

Where the Conflict Really Lies  
Alvin Plantinga  
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The conflict referred to in the title is, of course, the alleged war between Christianity and science. The thesis Plantinga defends is that where such conflicts have arisen, they are superficial and relatively easily reconciled. On the other hand, he argues, the conflicts between naturalism and science are deep and cannot be resolved. The book is divided into four major parts: Alleged Conflict (chapters 1 - 4), Superficial Conflict (5 - 6), Concord (7 - 9), and Deep Conflict (10).

The book starts, not surprisingly, with the issue as to whether the theory of biological evolution is incompatible with Christian belief. Plantinga sees no conflict whatever; his own view, as he says later on, is that God can create in any way he chooses. He tackles four thinkers who claim there is such a conflict: Dawkins, Dennett, Draper and Kitcher. A careful reading of Dawkins reveals, however, that while he claims he will show that evolution is incompatible with belief in God, what he actually argues for is that it is *possible* that all life forms were produced by unguided evolution. And even that shift, as Plantinga demonstrates, ends up being still further watered down to claim merely that unguided evolution is not astronomically impossible. Thus his argument ends up being the patently invalid inference that: P is not astronomically impossible, therefore P. "The conclusion to be drawn," says Plantinga, "... is that Dawkins gives us no reason whatever to think that current biological science is in conflict with Christian belief" (p. 30). Moreover, on careful inspection, Dennett's arguments turn out to be no better than Dawkins'. He, too, argues that unguided evolution is possible and takes that to show it's true, though he at least adds a second line of argument attempting to show that God doesn't exist. To accomplish this he begins with the claim that none of the traditional arguments for God's existence work. Incredibly, this huge and important claim is not then backed up by a critique of even *one* of the arguments given by current philosophers of religion! Moreover it is conjoined to the (implicit) claim that for belief in God to be justified it would have to have *scientific* evidence - another huge and important claim which is also left undefended. In place of actually defending these claims, Dennett simply resorts to ridiculing those who believe in God. So Plantinga concludes: "I'm sorry to say this is about as bad as philosophy (well, apart from the blogosphere) gets; Christian charity, perhaps even good manners might require passing silently by the embarrassing spectacle, eyes averted... Dennett's ventures into the epistemology of religious belief do not inspire confidence." (p. 45) Needless to say, neither Dawkins nor Dennett offers a separate justification for the claim that evolution was *unguided*, which Plantinga exposes as a metaphysical or religious add-on to evolution. As such, it is "an assumption that in no way enjoys the authority of science."

Draper, on the other hand, at least mounts an argument. He claims that evolution is evidence which favors the probability of naturalism over theism. Plantinga formulates and analyzes this claim in his usual perceptive manner, acknowledging points that could be in Draper's favor. But in the end, as he sees it, Draper's argument comes down to the argument that: if all else is evidentially equal, theism is improbable (p. 51). To this Plantinga replies that all else is not equal. For example, wouldn't the existence of intelligent moral beings be more likely given theism than naturalism? Kitcher also claims that there is a conflict between evolution and the kind of theism that believes in a God who "cares for his creatures." Again Plantinga fails to see any real conflict. As he says: "... God could have created life in all its diversity by way of such a process [evolution], guiding it in the direction in which he wants to see it go..." The issue, once again, is not evolution *per se* but whether evolution is guided by God. So it is not surprising that the claim evolution is unguided morphs into another argument altogether, the traditional problem of evil: Kitcher argues that the existence of suffering in the world is evidence against the existence of God. Plantinga handles this argument with even-handed fairness, conceding

that "Much in the natural world - just as much in the human world - does indeed seem the sort of thing a loving God would hate" (p. 58). But as he's already written about this topic more than once (e.g., *The Nature of Necessity* and *God, Freedom, and Evil*), he has a ready reply. What he offers is a quick summary of one of his earlier counter-arguments, and then concludes this way: "Not everyone agrees with this theodicy; and perhaps no theodicy we can think of is wholly satisfying. If so, that should not occasion great surprise: our knowledge of God's options in creating the world is a bit limited. Suppose God does have a good reason for permitting sin and evil, pain and suffering; why think we'd be the first to know what it is?" (59).

I have covered these first few thinkers in some detail so as to convey something of the book's tone and style, but from here on I must be briefer. Chapters three and four deal with the oft repeated objection that belief in miracles is incompatible with scientific prediction. In chapter three Plantinga deals with this supposed conflict from the standpoint of the old (Newtonian) physics, and in four he deals with it from the standpoint of quantum mechanics. He shows convincingly that miracles would not conflict with either system, and are in fact even less of a problem for quantum mechanics than for Newtonian physics. What's more, he shows that the reason so many Christian theologians as well as naturalist critics have thought there is a conflict, is that they have confused physics with determinism. After disposing of this mistake, his main argument in defense of miracles goes: 1) Any law of physics is a necessary truth *only in a closed system*. 2) As soon as God acts in the world the locus at which he acts is not a closed system, so 3) it is *impossible* that a miracle violate a physical law.

Chapter five begins the section on superficial conflicts, conflicts between Christianity and science which are genuine but resolvable. The topics of the chapter are evolutionary psychology and scripture scholarship. It deals first with the attempts of evolutionary psychology to explain ethics and/or religion. A number of such theories are reviewed in this chapter, and Plantinga's general conclusion about them is that they all seem to assume that simply giving a plausible natural account for the origin of religion has thereby discredited its truth. Against this assumption he points out that "No one thinks describing the mechanisms involved in perception impugns the truth of perceptual beliefs; why should one think things are different with religion?... Finding a natural origin for religion in no way discredits it." (p. 140) The same holds for theories about the origin of morality, such as that of Wilson and Ruse. They argue that the phenomenon of ethics is adaptive at the group level and has become ubiquitous by way of selection. But just how is that incompatible with Christian belief? In each case the theories covered show the same pattern: it is not the scientific theory itself that is incompatible with Christian belief, but the theory plus an assumption that evolution is unguided, or that any capacity which evolves in the way they propose delivers only false beliefs, or something of the sort. So, once again, it is not the science that is in conflict but the science plus some question-begging add-on which is asserted but not justified.

Much of contemporary biblical scholarship, on the other hand, exhibits a conflict which is genuine. Assumptions about history derived from Ernst Troeltsch have, indeed, led a number of scholars to take a position that - in the words of Bultmann - requires "... the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects... [which] cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers." Other thinkers base their method on Duhem's proposal to accept from scripture as factual only whatever convinces everyone in the relevant community. Either of these assumptions does, indeed, rule out many beliefs of creedal Christianity. The question, then, is whether such genuine conflicts present the Christian with "defeaters" those beliefs. Hence chapter six is an extended introduction into the epistemology of what it takes to defeat a belief. Happily, this is written at a level that does not require the reader to be a logician or a philosopher. The upshot, as you would expect, is that methodological naturalism (in both its strong and weak senses) can indeed produce

conflicts with traditional Christianity, but not defeaters. This is especially so if the Christian belief at stake is taken as a *basic* belief; a belief not justified by other beliefs but one that has its own "intrinsic warrant." The fact that its rejection can be derived from scholarly work which assumed a different "evidence base" from the Christian evidence base, is no defeater for such a belief.

Chapters seven and eight set out the deep concord that exists between traditional Christianity and science. They begin with a discussion of the "fine tuning" of the universe which makes possible life as we know it. This is examined closely to see if it can support an argument for theism in the face of the "many universes" counter-argument. The conclusion is that "...the FTA [fine tuning argument] offers some slight support for theism... but only mild support." (p. 224) This segues into a treatment of arguments from design, which focuses upon Behe and his critics. The analysis of this controversy is intense and clear and compelling. In the end Plantinga sees design arguments to fail as proofs of a designer, but then distinguishes design *argument* from design *discourse*. The difference is that discourse attempts to point to something rather than prove it. But even granted the legitimacy of this distinction, he comes to the view that it doesn't offer much. He concludes that "... we really can't tell what sort of support, if any, design discourses offer theism without knowing whether theism is true." (p. 264)

Chapter nine puts on display the deep concord between Christian belief and science. It rehearses the history of the rise of science under the influence of such Christian beliefs as the reliability of human reason (because in the image of God), the regularity of nature (owing to God's providence), that nature is law-governed (God as law-giver to creation), and so on. The treatment here is informative and well balanced, full of reminders about how the relations between Christianity and the rise of science really went, rather than the tiresome fiction that they were at war. The final chapter then turns to the deep discord between science and naturalism, starting with the way the naturalist version of evolution undercuts itself.

As Plantinga makes clear at the outset of the chapter, he is not now trying to prove naturalism false or theism true. The argument is simply that "... naturalism is in conflict with evolution... The conflict is not that they can't both be true (the conflict is not that there is a contradiction between them); it is rather that one can't sensibly accept them both." (p. 310) The conflict, he says, is between naturalism - understood as materialism - and unguided evolution. (Since it seems to me that Plato and Aristotle were both naturalists but not materialists, I'm uncomfortable with the assumption that naturalism and materialism are largely the same, but perhaps that's just a verbal quibble.) The argument is, in a nutshell, that if our cognitive faculties have randomly evolved guided only by survival constraints, there is then no reason to suppose they deliver truth. This argument is not new, and Plantinga cites a number of thinkers who have put it forward in various forms. The claim is that the probability that our reasoning capabilities are such as to deliver truth (rather than merely survival) is low on the assumption they are the products of a random evolutionary process. This is defended with respect to both reductive and non-reductive materialism with the same results: "In either case, the underlying neurology is adaptive, and determines belief content. But in either case it doesn't matter whether to the adaptiveness of the behavior (or of the neurology that causes the behavior) whether the content determined by that neurology is true." (p. 339) Plantinga considers a number of objections to this argument and offers compelling rejoinders to all of them. He concludes with this: "Given that naturalism is at least a quasi-religion, there is indeed a science/religion conflict, all right, but it is not between science and theistic religion: it is between science and naturalism. That's where the conflict really lies."

If you have not read Plantinga before, this book would be an excellent place to start. You will

find it a model of clarity written in an engaging style that also includes good humor. As usual, Plantinga is a master of his material, and a first-rate logician. No one interested in the relation of science and religion should fail to read this book and no one who reads it could fail to profit by doing so.

All that said, there is still something about the book that bothered me. At a number of points Plantinga spends a good bit of effort on whether theism is probable: he counter-punches Dawkins' claim that it isn't with an analysis of probability; he parries Draper by concluding that theism is at least as probable as naturalism; and he considers the "antecedent probability of theism" in his section on the fine tuning of the cosmos. My problem with this is not that he's wrong about how to handle probability, but that for a Christian belief in God is not a matter of probability at all. Let me illustrate this point with the following true story. Last fall my eldest son was in Vienna on business and decided to use a day off to look for a little gift to bring home to his boys, who are 7 and 9 years old. In a confectioner's shop he found the most charming little chocolate mice, and bought them. He carefully nursed them all the way home hand-carrying them so they wouldn't break, and when he finally came through the front door he called out: "Boys I have a treat for you!" But the boys answered: "Wait. Before you show us what you've brought us, we want to show you the surprise we made for you." And they opened the refrigerator door and proudly drew out *a tray of chocolate mice*.

I have no idea what the probability of that is, but I do know that whatever it is has nothing whatever to do with the truth of the belief that they were all confronting chocolate mice. No doubt Plantinga would agree with this point. There are places in the book where he speaks of deeper grounds on which Christians believe in God; he refers to humans having a *sensus divinitatis*, and to (at least some) Christian beliefs being basic and thus self-warranted. But at no place does the book actually come right out and say that these deeper sources all involve *the experience of God*. By contrast, Calvin does do that. Concerning how we know the truth about God he says:

As to the question, How shall we be persuaded that [scripture] came from God ... it is just the same as if we were asked, How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Scripture bears on the face of it as clear evidence of its truth as white and black do of their color, sweet and bitter of their taste... (Inst. I, vii, 2)

Such, then, is a conviction that asks not for reasons... knowledge in which the mind rests more securely than any reasons... I say nothing more than what every believer *experiences in himself* though my words fall far short of the reality. (Inst. I, vii, 5) (emphasis mine)

My question, then, is this: why we should even engage the issue of the probability of God's existence at all? Doing so seems to legitimate that question when in fact our belief is one we hold because its truth is acquired by seeing it "with the eyes of your mind" (Eph. 1:18). This, because it is hearing God speak, is one way of experiencing God.

Roy Clouser  
Prof Emeritus  
The College of New Jersey