

Alvin PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011. 359 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-981209-7

In *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, Alvin Plantinga adds his voice to the debate over whether there is conflict between science and religious belief, defending the thesis that “there is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion, but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism” (ix). The book is, here and there, of relatively high calibre—only the most purblind anti-religionist will insist that Plantinga’s defence of the first part of his thesis is a non-starter—but it is also a disappointment, weak on new ideas and containing a number of eminently disputable, if not highly dubious, claims and arguments. Furthermore, and relatedly, the book is dialectically unsuccessful: discerning readers not already inclined to believe that there is no conflict between science and religion will be unmoved.

In chapters 1 and 2, Plantinga deals with the alleged tension between theistic belief and evolution, arguing that, contrary to what Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and others have claimed, there is no conflict between them, since God created biological organisms *via* the process of evolution. Organisms evolved over billions of years—that much isn’t rationally contestable given the avalanche of evidence for evolution—but that was God’s handiwork: he *used* evolution to create organisms. (One is left wondering why a supposedly omnipotent and morally perfect deity used such a comically protracted, violent, and wasteful process to do this, a process that has caused, and continues to cause, countless billions of human and non-human animals to suffer grisly deaths from disease, starvation, predation, and so on. In an attempt to assuage the reader’s befuddlement, Plantinga mentions a theodicy that, he admits, “is unlikely to become popular among secularists” and then makes the expected appeal to mystery (58f.).)

But problems arise straightaway. Apart from expressing incredulity about there being

enough time for a blind, unguided process to yield creatures like us (e.g., 22f.), Plantinga gives no reason to think that there *has not* been enough time for a blind, unguided process to yield creatures like us. Perhaps he is right that it has not been demonstrated that life is undesigned (this cannot, of course, be demonstrated); still, he hasn’t given any reason to prefer his brand of evolutionary creationism to unguided natural selection. More on this later.

In chapter 2, Plantinga takes particular aim at Daniel Dennett, reproaching him for putting too much stock in reason. In *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, Dennett argues that if you can’t show by reason that a source of religious belief is reliable, then it is irrational to accept the deliverances of that source. Plantinga responds by launching an argument from William Alston, according to which Dennett’s argument embodies a double standard. Alston points out that we don’t impose that kind of requirement on other sources of knowledge, such as perception and memory. We can’t, arguably, show by reason, or otherwise non-circularly, that these sources of knowledge are reliable, but it doesn’t follow that accepting their deliverances is irrational. So why, asks Plantinga, the double standard? “Why insist that it is irrational to accept religious belief in the absence of an argument for the reliability of the faculty or belief producing processes [faith, Calvin’s ‘*sensus divinitatis*,’ etc.] that give rise to it? ... Why treat the sources of religious belief differently?” (48)

But this seems clearly to be a bad argument. Perception and memory are universally regarded as reliable belief-forming faculties, whereas faith, a *sensus divinitatis*, etc. are not. Billions of people believe in gods other than the one Plantinga champions, and millions more are atheists or agnostics. Given the interminable controversy surrounding religious belief—a controversy for which there is patently no analogue when it comes to beliefs derived from perception and memory—and given that there isn’t anything remotely resembling a good reason (bald assertions by dead theologians don’t count) for believing

that some of the “sources” of religious belief—e.g., Calvin’s *sensus divinitatus*—even exist, it is absurd, frankly, to suppose that the sources of religious belief are on a par epistemically with the sources of our other beliefs. What is Plantinga (and Alston) up to?

The sources of religious belief are different—radically different—from the sources of our other beliefs because, simply, there is no reason to think that they generate *true* beliefs. And this, in turn, is because there is no reason to think that God, the alleged *ultimate* source of religious belief, exists. Plantinga is not deterred, obviously, by what he has dubbed “Great Pumpkin worries,” but he should be, since they (or something like them) constitute a virtual *reductio* of the Alstonian argument he advances. Presumably he would dismiss as unserious an appeal by a remote tribespeople to, say, a “*sensus goblinus*” on behalf of their belief that there are invisible goblins living in watches making them tick, just as, presumably, he would dismiss as unserious an appeal to faith on behalf of such a belief; and his rationale for doing so would, presumably, be that there is no reason to believe that there are invisible goblins living in watches. But then why should anyone take seriously his appeal to an equally arbitrary *sensus divinitatis* on behalf of his belief in an invisible deity?

The source of the belief that there are invisible goblins living in watches, whatever it is, is unreliable precisely because there is no reason to think that invisible-goblin beliefs are caused (down the line) by invisible goblins. Likewise, the source of one’s belief in an invisible deity, whatever it is, is unreliable precisely because there is no reason to think that invisible-deity beliefs are caused by invisible deities. This difficulty, notice, does not afflict perception. We do not, and need not, mistrust the deliverances of this faculty for the simple reason that the objects (events, etc.) that it “delivers” are (or were) *publicly observable*. Indeed, this feature of the deliverances of this faculty is precisely what distinguishes them from the deliverances of hallucinations and dreams. The objects of hallucinations and dreams, unlike the objects of perception, aren’t publicly observable, aren’t checkable, so we regard hallucinations and dreams as unre-

liably related to the production of true beliefs. Similarly, the objects of faith, a *sensus divinitatis*, etc. aren’t publicly observable, so we regard these processes—or, at any rate, *should* regard these processes—as unreliably related to the production of true beliefs.

Note that it won’t do to rejoin by saying that the reason we conclude that beliefs caused by hallucinations are false is because, if they were true, we would expect the objects of hallucinations to be publicly observable, which isn’t so for a private revelation from God. This won’t do, because who is to say that any experienced object that isn’t publicly observable isn’t real? The “hallucinated” pink elephant could be real—nobody’s denying that. The point is that, in virtue of its being publicly unobservable, we should (and do) assume that it isn’t. Similarly, the objects of faith, a *sensus divinitatis*, etc. could be real. The point is that, in virtue of their being publicly unobservable, we should assume that they aren’t, or at least suspend judgement about whether they are.

In chapters 3 and 4, Plantinga examines the alleged conflict between science and special divine action, focusing, in chapter 4, on the question of whether quantum mechanics prohibits divine providential action and answers to prayer. Some readers may, as I did, find these chapters to be somewhat tedious. It seems to me vanishingly unlikely that there are supernatural entities of any kind—and, indeed, Plantinga’s preferred deity is, to my mind, demonstrably impossible—but even if there is a god, there is no reason to believe that she answers prayers or performs miracles (or otherwise intervenes in human or non-human affairs). The evidence for miracles is non-existent, and people who pray for luck, or health, or whatever aren’t any luckier, or healthier, or whatever than people who don’t.

To be sure, Plantinga’s aim in chapters 1–4 isn’t to procure converts to creationism or to the doctrine of divine action. His aim is to show that there is no conflict between science and these religious doctrines. And, in a limited way, he has done that; that is, he has shown that, logically, the former doesn’t preclude the latter (something this reviewer, at least, never doubted), because it could be (for example) that God created organisms via the

process of evolution. But the believer scarcely has grounds for claiming victory.

Why? Suppose it is true that the evidence that evolution is not divinely guided is inconclusive. It doesn't follow from this that the hypothesis that it *is* divinely guided is just as respectable as the hypothesis that it isn't. To see this, note the following argument: There is no conclusive evidence to demonstrate that conspiracy theory *c* of event *y* is false; therefore, *c* is just as respectable as any opposing non-conspiracy theory of *y*. This argument is fallacious. Even if the evidence against *c* is inconclusive, it doesn't follow that *c* is just as respectable as any non-conspiracy theory. We have certain standards of evidence, and we know what would count as evidence for *c*. Thus, in the (assumed) absence of evidence for *c* we are rationally obliged to believe it is false, or at least rationally obliged to withhold judgement on whether or not it's true. It follows that there is a (non-logical) conflict between *c* and the available non-conspiracy theory: the latter is evidentially more respectable than the former. Similarly, even if the evidence that evolution is not divinely guided is inconclusive, it doesn't follow that the hypothesis that it is divinely guided is just as respectable as the hypothesis that it isn't. There is no evidence of evolution's being divinely guided (more on this below). Thus, in the absence of evidence for such guidance, we are rationally obliged to believe that there hasn't been any of it, or at least rationally obliged to withhold judgement on whether or not there has been any of it. It follows that there is a (non-logical) conflict between the view that evolution is divinely guided and the view that it isn't: the latter is evidentially more respectable than the former.

In chapter 5, Plantinga defends the thesis that "developments in evolutionary psychology and historical Biblical criticism do not offer, or even threaten to offer, *defeaters* for Christian or theistic belief" (130). His central premise for this thesis is that "describing the origin of religious belief and the cognitive mechanisms involved does nothing ... to impugn its truth" (140). This is true, but, as Brian Leiter has shown, "*we should* be suspicious of the epistemic status of beliefs that have the wrong causal etiology. That's the les-

son of the Gettier counterexamples [to the justified true belief model of knowledge]" (Leiter 2004, 104). In other words, explaining a belief's causal etiology can impugn its warrant, even if it does not impugn its truth. If you believe that Bert is guilty of the crime based on evidence collected by Sally, and then discover that Sally has been planning to frame Bert, you no longer have a reason to believe that Bert is guilty, even though it might turn out that he is. In short, you have what Plantinga (165) calls an *undercutting* defeater for your belief (as opposed to a *rebutting* defeater, which shows that a belief is false). Plantinga is cognizant of this difficulty, but he isn't bothered by it. In response to the Freudian explanation of theistic belief—that it arises from what Freud calls "wish-fulfillment"—Plantinga says that "it is at least possible that God gets us to be aware of him by way of a mechanism like wish-fulfillment" (149). Yes, that is possible, but why on earth should anyone believe it? We should expect the Freudian explanation of theistic belief to be false given theism unless a good—i.e., independent, *non-ad hoc*—reason can be given for thinking that God gets us to be aware of him by way of wish-fulfillment. Compare: it is possible, let us assume, that Bert is guilty of the crime despite Sally's efforts to frame him, but unless an independent, non-ad hoc reason can be given for thinking that he's guilty despite Sally's efforts to frame him, one's belief that he's guilty is unwarranted. In the absence of such a reason, it would be irrational for one to continue believing he's guilty on the grounds that one really wishes he were and that it's *possible* that he is.

In chapter 6, Plantinga argues that what he calls Simonian science, which is science that specifies how things look from a perspective characterized by methodological naturalism (MN), does not provide the believer with a defeater for her belief. I would have thought it was obvious that MN does not provide the believer with a *rebutting* defeater for her belief—that's a tall order anyway—but I would have thought it was equally obvious that it provides the believer with an *undercutting* defeater for her belief. We don't appeal to the help of supernatural agents to develop vaccines, build atomic bombs, clone sheep,

etc., so why should we appeal to the help of supernatural agents to develop a theory of how life evolved or of how the universe came to be? That is to say, science's commitment to MN is *a posteriori*: scientists adhere to the method because of the terrific scientific results it yields. And the success of naturalistic methods makes it unnecessary to posit supernatural entities (whatever those might be). But if it is unnecessary to posit supernatural entities, then there is no reason to persist in believing in them (and perhaps even something of a reason to *disbelieve* in them).

In chapter 7, Plantinga examines fine-tuning arguments, i.e., arguments that attempt to show that the alleged fine-tuning in the structure of the universe is evidence of intelligent design. He concludes that fine-tuning "offers some slight support for theism" (224). It is unclear how he is able to help himself even to this very weak conclusion, however. Even if (contrary, as I see it, to fact—Plantinga ignores the work of physicists who claim that the universe isn't fine-tuned) the universe is fine-tuned, and even if (contrary, as I see it, to fact) fine-tuning offers support for intelligent design, it offers no support whatever for *theism*. This is so for at least eight reasons: (1) multiple designers are possible, as Hume argued; (2) the designer need not be omniscient; (3) the designer need not be omnipotent; (4) the designer need not be omnipresent; (5) the designer need not be benevolent (never mind *omnibenevolent*), or even non-malevolent; (6) the designer need not be a person, or even a psychological being; (7) the designer need not be eternal; and (8) the designer need not be a supernatural entity—e.g., it could be a physical or "enmattered" entity (e.g., from a different universe). Plantinga might think he knows on other grounds the identity of the fine-tuner, but that is irrelevant, for his claim is that *fine-tuning*, not some other ground, offers support for theism. Perhaps, though, I've gotten him wrong. Perhaps all he is saying is that since any explanation of the fine-tuning in the structure of the universe that doesn't appeal to a designer is, by his lights, unacceptable, we have to consider explanations that *do* appeal to a designer, and among them is the theistic explanation. But this doesn't narrow the

field non-negligibly, since there are an infinite number of possible explanations, both natural and supernatural, that appeal to a designer (e.g., if you posit an explanation according to which there were four designers, I can posit an explanation according to which there were five, and so on ad infinitum).

In chapter 8, Plantinga examines, without due attention to the literature, Michael Behe's infamous thesis that so-called "irreducibly complex" biological structures—i.e., biological structures that could not have come to be by gradual, step-by-step evolution—provide evidence of intelligent design. He proposes that the best way to construe Behe's defence of intelligent design is as non-argumentative design discourses that "present us with epistemic situations in which the rational response is design belief—design belief for which there aren't strong defeaters" (264). The idea, more fully, is that organisms *appear* designed, and if something appears designed, then, in the absence of strong defeaters, the rational response is to believe it is designed, in roughly the same way that, à la phenomenal conservatism, if an object appears blue, then, in the absence of strong defeaters, the rational response is to believe it is blue. He concludes that "Behe's design discourses do support theism, although it isn't easy to say how much support they offer" (264).

There are a number of serious problems with this chapter. First, Plantinga's defence of irreducible complexity, and the inference from it to design belief, is markedly sparse. He does discuss one reply to Behe's arguments, Paul Draper's (2002), but replies by Kenneth Miller, Elliot Sober, Sahotra Sarkar, Graham Oppy, Michael Ruse, Paul Gross, Robert Pennock, and other elegant critics aren't so much as mentioned. At one point he says that "the reviewers seem to suffer from an inability to pay attention to what Behe actually says" (234). Perhaps some reviewers suffer from this inability, but many—indeed most—do not.

Second, Plantinga tries to rebut the objection that there are (undercutting) defeaters for design belief—e.g., that the appearance of design can be explained by natural processes without resorting to the contrivances of an external, supernatural agent—by simply exploiting our (ever diminishing)

ignorance of the evolution of biochemical and cellular systems. For example, he asserts that “for these structures at the cellular and molecular level, there aren’t (yet) any Darwinian accounts or explanations” (258). (Would Plantinga renounce his design beliefs if there were?) But this sort of appeal to ignorance, while *de rigueur* among proponents of intelligent design, is, as it has always been, dialectically idle. Yes, there are gaps in our knowledge of the evolution of these systems, and yes, intelligent design advocates maintain that a specific kind of design theory, one which posits a supernatural intelligence, is required to bridge these gaps. But nobody who isn’t antecedently committed to supernaturalism will be motivated by anything Plantinga says to bridge these gaps this way. And this is because he gives no reason—*there isn’t one*—to suppose that they can’t be bridged (eventually) with a plausible Darwinian explanation. In fact, Plantinga himself suggests that they can be when he says that “there are reasonably plausible Darwinian explanations at the anatomical level for many structures and systems; that fact should perhaps reduce the confidence with which one forms design beliefs at the cellular level” (259). But then, without argument, he dismisses these explanations as an “*extremely partial defeater*” of design belief.

And third, Plantinga slants the playing field against Darwinians, contending both

that there are gaps in our knowledge of the evolution of biochemical and cellular systems and that among the proffered detailed Darwinian accounts of these systems “there isn’t a lot beyond just-so stories” (258). So it would seem that, on Plantinga’s view, if biologists ignore gaps in our knowledge of the evolution of biochemical and cellular systems, they are conceding, if only tacitly, that intelligent design theory is worth taking seriously. But if they try to bridge these gaps by providing a detailed Darwinian account of some biochemical or cellular system, they are merely telling just-so stories. This manoeuvre effectively removes Darwinians from the playing field altogether—more or less by fiat!

In the last chapter, Plantinga offers yet another version of his evolutionary argument against naturalism. This is the “deep conflict between science and naturalism” part of his thesis. The argument has been much-discussed and, in my judgement, refuted. The version Plantinga presents in this book doesn’t, as far as I can tell, have the resources to deflect certain extant objections—by, e.g., Fodor (1998) and Churchland (2009).

As I expect is plain, I cannot recommend this book, but given Plantinga’s reputation, it will no doubt come to enjoy more esteem than many better books on science and religion.

Greg JANZEN  
University of Calgary

#### REFERENCES

- Churchland, Paul 2009: “Is Evolutionary Naturalism Self-Defeating?”. *Philo* 12, 135–41.
- Draper, Paul 2002: “Irreducible Complexity and Darwinian Gradualism”. *Faith and Philosophy* 19, 3–21.
- Fodor, Jerry 1998: “Is Science Biologically Possible? Comments on Some Arguments of Patricia Churchland and of Alvin Plantinga”. In: Jerry Fodor, *In Critical Condition: Polemical Essays on Cognitive Science and the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 189–202.
- Leiter, Brian 2004: “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud”. In: Brian Leiter (ed.), *The Future for Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 74–105.