
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 unreliably 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