

ON CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP

Christian thinkers going back at least to Augustine have seen human history as involving a contest, a sort of warfare, a battle between two implacably opposed spiritual forces.

the *Civitas Dei* and the *Civitas Mundi*. The former is dedicated, in principle, to God and to his will and to his glory; but the latter is dedicated to something wholly different. Augustine; *De Civitas Dei*

Augustine (and Kuyper) are right; and the contemporary western intellectual world, like the worlds of their times, is a battleground or arena in which rages a battle for men's and women's souls. This battle, I believe, is a three way contest. There are three main contestants: Christianity or Christian theism, Perennial Naturalism, and Creative Anti-Realism

A. PERENNIAL NATURALISM

goes back to the ancient world (Epicurus, Democritus, Lucretius); among our contemporaries and near contemporaries there are John Dewey, Willard van Orman Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, Carl Sagan, many who look to science for salvation, an astounding number of liberal theologians, and a host of others in and out of academia. From this perspective, there is no God and human beings are properly seen as parts of nature. The way to understand what is most distinctive about us, our ability to love, to act, to think, to use language, our humor and playacting, our art, philosophy, literature, history, our morality, our religion, our tendency to enlist in sometimes unlikely causes and devote our lives to them--the fundamental way to understand all this is in terms of our community with (nonhuman) nature. We are best seen as parts of nature and are to be understood in terms of our place in the natural world.

Gordon Kaufman (Harvard theologian): God is "the historical evolutionary force that has brought us all into being".

Perennial naturalism constantly influences and clearly corrupts Christian thinking.

Christians who think about science, for example, sometimes say that science (not just physics and chemistry, but also economics, sociology, psychology, etc.) can't take any account of God in giving its explanations; science is necessarily restricted, both in its subject matter and in its explanations and accounts, to the natural world. But why think a thing like that? Why shouldn't we use all that we know in trying to understand ourselves and our world?

B. CREATIVE ANTI-REALISM

the fundamental idea--in sharp contrast to Naturalism--is that we human beings, in some deep and important way, are ourselves responsible for the structure and nature of the world; it is *we*, fundamentally, who are the architects of the universe. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and the categories of space and time, object and property, truth and falsehood, possibility and necessity, existence and nonexistence. According to this view the world of trees and planets and dinosaurs and stars--receives its basic structure from the constituting activity of mind.

Theologian Don Cupitt "The consequence of all this is that divine and human creativity come to be seen as coinciding in the present moment. The creation of the world happens all of the time, in and through us, as language surges up within us and pours out of us to form and reform the world of experience. Reality . . . is effected by language . . ." This is said to be "a philosophy of religion for the future" and "a genuine alternative to pietism and fundamentalism"

C. RELATIVISM

We construct the world: but then it looks as if we construct different worlds. Jerry Falwell, Richard Rorty, Carl Sagan. the thought that there simply *isn't* any such thing as *the* way the world is, no such thing as objective truth, or a way the world is that is the same for all of us. Rather, there is my version of reality, the way I've somehow structured things, and your version, and many other versions: and what is true in one version need not be true in another. As Marlowe's Dr. Faustus says, "Man is the measure of all things; I am a man; therefore I am the measure of all things."

anti-commitment: To 'see' this point, however, is, in a way, to see through any sort of *commitment* with respect to one's intellectual life. Commitment goes with the idea that there really *is* such a thing as truth; to be committed to something is to hold that it is true, not just in some version, but *simpliciter* or absolutely.

So three major perspectives, three wholly different and deeply opposed perspectives: Christian theism, perennial naturalism, and creative anti-realism with its progeny of relativism and anti-commitment.

both perennial naturalism and creative anti-Realism (with its progeny of relativism and anti-commitment) find contemporary expression in allegedly Christian theology.

This is new and with-it, all right, but it is also preposterous. It is about as sensible as trying to palm off, say, the Heidelberg Catechism or Apostle's Creed as the newest and most with-it way of being an atheist.

these ways of thinking are not just *alternatives* to Christianity; they run profoundly *counter* to it.

D. ARE SCIENCE AND SCHOLARSHIP NEUTRAL?

the world of scholarship is intimately involved in the battle between these opposing views.

Some examples:

(1) Creative anti-realism: Richard Rorty's notion that truth is what my peers will let me get away with saying.

(2) structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstructionism in literary studies.

Roland Barthes:

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. . .

. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*) by refusing to assign a secret, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text) liberates what may be called an antitheological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases--reason, science, law.

(3) Evolution.

Richard Dawkins: "It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet someone who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I'd rather not consider that)". But from a naturalistic perspective evolution is the only game in town. It is the only available answer to the question "How did it all happen? How did all of these forms of life get here? Where did this vast profusion of life come from? And what accounts for the apparent design (Hume's "nice adjustment of means to ends") to be found throughout all of living nature?"
Richard Dawkins:

All appearances to the contrary, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics, albeit deployed in a very special way. A true watchmaker has foresight: he designs his cogs and springs, and plans their interconnections, with a future purpose in his mind's eye. Natural selection, the blind, unconscious automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the *blind* watchmaker (5).

The point about evolution: it is a plausible effort to remove one of the major embarrassments for the atheist.

(4) Another example from the same area with a different twist: Futuyma, Gould, Simpson, Dawkins, Provine and others unite in claiming that evolutionary biology shows that human beings are the result of *chance* processes and hence have not been designed by God or anyone else.

Douglas Futuyma *Evolutionary Biology*, p. 3 (2nd edition 1986):

By coupling undirected, purposeless variation to the blind, uncaring process of natural selection Darwin made theological or spiritual explanations of the life processes superfluous. Together with Marx's materialistic theory of history and society and Freud's attribution of human behavior to processes over which we have little control, Darwin's theory of evolution was a crucial plank in the platform of mechanism and materialism--of much of science, in short--that has since been the stage of most Western thought.

George Gaylord Simpson, *The Meaning of Evolution* pp. 344-45 (rev. ed. 1967)

Although many details remain to be worked out, it is already evident that all the objective phenomena of the history of life can be explained by purely naturalistic or, in a proper sense of the sometimes abused word, materialistic factors. They are readily explicable in the basis of differential reproduction in populations (the main factor in the modern conception of natural

selection) and of the mainly random interplay of the known processes of heredity. . . . Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind.

(5) Herbert Simon's recent article, "A Mechanism for Social Selection and Successful Altruism." *Science* vol. 250 (December, 1990) pp. 1665 ff. (Simon won a Nobel Prize in economics, but is currently professor of computer studies and psychology at Carnegie Mellon)

Why, asks Simon, do people like Mother Teresa, or the Scottish missionary Eric Liddel, or the Little Sisters of the Poor, or the Jesuit missionaries of the 17th century, or the Methodist missionaries of the 19th--why do these people do the things that they do? Why do they devote their time and energy and indeed their entire lives to the welfare of other people? Of course it isn't only the great saints of the world that display this impulse; most of us do so to one degree or another. Most of us give money to help feed and clothe people we have never met; we support missionaries in foreign countries; we try, perhaps in feckless and fumbling ways, to do what we can to help the widow and orphan.

Now how, says Simon, can we account for this kind of behavior? The *rational* way to behave, he says, is to act or try to act in such a way as to increase one's personal fitness, i. e., to act so as to increase the probability that one's genes will be widely disseminated in the next and subsequent generation, thus doing well in the evolutionary derby. ("Fitness simply means expected number of progeny" (p. 1665)). A paradigm of rational behavior, so conceived, was reported in the South Bend Tribune of December 21, 1991 (dateline Alexandria (Va.)): "Cecil B. Jacobson, an infertility specialist, was accused of using his own sperm to impregnate his patients; he may have fathered as many as 75 children, a prosecutor said Friday." Unlike Jacobson, however, such people as Mother Teresa and Thomas Aquinas cheerfully ignore the short or long term fate of their genes; what is the explanation of this bizarre behavior?

The answer, says Simon, is two mechanisms: "docility" and "bounded rationality":

Docile persons tend to learn and believe what they perceive others in the society want them to learn and believe. Thus the content of what is learned will not be fully screened for its contribution to personal fitness (p. 1666).

Because of bounded rationality, the docile individual will often be unable to distinguish socially prescribed behavior that contributes to fitness from altruistic behavior [i. e., socially prescribed behavior that does not contribute to fitness--AP]. In fact, docility will reduce the inclination to evaluate independently the contributions of behavior to fitness. . . . By virtue of bounded rationality, the docile person cannot acquire the personally advantageous learning that provides the increment, d , of fitness without acquiring also the altruistic behaviors that cost the decrement, c (p. 1667).

The idea is that a Mother Teresa or a Billy Graham or a Thomas Aquinas displays "bounded rationality"; they are unable to distinguish socially prescribed behavior that contributes to fitness from altruistic behavior (socially prescribed behavior which does not). As a result they fail to acquire the personally advantageous learning that provides that increment d of fitness without, sadly enough, suffering that decrement c exacted by altruistic behavior. They acquiesce unthinkingly in what society tells them is the right way to behave; and they aren't quite up to making their own independent evaluation of the likely bearing of such behavior on the fate of

their genes. If they *did* make such an independent evaluation (and were rational enough to avoid silly mistakes) they would presumably see that this sort of behavior does not contribute to personal fitness, drop it like a hot potato, and get right to work on their expected number of progeny.

not even a beginning of a viable explanation

She is reflecting in her limited human way the magnificent splendor of Christ's sacrificial action in the Atonement. Indeed, is there anything a human being can do that is *more* rational than what she does?

(6) 'fine-tuning' in cosmology.

(7) Science of mind: psychology, artificial intelligence, philosophy of mind: one vast research project dedicated to giving a naturalistic account of such mental phenomena as consciousness, desire, belief, intentionality, qualia, and the like. From a theistic point of view, much of what goes on can be seen as misguided.

(8) Scripture scholarship

E. WHAT SHOULD CHRISTIANS DO?

Christians, and especially Christian academics must become very serious about Christian scholarship.

First, we need consciousness raising, Christian cultural criticism.

E.g., re the examples given. In some cases straightforward; in others less so. E.g., the claim on the part of Simpson, Futuyma taking the 'random' in (e.g.,) random genetic mutation in such a way that it entails not supervised, orchestrated, caused, or planned by God. But it would have to be a very unusual scientific theory that could entail that human beings were not designed by God: how could there be anything like empirical evidence for this claim? It might be replied that the evidence for a theory is in its success, and this is a successful theory. Reply: we have two different senses of 'random' available: Randomness₁: a process is random in this sense if it is not predictable, or perhaps not governed by natural law, or only by statistical law, not connected with the welfare of the organism involved, and so on and Randomness₂: the preceding plus not planned or orchestrated by God. The theory that conjoins the two may be successful (whether it really is or not isn't relevant to this discussion) but the conjunction of the first with the denial of the second is equally confirmed; since the evidence confirms the denial of the theory in question as strongly as it confirms it, it doesn't give any reason to believe it.

And second, we must work at the various areas of science and scholarship in a way that is appropriate from a Christian or more broadly theistic point of view. Here the first thing to do is to see just where the relevant Christian scholarly community will want or need to do things differently. And this must be done in many different areas: in philosophy, of course, but also in the other humanities--history, literary studies, art, and so on; in the human sciences: psychology, sociology, economics, government, political theory, and the like: and also in the natural sciences. Maybe quite different degrees of relevance in different disciplines, and in different parts of the same discipline.

By way of conclusion, then: contemporary scholarship is an arena in which a fundamentally religious conflict is being played out: the struggle is between a theistic perspective, on the one hand, and perennial naturalism and creative anti-realism (along with the relativism and anti-commitment it spawns) on the other. These last dominate contemporary scholarship; furthermore they are deeply opposed to the Christian perspective. What the Christian and theistic community needs, therefore, is first, Christian cultural criticism, and second, Christian scholarship.

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