

Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies

I'll argue (1) that contemporary evolutionary theory is not incompatible with theistic belief, (2) that the main antitheistic arguments involving evolution together with other premises also fail, and (3) that naturalism, the thought that there is no such thing as the God of theistic religion or anything like him, is an essential element in the naturalistic worldview (a sort of quasi-religion in the sense that it plays some of the most important roles of religion) and that naturalism is in fact incompatible with evolution. Hence there is a science/religion (or science/quasi-religion) conflict, all right, but it is a conflict between naturalism and science, not theistic religion and science.

I Contemporary evolutionary theory is compatible with theistic belief

'Evolution' covers a variety of theses: (1) the ancient earth thesis, (2) the thesis of descent with modification, (3) the common ancestry thesis, (4) 'Darwinism': the claim that the principle mechanism driving this process of descent with modification is natural selection winnowing random genetic mutation.

Is Darwinism incompatible with theistic religion?

God has created human beings *in his image*.

God could have caused the right mutations to arise at the right time.

What is *not* consistent with Christian belief is the claim that evolution and Darwinism are *unguided*—where I'll take that to include *being unplanned and unintended*.

George Gaylord Simpson: "Man [and no doubt woman as well] is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind."

Stephen Jay Gould: If the evolutionary tape were to be rewound and then let go forward again, the chances are we'd get creatures of very different sorts.

Dawkins: *The Blind Watchmaker*: All appearances to the contrary, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics, albeit deployed in a very special way. A true watchmaker has foresight: he designs his cogs and springs, and plans their interconnections, with a future purpose in his mind's eye. Natural selection, the blind, unconscious automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the *blind* watchmaker. (p. 5) The subtitle of the book: "Why the evidence of evolution reveals a universe without design."

Why does Dawkins think natural selection is blind and unguided? Why does he think that "the evidence of evolution reveals a universe without design"?

Dawkins does three things: (1) he recounts some of the fascinating anatomical details of certain living creatures and their ways, (2) he tries to refute arguments for the conclusion that blind, unguided evolution could not have produced certain of the wonders of the living world, and (3) he makes suggestions as to how these and other organic systems could have developed by unguided evolution.

The form of the main argument:

- (1) We know of no irrefutable objections to its being biologically possible that all of life has come to be by way of unguided Darwinian processes:

Therefore,

- (2) All of life has come to be by way of unguided Darwinian processes.

Dawkins utterly fails to show that “the facts of evolution reveal a universe without design;” still the fact that he and others assert his subtitle loudly and slowly, as it were, can be expected to convince many that the biological theory of evolution is in fact incompatible with the theistic belief that the living world has been designed.

What about the fact that the relevant genetic mutations are said to be *random*?

Ernst Mayr: When it is said that mutation or variation is random, the statement simply means that there is no correlation between the production of new genotypes and the adaptational needs of an organism in a given environment (*Towards a New Philosophy of Biology*, p. 99).

Elliott Sober: There is no *physical mechanism* (either inside organisms or outside of them) that detects which mutations would be beneficial and causes those mutations to occur (“Evolution without Metaphysics”).

The point is that a mutation accruing to an organism is random just if neither the organism nor its environment contains a mechanism or process or organ that causes adaptive mutations to occur. But clearly a mutation could be both random in that sense and also intended and indeed caused by God.

The claim that evolution demonstrates that human beings and other living creatures have not, contrary to appearances, been designed, is not part of or a consequence of the scientific theory of evolution as such, but a metaphysical or theological add-on.

As polls reveal, most Americans have grave doubts about the truth of evolution. Many Christians are concerned about the teaching of evolution in the schools and want to add something as a corrective (ID) or want it taught as a mere “theory” rather than as the sober truth.

Why?

We are regularly told by the experts (Dawkins, Dennett, Ayala, Gould, others) that current scientific evolutionary theory asserts or implies that the living world is not designed and that the evolutionary process is unguided. E.g., the National Association of Biology Teachers until 10 years or so ago officially described evolution (on their website) as “an unsupervised, impersonal, unpredictable and natural process. . .”

If we are regularly told by the experts that in fact the theory *is* a theory of unguided evolution, it’s no wonder that many Christians believe that. Further, if they do believe that, it is no wonder that they don’t want it to be taught as the sober truth in the public schools: thus understood, it is incompatible with Christian (and Jewish and Muslim) belief. Clearly there are questions of justice here—would it be just to teach in public schools positions that go contrary to the religious beliefs of most of those who pay for those schools?

II Broader Antitheistic Arguments from Evolution

First, there is the claim that evolution undercuts the argument from design, thus reducing the rational support, if any, enjoyed by theism.

John Dupre: “Darwinism undermines the only remotely plausible reason for believing in God.”

Michael Behe’s *The Edge of Evolution*

But the real point lies in a different direction: if theistic belief is true, then very likely it has both rationality and warrant in the *basic* way.

The demise of the teleological argument, if indeed evolution has compromised it, is little more of a threat to rational belief in God than the demise of the argument from analogy for other minds is to rational belief in other minds.

Second: evolution, so wasteful and productive of suffering, is not the sort of process God would use or permit.

A special case of the so-called problem of evil, a problem alleged to afflict theistic belief.

Current science shows that suffering, both human and animal, has gone on much longer than previously thought; but it doesn’t thereby diminish the value of Christian responses to the problem of evil and in this way doesn’t exacerbate that problem.

Third: the hypothesis of unguided evolution is allegedly superior to that of guided or orchestrated evolution, because it is simpler and thus more Ockhamistic.

P(D/E&G) or P(D/E&U)?

What about $P(D/E\&U)$?

The really hard problem: the stupifying complexity of the living cell, both prokaryotic and eukaryotic.

Bruce Alberts, President of the National Academy of Sciences: . . . nearly every major process in a cell is carried out by assemblies of 10 or more protein molecules. . . . Indeed, the entire cell can be viewed as a factory that contains an elaborate network of interlocking assembly lines, each of which is composed of a set of large protein machines.

But again, the real point lies in a different direction. The theist, of course, already believes in God: there is no additional Ockhamistic cost in the hypothesis of guided evolution.

III Naturalism vs. Evolution

Where N is naturalism, E is current evolutionary theory and R is the proposition that our cognitive faculties are reliable,

- (1) $P(R/N\&E)$ is low.
- (2) One who accepts N&E and also sees that (1) is true has a defeater for R.
- (3) This defeater can't be defeated.
- (4) One who has a defeater for R has a defeater for any belief she takes to be produced by her cognitive faculties, including N&E.

Therefore

- (5) N&E is self-defeating and can't rationally be accepted.

Argument for Premise (1):

Take naturalism to include materialism. From the point of view of materialism, a belief will presumably be an event or structure in the nervous system, perhaps in the brain.

Instead of thinking about ourselves, think about a population of creatures on some distant planet, perhaps in some other universe; and suppose that N&E hold for them. What we can assume about these creatures is that their behavior is adaptive, conducive to survival and reproduction. This behavior is caused by processes in their brains—the underlying neurology. That neurology, therefore, is also adaptive. This neurology, furthermore, also causes their beliefs. But, as far as that adaptive behavior is concerned, it doesn't matter whether those beliefs are true or false. If true, fine; if false, also fine; either way the underlying neurology causes adaptive behavior. It therefore doesn't matter whether their beliefs are mostly true or mostly false, or 50-50. So take any particular belief: what is the probability that it is true? About .5. But then the probability of R, for these creatures, is really low, i.e., $P(R/N\&E)$ with respect to them is really low.