

A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN?

Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?

by Daniel C. Dennett and Alvin Plantinga (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Daniel Dennett and Alvin Plantinga are two of the world's most distinguished living philosophers. At the final session of a 2009 American Philosophical Association conference in Chicago, they crossed swords over the question "Are science and religion compatible?" The editor of the Oxford University Press series in which this new volume appears, James P. Serba, recalls in the foreword to the book, "Sessions at that time slot for obvious reasons are usually not well attended. . . . As I approached the room assigned . . . I was redirected to a much larger room. Although I was still about ten minutes early . . . all the seats had already been taken." Listeners lined the walls and sat on the floor expecting a memorable event, and they were not disappointed.

Science and Religion: Are They Compatible? extends Dennett and Plantinga's 2009 debate. In it, each of these two thinkers attempts to convince readers that his position is simply, entirely right, and that the opposing view is simply, entirely wrong. At seventy-two pages, not including the foreword, this short book is an excellent starting point for those who want to examine the most sophisticated philosophical arguments of both the New Atheists and their critics.

Plantinga in his first chapter, "Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really

Lies," narrows the scope of the question to theistic religion, particularly Christian belief. He contends that naturalistic atheism is a "quasi religion" which is itself incompatible with contemporary science. In contrast, the Judeo-Christian God understood as the Creator who orchestrates life's emergence and development is in harmony with evolutionary theses such as an ancient earth, descendant life forms modifying or mutating from their forbears, and a common genetic ancestry linking all living organisms. Plantinga challenges naturalistic glosses which claim that evolution is or must be unguided and purely a matter of chance. This claim that evolution, to be "scientific," must be inherently atheistic is a metaphysical prejudice, a theological add-on that is not an intrinsic element of the real science of evolution.

Anticipating the most common philosophical objection to theism, Plantinga also engages the "problem of evil" in relation to human and animal suffering within the process of evolution, what Alfred Lord Tennyson envisioned as "nature, red in tooth and claw." Why would a good and all-powerful God create such a savage world? Plantinga

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proffers multiple theodicies: the Augustinian “O Felix Culpa!” (fortunate fall), Leibniz’s “Best Possible World,” and the workings of a Satanic or demonic agency, or at least an errant human free will, that God nevertheless redirects providentially to achieve the good.

Nor, according to Plantinga, does atheistic materialism win its case against theism

the planet Krypton are as at least equally plausible sources for life on earth as the Judeo-Christian God.

Dennett then derides Plantinga’s arguments as dangerous and absurd since they could affirm a false criminal conviction. Dennett parodies Plantinga: “The defense has shown, I grant, that it *could* have been an accident, but not that it *was* an accident. . . .



Dennett and Plantinga: two distinguished philosophers face off

by Ockham’s razor, since arguments from design, intuition, and spiritual experience corroborate God’s existence. Naturalistic or reductive materialism—the principle that the physical world constitutes all of reality—is untenable for Plantinga because it fails to account for truthful and trustworthy content in ideas and beliefs external to their manifestations in the brain and other physical media. By its very nature, atheistic materialism excludes nonphysical realities such as mathematical formulas.

Dennett surprisingly concedes three points to Plantinga: (1) contemporary evolutionary theory *is* compatible with theistic belief; (2) evolution does *not* demand that mutations occur only by chance; and (3) evolution by itself does *not* deny divine design. But like Richard Dawkins in Ben Stein’s documentary *Expelled* (2008), Dennett considers that intergalactic travelers or (in Dennett’s conjecture) Superman from

“Satan and his minions” . . . may be involved in one way or another.” Besides, Dennett claims, “naturalism is *tacitly assumed* in all reputable courts of law and throughout scientific investigation.” Dennett also ridicules Intelligent Design theorist Michael Behe as unworthy of serious attention. Although careful examination could refute Behe easily, Dennett argues, to do so would only verify “what we never doubted in the first place” and fritter away scientific careers by distracting researchers from more valuable tasks.

Plantinga’s response is to ask whether God’s devising and guiding evolution is really as ridiculous as believing that Superman is the source of life on earth. He argues that atheism is significantly like solipsism—the belief that no one exists but oneself—because both deny the existence of particular personal beings (atheism denies the existence of God; solipsism denies the existence of other people). In doing so, both disregard

ostensibly hardwired beliefs held by the vast majority of humanity, and both are difficult to support rationally. Plantinga writes:

Atheism is a lot more like solipsism than theism is like Supermanism. Superman is certainly an impressive young fellow, but clearly not much greater than Captain Marvel, or even the Green Lantern. God, on the other hand, is all-knowing, all-powerful, and wholly good; furthermore, God has these properties essentially. . . . Of course we can modify the Superman story to make Superman more like God, [but eventually, Superman simply becomes a different] name for God.

In other words, if, in order to make “Supermanism” more plausible, Dennett designates Superman as omnipotent, omniscient, the loving and good creator of the universe (instead of just a tough Kryptonian in a red cape), then he is really invoking God by default, even if he uses “Superman” as the moniker.

Plantinga agrees with Dennett that evolution rewards reliable cognitive faculties but questions why our faculties should be reliable *given atheistic naturalism*. Nor, he observes, is it the case that science tacitly assumes there is no God. Many scientists see themselves “exploring, explaining, and discovering how this world—a world that God has created—works.”

Finally, Plantinga admonishes that advancing the view that science and religion are necessarily irreconcilable in fact harms both. The potential harm to religion is well understood. But if forced to choose between the two, many people will opt for religion and so reject science. A dogmatic (and false) dichotomy between religion and science could thus cripple the public subsidies on which the modern scientific enterprise depends.

Dennett reiterates that “Superman” is as good an explanation for life on earth as is God. “Supermanism” lacks only God’s advantage of being grounded in “an ancient tradition with many eminent contributors.” But just because innumerable smart and illustrious people, including scientists, believe in God does not mean that God really exists. Dennett concludes by denouncing miracles—an attack Plantinga anticipates by underscoring that science describes only “the normal course of things” and so does not exclude the possibility of God’s intermittently acting in exception to “the normal course of things.”

The contributions to *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* might be criticized on several fronts. Plantinga powerfully argues that atheism might be less compatible with evolution than Christian theism, but his bolder assertion that atheistic naturalism is *incompatible* with evolutionary theory or science is less persuasive. Also, Plantinga at times employs abstract philosophical equations that might impress analytic philosophers but will probably evoke glazed stares from readers with no training in formal logic.

As for Dennett, belittling Michael Behe and Intelligent Design refutes neither of them. And in contrast with numerous philosophical arguments and evidence for God’s existence compiled, for example, by Boston College philosophers Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli in *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (1994), there is really no rational basis for Dennett’s facetious “Supermanism.” Ridicule is, in the end, not very philosophical.

Moreover, positing Superman or other aliens as the source for life on earth only pushes the question of origins back a notch: Who or what created the aliens? Avoiding an infinite causal regress requires something or someone (such as God) outside, above, or beyond our known physical laws to initiate the universe and life within it.

Dismissing smart Christians as irrelevant to the truth of Christianity is hypothetically sustainable, since smart people can be mistaken even about what matters most to them. But this is a curious argument for Dennett, given his status as a founding figure of the “Brights” movement, which campaigns to replace the term “atheist” with “Bright” as the standard designation for people who are confident God does not exist.

Science and Religion: Are They Compatible? is a pithy pamphlet addressing a truly fundamental question. If Dennett is correct that science and religion are incompatible, a complete and irrevocable breakup seems inevitable. If Plantinga is right, then science and religion, or science and Christianity at least, may enjoy a thriving marriage, since they are in fact a match made in heaven.

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