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Review of "Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism"

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Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

In *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, Alvin Plantinga presents a nuanced, well-informed account that does not seek to quickly dismiss either side of the debate. Indeed, the work's greatest strength is that Plantinga does not try to heighten or allay the conflict between science and religion for the sake of maintaining his argument. Rather, he aims to show both where there is real conflict between science and religion and where there is concord, giving the reader a clear sense of the significance of these areas to the relationship between science and religion. He concludes by challenging the common assumption that there is deep concord between science and naturalism, the view that there is nothing beyond the closed system of the natural world. In doing so, he provides an informed account of relevant issues from both the religious and scientific perspectives that takes the discussion to a more nuanced realm than is commonly seen in many popular books in this area. Though it is not an objective account or without a polemical aim, Plantinga is able to acknowledge that there is a real conflict between science and religion, a point that would seem to go against his aims, without turning it into an acrimonious affair in the manner of Richard Dawkins and the group commonly referred to as the New Atheists. Thus, he provides a more balanced account that informs the reader about both sides of the issue better than many of the popular texts that have gained prominence in this realm.

Plantinga's overall thesis is that "there is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion, but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism" (ix). Plantinga develops this thesis from a particular stance: he is a Christian in the Reformed tradition, committed to the existence of a personal God and the central tenets of orthodox Christianity. While he uses the term "religion," as in the conflict between science and religion, it is clearly meant to indicate religions that adhere to a belief in a personal God who can interact with the natural world. While Plantinga's account could include religions other than Christianity that have these traits, his intention is not to create a pluralistic account but to show that the claim that Christianity and science are incompatible is off base. To do this, Plantinga references not only his Christian background but also his extensive background in philosophy. He is a leading figure in the philosophy of religion, as well as the philosophical fields of metaphysics and epistemology, having made major contributions to both disciplines. It is also important to note at the outset that Plantinga is not challenging scientific findings. Indeed, throughout the work, Plantinga shows a great respect for science, calling it "impressive and amazing" (xii) and "a splendid intellectual achievement" (3). Furthermore, one of Plantinga's concerns is that, in the face of a deep conflict between science and religion, given science's significant achievements and merits, it is religion, not science, that would need to justify itself. The book, then, aims to contest not science but claims about the implications of scientific findings, focusing on more philosophical and theological debates.

The book is divided into four parts: the first two address the claim that there is a conflict between science and religion, the third addresses the claim that there is deep concord between



science and religion, and the fourth addresses the claim that there is superficial concord but deep conflict between science and naturalism. The first part looks at the alleged conflict between science and religion. Plantinga argues against the position, represented most vociferously by Richard Dawkins, that there is a deep conflict between science and religion, particularly religions that adhere to a belief in a God who acts in history. According to Dawkins, the religious and scientific worldviews are incompatible. For Dawkins, this incompatibility is grounded in evolutionary science, which he feels eliminates the possibility of and need for a god who created the universe or guides the process of evolution. In response, Plantinga argues that this is not a real conflict but simply an alleged one. He aims to show that nothing in the science of evolution says that evolution could not be a process that is guided by God. For Plantinga, this claim cannot be verified by science, as any discussion of guided evolution moves beyond the limits of scientific inquiry into the realm of philosophical or theological justification. While Dawkins and others try to cash out evolution as the ultimate defeater of religion, Plantinga endeavors to show that any conflict between science and religion, in particular Christianity, is merely superficial and that the two realms, even with the findings of evolutionary science, can interact harmoniously. Furthermore, Plantinga demonstrates how the findings of quantum mechanics may provide the resources necessary to show that divine intervention is possible.

The second part of the book looks at two areas in which there is an actual conflict between science and Christian belief: evolutionary psychology and historical biblical scholarship. Evolutionary psychology seeks to show how various human traits and behaviors are a result of evolutionary processes. For example, it claims that morality emerged because it was advantageous to human survival for us to cooperate with one another. Evolutionary psychology has also offered explanations for the origin of religion. Thus, it appears to pose a threat to the validity of religious belief, including Christianity. Historical biblical scholarship poses a similar threat by claiming that scripture is a cultural product composed over long periods of time and influenced by society. Scripture is not seen as revealed but as constructed and influenced by historical and sociological factors. Plantinga does not directly argue with the findings of either of these camps, seeing both as valuable intellectual pursuits. Instead, he argues that these endeavors do not present defeaters (or a claim that causes one to no longer be able to rationally hold on to a belief) for Christian beliefs. Plantinga's argument is that a reasonable person can hold the findings of evolutionary psychology and/or historical criticism of the Bible to be compelling and incorporate them into their knowledge base while also holding to the truths of Christianity. While there is a superficial conflict between Christianity and science, it does not demand that a rational person give up their religious beliefs in order to agree with the findings of evolutionary psychology or historical biblical criticism.

The third part of the book makes the case for a deep concord between science and Christianity, a claim Plantinga justifies through three different investigations. The first is the fine-tuning argument, which states that universe is finely tuned, meaning that if certain aspects of the universe were only slightly different (for example, a small change in the force of gravity or the rate at which the universe is expanding), life as we know it would not have developed. Given the precision needed to create and maintain the universe as it is, it follows that it is reasonable to think the process could be guided by some form of intelligence (i.e., by a divine process). The second investigation concerns irreducible complexity. This theory states that organisms contain



structures that cannot have evolved in a step-by-step process because the removal of any one of the parts would have led to the failure of the system as a whole. Again, this view gives us reason to think that some form of intelligence must be guiding the process of evolution. The third and most compelling investigation centers on the Christian doctrine of *imago dei*, which states that humans are created in the image of God. Part of this doctrine is the idea that God is a knower, and therefore, humans, being made in the image of God, are also knowers. The doctrine gives us good reason to think that our knowledge of the world is correct – that is, that our perceptions and understanding of the world correctly correspond to reality. As science is a major avenue for gaining knowledge about the world, the doctrine of *imago dei* is quite hospitable to a pursuit of scientific inquiry. Hence, Christian belief is seen not only as hospitable to science but also as a bolstering force that helps guarantee the accuracy of scientific discoveries.

The fourth part of the book examines the other side of the third part, arguing that science and naturalism are not as concordant as is often assumed. Plantinga's objective is to show that it is difficult to accept both naturalism and the concept of unguided evolution. Briefly, his argument is that, given unguided natural selection, the probability of our cognitive faculties being reliable is low because these faculties would be successful based on survival not accuracy. Thus, we could have an inaccurate faculty that would be helpful for survival. It follows that within the paradigm of unguided evolution, our cognitive faculties are not necessarily reliable. Therefore, if I believe in evolution, I have a defeater for any belief I hold, including my beliefs in evolution and naturalism. Hence, beliefs in naturalism and unguided evolution are self-defeating, thereby revealing the deep conflict between science and naturalism.

As noted earlier, Plantinga's work is a welcome and needed addition to the ongoing popular discussion of science and religion. One of the merits of *Where the Conflict Really Lies* is that Plantinga shows the unsophisticated and problematic approaches of popular writers such as Richard Dawkins, who set out to write polemical texts that quickly and naively dismiss religion in favor of science. Plantinga presents a well-reasoned and sustained critique of these writers that highlights the problems with their arguments. Moreover, this strength is then bolstered by the real merit of Plantinga's work. He moves on to engage the more substantial and significant issues in the debate, and in doing so, he is able to convey the details and issues in a manner that is accessible and understandable. One leaves the book with a good understanding of the key issues in the science/religion discussion, particularly as it relates to Christianity, along with a better knowledge of key figures and debates in the field. In addition, Plantinga's argument, while not flawless, is compelling and well-developed. He references the current literature on the topic and presents clear and easy-to-follow arguments. Indeed, the account was compelling enough to merit a review by prominent philosopher Thomas Nagel in *The New York Review of Books*. In the review, Nagel acknowledged that as an atheist, he is not sympathetic to Plantinga's starting position, but that *Where the Conflict Really Lies* makes a compelling case for theistic belief. One would be well served by reading both Nagel's review and the responses it drew from Galen Strawson and others.

However, there are a few issues with the book. The first is that part of the book is set off from the rest using a smaller font. The small font indicates sections that are more technical in nature and could be skipped if one wishes. If one were to skip these sections, the overall argument



of the book would still prove coherent. If one pursues these sections, they may find themselves in a strange land of epistemology and Bayesian statistical calculus. These sections are by no means opaque, but they do demand more of the reader. In addition, at points, Plantinga's strong allegiance to Christianity negatively influences the book. While he makes it clear that he wants to advance a case for Christianity, a perspective that is not a problem in and of itself, at points he seems to default to the truth of Christian belief. That is, when he is working in the realm of probabilities and the calculus works such that there is some question as to which possibility seems more likely, Plantinga favors Christianity being correct. Again, he does not do this covertly; his starting point is made clear throughout the work. However, considering the arguments made in the book, this default to Christianity feels disingenuous, as if Plantinga has stacked the deck from the start such that the calculus will work out in favor of Christianity. This by no means tarnishes the work completely, but it does give one pause.

Where the Conflict Really Lies provides a coherent, accessible, and compelling account of current discussions of religion and science that will prove useful to those familiar with the debates while also providing an excellent introduction to those just entering this territory. While Plantinga clearly aims to show the compatibility of Christianity and science and, with that, the veracity of Christianity, he avoids simple answers, acknowledging conflicts exist and showing a solid understanding of the material. For this reason, he moves the discussion beyond the more polemical works that have dominated much of the popular discussion on this issue.

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