

## PLANTINGA'S "DEFEAT" OF NATURALISM

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Alvin Plantinga has proposed a widely-discussed argument to prove that evolutionary naturalism is insupportable, because it can give no reason why we should rely on our senses—and, more generally, our minds—to give us accurate information about the world. Briefly, the argument is this: evolutionary naturalism holds that our senses must be reliable because they have evolved to promote the survival (and thus genetic success) of their possessors. An organism whose picture of the world was systematically inaccurate would be unlikely to survive long, and therefore its genes would play little or no role in the genetic pool. But, Plantinga argues, since evolution selects for survival value, it cannot directly select for truth (229ff). Those familiar with Plantinga's arguments will recall that they are often couched in the language of probability. In his notation Plantinga represents the probability of our senses being generally accurate as  $R$ . His argument claims, then, that the probability of  $R$  is small or inscrutable (228f). And so it is possible that the picture of the world we receive from our senses differs greatly from that which is true. Thus, on evolutionary grounds we cannot consider our sensory information reliable, including that information that convinces us of the truth of evolution. Plantinga considers this argument to "defeat" evolutionary naturalism.

I will argue to the contrary that this notion is a logical impossibility. It is conceptually impossible that a systematically inaccurate picture of the world could promote survival. Since it is logically impossible, it cannot be true. Since *not-R* is logically impossible, the probability of  $R$  is one. And if that is the case then the case against naturalism is refuted—or, in Plantinga's word, defeated—just as he claims to have defeated naturalism.

First, however, it will be well to consider just what is meant by "naturalism." It is commonplace and useful to distinguish between two forms of naturalism. Methodological naturalism is simply the intent to pursue naturalistic explanations. As such it does not seek, though it does not necessarily rule out, miracles or divine explanations. It is compatible with any form of religion; and indeed there are many scientists of the highest repute who accept one or another religion. But methodological naturalism is indispensable for the practice of science. A contemporary scientist who appealed to divine intervention to explain something she could not otherwise account for would be regarded as having left the field of science. This is not, as often charged, dogmatism, but merely a clear understanding of what constitutes science.

Metaphysical naturalism goes much further. Not only does it seek naturalistic explanations in practice, it rejects even the theoretical possibility of supernatural intervention. Any phenomena not currently explainable by natural law must necessarily be explainable by some law or laws now unknown to us, or, perhaps, not explainable at all. Thus metaphysical naturalism is necessarily atheistic. Supernaturalists sometimes complain that metaphysical naturalism is dogmatic. But some such naturalists believe that there exist compelling arguments for their position, so that it is no more dogmatic than theism—and perhaps less so.

What, then, of Plantinga's argument? To repeat, the evolutionary naturalist holds that there is good reason to accept that our senses are generally reliable since the survival of the organism depends on its sensory input (and judgments) being generally correct. The

stock example is that of a monkey or arboreal ape brachiating through the trees. Its perception of the branch to grasp next, and its judgment as to its strength, are critical to its longevity, and thus to its contribution to future gene pools.

This empirical argument by itself, however, cannot be used against Plantinga, on pain of circularity; for the very point at issue is whether our senses, including those that lead to the evolutionary naturalist's confidence in evolution, can be relied on to give us (generally) accurate information. But I believe that a conceptual argument can answer this question in the affirmative.

Plantinga's argument that the senses may not be systematically reliable requires that we consider it possible that there could be an alternative set of supposed sensory conclusions that would promote survival as well as, or better than, those which accurately reflect the state of the world (226). (This might be a good time to note that the arguments on both sides here seem to rely on some sort of realistic epistemology or ontology, in which it is supposed that there are truths about the world, which might or might not accurately be reported by our senses. This seems to me most likely correct; but in any case I will not dispute it in the present discussion )

Plantinga's attempts to cast doubt on the reliability of our senses involve a multitude of ingenious examples. In one case he imagines an organism (one supposes early man, but this does not matter) whose beliefs about the world are entirely incorrect, yet result in behavior as useful for survival as true ones. When approached by a tiger the true belief presumably is that the tiger is likely to eat him if he does not escape; and therefore he would be well advised to flee, or climb into a hole where the tiger could not follow. But what if his belief was, instead, that the tiger is a cuddly pussycat which he wishes to pet; and he believes that the most effective way to achieve this goal is to run away, so that the tiger will follow him to play? (225). This erroneous belief will result in escape behavior just as effective as the true belief that the tiger is a danger to him. There are many other such examples, and entertaining they are.

However, these examples are in all cases applied to individual cases or incidents. What is at issue is not whether there could be wrong sense impressions or wrong interpretations *on some occasions*. That is beyond dispute. Hallucinations, misperceptions, mistakes of memory, etc., are commonplace enough; and they may create difficulties of all sorts. But the theory of evolution does not presuppose perfection, nor would perfection be required for it to function as evolutionists understand it to.

To illustrate, one of the most ardent disputes concerns the eye. Evolutionists believe that eyes evolved dozens of times in multiple evolutionary lines. A common mistake made by critics of evolution is that the eye could not have evolved because it would not accomplish its function unless it had already achieved its current form. But eyes in various forms can be observed in various stages of development in different fossil and living organisms. And the present point is that no eye needs to be perfect in order to promote survival—indeed, of course, no eye *is* perfect. Birds of prey such as owls and eagles have vision far superior to that of humans; this does not mean that human eyes are useless. For that matter, there is a vast difference among human eyes. Evolution, then, does not achieve, or strive for, perfection—only sufficient effectiveness to promote

survival.

But to establish his point Plantinga's notion must be that our senses could give us a *systematically* inaccurate picture of the world, while still promoting genetic survival. To return to the tiger example (225), Plantinga is able to create a (somewhat) plausible scenario, in which the threatened individual believes that he is fleeing when in fact he is instead *approaching* the tiger; and this results in behavior that is survivally successful. Perhaps this makes sense in this one particular case. But the issue is whether it is possible that such errors could *consistently* be successful. That is, that persons could *consistently* mistake the difference between approaching and retreating while still enjoying genetic success. And this seems impossible. For then the person could not, consistently, tell the difference between retreating and approaching. Indeed, the conceptual distinction between the two could not exist. So it would not be coherently possible to believe, or to say, that one was either approaching or retreating from anything. Neither term could have a consistent meaning in their language or any other. Therefore it could not be correct to claim that the incorrect belief that one was retreating when, in fact, one was approaching, was equally successful at promoting survival.

Now, one might be inclined to say that, even if the prospective tiger lunch was mistaken about the distinction between approaching and retreating, *we observers* can tell the difference. But if Plantinga's account were accepted, we would be in the same situation as the hapless intended prey. So the distinction would be as meaningless for us as for him!

Again, it is valuable for survival for organisms such as humans and some "lower" animals to be able to count. If three bears go into a cave and two come out, it is well to recognize that there is still one bear in the cave before entering. Is a coherent supposition that we could—systematically—count inaccurately? I believe not.

Imagine what this would involve. One person would count three bears, another two, another five. And the same person, presented with the same number of bears (or any other objects, of course) on different occasions would perhaps count differently. When sharing meat, no one could tell how many portions to count out in order to give one to each diner. As in the tiger example, the *very concept* of a "correct" number could not exist—either for the imaginary one counting, or for us. And therefore it is incoherent to suppose that it would *consistently* be more successful in supporting survival than a true picture that (usually) gave the correct number.

This notion could have no meaning. The reason for this is obvious enough. The concept of counting requires (mostly) consistent agreement among those doing the counting. If the ability to "count" objects depended on something other than the number of objects being counted, then it just would not be counting at all, since it could not be put to the very general purposes for which we use counting. And so there would be no criterion by which to say that counting "incorrectly" was just as conducive to survival as counting "incorrectly." This means that any supposed alternative to counting correctly is not alternative at all; it cannot even be stated coherently without presupposing the ability to count—actually—correctly! But if it cannot be stated coherently it cannot be a true account.

As one final example, consider another common human activity that depends crucially on the agreement of perceptions with reality: measuring. Imagine two carpenters building a house. One is installing rafters; he measures the length of the board needed; this requires that he perceive the space to be spanned, perceive his tape measure, perceive the reading when he places the tape on the gap. He then calls this measurement down to the other carpenter on the ground with the lumber and saw. That workman must then use his own tape to lay out that length on a board. This requires that he perceive the board, the tape, etc. The practice of measurement requires that these perceptions largely agree, or else that practice could not be used to achieve its multifarious purposes—such as building houses. This is not merely a practical necessity, as for example, not using defective tape measures. (A defective tape could be *shown* to be defective by comparing it with others, several if necessary. Of course, this would again require agreement in perception of the world). The very concept of measurement itself requires general agreement; and this requires agreement in perception. It is simply incoherent to suppose that our perceptual apparatus could be systematically inaccurate, and still result in successful measurements. Therefore, it is not a coherent picture to imagine that such a perceptual apparatus could evolve by natural selection.

Now let us be clear about where we are. I have argued that it is not coherent to claim that our senses could *systematically* and *consistently* mislead us about the truth of the world. So this is not a genuine alternative to the naturalistic evolutionary belief that our senses are generally correct. But I have not said that it is incoherent to suppose, *simpliciter*, that incorrect perceptions or beliefs could have survival value.

If one believes that the concept of a supernatural God is coherent, then it seems perfectly coherent to suppose that such a being *systematically* and *consistently* misleads us in just the ways required to promote survival! In the tiger case, then, God would make us believe, falsely, that we were facing a cuddly pussycat, and that our most promising way of getting to pet it would be to run away! And in the counting case, God would delude us into believing that false numbers were correct; but in such a consistent manner that the results would come out as intended: the one “counting” out pieces of meat would perhaps think there were six to serve, when there were seven; but he would make the same mistake when “counting” the portions, so that they would match after all.

This would constitute a sort of odd latter-day Occasionalism, in which God (to mix philosophical metaphors) would function like a Cartesian demon. He would make everything fit, despite our errors in perceiving and believing. On this view, the survival success of our inaccurate senses would be an ongoing, indefinitely prolonged, series of miracles! If we further believe, not only that the concept of a supernatural God is coherent, but that one such exists and is infinitely good, then we might reasonably expect these miracles to continue. (Though moral purists might question the goodness of a God who systematically deceives us; and, as with Descartes, we might have some difficulty explaining why our inaccurate senses do not *always* lead to success.) However, so far as I can see, this notion is logically coherent.

But, recall that Plantinga’s criticism was put forth as a rational criticism of a *scientific* theory, evolutionary naturalism. And the scenario just mentioned could in no possible way be considered scientific. Any survival success we achieve would have no

explanation whatever in scientific terms. For example, on this view Plantinga would have to deny that there was any law-like connection between the physical input to our biological mechanisms, such as the eye and the brain, and the results which we "perceive" or the way in which we behave. The latter would in all cases be the result of God's miraculous disposition. Scientific explanations would be altogether irrelevant. (I should think, though I cannot argue here, that one adopting this view would have to apply it to science in general—i.e., go all the way with Occasionalism—since it would seem to make *any* scientific explanation otiose, if possible at all.)

The conclusion seems to be that, on Plantinga's hypothetical account, sensory success could only be explained miraculously. On scientific grounds, that would be no explanation at all. On the other hand, evolutionary naturalism does give a coherent naturalistic explanation, which requires no appeal to the supernatural, but only the commonsense and commonplace suppositions that we all accept all the time in our non-philosophical activities. Therefore—though this is not a philosophical proof—the explanation of evolutionary naturalism is to be preferred scientifically.

So, if my argument is correct, Plantinga's supposed criticism of evolutionary naturalism constitutes a complete substitution of theology for science, rather than a demonstration of an internal inconsistency within the scientific account. But of course this latter is precisely what was claimed for it. It cannot therefore succeed as a rational criticism of science on its own grounds, and could only be defended on religious, not scientific or rational, grounds.

Plantinga may not be bothered by the wholesale rejection of the best scientific information (when was he ever?). But a theological argument should be recognized for what it is, and not disguised as science. I conclude that it is Plantinga's own argument, not evolutionary naturalism, that is defeated.

#### **WORK CITED**

Plantinga, Alvin. *Warrent and Proper Function*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.