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A philosopher's view of God and evolution

Chase Nordengren | Jun. 13, 2013 Young Voices

The great mystery of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a 10-foot-tall black monolith, an imposing brute of a tower that appears throughout the film's time shifts. The tower and its high-pitched squeal appears to have two functions: turning pre-human apes into tool-wielding men and turning astronaut Dave Bowman into something far more than human.

The monolith is not unlike the tree in the Garden of Eden, a creation of some unearthly other that drives forward the evolution of humanity. I couldn't help but think of both in April as I sat in a lecture by Notre Dame University philosopher Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga has become perhaps the most notable academic proponent of God-driven evolution, and his new book takes that argument a step further to argue it is ultimately naturalistic evolution, not theism, that is incompatible with science.

Plantinga says Darwin's evolution -- the descent of species with modification, driven by natural selection -- does not suggest either way the viability or inviability of theistic faith. God could have, within that system, caused "the right mutations to arise at the right time," guiding evolution so man was still made in the image of God. It is instead "naturalism," the belief in an evolution that is random and undirected, that pushes both the current limits of scientific knowledge and the boundaries of the hard sciences themselves.

If this argument sounds similar to intelligent design, that's understandable. While Plantinga supports the spirit of the movement, he doubts the hypothesis that science can demonstrate the God behind biological complexity. For better or worse, Plantinga's argument sits firmly in philosophy and not in biology.

The hinge of Plantinga's take concerns the evolutionary worth of truth, understanding the world as it is. Under naturalism and evolution, Plantinga argues, the probability that human beings have reliable faculties is rather low. There is no inherent neurological advantage to truth, he posits, and if prominent naturalists Richard Dawkins or Stephen Jay Gould are taken at their word, there is therefore little reason to suspect random mutation produced human faculties with the power to correctly imagine a metaphysics.

If such an idea is true, all human beliefs are subject to weakness, including the belief in naturalism and evolution. For the naturalist, Planting argues, truth is accidental. Therefore, if naturalism were true, we human beings wouldn't have the cognitive function to know so.

Here, Plantinga is generalizing his opponents. Belief in the scientific method is, at root, a belief that knowledge can be decontextualized and evaluated objectively. This model of logical influence stands outside individual human understandings -- in some ways, aggregating them into a system that speaks to truth where feasible and remains silent where evidence suggests less.

However, I think the argument is theologically troublesome as well. It is characteristic of a kind of body-soul dualism to separate truth, in some ways a manifestation of the Holy Spirit in our souls, from the neurobiological output of our brains. Further, it treats truth as this concrete, delineated reality, as though truth were not the accumulation of facts and habits across generations and instances.

Truth is, theologically, Christ himself and goodness itself. Knowledge of truth separates man in that sense, but is (almost by extension) an evolutionary advantage as well. We must fully understand dangers to overcome them. We know each other in order to care for each other. Understanding the world as it is helps us survive.

From both Eden's tree and Kubrick's monolith springs the knowledge that makes the difference for human beings. Whomever, or whatever, put them there, it is the humans themselves who ultimately reached toward that knowledge and accepted it. The reductive notion of a single cause of that leap -- either God or randomness -- fails to consider the breadth of unexplored evolutionary possibilities.

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