The New York Review of Books

A Philosopher Defends Religion

SEPTEMBER 27, 2012

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Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism
by Alvin Plantinga
Oxford University Press, 359 pp., $27.95

Sijmen Hendriks

Alvin Plantinga, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 1995

1.

The gulf in outlook between atheists and adherents of the monotheistic religions is profound. We are fortunate to live under a constitutional system and a code of manners that by and large keep it from disturbing the social peace; usually the parties ignore each

other. But sometimes the conflict surfaces and heats up into a public debate. The present is such a time.

One of the things atheists tend to believe is that modern science is on their side, whereas theism is in conflict with science: that, for example, belief in miracles is inconsistent with the scientific conception of natural law; faith as a basis of belief is inconsistent with the scientific conception of knowledge; belief that God created man in his own image is inconsistent with scientific explanations provided by the theory of evolution. In his absorbing new book, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, Alvin Plantinga, a distinguished analytic philosopher known for his contributions to metaphysics and theory of knowledge as well as to the philosophy of religion, turns this alleged opposition on its head. His overall claim is that "there is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion, but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism." By naturalism he means the view that the world describable by the natural sciences is all that exists, and that there is no such person as God, or anything like God.

Plantinga's religion is the real thing, not just an intellectual deism that gives God nothing to do in the world. He himself is an evangelical Protestant, but he conducts his argument with respect to a version of Christianity that is the "rough intersection of the great Christian creeds"—ranging from the Apostle's Creed to the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles—according to which God is a person who not only created and maintains the universe and its laws, but also intervenes specially in the world, with the miracles related in the Bible and in other ways. It is of great interest to be presented with a lucid and sophisticated account of how someone who holds these beliefs understands them to harmonize with and indeed to provide crucial support for the methods and results of the natural sciences.

Plantinga discusses many topics in the course of the book, but his most important claims are epistemological. He holds, first, that the theistic conception of the relation between God, the natural world, and ourselves makes it reasonable for us to regard our perceptual and rational faculties as reliable. It is therefore reasonable to believe that the scientific theories they allow us to create do describe reality. He holds, second, that the naturalistic conception of the world, and of ourselves as products of unguided Darwinian evolution, makes it unreasonable for us to believe that our cognitive faculties are reliable, and therefore unreasonable to believe any theories they may lead us to form, including the theory of evolution. In other words, belief in naturalism combined with belief in evolution is self-defeating. However, Plantinga thinks we can reasonably believe that we are the products of evolution provided that we also believe, contrary to

naturalism, that the process was in some way guided by God.

2.

I shall return to the claim about naturalism below, but let me first say more about the theistic conception. Plantinga contends, as others have, that it is no accident that the scientific revolution occurred in Christian Europe and nowhere else. Its great figures, such as Copernicus and Newton, believed that God had created a law-governed natural order and created humans in his image, with faculties that allowed them to discover that order by using perception and reason. That use of perception and reason is what defines the empirical sciences. But what about the theistic belief itself? It is obviously not a scientific result. How can it be congruent with a scientific understanding of nature?

Here we must turn to Plantinga's general theory of knowledge, which is crucial to understanding his position. Any theory of human knowledge must give an account of what he calls "warrant," i.e., the conditions that a true belief must meet in order to constitute knowledge. Sometimes we know something to be true on the basis of evidence provided by other beliefs, or because we see that it is entailed by our other beliefs. But not every belief can depend on other beliefs. The buck has to stop somewhere, and according to Plantinga this happens when we form beliefs in one of the ways that he calls "basic."

The basic belief-forming capacities include perception, memory, rational intuition (about logic and arithmetic), induction, and some more specialized faculties, such as the ability to detect the mental states of others. When you look in the refrigerator and see that it contains several bottles of beer, you form that belief immediately without inferring it from any other belief, e.g., a belief about the pattern of shapes and colors in your visual field. When someone asks you whether you have had lunch yet, you can answer immediately because you remember having had lunch, and the memory is a belief not based on any other belief, or on perception, or on logical reasoning.

Beliefs that are formed in the basic way are not infallible: they may have to be given up in the face of contrary evidence. But they do not have to be supported by other evidence in order to be warranted—otherwise knowledge could never get started. And the general reliability of each of these unmediated types of belief-formation cannot be shown by appealing to any of the others:

> Rational intuition enables us to know the truths of mathematics and logic, but it can't tell us whether or not perception is reliable. Nor can we show by rational intuition and perception that memory is reliable, nor (of course) by perception and

> memory that rational intuition is.

But what then is the warrant for beliefs formed in one of these basic ways? Plantinga holds that the main condition is that they must result from the proper functioning of a faculty that is in fact generally reliable. We cannot prove without circularity that the faculties of perception, memory, or reason are generally reliable, but *if* they are, then the true beliefs we form when they are functioning properly constitute knowledge unless they are put in doubt by counterevidence.[1] Human knowledge is therefore dependent on facts about our relation to the world that we cannot prove from scratch: we can't prove the existence of the physical world, or the reality of the past, or the existence of logical and mathematical truth; but if our faculties do in fact connect with these aspects of reality, then we can know about them, according to Plantinga's theory.

For example, if our perceptual beliefs are in general caused by the impact on our senses of objects and events in the environment corresponding to what is believed, and if memories are in general caused by traces in the brain laid down by events in the past corresponding to what those memories represent, then perception and memory are reliable faculties, which can give us knowledge even though we cannot prove they are reliable.

So far we are in the territory of traditional epistemology; but what about faith? Faith, according to Plantinga, is another basic way of forming beliefs, distinct from but not in competition with reason, perception, memory, and the others. However, it is

> a wholly different kettle of fish: according to the Christian tradition (including both Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin), faith is a special gift from God, not part of our ordinary epistemic equipment. Faith is a source of belief, a source that goes beyond the faculties included in reason.

God endows human beings with a *sensus divinitatis* that ordinarily leads them to believe in him. (In atheists the *sensus divinitatis* is either blocked or not functioning properly.)[2] In addition, God acts in the world more selectively by "enabling Christians to see the truth of the central teachings of the Gospel."

If all this is true, then by Plantinga's standard of reliability and proper function, faith is a kind of cause that provides a warrant for theistic belief, even though it is a gift, and not a universal human faculty. (Plantinga recognizes that rational arguments have also been offered for the existence of God, but he thinks it is not necessary to rely on these, any more than it is necessary to rely on rational proofs of the existence of the external world to know just by looking that there is beer in the refrigerator.)

It is illuminating to have the starkness of the opposition between Plantinga's theism and the secular outlook so clearly explained. My instinctively atheistic perspective implies that if I ever found myself flooded with the conviction that what the Nicene Creed says is true, the most likely explanation would be that I was losing my mind, not that I was being granted the gift of faith. From Plantinga's point of view, by contrast, I suffer from a kind of spiritual blindness from which I am unwilling to be cured. This is a huge epistemological gulf, and it cannot be overcome by the cooperative employment of the cognitive faculties that we share, as is the hope with scientific disagreements.

Faith adds beliefs to the theist's base of available evidence that are absent from the atheist's, and unavailable to him without God's special action. These differences make different beliefs reasonable given the same shared evidence. An atheist familiar with biology and medicine has no reason to believe the biblical story of the resurrection. But a Christian who believes it by faith should not, according to Plantinga, be dissuaded by general biological evidence. Plantinga compares the difference in justified beliefs to a case where you are accused of a crime on the basis of very convincing evidence, but you know that you didn't do it. For you, the immediate evidence of your memory is not defeated by the public evidence against you, even though your memory is not available to others. Likewise, the Christian's faith in the truth of the gospels, though unavailable to the atheist, is not defeated by the secular evidence against the possibility of resurrection.

Of course sometimes contrary evidence may be strong enough to persuade you that your memory is deceiving you. Something analogous can occasionally happen with beliefs based on faith, but it will typically take the form, according to Plantinga, of a change in interpretation of what the Bible means. This tradition of interpreting scripture in light of scientific knowledge goes back to Augustine, who applied it to the "days" of creation. But Plantinga even suggests in a footnote that those whose faith includes, as his does not, the conviction that the biblical chronology of creation is to be taken literally can for that reason regard the evidence to the contrary as systematically misleading. One would think that this is a consequence of his epistemological views that he would hope to avoid.

3.

We all have to recognize that we have not created our own minds, and must rely on the way they work. Theists and naturalists differ radically over what justifies such reliance. Plantinga is certainly right that if one believes it, the theistic conception explains beautifully why science is possible: the fit between the natural order and our minds is produced intentionally by God. He is also right to maintain that naturalism has a much

harder time accounting for that fit. Once the question is raised, atheists have to consider whether their view of how we got here makes it at all probable that our cognitive faculties should enable us to discover the laws of nature.

Plantinga argues that on the naturalist view of evolution, interpreted materialistically, there would be no reason to think that our beliefs have any relation to the truth. On that view beliefs are states of the brain, and natural selection favors brain mechanisms solely on the basis of their contribution, via behavior, to survival and reproduction. The content of our beliefs, and hence their truth or falsehood, is irrelevant to their survival value. "Natural selection is interested, not in truth, but in appropriate behavior."

Plantinga's version of this argument suffers from lack of attention to naturalist theories of mental content—i.e., theories about what makes a particular brain state the belief that it is, in virtue of which it can be true or false. Most naturalists would hold that there is an intimate connection between the content of a belief and its role in controlling an organism's behavioral interaction with the world. To oversimplify: they might hold, for example, that a state of someone's brain constitutes the belief that there is a dangerous animal in front of him if it is a state generally caused by encounters with bears, rattlesnakes, etc., and that generally causes flight or other defensive behavior. This is the basis for the widespread conviction that evolutionary naturalism makes it probable that our perceptual beliefs, and those formed by basic deductive and inductive inference, are in general reliable.

Still, when our faculties lead us to beliefs vastly removed from those our distant ancestors needed to survive—as in the recent production and assessment of evidence for the existence of the Higgs boson—Plantinga's skeptical argument remains powerful. Christians, says Plantinga, can "take modern science to be a magnificent display of the image of God in us human beings." Can naturalists say anything to match this, or must they regard it as an unexplained mystery?

Most of Plantinga's book is taken up with systematic discussion, deploying his epistemology, of more specific claims about how science conflicts with, or supports, religion. He addresses Richard Dawkins's claim that evolution reveals a world without design; Michael Behe's claim that on the contrary it reveals the working of intelligent design; the claim that the laws of physics are incompatible with miracles; the claim of evolutionary and social psychologists that the functional explanation of moral and religious beliefs shows that there are no objective moral or religious truths; the idea that historical biblical criticism makes it unreasonable to regard the Bible as the word of God; and the idea that the fine-tuning of the basic physical constants, whose precise

values make life possible, is evidence of a creator. He touches on the problem of evil, and though he offers possible responses, he also remarks, "Suppose God does have a good reason for permitting sin and evil, pain and suffering: why think we would be the first to know what it is?"

About evolution, Plantinga argues persuasively that the most that can be shown (by Dawkins, for example) on the basis of the available evidence together with some highly speculative further assumptions is that we cannot rule out the possibility that the living world was produced by unguided evolution and hence without design. He believes the alternative hypothesis of guided evolution, with God causing appropriate mutations and fostering their survival, would make the actual result much more probable. On the other hand, though he believes Michael Behe offers a serious challenge to the prevailing naturalist picture of evolution, he does not think Behe's arguments for intelligent design are conclusive, and he notes that in any case they don't support Christian belief, and perhaps not even theism, because Behe intentionally says so little about the designer.

Plantinga holds that miracles are not incompatible with the laws of physics, because those laws determine only what happens in closed systems, without external intervention, and the proposition that the physical universe is a closed system is not itself a law of physics, but a naturalist assumption. Newton did not believe it: he even believed that God intervened to keep the planets in their orbits. Plantinga has a lengthy discussion of the relation of miracles to quantum theory: its probabilistic character, he believes, may allow not only miracles but human free will. And he considers the different interpretations that have been given to the fine-tuning of the physical constants, concluding that the support it offers for theism is modest, because of the difficulty of assigning probabilities to the alternatives. All these discussions make a serious effort to engage with the data of current science. The arguments are often ingenious and, given Plantinga's premises, the overall view is thorough and consistent.

The interest of this book, especially for secular readers, is its presentation from the inside of the point of view of a philosophically subtle and scientifically informed theist—an outlook with which many of them will not be familiar. Plantinga writes clearly and accessibly, and sometimes acidly—in response to aggressive critics of religion like Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. His comprehensive stand is a valuable contribution to this debate.

I say this as someone who cannot imagine believing what he believes. But even those who cannot accept the theist alternative should admit that Plantinga's criticisms of naturalism are directed at the deepest problem with that view—how it can account for

the appearance, through the operation of the laws of physics and chemistry, of conscious beings like ourselves, capable of discovering those laws and understanding the universe that they govern. Defenders of naturalism have not ignored this problem, but I believe that so far, even with the aid of evolutionary theory, they have not proposed a credible solution. Perhaps theism and materialist naturalism are not the only alternatives.

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1. 1
   The details are complicated, and are set out in Plantinga's three-volume magnum opus, *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function* (both Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000). ↩

2. 2
   This is often the result of sin, though not necessarily the sin of the unbeliever; see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 214. ↩