

FIRST THINGS

NATURAL RELIGION

by
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Is Nature Enough?

Truth and Meaning in the Age of Science

by John F. Haught

Cambridge University Press, 232 pages, \$19.99

John Haught asks, “Is nature enough?”—which naturally elicits the question, “Enough for what?” Indeed, one way to understand the age-old debate between science and religion is to see it as an argument as to whether there is something about nature that nature is not enough to explain.

Among contemporary theologians, Haught is one of the few scientifically serious enough to come up with a case that scientists could take seriously, even if only as a philosophical proposal. The Landegger Distinguished Research Professor of Theology at Georgetown University, Haught addresses them by continuing the long career he has made of advocating engagement between theology and modern science (as opposed to the easier and more popular options of “conflict” and “separation”).

In a series of books for different if overlapping audiences, Haught has endeavored to show that

Christian theologians have nothing to fear from evolution, understood as the emergence of species of living beings by random mutation and natural selection over the course of “deep time.” Nothing, that is, unless they insist on upholding certain ideas such as the literal truth of the two creation accounts in Genesis.

If his 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences is any indication, John Paul II would have agreed with Haught on the matter of the evolution of living bodies, including the human body. So does Benedict XVI—or so, at least, his recently republished Munich homily series *In the Beginning* seems to show. In Haught’s view, theologians have nothing to fear because modern science, especially evolutionary biology, supplies only observable facts, theories more or less experimentally testable in terms of what they predict, and techniques based on such facts and theories; it is not equipped to show that only what can be known scientifically can be known at all. That would be scientism—an epistemological thesis of philosophy, not science. Scientism’s metaphysical correlate is naturalism, according to which nature, the most general object of scientific inquiry, is “all there is.” Haught calls the familiar, fashionable combination of scientism and naturalism “scientific naturalism,” and he never tires of repeating that it is not science itself but the philosophy of scientific naturalism that he opposes.

The key to the distinction is found in what Haught terms “layered explanation” and “wide empiricism.” For example, he considers how one might answer the question why a fire is burning in one’s backyard. For a budding physicist, one answer would be to describe, at the molecular level, the processes of combustion and heat convection. A more common explanation would be to say how the wood got there and caught fire to begin with. But the sort of question that most often arouses our interest is, “But why did you set the fire?” A perfectly good answer of the kind that most often interests us would be, “To toast marshmallows to eat.”

Haught’s point is that neither the first kind of explanation, which is roughly what Aristotle called material causation, nor the second, which is efficient causation, implies or excludes the last, which

is final causation: the purpose of the thing. The point holds generally: There is no good reason to believe that even a true, complete scientific account of material and efficient causes in nature—an account that some neo-Darwinians seem remarkably confident about proclaiming “in principle”—would rule out a philosophically teleological account of nature’s existence as a whole. Thus to the question “Why does the cosmos exist?” one can give a theological answer that does not substitute for a scientific one. Both could be true, the latter being “layered” within the former.

God as final cause would not, of course, show up within the layers of scientific explanation. He could not do so without becoming the rightly dreaded “God of the gaps” that theists have too often allowed themselves to invoke. So Haught gives no aid and comfort to advocates of Intelligent Design. Citing God as final cause does not fill in answers that current science has yet to discover; rather, it picks up where the characteristic methods and questions of science, as that range of disciplines is now understood, must leave off—just as the question why I set a fire picks up where citing the processes of making a fire and of combustion must leave off.

By the same token, no theory of evolution, no matter how well confirmed, can show that biological life either developed or exists without some grand-scale purpose manifested by means of them. What can appear only random in material and efficient causes—which are, stochastically, enough to produce their effects but cannot be shown to necessitate them—can be seen as intentional from the standpoint of final cause. The explanations are layered and compatible, not mutually competitive. Indeed, Haught argues that the contingency of evolution—a process that takes an awfully long time, includes many dead ends, and is fraught with struggle, suffering, and death—is itself some evidence of how the purpose of the cosmos is being fulfilled. That’s an intriguing notion, which Haught developed at greater length in his 2001 book *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, using the kenosis of the crucifixion as his model.

Regardless of how persuasive one finds such speculations, however, Haught’s main thesis is more

clearly supported by his advocacy of a “wider” or “richer” empiricism than emphatically empirical naturalists—such as Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Richard Lewontin—seem willing to allow. In the much-publicized views of such thinkers, the realities of subjectivity are not so much explained as explained away. “Fields of meaning” such as “affectivity, intersubjectivity, narrativity, beauty,” and even “theory” itself appear accidental epiphenomena of interactions among lifeless, publicly observable things. What is, in terms of cosmic evolution, “later-and-more” is thus seen as exclusively the product of what is “earlier-and-simpler.”

Such is the “ontology of death,” as Haught (following Hans Jonas) calls it, and it’s no accident that its many adherents tend to see nothing wrong with a concomitant moral culture of death. The ontology of death results from elevating to first rank a certain type of explanation that has its proper place only at a certain level, so all other sorts of explanation appear as candidates for eventual scientific debunking. Believing otherwise is seen as somehow weak-minded. Readers exposed to a typical, secular Anglo-American philosophy department will be familiar with the attitude, and Haught is right to attack both its hubris and its inability to do much with consciousness other than reducing it to something less interesting.

But even for the empirically minded, the universal human questions that religion and philosophy address, and the answers they give, cannot be reasonably reduced to mere adaptive (or maladaptive) formations. Evolutionary reductionism—today’s favored brand of scientific naturalism—does not so much answer the biggest questions as shunt them aside.

What weakens Haught’s otherwise cogent arguments are the elements he derives from two twentieth-century Jesuits: Bernard Lonergan and Teilhard de Chardin. Lonergan was perhaps the cleverest of the Transcendental Thomists who came out of the neo-scholastic revival during the decades between the two Vatican councils. The most characteristic argument-form of that school is *retorsion*. In effect, retorsive arguments aim to show that being a principled atheist is

“performatively” self-contradictory: One cannot consistently obey such imperatives as “be faithful to the desire to know” and “be responsible” while denying that they truly “anticipate” an “infinite horizon” of being, truth, and value by which one is also grasped, which of course turns out to be God.

I have always found such arguments logically problematic. That retorsive arguments have had little impact outside Jesuit-educated circles, despite having been circulated among Catholic philosophers and theologians for several generations, is one indication of that weakness. The facts cited by such arguments certainly do show that it is unreasonable to quash or explain away the kinds of questions to which the God of classical theism can be offered as a suitable answer. But one doesn't need retorsive arguments to become convinced of that, and the entire class of arguments has managed to function largely as an academic sideshow.

Haught's use of Teilhard is even more questionable. Teilhard thought of creation as God's gradual “unification” of what is inchoate and multiple; thus the *nihil* of creation ex nihilo appears as—how to put it—perhaps “a scattered and otherwise unconceptualizable something-or-other.” A metaphysics that treats nothing as something does not comport with orthodox Christianity.

Worse still, the work that Haught most often cites is *Christianity and Evolution*, a collection of essays in which Teilhard calls even moral evil a “statistically inevitable byproduct of evolution.” Once the Fall occurred, of course, its effects did ensure that moral evils became “statistically inevitable,” meaning that some-or-other actual, freely committed sins are inevitable even though no particular one is. But Teilhard's cosmology all but forces him to say that even the first sin, the Fall itself, was bound to occur at some-or-other point given the general, evolutionary order of creation. That is not orthodox Christianity either, and one needn't be a fundamentalist to see as much.

Even so, the broader concern for Haught's work is whether many scientists will take note of this

book. It will certainly be consulted more by theists seeking a philosophical response to naturalism than by naturalists looking for the best arguments against their philosophy. Given that naturalism is a dogma entrenched in secular academia today every bit as much as theism was in medieval Catholic universities, that too is only to be expected. But one can reasonably hope that Haught's project will get enough attention among scientists to be pursued.

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