

Daniel C. Dennett and Alvin Plantinga

Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?

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This short book is an elaboration of an exchange that took place at the American Philosophical Association in 2009 between religious thinker Alvin Plantinga (who recently retired as Professor of Philosophy at Notre Dame) and atheistic thinker Daniel Dennett (Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University). The debate opens with an essay by Plantinga which introduces a number of interesting issues concerning the relationship between religion and science, especially evolution; Dennett then offers a reply rather than a more straightforward presentation of his own positive position, but this does emerge in the later stages, where each thinker replies twice more to the remarks of the other. The aim of this book, which is part of the Oxford point/counterpoint series, is to whet readers' appetites, rather than to offer a detailed analysis. One does get a good sense of the main issues under dispute; the overall result is an interesting exchange on a very timely topic, and one which gives readers a good illustration of how this debate is often conducted today, especially from the atheistic side.

Plantinga introduces the discussion by defending four claims: (1) that contemporary evolutionary theory is not incompatible with religious belief; (2) that the argument for atheism based on evolution fails; (3) that even if current science were incompatible with religious belief, it would not follow that theistic belief is irrational; and (4) that naturalism, the view that physical reality is all there is (and hence there is no God), is a kind of quasi-religion, and is also incompatible with evolution (because human beings can have true beliefs, something that would be improbable if our cognitive faculties had come about by means of an unplanned evolutionary process).

Plantinga points out that when some claim that evolution is incompatible with religious belief, they mean that evolution, understood as an *unguided* or *unplanned* process, is incompatible with religious belief, and he agrees that if *this* is what evolution means, then it *would* be incompatible with religious belief. However, the theory of evolution itself does not show (or indeed claim) that the process is unguided; this is an add-on by those like Dennett who wish to co-opt evolution as an argument for atheism (and, we might add, a confusion that is too often found in biology textbooks). Plantinga also draws attention to the complex question of chance in nature, and suggests that it is not clear that the process of evolution operates by chance (as is often claimed), since the process could be guided by God, and if one insists that we must regard it as operating by chance, then one seems to be begging the question. Evolutionary theory, in short, does not show that there is no design in nature, he notes, especially since it reveals the existence of incredible biological complexities, coupled with the fact that the probabilities of these occurring all throughout nature are staggeringly low. Plantinga thinks that Michael Behe's work on irreducible complexities in biology (in his book *Darwin's Black Box*), which Behe argues are evidence of intelligent design in nature, is persuasive.

These are telling points by Plantinga, but one problem perhaps that readers will note is that he approaches the debate from the position of a theist who believes in God, and who then wonders how he should respond to the theory of evolution. This approach runs the risk of not perhaps facing up to some of the problems raised by evolution, problems one would be more inclined to confront if one started from a more neutral position on the question of God's possible existence, and then asked what bearing the evidence from evolutionary theory might have on that question. This latter approach would make one face up more than Plantinga does to two claims from Dennett's side: that it is reasonable to think that evolution is random, and that evolution can also be interpreted as evidence for atheism, whether this is part of the official theory or not. Plantinga holds that the theist has effective replies to these questions, but his overall approach seems to be one where one does not have to worry about these matters because one already starts with the existence of God, rather than asking if these matters would prevent one from getting to God's existence in the first place.

One thing that is striking about Dennett's replies to Plantinga throughout the whole book is his style of arguing. It is suffused with a certain arrogance about the subject matter, where he comes close to simply *assuming* the truth of his position, begging many of the important questions, and not addressing them adequately or fairly (John Searle has made a similar point about Dennett's work on consciousness, which is part of his larger atheistic project). It is important to highlight this point because Dennett's approach is quite typical of the current atheist intellectual movement in general. However, this means that only those that are already in strong agreement with him are likely to be persuaded by his arguments, though surely there must occasionally be a pang of conscience among philosophers who adopt this approach, a recognition that deep down they are avoiding the central questions? I cannot see how philosophically-minded atheists could be satisfied with an approach like Dennett's.

Thus, in his reply to Plantinga on the question of there possibly being an intelligent mind behind reality—a perfectly reasonable question that millions of people throughout history have asked—he suggests that we could also say that Superman is behind the universe! Dennett agrees that evolution may be compatible logically with religious belief, but it is also logically compatible with Supermanism, and he suggests that if we gave him enough time he could produce widespread belief in Supermanism (this represents another tendency of modern atheistic advocates—to regard people that disagree with them as stupid—which may make them feel better, but does nothing to help us understand the main philosophical questions). Dennett also insists that naturalism is *assumed* in modern science, and that science would make no sense without it. This may be true, but we must distinguish between what is called methodological naturalism (where we adopt the operating position *in a specific discipline* that only physical explanations will be considered and pursued) and metaphysical naturalism, where we stipulate that the *only* explanations we will entertain for *any* question will be physical, scientific ones. To adopt the former position in science is to say nothing about whether the latter position is true in general. Dennett ignores this distinction, and so ends up assuming that metaphysical naturalism follows from (or perhaps is the same thing as) methodological naturalism.

Plantinga also notes that much of the evidence for natural selection in particular is very vague, and does not come close to explaining the complexities involved in biological organisms, for example. And so how can we be so confident that an intelligent designer is not involved?

This is an interesting point that worries many (and many biologists seem quite defensive on this issue, to put it mildly!), but one could grant it, and yet hold that the evidence on the whole still strongly favors natural selection. Dennett does agree that Michael Behe is right that “there are large gaps in our detailed accounts of the evolution of many complex features” (32), but suggests that the reason for this is that “the young researchers...prefer to tackle other topics... not because they fear there is no evolutionary explanation...[but because] they fear they would work hard for a decade, solve the problem, and show exactly how the features evolved, and hence are not, in spite of first appearances ‘irreducibly complex’—and their scientific colleagues would, in effect, say ‘What else is new? Of course they evolved. Thanks for proving something we never doubted in the first place’” (34). For sheer chutzpah, this is hard to beat! One wonders if we are supposed to take this kind of reason seriously for the large gaps in evolutionary explanations?

Unsurprisingly, Plantinga has no time for the Supermorphism argument. He responds by saying that it is quite significant that millions of people throughout history have believed in God; the Supermorphism hypothesis is silly, since one can easily show that it does not in fact help us explain things (for example, Superman did not live long enough, a point which, when pursued to its logical conclusion, just pushes us back to questions about *ultimate* origins and structure, questions one cannot help but get the impression that Dennett is simply refusing to recognize and address). Dennett seems to have trained himself to regard the central philosophical questions arising out of these topics as silly, but this subjective response does nothing to reduce the importance of these questions, or help us with the answers. So Plantinga seems right in making the point that Dennett’s personal incredulity won’t work as an argument against theistic responses to these questions since “the vast majority of the world’s population find theism perfectly sensible,” (60) and they also find it very difficult to accept that the wonderful diversity of life on earth, including the human brain, came about through *unguided* evolution. Those who believe that “unguided evolution” can explain it all, as Plantinga astutely observes, “but who then raise their hands in self-righteous epistemic horror at the alleged epistemic excesses of theists, are like a bawdyhouse proprietor who is scandalized by the R-rated film shown in the theater next door” (60)!

This book does a good job of introducing the fascinating range of questions concerning the relationship between religion and science (especially evolution) and hopefully will achieve its aim of encouraging readers to pursue their interests further in the now large literature available on this complex topic. In this respect, we must note that one significant oversight in a book of this type is the lack of a bibliography, or some guidelines for further reading.

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