

Alvin Plantinga's Where the Conflict Really Lies Science, Religion, and Naturalism

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SUMMARY

Examines both the logical and probabilistic arguments against God from suffering and evil.

ALVIN PLANTINGA'S WHERE THE CONFLICT REALLY LIES SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND NATURALISM

Plantinga's book is a semi-popular treatment of the conflicts, real or perceived, between science and religion, broadly construed. Because these disciplines are so broadly construed, the Christian who is interested in apparent conflicts between science and biblical Christianity will likely be somewhat disappointed in Plantinga's treatment. In the two chapters on "Evolution and Christian Belief," for example, one will find no engagement whatsoever with the biblical text; the discussion is restricted to the compatibility of theism with evolutionary biology. That is because Christian belief is taken to be what Lewis called "mere Christianity," which does not include any specific creation account. So while the Christian reader may be readily convinced of Plantinga's claim that no conflict exists between theism and evolutionary biology, he may still be left wondering how the biblical creation stories are to be properly interpreted and to what degree the evidence of evolutionary biology is compatible with that interpretation.

Plantinga's central thesis in the book is that while there is a genuine conflict between religion and science, that conflict lies, not between theistic religion and science but between the religion of naturalism and science. Plantinga discusses four areas of engagement between science and religion: fields where there is no conflict at all, but only the illusion of conflict; fields where there is genuine, but superficial and easily resolved, conflict; fields where science and religion are in pleasant concord; and finally a case where there is deep and irresolvable conflict between contemporary science (evolutionary biology) and religion (naturalism). These four areas form the four more or less independent sections of the book.

In the section on falsely alleged conflict between science and religion, Plantinga deals with two fields: (1) evolutionary biology and theism, and (2) physics and divine action in the world. Plantinga believes that there is not even a superficial conflict between these scientific disciplines and theology. He who rightly understands them will see that these fields ought to be comprised by the area of concord between science and religion, and anyone who thinks otherwise merely shows that he has not properly understood these disciplines or their implications.

With respect to evolutionary biology, Plantinga chastises scientists who have asserted that according to evolutionary biology the evolutionary process is undirected or purposeless. Such claims are not properly part of the biological theory itself but are a philosophical add-on, an extra-scientific assertion. In support Plantinga quotes the eminent evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr, who wrote: "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" (p. 11). Such a definition of "random" is wholly compatible with God's causing mutations to occur with a certain *telos* in view. The chapters on this alleged conflict also include blistering critiques of Richard Dawkins' and Daniel Dennett's anti-theistic claims based on evolutionary theory.

The chapters on divine action in the world are among the most interesting in the book. Plantinga has no difficulty in showing that neither classical physics nor quantum physics suggests in any way that God cannot intervene miraculously in the series of secondary causes in the world to produce certain events and that such actions and events are entirely compatible with the laws of physics. Theologians in the much publicized Divine Action Project, who typically hold that physics requires noninterventionist accounts of divine action, come away from this discussion, frankly, with egg on their faces. It is much to be hoped that theologians engaged in the dialogue between science and theology will profit from Plantinga's discussion.

Under the area of superficial conflict Plantinga discusses (1) evolutionary psychology and religious belief and (2) historical-critical New Testament scholarship and Christian theology. We see here how broadly Plantinga construes science. Evolutionary psychology (a.k.a. sociobiology) is in conflict with Christian theology, Plantinga claims, in denying the objectivity of moral obligation and treating religious belief as an illusion of the human brain.

I was surprised and puzzled that Plantinga should have thought there actually exists a conflict between historical scholarship and Christian theology (remember, we are not talking about biblical inerrancy but the tenets of mere Christianity). An apparent conflict, perhaps, but a genuine, if superficial, conflict between historical-critical studies of the New Testament and Christian theology? The examples Plantinga gives do not inspire confidence that such a genuine conflict exists: G. A. Wells, Thomas Sheehan, and John Allegro serves as witnesses to such conflict. To his credit, Plantinga also knows the work of John Meier, but why does Plantinga think that historical-critical studies *per se* are (superficially) in conflict with Christian theology?

Well, the answer turns out to be the methodological naturalism presupposed by many historical scholars (as well as evolutionary psychologists) (p. 169). It is this presupposition which lies at the root of the conflict. Such a conflict is easily resolved, however, because the Christian Scripture

scholar should not embrace methodological naturalism.

But then is this not a case of merely apparent, not real, conflict? In order for the conflict to be genuine, methodological naturalism would have to be inherent to the science of historiography itself. But why think that? Should not Plantinga have said in this case what he said in the case of evolutionary biology, that this assumption is a philosophical add-on, an extra-scientific assumption? The historian who denies, say, Jesus' resurrection due to his assumption of methodological naturalism is making the same mistake as the biologist who thinks that the evolutionary process is undirected due to his assumption of ontological or methodological naturalism. In neither case is there properly a conflict of science and religion: the conflict is between religion and certain philosophical assumptions.

In the area of concord of science and religion Plantinga discusses (1) the appearance of design in the cosmos and biosphere and theism, and (2) the deep roots of science and theism. Plantinga is aware of but does not discuss the evidence of contemporary cosmogony for a beginning of the universe as a case of concord between science and theology, a striking omission.

While sympathetic to design arguments, in the end Plantinga argues that we should not think of design in terms of an inference but in terms of a properly basic belief, a sort of perception, grounded in our experience of the world. It seems to me, however, that Plantinga's criticisms of the fine-tuning arguments taken either as an inference to the best explanation, as a Bayesian calculation, or as a likelihood calculation, are much too quick (pp. 220-4). Robin Collins, who defends a likelihood version, argues that fine-tuning is more to be expected on theism than atheism. And why despair of giving rough estimates to the prior probabilities of theism and atheism when the evidence pertinent to all the *other* theistic arguments is part of the background information? Even Plantinga grants that the argument may lead the atheist to modify upward his estimate of theism's probability, which to my mind is a significant accomplishment in building a cumulative case. Given those prior probabilities an inference to the best explanation can go through as well.

But even if we accept design as a perception, not an inference, will this not lend significant support to theism? Here Plantinga raises Hume's cavils about the number of designers or limited designers. But to my mind, the conclusion that there is some transcendent, intelligent mind behind the entire universe and nature's laws is so overwhelming that Hume's cavils are just that. Even such a limited conclusion strikes me as enormously supportive of theism.

Plantinga's section on deep concord between science and religion is more provocative than developed and will serve, I hope, as a stimulus to a new generation of Christian philosophers to

explore these issues further. Of the various topics surveyed here, especially interesting to this reviewer is the sub-section on mathematics. Plantinga sees a positive advantage of theism over naturalism in being able to account for what Eugene Wigner famously called “the unreasonable efficacy of mathematics.” Although much worrying about the applicability of mathematics has gone on in the philosophy of mathematics community, Plantinga seems correct that, whether one is a Platonist or anti-platonist about mathematical entities, theism has the explanatory resources for a straightforward solution to the problem in view of God’s constructing the world to exhibit a certain mathematical structure, resources which naturalism conspicuously lacks.

In this sub-section Plantinga also rejects Platonism concerning mathematical objects in favor of a divine Conceptualism, numbers being God’s thoughts and sets His mental collectings. Much more deserves to be said about this interesting suggestion. If sets are literally God’s collectings, then when I collect mentally the objects on my desk into a set, this is obviously not God’s activity, but mine, so that I do not in fact grasp the set of objects on my desk, which seems wrong. If numbers are literally God’s thoughts, then they are concrete objects or events in God’s mental life which would seem to be just as inaccessible to our minds as on Platonism.

Plantinga all too briefly addresses Paul Benacerraf’s epistemic objection to Platonism, commenting:

According to classical versions of theism, sets, numbers, and the like . . . are best conceived as divine thoughts. But then they stand to God in the relation in which a thought stands to a thinker. This is presumably a *productive* relation: the thinker produces his thoughts. It is therefore also a causal relation. If so, then numbers and other abstract objects also stand in a causal relation to us. For we too stand in a causal relation to God; but then anything else that stands in a causal relation to God stands in a causal relation to us. Therefore numbers and sets stand in a causal relation to us, and the problem about our knowing these things disappears (p. 291).

This response seems to me wholly unsatisfactory. God is the cause of mathematical objects; God is the cause of us; therefore, mathematical objects are causally related to us? This reasoning seems to overlook the directionality of causal relations. If A is the cause of B and B is the cause of C ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$), then, plausibly, A is causally related to C. But if B is the cause of A, and B is also the cause of C ($A \leftarrow B \rightarrow C$), then why think that A and C stand in any causal relation, especially in one that has a direction such that C is affected by A? Clearly, Plantinga needs to say more to explain how we acquire knowledge of the mental events in God’s mind.

Finally, we come to an area of deep conflict between science and the religion of naturalism. Here we find the latest and, Plantinga hopes, final version of his celebrated evolutionary argument

against naturalism, now refined in light of criticism of earlier versions. The argument does not aspire to prove naturalism false; it is rather that one cannot sensibly believe both naturalism and the scientific theory of evolution.

Letting R be the proposition that our cognitive faculties are reliable, N the proposition that there is no such person as God or anything like Him (naturalism), and E the proposition that we and our cognitive faculties have come to be in the way proposed by the contemporary scientific theory of evolution, Plantinga formulates the argument as follows:

1. $\Pr(R|N\&E)$ is low.
2. Anyone who accepts (believes) N&E and sees that $\Pr(R|N\&E)$ is low has a defeater for R.
3. Anyone who has a defeater for R has a defeater for any other belief he thinks he has, including N&E itself.
4. If one who accepts N&E thereby acquires a defeater for N&E, N&E is self-defeating and can't rationally be accepted.
5. Therefore, N&E can't rationally be accepted.

Plantinga devotes most of his space to the defense of (1). A crucial presupposition of this premiss, which is rarely challenged, is that naturalism implies the falsity of substance dualism with respect to human beings. The naturalist who is a mind/body dualist, it seems, could resist the force of Plantinga's defense of (1). By contrast, I wonder how the non-Molinist, non-interventionist, anthropological monistic theologians of the Divine Action Project could resist the force of Plantinga's argument.

Plantinga's book is chock-full of provocative and interesting ideas. It is more a stimulus to further research and discussion than an extensive treatment of the many issues it raises.

Finally, Oxford University Press deserves to be chastised for so poorly producing this book by an eminent philosopher. The dimensions of the book are too small, with the result that the print is too little for easy reading, a problem augmented by Plantinga's putting the most difficult passages of the book in an even tinier font. Printer's errors riddle the text, *e.g.*, an "even if" seems omitted from "But Dawkins's answers to (4) and (5) are correct . . ." (p. 13); we read that "some relatively complex things did not descent from relatively—celled organisms but . . ." and "Given the incredibly difficulties" (p. 51); did Bultmann really advocate a "hand-off theology" (p. 72; did the German scholar know American football?); it is said of the Bible that "its principle author is God" (p. 153). Competent editing would have caught these and other mistakes. Finally, the book's dust jacket, a

putrid yellow, is dreadfully designed. OUP should have done better by Plantinga than this.