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BOOK REVIEW

Alvin Plantinga: Where the conflict really lies: science, religion, and naturalism

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In Alvin Plantinga's new work on science and religion, readers encounter not only the thoughtful reflections of a talented philosopher but an engaging and entertaining perspective on an all-too-rancorous subject. From the beginning, however, the ambitious nature of Plantinga's thesis is unambiguous: contrary to popular opinion, "*there is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion, but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism*" (p. ix; all quoted italics are original). His argument unfolds in four stages.

In Part I, Plantinga examines leading arguments claiming that there is deep conflict between science and Christian/theistic belief, concluding that these conflicts are merely apparent. For instance, to those who argue that there is a conflict between science and miracles (or divine action generally), he retorts that conservation laws only apply to causally closed systems. Such laws contain a *ceteris peribus* clause: "When the universe is causally closed (when God is not acting specially in the world), P" (p. 80). He takes on those claiming that theistic belief and Darwinian evolution are incompatible. Any incompatibility only results from a "philosophical gloss or add-on to the scientific doctrine of evolution: the claim that evolution is *undirected*, unguided, unorchestrated by God" (p. xii).

In Part II, Plantinga argues that, while there are some real conflicts between science and Christian belief, these conflicts are only superficial: "they don't tend to

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provide defeaters for Christian or theistic belief" (p. xiii). Evolutionary psychology and historical Biblical criticism, which work within the framework of methodological naturalism, consider only a restricted evidence set. There is no reason to think that these theories automatically generate defeaters for Christian belief, since the Christian's total evidence is not similarly restricted.

Going on the offensive in Part III, Plantinga maintains that there are arguments from science which provide non-negligible evidence for theistic belief. His conclusions are markedly restrained. (Perhaps this is unsurprising given that Plantinga's work has long been more concerned with defending the rationality of religious belief than proselytization.) In addition to defending the claim that the fine-tuning argument lends "mild support" to theism, Plantinga provides a partial defense of Michael Behe's design argument, and reframes it along Reformed Epistemology lines: Behe provides an occasion for non-inferential design perception (think: *sensus designitatis*). Plantinga also argues that there is great concord between Christian theism and the foundational assumptions of the scientific project. For instance, Christianity's doctrine of creation—that God created all of nature and forged our rational capacities in the *imago dei*—explains the amazing fit between the world and our cognitive powers; it explains why science works.

Finally, in Part IV, Plantinga takes off the gloves and argues that there is a deep science-naturalism conflict. Here Plantinga rehearses a revised version of his well-known Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism: given the conjunction of naturalism and evolution, it is improbable that one's cognitive faculties are reliable. Knowing this and believing naturalistic evolution yields an undercutting defeater for the reliability of one's cognitive faculties and hence for most all one's beliefs (including naturalistic evolution). Thus, naturalistic evolution "can't be rationally accepted" (p. 345). Plantinga, of course, thinks naturalism rather than evolution should be jettisoned.

Even as well-argued a book as this has its share of (arguable) flaws. We will focus on two. First, Plantinga's argument for the compatibility of Darwinian theory and Christianity is less than convincing. We'll describe Plantinga's view, and then point out the potential problem.

Christianity insists "that God has created human beings *in his image*. This requires that God *intended* to create creatures of a certain kind" (p. 11). But Plantinga points out that God could easily direct evolutionary forces: "God could have caused the right mutations to arise at the right time; he could have preserved populations from perils of various sorts" (p. 11). Thus, the only conflict between Darwinism and Christian belief "is the claim that this process of evolution is *unguided*" (p. 12). Plantinga thinks this claim of unguidedness is a mere naturalistic gloss on a theism-neutral scientific theory.

The arguable flaw arises when Plantinga specifically addresses the worry that *random* mutations cannot be caused by God:

> if these mutations are random, aren't they just a matter of chance? But randomness, as construed by contemporary biologists, doesn't have this implication. According to Ernst Mayr, the dean of post-WWII biology, "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." Elliott Sober, one of the most respected contemporary philosophers of biology, puts the point a bit more carefully: "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." But their being random in *that* sense is clearly compatible with their being caused by God (pp. 11–12).

Sober's idiosyncratic definition may be compatible with God-guided mutations, but it does little to establish that the Darwinian theory of "contemporary biologists" is compatible with Christian theism.

Mayr's understanding of randomness is more common. Yet Mayr could be taken in two ways (Koons and Gage forthcoming): (M_1) it's never the case that specific mutations happen *because* they are adaptive, or (M_2) there is no correlation between mutations and adaptive functions. Contravening (M_1), Plantinga's God-guided mutations would (sometimes) occur precisely because they are adaptive. These mutations are teleological, or end-driven toward functional adaptation. But when Mayr himself (1983, p. 324) surveyed the primary literature from Dobzhansky to Lewontin to Wright, he concluded, "The one thing about which modern authors are unanimous is that adaptation is not teleological." And contravening (M_2), if God intervenes to introduce adaptive mutations with sufficient frequency to shape evolutionary history, he must induce some correlation (perhaps weak, perhaps imperceptible to us – but still real) between the occurrence of mutations and their adaptiveness, unless he (bizarrely) deliberately prevents an equal number of equally adaptive mutations.

Perhaps Plantinga only wishes to claim that one might construct an evolutionary theory according to which God guides mutations even though they are *epistemically* random/uncorrelated, and that this theistic theory is empirically equivalent to Darwinian theory. But this would not show Christian theism to be compatible with Darwinian theory. The God-guided-but-epistemically-random theory is not the theory of leading Darwinians, nor was it Darwin's theory. Darwin explicitly rejected the view that God guides "chance" or "accidental" variations (Beaty 2006, pp. 639–640); and he insisted that he "would give absolutely nothing for the theory of nat. selection, if it require miraculous additions at any one stage of descent" (Darwin 1991, p. 345). Plantinga might fare better, then, to maintain that Christian theism is compatible with all major empirical findings of evolutionary biology, rather than Darwinian theory itself.

The second (arguable) flaw we want to point out regards Plantinga's claim that evolutionary psychology provides just a "superficial conflict" between science and religion. Plantinga writes:

> some writers seem to think that in coming up with a suggestion as to the evolutionary origin of religion, they are in some way discrediting it. … Describing the origin of religious belief and the cognitive mechanisms involved does nothing, so far, to impugn its truth. No one thinks describing the mechanisms involved in perception impugns the truth of perceptual beliefs; why should one think things are different with respect to religion? (p. 140)

Now, it's controversial to say that there is a successful evolutionary account of the origin of the cognitive mechanisms that lead to religious belief. Plantinga doesn't take a strong stand on that, and we won't either. But let's suppose that there is such an evolutionary account. Does this impugn religious belief? It's true that providing an evolutionary account of the origin of the cognitive mechanisms that lead to religious belief does not show that religious belief is false. God could have brought about our existence in such a way that God ensures that we have exactly these cognitive mechanisms, and moreover, God could have set up the world such that we obtain these cognitive mechanisms via evolutionary means. But the problem is that, since this cognitive mechanism arises via evolutionary means, we could exist with this cognitive mechanism regardless of whether there is a God (well, under the controversial assumption that it's possible for creatures like us to exist given naturalism). If all it takes is a naturalistic evolutionary process for us to have the cognitive mechanism that leads to religious beliefs, then if naturalism is true, creatures could still have this cognitive mechanism. And that does impugn religious belief: to the extent that religious belief is held just because of this cognitive mechanism, we have no reason to believe that these religious beliefs are true, because the religious beliefs would be held regardless of whether God actually exists.

To further elucidate this reasoning, let's go back to Plantinga's analogy with perception. We have (let's suppose) an evolutionary account of the origin of the cognitive mechanisms that lead to perceptual belief. Nevertheless, we conclude, that doesn't impugn the truth of our perceptual beliefs, and we believe that the sky is blue. But now suppose that we discover a new and surprising fact about belief-forming creatures made of DNA: they are only able to reproduce if they believe that the sky is blue. Thus, we'd evolutionarily evolve to believe that the sky is blue, regardless of the color of the sky. If we discovered this new and surprising fact, we'd call into question the truth of our belief that the sky is blue.

The worry is that the same holds for theistic belief. There is a cognitive mechanism that leads to theistic belief, but there is (we're supposing) a good evolutionary account of why we've evolved to have that cognitive mechanism. We'd evolutionarily evolve to believe that God exists, regardless of whether God exists. This should call into question one's belief that God exists. At least, it should if the evolutionary-arising cognitive mechanism provides the *only* reasons one has for believing in God. But some of the standard arguments that are given for the existence of God are arguably not a product of this evolutionary-arising cognitive mechanism. Consider the arguments Plantinga focuses on in his book: the fine-tuning argument and Behe's irreducible complexity argument. While the general (and controversial) mechanism of perceiving design that Plantinga approvingly talks about does arguably have an evolutionary basis, the fine-tuning argument and the irreducible complexity argument arguably do not (other than that they utilize our intellect, and our intellect arguably has a evolutionary basis).

Thus, Plantinga could maintain that he has other reasons to believe in God, beyond those given by the evolutionary-arising cognitive mechanisms in question. But a potential problem here is that Plantinga does not hold that the fine-tuning and irreducible complexity arguments provide *strong* reason to believe in God. Of course, readers familiar with Plantinga's corpus will know that Plantinga's belief in God doesn't

depend on such arguments: belief in God is properly basic, and hence it is rational to believe in God without argumentative defense (see e.g., Plantinga 2002).

This brings up one final issue. To what extent should the Christian take into account her Christian beliefs when doing science? Plantinga raises this issue (pp. 189–190), but doesn't give a definitive answer here (though Plantinga 1996 takes a friendly stance toward Christians bringing all they know to bear upon their scientific endeavors).

Even though one of us is an atheist, we both think that it is legitimate for a Christian to do science starting from what she believes about the world as a Christian. Science already works this way: we have to make non-scientific background assumptions. For example, we believe that the math calculations we do while doing science are typically done correctly, and we're not being deceived by an evil demon to falsely believe that we're doing the calculations correctly. This is a non-scientific belief that we simply take for granted in doing science. But we shouldn't *just* take these beliefs for granted; we should look for evidence that we're mistaken (or that we're not). It's to Plantinga's credit that, even though he could rest on his philosophical laurels of having shown that belief in God is properly basic, he continues to explore, in a fascinating and engaging way, the evidence for and against his theistic belief.

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