

When Religion Steps on Science's Turf & The Emptiness of Theology

When Religion Steps on Science's Turf
The Alleged Separation Between the Two Is Not So Tidy
by Richard Dawkins
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A cowardly flabbiness of the intellect afflicts otherwise rational people confronted with long-established religions (though, significantly, not in the face of younger traditions such as Scientology or the Moonies). S. J. Gould, commenting in his Natural History column on the pope's attitude to evolution, is representative of a dominant strain of conciliatory thought, among believers and nonbelievers alike: "Science and religion are not in conflict, for their teachings occupy distinctly different domains ... I believe, with all my heart, in a respectful, even loving concordat [my emphasis]"

Well, what are these two distinctly different domains, these "Nonoverlapping Magisteria" that should snuggle up together in a respectful and loving concordat? Gould again: "The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value."

Who Owns Morals?

Would that it were that tidy. In a moment I'll look at what the pope actually says about evolution, and then at other claims of his church, to see if they really are so neatly distinct from the domain of science. First though, a brief aside on the claim that religion has some special expertise to offer us on moral questions. This is often blithely accepted even by the nonreligious, presumably in the course of a civilized "bending over backwards" to concede the best point your opponent has to offer - however weak that best point may be.

The question, "What is right and what is wrong?" is a genuinely difficult question that science certainly cannot answer. Given a moral premise or a priori moral belief, the important and rigorous discipline of secular moral philosophy can pursue scientific or logical modes of reasoning to point up hidden implications of such beliefs, and hidden inconsistencies between them. But the absolute moral premises themselves must come from elsewhere, presumably from unargued conviction. Or, it might be hoped, from religion - meaning some combination of authority, revelation, tradition, and scripture.

Unfortunately, the hope that religion might provide a bedrock, from which our otherwise sand-based morals can be derived, is a forlorn one. In practice, no civilized person uses Scripture as ultimate authority for moral reasoning. Instead, we pick and choose the nice bits of Scripture (like the Sermon on the Mount) and blithely ignore the nasty bits (like the obligation to stone adulteresses, execute apostates, and punish the grandchildren of offenders). The God of the Old Testament himself, with his pitilessly vengeful jealousy, his racism, sexism, and terrifying bloodlust, will not be adopted as a literal role model by anybody you or I would wish to know. Yes, of course it is unfair to judge the customs of an earlier era by the enlightened standards of our own. But that is precisely my point! Evidently, we have some alternative source of ultimate moral conviction that overrides Scripture when it suits us.

That alternative source seems to be some kind of liberal consensus of decency and natural justice that changes over historical time, frequently under the influence of secular reformists. Admittedly, that doesn't sound like bedrock. But in practice we, including the religious among us, give it higher priority than Scripture. In practice we more or less ignore Scripture, quoting it when it supports our

liberal consensus, quietly forgetting it when it doesn't. And wherever that liberal consensus comes from, it is available to all of us, whether we are religious or not.

Similarly, great religious teachers like Jesus or Gautama Buddha may inspire us, by their good example, to adopt their personal moral convictions. But again we pick and choose among religious leaders, avoiding the bad examples of Jim Jones or Charles Manson, and we may choose good secular role models such as Jawaharlal Nehru or Nelson Mandela. Traditions too, however anciently followed, may be good or bad, and we use our secular judgment of decency and natural justice to decide which ones to follow, which to give up.

Religion on Science's Turf

But that discussion of moral values was a digression. I now turn to my main topic of evolution and whether the pope lives up to the ideal of keeping off the scientific grass. His "Message on Evolution to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences" begins with some casuistical doubletalk designed to reconcile what John Paul II is about to say with the previous, more equivocal pronouncements of Pius XII, whose acceptance of evolution was comparatively grudging and reluctant. Then the pope comes to the harder task of reconciling scientific evidence with "revelation."

Revelation teaches us that [man] was created in the image and likeness of God. ... if the human body takes its origin from pre-existent living matter, the spiritual soul is immediately created by God ... Consequently, theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the mind as emerging from the forces of living matter, or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man. ... With man, then, we find ourselves in the presence of an ontological difference, an ontological leap, one could say.

To do the pope credit, at this point he recognizes the essential contradiction between the two positions he is attempting to reconcile: "However, does not the posing of such ontological discontinuity run counter to that physical continuity which seems to be the main thread of research into evolution in the field of physics and chemistry?"

Never fear. As so often in the past, obscurantism comes to the rescue:

Consideration of the method used in the various branches of knowledge makes it possible to reconcile two points of view which would seem irreconcilable. The sciences of observation describe and measure the multiple manifestations of life with increasing precision and correlate them with the time line. The moment of transition to the spiritual cannot be the object of this kind of observation, which nevertheless can discover at the experimental level a series of very valuable signs indicating what is specific to the human being.

In plain language, there came a moment in the evolution of hominids when God intervened and injected a human soul into a previously animal lineage. (When? A million years ago? Two million years ago? Between Homo erectus and Homo sapiens? Between "archaic" Homo sapiens and H. sapiens sapiens?) The sudden injection is necessary, of course, otherwise there would be no distinction upon which to base Catholic morality, which is speciesist to the core. You can kill adult animals for meat, but abortion and euthanasia are murder because human life is involved.

Catholicism's "net" is not limited to moral considerations, if only because Catholic morals have scientific implications. Catholic morality demands the presence of a great gulf between Homo sapiens and the rest of the animal kingdom. Such a gulf is fundamentally anti-evolutionary. The sudden injection of an immortal soul in the timeline is an anti-evolutionary intrusion into the domain of science.

More generally it is completely unrealistic to claim, as Gould and many others do, that religion keeps itself away from science's turf, restricting itself to morals and values. A universe with a supernatural presence would be a fundamentally and qualitatively different kind of universe from one without. The difference is, inescapably, a scientific difference. Religions make existence claims, and this means scientific claims.

The same is true of many of the major doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. The Virgin Birth, the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Resurrection of Jesus, the survival of our own souls after death: these are all claims of a clearly scientific nature. Either Jesus had a corporeal father or he didn't. This is not a question of "values" or "morals"; it is a question of sober fact. We may not have the evidence to answer it, but it is a scientific question, nevertheless. You may be sure that, if any evidence supporting the claim were discovered, the Vatican would not be reticent in promoting it.

Either Mary's body decayed when she died, or it was physically removed from this planet to Heaven. The official Roman Catholic doctrine of Assumption, promulgated as recently as 1950, implies that Heaven has a physical location and exists in the domain of physical reality - how else could the physical body of a woman go there? I am not, here, saying that the doctrine of the Assumption of the Virgin is necessarily false (although of course I think it is). I am simply rebutting the claim that it is outside the domain of science. On the contrary, the Assumption of the Virgin is transparently a scientific theory. So is the theory that our souls survive bodily death, and so are all stories of angelic visitations, Marian manifestations, and miracles of all types.

There is something dishonestly self-serving in the tactic of claiming that all religious beliefs are outside the domain of science. On the one hand, miracle stories and the promise of life after death are used to impress simple people, win converts, and swell congregations. It is precisely their scientific power that gives these stories their popular appeal. But at the same time it is considered below the belt to subject the same stories to the ordinary rigors of scientific criticism: these are religious matters and therefore outside the domain of science. But you cannot have it both ways. At least, religious theorists and apologists should not be allowed to get away with having it both ways. Unfortunately all too many of us, including nonreligious people, are unaccountably ready to let them.

I suppose it is gratifying to have the pope as an ally in the struggle against fundamentalist creationism. It is certainly amusing to see the rug pulled out from under the feet of Catholic creationists such as Michael Behe. Even so, given a choice between honest-to-goodness fundamentalism on the one hand, and the obscurantist, disingenuous doublethink of the Roman Catholic Church on the other, I know which I prefer.

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The Emptiness of Theology

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A dimly unctuous editorial in the British newspaper the Independent recently asked for a reconciliation between science and "theology." It remarked that "People want to know as much as possible about their origins." I certainly hope they do, but what on earth makes one think that

theology has anything useful to say on the subject?

Science is responsible for the following knowledge about our origins. We know approximately when the universe began and why it is largely hydrogen. We know why stars form and what happens in their interiors to convert hydrogen to the other elements and hence give birth to chemistry in a world of physics. We know the fundamental principles of how a world of chemistry can become biology through the arising of self-replicating molecules. We know how the principle of self-replication gives rise, through Darwinian selection, to all life, including humans.

It is science and science alone that has given us this knowledge and given it, moreover, in fascinating, over-whelming, mutually confirming detail. On every one of these questions theology has held a view that has been conclusively proved wrong. Science has eradicated smallpox, can immunize against most previously deadly viruses, can kill most previously deadly bacteria. Theology has done nothing but talk of pestilence as the wages of sin. Science can predict when a particular comet will reappear and, to the second, when the next eclipse will appear. Science has put men on the moon and hurtled reconnaissance rockets around Saturn and Jupiter. Science can tell you the age of a particular fossil and that the Turin Shroud is a medieval fake. Science knows the precise DNA instructions of several viruses and will, in the lifetime of many present readers, do the same for the human genome.

What has theology ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody? When has theology ever said anything that is demonstrably true and is not obvious? I have listened to theologians, read them, debated against them. I have never heard any of them ever say anything of the smallest use, anything that was not either platitudinously obvious or downright false. If all the achievements of scientists were wiped out tomorrow, there would be no doctors but witch doctors, no transport faster than horses, no computers, no printed books, no agriculture beyond subsistence peasant farming. If all the achievements of theologians were wiped out tomorrow, would anyone notice the smallest difference? Even the bad achievements of scientists, the bombs, and sonar-guided whaling vessels work! The achievements of theologians don't do anything, don't affect anything, don't mean anything. What makes anyone think that "theology" is a subject at all?

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