

Science, Darwin and Religion: Irreducibility, Nominalism and the Failure of the Scientific Establishment

Abstract:

This brief paper seeks to take a critical stance on some of the literature on the famed question of “science vs. religion.” the books here deal with a stereotyped view of “religion,” holding that science is capable of pronouncing on religious questions. The methodological problems and assumptions of these books form the main structure of this critique.

Introduction

The three books under consideration here are yet more contributions in an already large and cliché-ridden field. The two abstractions, “science” and “religion,” are counterpoised with the familiar victory of science a foregone conclusion. In general, the arguments are weak, question-begging, and deeply ideological. In all three offerings, it is only Christianity that must change. Darwinism is generally considered factual a priori.

All three works here are very similar: each summarizes the basic elements of Darwinian theory, then placing it against the typical Christian and biblical claims such as Adam and Eve, Original Sin and the development of sinful humanity until the destruction of the flood. Generally speaking, both science and religion are tightly stylized, with the claims of Darwin and his school taken for granted. The problem of these three works is that they all assume Darwinian (or its offshoots) to be true, which then forces these authors to spend much time figuring out how “religion,” or Christianity more specifically, can fit within this scientific approach.

The Structure of Science

Rolston's book deals with the relation between Darwin and the genetic make up of human beings. The basic assumption is that nature—itself never defined—has no intrinsic meaning or purpose. “Value” is something that must be separated from the natural order, since these exist in two very separate areas. None of the books deal with the patristic arguments against materialism, such as St. Basil's *Hexameron*, where many of these issues have long since been covered. The ancient Logos theory remains at the root of Christianity's relationship with the natural world, yet, it is not mentioned by any of the three writers.

The fact is that Christianity, in its patristic form, spent thousands of pages dealing with Logos, the relation between God and Man in Christ, and its connection to the natural order. The patristic concept is that Logos is the spiritual and law-bound relation among objects, identified with the godhood of Christ. The fact that the thousands of pages in ancient Greek that have been written by the patristic movement is not mentioned, even in passing, means that these books merely take the biblical approach to Christianity without the patristic view of it. The ancient understanding of the essences that connect all natural forms, so familiar to the Platonists, is nowhere to be found. The problem then is that their concept of “Christianity” is strongly biblical and highly stereotyped. These authors forget about the patristic consensus concerning the neo-Platonic approach to the natural order. This served as the root of the Greek, patristic approach to the natural world.

Michael Ruse writes ominously,

An essential component of Christian theology is that humans are descended from a unique pair (monogenism). That part of the Adam and

Eve story cannot be interpreted symbolically, the trouble is that this goes completely against our thinking about the nature of the evolutionary process. Successful species like humans do not pass through single-pair bottlenecks: there is certainly no evidence that this was true of *Homo sapiens*, a species which seems to have been well spread around the earth (75-76)

This statement is typical of all three writers. It is so loaded with assumptions that it is worse than useless to use in a book on science. Science is reduced here to the general opinions of the scientific establishment—as if these two are the same—and then it confronts the arguments of the ancient faith. The fact that the quotation above merely assumes Darwinism is true is bad enough, but the fact that a priori arguments are used to attack Christianity here is bald intellectual dishonesty. The fact that these doctrines “go against our thinking” requires no further development. The only rational conclusion here is that, in the academic environment, to openly defend the ancient Orthodox teachings will make the professor an outcast, an embarrassment. Hence, all three books take Darwinism as is, and then use it to confront Christian doctrine. Finally, the doctrines must change, but Darwinist remains the same.

The intellectual problem here is that the scientific establishment is assumed to have no boundaries. Science is not merely about cause and effect, the building of theory based on the inductive facts, it is about a comprehensive view of the world. The evidence here is everywhere. For example, the constant refrain that there is no purpose to nature, no intrinsic end, is merely assumed. The scientific method is powerless to show that statement to be true or false. It is rejected because it would interfere with the neat, neo-Darwinian synthesis.

In Rolston's book, the discovery of DNA is something that needs to be explained by Darwinism. The problem is that the discovery of DNA created many inconvenient problems for Darwin that, in many ways, de-legitimized its simplistic approach. DNA shows almost an entire “civilization” of “language” and mutual adaptation that, even in its simplest forms, is of immense and colossal complexity. Explaining how these complex chemical reactions could exist in the most primitive state of matter is an immense problem. However, the Darwinist explanation for it must be true, since Darwinism itself is true.

The fact is that, if Darwinism were to be debunked, the entire scientific establishment in our universities, government offices and medical establishments would have to be dismantled brick by brick. The chaos that would ensue in people's knowledge of themselves and the world would be revolutionary. Therefore, there can be no question that the defense of Darwin against all comers is in the interest of these establishments, to say the least. Therefore, writers like Rolston and Ruse, while bringing up important objections to the approach, must ultimately accept it as is.

Ruse, again, writes,

And the whole business of an original, unique Adam and Eve goes flatly against modern evolutionary biology is one supposed to believe that the parents of Adam and Eve—for they will have had such in the evolutionary story, if not in Genesis—were soulless or sinless or what? And what about their brothers and sisters, and the next generation of *homo sapiens*, most of whom were not descended from Adam and Eve? (209-210)

Ruse's characteristic sarcasm here strongly shows that scientific objectivity is not a high priority. The argument is, over and over again, that the bible stories cannot be true since it flies in the face of evolutionary theory. Since that begs the question, the honesty of these

authors must be questioned. The constant use of epithets such as “fundamentalist” litters these books, strongly calling into question any sense of neutrality or the very objectivity science holds to be its reason for being.

Barbour skillfully deals with the fairly complex concept of “irreducible communities” (100-104). Both Ruse and Barbour deal with the famous theory of Michael Behe concerning the concept of complexity. Behe writes:

By irreducibly complex I mean a single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning. An irreducibly complex system cannot be produced directly (that is, by continuously improving the initial function, which continues to work by the same mechanism) by slight, successive modifications of a precursor system, because any precursor to an irreducibly complex system that is missing a part is by definition nonfunctional. An irreducibly complex biological system, if there is such a thing, would be a powerful challenge to Darwinian evolution (Behe, 1997).

This is a familiar quote referenced in both books. Of course, this theory makes all the more sense when connected to the DNA problem that Rolston mentions. In Chapter 4 of his work, Barbour struggles with the concept of irreducibility. The basic argument is that no organism can change or mutate without also affecting its ecosystem. Rolston, in addition, deals with the concept of the ecosystem as the community that “situates” the changes in genetic structure. Both of these expressions of “biological community” pose great problems for evolution, but neither Barbour or Rolston follow the argument to its final conclusion.

In both books, Rolston and Barbour, the central argument is that the Darwinian synthesis is too simple. Survival of the fittest (regardless of all its other problems) has to be made sense out of not in isolation, but within a huge matrix of constantly reinforcing and mutually adapting entities of both organic and non-organic structures. This introduces the issue of cooperation (Rolston, 90ff). This does not imply that either of these authors seek to alter anything essential to the Darwinian system. It just means that there are legitimate, secular challenges on Darwin that must be met.

Cooperation in Rolston and Barbour rejects the strictly confrontational nature of Darwin's approach. The existence of ecosystems is the context for change. The fact that nature can be seen as both an arena for fighting as well as an arena for systematic and large-scale cooperation does several things. First, it challenges the basis of the “survival of the fittest” verbiage, but secondly, it challenges the nominalism that Darwin since (and positivism more generally) assumes.

Nominalism stresses that only individual things exist. Species and genre do not exist outside of the scientific mind. Species and genre are but are the creation of the scientific elite to conveniently reference entities based on common characteristics. What few writers (if any) have dealt with is the “irreducible complexity” challenged not only Darwin, but also the epistemology of positivism: that the ecosystem is the “individual” of the natural order. Biological entities are only parts of this structure, and hence should not be seen as objects at all, but parts to a much larger organism.

Barbour's concept of epistemological and ontological reductionism comes closest to dealing with this question. His view is that we can understand the lower orders of nature through an analysis of the higher. The higher orders, in turn, make sense only when situated in the lower orders. The epistemological issue here is significant, but the meanings are not

teased out from Barbour.

Darwinism and the scientific establishment in general deal with organic objects in nature. They treat them as individuals relating in various symbiotic relationships with other entities. However, if the individual thing, the object, is really an aspect of the larger whole, then this entire approach is faulty. The concept of the “individual” so significant to positivism (and Barbour's treatment of it, cf 94-95) is in fact an arbitrary creation, connected more to English social theory and middle class values than actual scientific work.

Beyond all this, the arguments here must be connected to a theological setting. Since none of the authors deal with the actual Christian scientific point of view (which is largely neo-Platonic) the entire structure of the argument is a complex straw man. The argument is this: if objects in space and time are bound by law, then this law must have existed prior to the object. This argument is deepened if the concept of “irreducible complexity” is mentioned. This is largely because the law is not something that primarily “affects” an individual in an environment, but is a part of the constant interaction between the ecosystem and even the cosmos as a whole.

What this implies then is that the nature of law, from which all things must operate, exists as a spiritual fact that transposes itself onto creation. In other words, Logos, or the Law of law, the source of the natural laws that science takes for granted, is a spiritual entity. If the irreducible hypothesis is true, then law here is not primarily the relations among parts. Law, that is, the natural laws that science deals with, is something that is “imposed” on individuals from a larger and more comprehensive source. Ruse writes,

Not everyone will be happy with this synthesis or attempt at harmony. There are both Darwinians and Christians who argue that if one starts using law, becoming a naturalist, this is the slippery slope which ends at the bottom with materialism: meaning at this point that nothing supernatural at all exists, which means atheism, which means that Christianity is ruled out as false. Hence, Darwinism, as a supreme manifestation of the naturalistic philosophy, ends in the falsity of Christianity (99).

The problem here is that the ancient synthesis of the Greek fathers used the Logos doctrine to deal with this “Law of law” so significant to the “irreducible” thesis. Logos, or the regular and law-bound connections among all elements of the cosmos, predates the cosmos, since its very existence is law bound from the beginning.

Think of it this way: if matter is law bound, and the relations among all material things are bound by an objective law that is no respecter of objects as such, then that law must exist at the same time as matter (or before). Because the very “first” presence of any material object in natural history was as law bound as matter today. Therefore, the problem for science is to make sense out of a “legal” order in nature (which the Greeks called Logos) that must exist in order for anything to happen, even random mutations. Evolution cannot itself evolve. Of course, random mutations are not random (as if they are not caused by something), but they might be seen as random from the point of view of a static and stable material order.

Science and religion in these three books is highly stereotypical and stylized. It is reduced to some variation of “the bible” against “science.” The deck is already stacked. The ancient, Platonic conception of Logos is the patristic approach to the sciences, and is heavily indebted to Plotinus and even the Roman stoics. The Bible is a poetic and profound look at

how the master of creation has dealt with humanity. Whether or not it is true is not the business of science since, ideally, it can only deal with the relations of material objects in the mechanism of causality. It cannot speak to the purposefulness of nature, and significantly, that the natural order is not, itself, a moral set of relations and symbols. Science, however, has done just that, demand that it and it alone have intellectual jurisdiction over the natural (and metaphysical) order. Religion, or “the bible” is relegated to the world of the “fundamentalists” an the non-tenured. Science has long left its confines in the world of mechanical cause and effect, and, over time, has claimed the right to pronounce resolutely on everything from religion, human love to society's laws of development.

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