Plantinga on the Natural: Naturalism Is Not Self-Defeating

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I.

Alvin Plantinga has argued that there is good reason to believe in science, but not in naturalism.[1] He believes**,** in particular, that evolution has caused our *behavior* to be to adaptive our survival. But, and this is the point, he believes there is no good reason to think that evolution has shaped our *beliefs about our sense perceptions* to be true. In other words, we are caused by evolution to *behave* in adaptive ways, but not to *believe* truths about the world around us. Therefore, on the presupposition of naturalism, there is no reason to believe our beliefs are true. And therefore there is no reason to believe our belief that naturalism is true is itself a true belief. This position is presented in his *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism.* Daniel Dennett has responded briefly.[2] I will argue that Plantinga's position is unsupported and unsupportable: evolution *does* explain why our beliefs are reliably true. Therefore, naturalism does *not* defeat itself.

Plantinga accepts the general scientific view of the evolution of perception. Our eyes, for example, have evolved so that we respond to food or danger; this hugely increases the probability that an organism will survive, and therefore pass on its genes, carrying these adaptations, to future generations. Plantinga accepts this interpretation–so far.

This evolutionary capability must have been produced by corresponding evolutions of the neurophysiology of the brain: the brain must have developed to perform the necessary causal functions. Plantinga agrees–so far.

And the functioning brain must have evolved to produce the necessary survival-enhancing behavior. Sight of food makes us approach it; sight of danger makes us flee or hide. For only with such useful behavior would the organs of sight (or sound, or smell, etc.) have any survival, and thus evolutionary, use whatever. And Plantinga

agrees again, that the necessary neurophysiological structures have evolved, and do function, as described. So far, so good. Plantinga seems to accept the results of contemporary science, and the explanatory consequences they entail.

II.

But now comes a surprising turn. Plantinga now argues that evolution does *not* select for *beliefs* about those perceptions. That is, we behave in adaptive ways, selected by evolution, in the generally agreed-on way. But our *beliefs* about those perceptions have nothing to do with evolution, selection, adaptiveness, or survival. And since it does not matter for survival whether these beliefs are true or not, evolution cannot select for truth.

To illustrate this remarkable claim, Plantinga invokes a number of examples. But I will argue that, for systematic reasons, they do not accurately support his central claim.

Plantinga's purpose is not merely to rebut, and in his mind, refute, the usual arguments about evolutionary naturalism. He wishes to go further: to construct an argument *against* naturalism. He claims that naturalism is self-refuting. He believes that evolutionary reasoning gives no support for the truth of our beliefs–any beliefs, about anything. Therefore there is no reason to believe that our belief in naturalism is true. This contention is the crux of his entire argument: the very basis for naturalistic evolution undermines itself.

Plantinga does not deny the truth of evolution, but only that of *naturalistic* evolution. So he denies that *un*guided nature can support our belief in evolution–or, indeed, anything. Rather, the position Plantinga thinks is supported by science is *guided* evolution–guided, of course, by a theistic God.

III.

Daniel Dennett is willing to accept the *possibility* of divinely guided evolution, since it is not directly excluded by any existing evidence (Dennett, 27). Nor does any evidence rule out the possibility that extraterrestrials arranged the emergence of life on earth. But, borrowing phraseology from Plantinga himself, Dennett dismisses any such speculation as an "entirely gratuitous fantasy," supported by no shred of evidence (*ibid.*). And belief in a divinity who guides evolution is equally unsupported and equally unacceptable.

Plantinga claims that evolutionary biology alone is compatible with divine design. The denial of design only follows, Plantinga insists, if naturalism is included as a premise. However, the relevant sort of naturalism here is metaphysical (or ontological) naturalism: the position that the universe in its entirety is natural, and there is no supernatural being.

But Dennett's rebuttal is couched in terms of an example which is irrelevant and misleading.[3] Dennett envisions a murder trial in which Tom, the accused, hates Fred, the victim, and is charged with smashing his head in with a sculpture. At trial Tom's defense counsel points out that the statue was precariously poised on a shelf above

the victim's head, that an earthquake shook the neighborhood at precisely the time of Fred's death, and that the accused was nowhere nearby. So the death is better explained as a tragic accident, not a premeditated murder.

Dennett imagines Plantinga pressing the charge of murder by insisting that the accused *might* have committed the murder, and that his innocence follows only if "naturalism" is assumed as a part of the evidence. Without this assumption, argues Dennett's Plantinga, the conclusion that the accused murdered the victim is perfectly plausible. For, even if the statue was caused to fall by an earthquake, it *could* be that the earthquake itself was caused by Tom's wishing hard enough. Nothing in geology itself refutes this possibility. We can rule it out only by assuming the naturalistic premise that Tom's wishes could not cause earthquakes. Dennett takes this to be parallel to Plantinga's reasoning that nothing in evolution itself rules out the possibility of divine design; for it *could be* that the conditions giving rise to evolutionary change were themselves divinely designed.

Here I think Dennett's criticism aims at the wrong target. Dennett needs to establish only that divine design is an unnecessary, wild, unsupported hypothesis. He has already made this point, and it seems sufficient for now.

The example of a trial at law is not really germane. What is assumed by any responsible court is not "naturalism" in the present sense. "Naturalism" here means that nature is self-sustained, freestanding, without any ultimate animistic support by a supernatural God. But no such far-reaching sense of naturalism is assumed, or discussed, or ever contemplated in legal reasoning. What is assumed is *naturalistic explanation,* within something like the known or supposed laws of nature. Therefore, if Tom's prosecutor (Dennett's imaginary Plantinga) were to suggest that Tom had the power to cause an earthquake just by wishing, the proposal would pretty certainly be dismissed out of hand.

But the reason for its dismissal would not be any assumption of metaphysical naturalism. Rather, the reason would be that we are quite certain that no one has such power. There is overwhelming evidence, though no doubt indirect, that no human being can influence fundamental geological processes this way. And if the prosecutor persisted in any such claim, it would be in principle open to him to present evidence that Tom, in fact, possesses this power. While it is difficult to imagine what evidence could support this wild assertion, I doubt there is any legal rule against it. And no such evidence would have any bearing on whether metaphysical naturalism is true, or on whether there is a God.

IV.

Dennett touches only briefly and tangentially on Plantinga's central claim, that evolution cannot produce systematically true beliefs. Recall that Plantinga is willing to grant that evolution produces neurological structures in our brains, and that these structures produce adaptive behavior. Most evolutionists would probably think this is enough to support their position.

But not Plantinga. He insists that *belief* is separate, logically, from behavior. This move is crucial for Plantinga's overall thesis. His ultimate goal is to show that natu-

ralism is self-defeating, because, on naturalism there can be no reason to suppose our beliefs are true. Since belief in naturalism is itself a belief, if there is no reason for believing our beliefs are true, then there is no reason to believe naturalism is true.

If this argument were sound, it would be telling indeed against naturalism; for naturalists want to and do claim that there is very good reason indeed to believe that the belief In naturalism is true. And, the reasons to believe naturalism is true are themselves *naturalistic*. In fact, the reasons to believe our beliefs are (largely, of course) true are to be found in the evolutionary picture of life. So the critical issue is whether, as Plantinga claims, evolution could produce behaviors that are systematically adaptive for survival, but that are associated with beliefs that are systematically false (or at least not systematically true).

The core of the argument is therefore Plantinga's claim that true belief is irrelevant to evolutionary adaptiveness. In other words, *false* beliefs, if associated with survival-producing behavior, would be just as good as true ones. This is why Plantinga says naturalism gives no reason to suppose our beliefs are true. Indeed, he says, the *content* of the beliefs–that which makes them true or false–is random. But a random proposition is much more likely to be false than true; so naturalism is much more likely to be false than true. This is why Plantinga thinks he has a "defeater" for naturalism.

Recall that Plantinga concedes that neurological structures evolve for adaptive reasons; he calls these structures, collectively, NP; and so shall I. But the *content* of a belief is distinct from NP; and it is NP that leads to adaptive behavior. He says

> …what is the probability that this content is *true*?…The content doesn't have to be true, of course, for the neuronal structure to cause the appropriate kind of behavior...it would be a piece of serendipity if this content, this proposition… were *true*; it could just as well be false.[4]

So he concludes that the probability that our senses produce reliably true beliefs is very low.

Plantinga analyzes this argument in terms of materialism; but this is irrelevant: the same point could be made about any philosophical theory of mind that could be advanced by evolutionists. The critical issue is the claim that the evolutionary usefulness of beliefs is independent of their truth. He illustrates with an example. If I want a beer, and I believe there is one in the fridge, he says, the NP properties in my brain make me go to the fridge rather than the washing machine.

> …my belief will be a neural structure that has both NP properties and also a propositional content. It is by virtue of the NP properties, however not the content, that the belief causes what it does cause. It is by virtue of *those* properties that the belief causes neural impulses to travel down the relevant efferent nerves to the relevant muscles, causing them to contract, and thus causing behavior. It isn't by virtue of the content of this belief; the content of the belief is irrelevant to the causal power of the belief with respect to behavior. (Plantinga, 336)

V.

Now, this might make sense if, but only if, it is coherent to suppose that the content of belief is irrelevant to the associated behavior. In Plantinga's examples truth is surgically removed, as it were, from the body of experience. He would have us imagine that my belief about a beer in the fridge is irrelevant to my act of fetching it. It is only on this supposition that we could imagine that the truth of the belief is unimportant.

But of course my belief in the beer is not so isolated: my belief is integrated with a large and complex body of other beliefs and actions: I believe I am in a house; the fridge is in the kitchen; my chair is in the living room, etc. The beliefs extend into the past and the future: I believe I bought the beer at the store yesterday, and placed it in the fridge. I believe that if I remove this one and drink it, there will then be one fewer beers. And I believe that if I remove and drink, say, twelve beers, I will become inebriated, and be unable to drive safely to the store to buy more. These examples could be extended indefinitely.

Materialism in particular is irrelevant to the main argument, because the totality of experience is integrated in a way that Plantinga's example ignores. *All* of the various philosophies of mind take account of this integration. Cartesian dualism, epiphenomenalism, pre-established harmony–you name it. *Any* account of mind and body has to reflect the fact that our experience at least appears to involve interaction with the world. And this interaction seems to be, at least for the most part, internally consistent.

But consider the mind-body relation that Plantinga is asking us to take seriously as a possible alternative. At the exact moment that my brain undergoes the NP phenomena that cause the experience of thirst, and further NP phenomena cause my body to rise, approach the fridge, grasp the bottle, return to my chair–my *belief* could be that I am on a plane to Sacramento, or making love to a starlet, or lecturing to my class! If Plantinga were to be believed, the falsity of those beliefs, and the truth of beliefs about my house, and fridge, and beer, and chair are of no importance. It would be merely "serendipity" if I had the latter, not the former, set of beliefs. I don't believe this, and neither do you.

Plantinga's task is to show that evolution cannot *explain* the existence of a reliable mechanism to arrive at true beliefs about the world. But obviously, intentional actions must be (mostly) based on true beliefs in order to succeed. If I want a beer, I need to go to the kitchen, open the fridge, and grasp the bottle, etc.

Plantinga's examples seem plausible only because they refer exclusively to a single organism. But evolution, including that of beliefs, occurs to populations, not individuals. Of course there is no reason to expect *random* beliefs to be true. But populations do not evolve beliefs randomly. Beliefs evolve–and NP mechanisms that produce corresponding actions--because they have survival value; and they have survival value because they are mostly true. No population of organisms could evolve NP mechanisms which made them act on random beliefs which were mostly false; there would be no survival value in this. Such organisms would quickly perish, and their genes would disappear from the pool. Plantinga's examples are irrelevant to evolution.

More significant, morally evaluable actions like saving a drowning child, obeying

a military commander, or remaining faithful to a spouse, require that beliefs correspond to the true states of affairs. Any such actions would be meaningless without a connection between actions and truth of beliefs.

To pursue the point, the possibility of doing anything intentionally, momentous or trivial, depends on having (approximately) true beliefs about the state of the world. And this leaves open the question of materialism, or of the causal efficacy of mental states: even if they are epiphenomenal, with no causal powers whatever, they must be largely true, else we would not even know what we were doing.

So *of course* true beliefs have survival value. Populations evolve the belief that it is safer to escape lions are more likely to pass on their genes than those who don't. Organisms which make choices systematically correlated with true beliefs improve their chances of surviving and reproducing. Therefore they add more genes to the pool than those whose beliefs are shaped only by serendipity. And therefore the mechanisms that result in true beliefs will be naturally selected. An individual who runs from a lion because he falsely believes he is chasing a rainbow *may* escape–occasionally. But *this* would be the true serendipity; chasing rainbows does not, systematically, lead to reproduction.

This is precisely what an evolutionary explanation should do: show that our senses give us a largely accurate picture of the world. They do so precisely because having true beliefs has survival value; and therefore so also do the mechanisms that lead to true beliefs. Therefore these mechanisms have evolved by natural selection. Plantinga fails utterly to show that we have no naturalistic reason to accept our beliefs. We have exactly the sort of reason to rely on our beliefs that evolution would predict. So naturalism does not defeat itself.

Notes

1. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
2. Daniel C. Dennett and Alvin Plantinga, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
3. Dennett and Plantinga, 30.
4. Plantinga, 334; emphasis original.