

Alvin Plantinga

Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism.

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Alvin Plantinga's *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (WCRL) is a valuable contribution to the vast current literature devoted to the subject of whether science and religion are in irreconcilable conflict. The main thesis of this provocative new work is simply stated: there is superficial conflict but deep accord between science and theistic religion, but only superficial accord and deep conflict between science and naturalism. WCRL is unabashedly apologetic in tone, in the sense of Plato's *Apology*: it is a vigorous defense of theism, specifically Christian theism, not a hand-wringing excuse for it. Plantinga's approach is to put the blame for discord with naturalism: 'That's where the conflict really lies' (360).

WCRL is an engaging read, but not a light one. Plantinga is an analytic philosopher whose works are filled with careful, sustained arguments. WCRL is no exception, so reading it requires some patience, and a modest toleration for logical formalism, but patience and toleration are rewarded by a richly argued narrative.

Plantinga's book has four parts. Part I, 'Alleged Conflict,' discusses some areas of supposed conflict between science and theistic (but mainly Christian) belief. One is biological evolution. Another is the claim that theistic religions endorse miracles or other sorts of special divine action (SDA) contrary to science. Plantinga argues that the conflict is only apparent (31, 67, 133). Rightly construed, there is no conflict between theistic religion and the scientific theory of evolution. Instead, Plantinga thinks that the conflict is between theistic religion and an undirected, unguided evolution, which he claims opponents of religion have superimposed on evolutionary biology. That's not part of the biological theory itself, but 'a metaphysical or theological add-on' (133). Similarly, SDA is allegedly incompatible with physics (74–5, 77). How so? Because the laws of classical physics, at least, assume causally closed systems. Here, Plantinga's predominant response is to say that this assumption is not part of the science proper (the law of energy conservation, say) but instead represents another 'metaphysical or theological add-on' (92–3). A second reply, which does not seem consistent with the first, is to grant that causal closure is in fact a methodological assumption (at least) of the way actual classical physics works, but to say that since scientific laws are formulated for closed systems, SDA would not violate any of them (xiii, 85, 134). Either way, Plantinga thinks, there is no conflict between classical physics and SDA.

What about quantum physics? Here Plantinga seems to embrace a position that will raise eyebrows: God is *always* acting specially in the world (beyond mere preservation or conservation) by causing *all* of the collapses of Schrödinger wave-functions that yield definite results for quantum measurements (120). Plantinga finds such 'divine-collapse causation' (DCC) attractive because it involves no divine violations of any natural law and because it fits nicely with his belief that human beings have real (originate) free will (121, 123–5). So again, if Plantinga is right, no conflict between science and religion, but instead a sign of consonance.

Are there areas of genuine conflict? Plantinga thinks that there are, or at least can be. He considers two examples in Part II of WCRL: evolutionary psychology (EP) and ‘scientific Scripture scholarship,’ often called ‘historical Biblical criticism’ (HBC) (134). But he thinks that both are only superficial challenges to the compatibility of contemporary science and Christian theism (xiii, 195, 196). Why? Plantinga’s main argument is that defenders of EP and HBC identify incompatibilities only by limiting the evidence base, so that those incompatibilities are not defeaters of Christian theism (168). More precisely, EP seeks to explain important human traits and behaviors solely in terms of the evolutionary origin of the human species (135–6). HBC, in turn, seeks to be ‘scientific’ in its study of the Bible and so will not countenance claims of God’s incarnation or Jesus’ resurrection (159–60). Plantinga’s response is to say that the evidence base of a Christian theist (creation, incarnation, resurrection, redemption, etc.) is broader than that of naturalists (esp. 182, 194–5). So the conclusions of EP and HBC are often in real conflict with Christian theism, but do not provide genuine defeaters. The conflicts are only superficial.

In Part III, Plantinga argues that there is in fact ‘deep accord’ between science and theistic religion. The defense of this position actually begins in the last two chapters of Part II, one devoted to the ‘fine-tuning’ cosmological design argument (ch. 7) and a second to Michael Behe’s defense of biological ‘intelligent design’ (ch. 8). The ‘fine-tuning’ argument (FTA) takes different forms, but basically it goes as follows: original cosmic conditions, which gave rise to the world in which we live, had to be on the border-line between go and no-go for some basic physical parameters (masses of particles and field strengths, for example) for us to be around. But since we are around, what is the explanation for the apparent ‘fine tuning’? A theistic explanation is that God is the ‘fine-tuner’ who has fashioned the world in a way that permits our existence (201, 203). Plantinga (204–31) considers a variety of objections to this argument—I think in a fair and instructive way—and concludes that as an argument, FTA gives only ‘mild support’ for theism (231).

Plantinga’s advocacy on Behe’s behalf is stronger, but only because he interprets Behe in an unusual way. Behe is usually interpreted as offering an *argument from* the existence of allegedly ‘irreducible complexity’ to intelligent design. Plantinga thinks that is a mistake. On his reading, Behe is not offering an argument *for* intelligent design (239–40). Rather, he is trying to make intelligible a sense of *perceptible* design (245, 253, 256). The idea here is that design can be directly perceived and that this can give rise to a non-argumentative basic belief that is warranted, since it has no serious defeaters. Conceived in this way, Behe’s ‘design discourse’ is, Plantinga thinks, ‘rather successful’ (266–7).

The main argument of Part III, ‘Deep Accord,’ involves showing the many ways in which Christian theism is deeply hospitable to scientific thought. These all revolve around one central theme: according to Christian belief, God has created human beings in his image (the *imago Dei* thesis), which includes our being able to have knowledge of ourselves and our world (277–8). More precisely, God has created us and our world in such a way that there is a *match* between our cognitive powers and the world. To use the medieval phrase, there is an *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*, a cognitive fit of the human mind with the world (279, 306). Theism provides natural answers to questions like: what explains the fact that laws discernible by human minds

govern what happens in the world (293)? Why is it reasonable to expect that mathematics understandable by human beings is useful in describing the world (295)? Why are humans successful in their inductive reasoning processes (306)? Naturalism, Plantinga argues, cannot answer these questions (313).

Part IV, entitled ‘Deep Conflict,’ presents Plantinga’s central argument for his conclusion that there is deep discord between science and naturalism. In summary form, his argument goes as follows: if evolution and naturalism were both true, then the probability of the reliability of our cognitive faculties as truthful (or truth conducive) would be low. If that is the case, however, any belief in evolution or naturalism should also be accorded a low probability. Alternatively, if, as most of us think, our cognitive faculties *are* generally reliable, then we have what is a defeater of the idea that evolution and naturalism are both true (324, 355). Here you might think that since Plantinga embraces evolution, he could simply conclude that naturalism is false. But, of course, his argument does not permit him that conclusion, since it would be an invalid disjunctive syllogism. The central argument is framed in terms of (unspecified) probabilities, but it is perhaps best viewed as a deductive *modus tollens*: if both evolutionary biology and naturalism are correct, then we have little reason to think that our cognitive faculties are reliable. But we have ample reason to think that our cognitive faculties *are* generally reliable, so we have good reason to think that the conjunction of evolution and naturalism is false. Plantinga clearly thinks that it is the naturalist premise that is at fault, but he does not claim to prove this (320). All he can conclude, if he is right, is that there is deep discord between science (specifically biological evolution) and naturalism, which is what he set out to show.

It is beyond the scope of a brief review to comment on what I have called Plantinga’s ‘central argument’. It occupies the last sixty pages of his book and is carefully argued. But a careful reply—teasing out and evaluating the somewhat different, although related, ways in which it seems to go—would require a lengthy essay. Similarly lengthy would be any careful reply to many of his other arguments, e.g., Plantinga’s claim that causal closure is a ‘philosophical or theological’ add-on to scientific practice and not a *component* of that practice, or his argument that DCC is a plausible account of how God acts in the world. I limit myself to a few comments on three of these arguments: that undirected evolution is just a ‘philosophical’ add-on, that the evidence base of theists is broader than what is available to naturalists, and that design (specifically divine design) can be perceived. Briefly, I want to suggest that Plantinga’s arguments, balanced against the replies of his critics, end in stalemates, which are difficult to adjudicate reasonably.

First, the question of whether evolution is or could be directed. Plantinga claims that it is not part of scientific biological theory that evolution is random and undirected. This has not been proved, but is an unscientific ‘add-on,’ so that it’s at least possible that biological evolution is, in fact, providentially guided. Opponents of Plantinga reply that while this may be possible, from all the scientific evidence it looks like nothing more than wishful thinking. To say that God works in mysterious ways is not much of a defense of directed evolution. Nor are Plantinga’s frequent ‘it’s possible that’ claims—that God could have planned, superintended, and guided evolution (48, 58, 133, 261). Here a naturalist can reasonably reply: ‘What is the evidence?’

So turn to evidence bases. Plantinga defines an evidence base as a set of beliefs that is used in conducting an inquiry (171) and then goes on to say that a theist has a broader evidence-base from which to judge matters than does a naturalist. Well, of course she does, by this definition. She has among her beliefs the following: the world was created and is sustained by God, humans are created in God's image, Jesus was the incarnate son of God, Jesus was resurrected and humans will be also, and the whole of creation will one day be redeemed. She may also have other, religion-specific beliefs, e.g. in transubstantiation. Nevertheless, these are not components of naturalist's set of beliefs, so he can reasonably ask what warrants them. After all, it's reasonable to expect of an 'evidence base' that it include warranted or justified beliefs, not just any beliefs.

Here Plantinga might reply that there are other sources of warrant besides the findings of natural science. For example, Plantinga might appeal to the story of Jesus's life, passion, and resurrection as it is told in the canonic Gospels. But this is not part of a naturalist's 'evidence base,' so what can Plantinga say? He might reply that it should be: but this is hardly an argument. Alternatively, Plantinga might appeal to aspects of the naturalist's own evidence base to argue, as he does in Part III of WCRL, that theism makes better sense of the fit between our minds and the world, and of the nature and success of science, than does naturalism. But a naturalist need not accept those conclusions, since he has replies to each of the points Plantinga makes (how cogent they are is a separate matter).

Another approach: Plantinga could argue, as he did in his discussion of Behe, that perception can be a source of non-argumentative warrant. It is difficult to see what to make of this argument. Plantinga may think that perception can give rise to warranted non-inferential belief in design. But what can he say to someone who doesn't think that? Surely, he cannot simply tell the nonbeliever to buy a better pair of glasses in order to perceive things the way he does! In one place, Plantinga implies that people who do not believe in design have to struggle to ignore what is right before their eyes (265, quoting Francis Crick). But Plantinga also quotes a letter from one of Darwin's friends who related a conversation in which Darwin said that while at times he saw evidence of design in orchids, for example, at other times he didn't (253–4). What to make of this? That Darwin just didn't see, or refused to see, what he should have seen?

A possible line of defense for the perception argument is the following: Plantinga thinks that we have the *sensus divinitatis* that John Calvin believed all humans possess (271, 322). He also thinks that in some people it doesn't function properly. Add to this the idea that rationality is a matter of normal cognitive functioning, and we obtain the conclusion that it is irrational to deny the divine. The obvious problem with this line of defense, of course, is that a naturalist would not accept the claim that he (or anyone else) has an innate sense of the divine, since he doesn't think that there is anything divine *to* perceive. What can Plantinga do to persuade him? Just claim that he is cognitively disoriented (indeed, cognitively defective, even if not perverse) in denying what he should accept?

Despite these reservations, WCRL is a very good book, well worth reading by both theists and non-theists for its thoughtful consideration of difficult and contentious issues. I warmly recommend it.

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