature can be formed by "dice" is correct, then, it is obvious that this thought is not possible to be proved by present scientific evidence (Tennant, 1930: 105). Because Tennant believes that this order and harmony in nature, that is, the intelligent designer designs the existing design. What he wants to tell is that the claim that nature coincidentally comes into existence on its own is not a very descriptive explanation. The manifoldness of the coincidences on which the order in the world, including man is conditional has already been sufficiently illustrated, though it might be more minutely and extensively expounded. These coincidences, let it be repeated, are present in the determinate natures of the cosmic elements, the world's original existents and their primary collocations in the adjustment of similarity to difference between them which is the ground of all the uniformity and variety, the stability and the progressiveness, of the irreversible process of becoming. Here, Tennant rightly ask that question: What is called coincidences can be seen again at the emergence of nonconforming innovation? Are these coincidences enough to inflate the cloud of dust, which is consecutively irregularly shaped by the changing wind of nature? These questions of Tennant em-



phasize the truth of theism. Because, according to him, the possibility of the details getting into each other is necessary to have a life and to maintain the adaptation of inorganic nature. Randomly failing in nature can cause everything to go down. For example, it is inevitable for an air cluster to destroy a house made of cards. That is why Tennant emphasizes the need to avoid saying that nature is self-created. At this point, Tennant asks us to ask ourselves the question: is it more reasonable if we look at the past of the universe, whether it is due to any reason not to bring itself into the square and to explain itself reasonably, or to perform it by a pre-existing mind and power? Naturally, the human mind will say that the second choice is more reasonable than the first (Tennant, 1930: 109).

It is clear from Tennant's thoughts that the universe has a certain level as a whole from different angles (physical, chemical and biological). It can be said that the idea of this order, which is put forward scientifically, in a sense, justifies theism. Because, according to theism, there is an order in the world and a creator force that is the embodiment of that order. According to Tennant's understanding of theism, science and religion do not conflict with each other (Alston, 1963: 22).

On the other hand, Tennant does not consider teleological argument merely regarding aesthetics. According to him, also the moral condition of a person should not be ignored. For the moral experience that man has acquired, and the so-called pre-conditions of this moral experience, have often originated in different moral arguments for theism, which expresses sufficient and independent teleological thought in their own right. In other words, Tennant emphasizes the importance of this approach, even though he does not admit that God's existence is directly derived from human morality and only morality (1930: 64).

According to Tennant, the value is something that is a common product of man and the world. In this sense, we cannot say that there is no value independent of man. The will of man leads him to discover many things in his own environment (Bertocci, 1951: 349-351). Free will does not mean that people manifest their capacity in their individual actions, share their preferences with their emotions and do something that a machine does. Because for Tennant, the free man prefers his actions himself. God has not created his actions. According to Tennant, whatever the natural



history of man, his moral history has begun with himself. Such a free will is the responsibility of the person who is a condition of the honorable freedom of God's servants. In an advanced entity like a man, virtue encompasses the possibility of moral evil. Naturally, this situation involves conflict and war. With these thoughts, Tennant emphasizes that there is no much possibility in the world in the battle against theism by saying that the moral evil in the world is the judge and in the criticism that physical evil is dominant too, the answer is that the physical evil does not have a very strict order.

However, according to Tennant, the answer to this objection is not a possibility in the human field nor an excess of uniformity in the area of physics. Tennant, perhaps the order of nature and the stubbornness of man could not be brought together through God. Tennant comments that this is because God is both almighty, and because of his own love. According to Tennant, the human character is neither given nor prepared in nature (1930: 191-192). But man succeeds if he can keep his consciousness that he is with other beings in the world by remembering his responsibilities and fulfill his moral necessity (Eren, 2015: 444). Naturally, the development of morality is neither continuous nor uninterrupted.

The first step in expressing the importance of moral order for theist philosophy should be to show that man belongs to nature and is a part of it. In this sense, the world cannot be defined and explained without considering the man and his values. In the same way, Tennant regards the body, sociability, knowledge, and morality of man in all its conditions as a sign of his commitment to the world. Because, as a phenomenal being, man is a part of the world as long as they are bound to nature. It is a figurative meaning for our philosopher to say that man is part of nature.

### **3. Approach to Theism regarding God's Attributes**

Tennant believes that the attributes of God are far beyond the qualities of man and possessed by him. According to him, God who has the capacity of creation made himself manifest by performing this act of creation. However, the idea of manifesting itself requires presupposing the creation of existing beings (creatures). Undoubtedly, according to



Tennant, man declares this dependence by using his imagination in a very challenging way and by giving his dependence on the world to the will of God, by accepting God and time before creation (Tennant, 1930: 127).

On the other hand, for Tennant theist thought often accepts God as the creator and the universe as created by the time it is created. At the same time, Tennant emphasizes God *qua* God is a creator, and the creator *qua* Creator is God or God without the world is not God. A further refinement is made when God is conceived as *essentially* the world-ground or creator; not another cause in the series, or a being who might or might not have created. As a matter of fact, according to Tennant's point of view, we cannot take the cause-effect relationship forever. Because thought and action are designed together in creation, and divine transcendence is not a temporal superiority in this sense creating a whole existence (McCann, 2005: 28).

Tennant believes that the design of the world is planned by a designer and that this designer must also be a creative entity. According to him, one of the deficiencies of classical cosmological argument is that the world is formed by the act of an architect in the pre-existing matter, which Tennant criticizes. Because in this thought, it is more about shaping the universe than creating the universe. Tennant emphasizes creator shapes not only the universe, but also its creative nature. In short, if there is an order in the world as a whole for our philosopher, this is only possible through creation. Without accepting creation we can not explain the order that exists in the universe. Tennant does not find it right that this act of creation is to be understood as being analogous to the work of a man in architecture. In other words, when a person turns a brick into a brick home according to science, it only forms a certain kind of fragment. But if those parts are organized by a creator of the universe, then the world we are in has a plan. Undoubtedly, the fact that God created all the beings of different ages separated by purely twisted knots and formed in the past shows that those parts do not only regulate but also allow them to change over time (Tennant, 1930: 123). This is a sign that for Tennant the order and the design that exist in the universe can only be by creation.

It should be noted here that Tennant thinks that creation thought



or concept is related to the facts implied by the world's teleological interpretation and that most of the empirical confirmation is also possessed. Because the idea of creation is contrary to the opinion of absolute pluralism or the thought that the world exists itself. At the same time, this idea rejects the idea that other beings are with God or that God is in them. So, according to our philosopher, also this creation thought does not accept the idea of Neo-Platonism "emanation" (Tennant, 1930: 123).

According to Tennant, some criticisms made by philosophers about the idea of the creation of theism have been based on the incomprehensibility of its idea of creation. But for Tennant, there is indeed no more plausible idea that can be substituted for theism explaining the universe better. In this sense, if alternative theories are said to exist that the universe exists on its own, or if it is said that ambiguous stretches spread and that the claims are correct, such as manifest themselves in a final form, in short, Tennant indicates that these allegations were equally vague and mysterious but it is not reasonable and logical (Tennant, 1930: 125). Undoubtedly Tennant believes that the universe cannot be created without a designer behind the fine tuning because he thinks that it is very precisely designed with fine-tuning. The idea that God created deliberately and willfully the universe which is the central claim of theism further reduces doubts at the point of explaining things, and there is no arbitrary hypothesis in it. According to Tennant, the ideas suggested as an alternative to the idea of creation, namely, the idea of haphazard design is not something that one can think and believe. Here, for Tennant theism claims that although the empirical validation of its own mind is not accepted, it can reasonably be justified. According to Tennant, to speak of the mind and the will which theism has attributed to God although it seems meaningless to some, the concept of divine intelligence is a concept that exceeds the mind. Evidently the will and reason in us presuppose their object, but this is not so for God (Tennant, 1930: 126).

Actually for Tennant, while theist writers look for the faithfulness of the world in God, they tend to reduce or destroy the element of divine will. Because the reason they behave this way in order not to destroy God's attributes, but to avoid anthropomorphism namely, they act by keeping the characteristics of the human being separate from God and



keeping him different from everything in a sense. Indeed, from the viewpoint of theist, if God is intelligent, purposeful, and helpful subject, what is called as his nature must also include intellect as well as will. Inevitably according to Tennant God reveals Himself in the act of creation. At this very point, Tennant points out that by revealing God's act of creation there must be a projection of what He created in His mind before His creation. Naturally, the human mind presupposes God and time before creation because he considers the creation of the universe and beings possible by the will of God (Tennant, 1930: 128).

Perhaps it is possible to conclude all these things: God's creation attribute is an inseparable element of his own existence. For we know that certain attributes belonging to God do not exist in man, for example, creation. According to us, the most critical thought that Tennant put forward regarding this issue is that God has to create the universe. Because according to Tennant, God without the world is not God. In fact, this necessity, the idea that God has to create the universe does not mean to impose something on God. It only means that if we call God the name of an entity, then we expect Him to fulfill the act of creation, which is the most essential feature of Him. We can think about this situation about people. For example, the most essential qualification of man is a reason and logical thinking. If we are to speak of an entity as a human, we will not expect him to be foolish and unreasonable, so our expectation will direct that he will realize intelligent and logical actions. However, it is certain that there are those who do not use their mind and logic. What we want to tell is that man reveals the most fundamental qualities that exist in human nature but not in another being. In other words, a being that does not exhibit the characteristics that exist in it means that he has not realized himself. We must understand Tennant's thought in this way.

### **Conclusion**

Tennant who is a religious philosopher and theologian isn't only interested in philosophy and theology, but also interested in analytical psychology. Tennant is a very effective advocate of the latter when scientific methods and attitudes are more popular than scientific conclusions against religious views. Tennant's method is more empirical than apriori.



His epistemological understanding is based on the psychological questioning of the cognitive capacity of the human mind. On the other hand, his theistic argument is more inductive. He examines the existence of God as a hypothesis. While he creates this hypothesis, he bases his claim on the assumptions of positive sciences. Tennant's doctrine was formed by taking his power from a philosophical point of view. However, it is said that the viewpoints of other sciences influence the weak points of this teaching. He presents theism and theology as an extension of science and treats it as a controversial hypothesis in essentially the same way. Tennant made theology intellectually respectable and this was his own view of the matter. To others, however, it will seem that Tennant was presenting religious belief in false colors. From their point of view, having excluded the actual basis of religious faith in religious experience, Tennant attempted in vain to infer religious conclusions from nonreligious data and by thus setting theistic belief upon a wrong and inadequate foundation, he has weakened rather than strengthened it. Despite all these criticisms, Tennant has brought theism to life with a different perspective that he has brought teleological evidence. This is his most important success.

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**Öz:** Maddi dünyanın ötesinde aşkın bir varlığın varlığı anlamına gelen ve kutsallığı kabul eden Teizm, Tanrı'nın sonsuz, bilinçli, evreni bilen ve güçlü bir kişiliğe sahip olduğu fikrini genellikle savunur. Bu makalede Teizmin İngiliz Filozof Frederick Robert Tennant (1866-1957) tarafından nasıl ele alınıp değerlendirildiğini ve bu düşüncenin diğer felsefi akımlara karşı hangi farklılıklarının ve üstünlüklerinin olduğuna değineceğiz. Buna ek olarak, Tennant'ın pozitif bilimle felsefe ve teolojiji nasıl uyumlaştırdığı da vurgulanacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Teizm, Tennant, Tanrı, empirik, rasyonel, evrim, bilim..

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