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EVOLUTION'S ACHILLES' HEEL?

by R. Scott Smith

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"That's just your interpretation," or *"that's just your opinion."* These are responses heard often when Christians say that Jesus is the only way to God, that homosexual acts and abortion are immoral, or when Christians try to explain why a biblical passage should be interpreted in a certain way. In a culture that has drunk deeply from the wells of relativism, we are accustomed to hearing people dismiss ethical and religious claims with these responses. And with postmodern-ism's influences, people think no one is neutral or unbiased in how they understand and even experience reality. It's as though we have on our interpretive lenses, and we cannot set them aside and peer directly at reality.

Have you ever noticed, however, that people don't respond in the same dismissive manner to the claims of science and scientists? Instead, they usually treat them and their claims with much deference and respect.

That's remarkable, but not unexpected. Here's why: our culture basically lives with the mindset that science uniquely gives us knowledge of truth (the facts), whereas ethics and religion are just personal opinions and preferences (or, at best, inferior knowledge). I call this bifurcation the "fact-value split." So, we'd expect people to respond with postmodern indifference to ethical and religious claims, but not to scientific ones.

Now, the kind of science in mind here is "naturalistic," that is, only what is scientifically knowable is real, which boils down to what is knowable by the five senses. So, in principle, such things as souls, mental states (i.e., nonphysical things like thoughts, beliefs, and experiences), and God cannot be *known* to be real. Or, to simplify, they just don't exist. On the other hand, we can test natural, physical stuff scientifically, so for the most part, that is what is thought to be real. And that is the philosophical understanding of reality that undergirds evolution by natural selection—"naturalism." There's only the physical universe, without a God, souls, or anything essentially nonphysical.¹

NATURALISM: THE ENEMY OF SCIENCE

But what if we found out that we have believed a grand deception? For if evolutionary science were actually telling us the truth about reality, then I think we'd be stuck in an

endless cycle of interpretations, without a way to get started with our interpretations and know how things really are. If I am right, *there is no way that science could give us knowledge if naturalistic evolution were true.*

Separated by Essences

To help show why, I'll start with a core idea about *naturalistic* evolution. It is a denial of *natures*, or *essences*, something nonphysical that was believed to be real until the time of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Aristotle thought there was a "great chain of being," and the differences between a genus (and its species) and another one is due to a common essence, or nature—a principle of life that every member of that "kind" has. So, all dogs have an essential nature to them—"dogness," we might call it—and all humans have a human soul.

But with Darwin's arrival, biological classification came to be seen in terms of one large interconnected "tree of life," in which all living things (past and present) share a common ancestor—without any nonphysical essences or natures that separated living things into kinds. All that counts is what can be empirically known—and nonphysical natures (like a human soul, made in God's image) have come to be seen as holdovers of bygone philosophical and religious views. All living things are made up of just matter, with variations in their arrangements that give rise to different qualities (e.g., the human brain's capacities versus a chimp's).

BLIND CHANCE?

Now, let's take a look at the basic ideas of a leading philosopher, neuroscientist, and New Atheist, Daniel Dennett, who takes naturalistic evolution seriously. He agrees: there are no essences or souls whatsoever; and there are no nonphysical things like thoughts, beliefs, or experiences (like ones we use to make observations).² There's only physical stuff, including brains that do the hard work of processing sensory input.³

For him, natural selection is totally a *blind* process (as described in Richard Dawkins's book *The Blind Watchmaker*)—there is no planning for some goal, thinking about what a desired outcome might be, believing something to be so, or trying to make something happen at all. So, there are *no real intentions* or purposes that natural selection is trying to achieve.⁴

Now, experiences that we use to observe things have an interesting quality—they always are *of* something. For instance, scientists can have experiences of the behavior of a molecule in an experiment. Or, I can have an experience of eating a juicy steak. The same goes for thoughts and beliefs—they are *of* or *about* things. I can think about what movie I want to see, or have a belief about who will win the most gold medals in the Olympics. In fact, try having any of these mental states that are not of or about things!

Yet, physical things do not seem to have this quality. They might be harder than, higher than, or to the left of something else, but they do not seem to be *of* things in the same way these mental states are. So, what is this quality? Often it is called *intentionality*, and it seems to be a unique feature of these mental states.

But with naturalistic evolution, nonphysical mental states aren't real, and so their intentionality also would not be real. There are only brain states and physical patterns, and behavior. Still, it is hard to deny that we do think, form beliefs, and have experiences, because we are so used to doing that. So, Dennett has to come up with a different way to explain them, and his answer is that we simply interpret these physical things as being of something.⁵

Let's note something Dennett admits, but then denies. He says that if there were real, intrinsic essences (something nonphysical that is true of something just because of what *kind* of thing it is—i.e., due to its essential nature), then there could be a “deeper” fact (beyond just behavior) of the matter of what our thoughts (or beliefs, experiences) are *really* about. That is, just due to what those mental states would be essentially, they *really* could be *of* their objects, and not something else.⁶ So, if my thought of a Starbucks Frappuccino had an essence, it really would be about that drink.

But since naturalistic evolution denies any such essences or natures, Dennett says we are left just with *interpreting* the behavior of people (and even sophisticated computers and robots) as being “about” their objects.⁷ But that's all we have to go on—just our interpretations, in which we *attribute* to a person, or a chess-playing computer, thoughts and beliefs about things (like, the next move to make in the chess game, or the errand that needs to be run).⁸ We might put it this way: based on someone's behaviors, we *interpret* them to mean that the person is having thoughts about something, but that is just our way of talking, expressing just how we interpret their behavior, when in reality, there really are no such intentions at all.⁹

Here's the Catch

If we are left with only interpreting actions to mean that a person has thoughts and other experiences that were of something (maybe an errand that needs to be run), there could be many other interpretations, too. Maybe they were of something entirely different (say, a movie on the Hallmark Channel tonight). But, there is *no fact* of the matter to which we can appeal to settle the issue. Dennett admits that for it to be so, there would have to be an essence to the thought's being of something, so that it was indeed about the errand, and not the show.

Without them, we are left only with interpretations, but of what? The only answer available seems to be another interpretation. If we keep pressing that question, we are left with just interpretations of other interpretations, which also are of other interpretations, and so on, without any way to ever get started in just experiencing something as it really is. That's the same predicament postmodernism lands in, without any knowledge and without a way to even get started!¹⁰

Mental States

The problem gets even worse. So far, we've been discussing how we'd interpret others' behavior. To do that, we too would be making observations of *others'* behaviors, then having thoughts and forming beliefs about them, and more. But Dennett tells us that even *our* very experiences, thoughts, and so on cannot *really* be about their intended

objects; we too just *take* them to be about what we observed, but that is just our interpretation. This is because any so-called mental state doesn't have an essence to be about a particular object or subject. If our thoughts and experiences cannot really be about something, then how would we ever come to know how things really are?

Fortunately, that is not at all how we experience life. Our thoughts, beliefs, and experiences we use to make observations seem to have three essential features:

1. They are "particularized." My thought about tonight's dinner, or my experience of drinking a Starbuck's chocolate Vivano smoothie, is not generic or unspecified. In each case, it is about something particular.
2. These mental states must be of or about something. It does not seem we could have a thought, belief, or an experience used in making an observation that lacks this quality. (Again, try having a thought or an experience that isn't about anything.)
3. They also seem to be intrinsic, or essential, to each mental state. My thought about last night's dinner could not be about anything else and still be the thought it is. I could observe the price of gas at the Exxon station, but *that* experience could not have been of my dinner.

So, how do we best explain these three apparently essential features of intentional states? Dennett provides the clue: *if* mental states really had nonphysical essences or natures to them, *then* they *really* could be of their intended objects, which we could know to be the case. Now, these case studies are examples of mental states that *really are* of their intended objects.

That finding, coupled with the conclusion we reached already (that if naturalistic evolution is true, we would be stuck in a never-ending and never-starting cycle of interpretations) should be enough to show us that *naturalistic evolution (and its related view of what is real — naturalism) must be false*. The fact is that we do know many things, and this fact demands a very different view of what is real.

EXPLAINING NONPHYSICAL REALITY

But, what might that "different view" look like? First, it seems it must allow room for essences, like souls for humans and "dogness" for dogs, and even for thoughts, beliefs, and experiences to exist. That means there must be real, nonphysical things. Not everything can be just physical; naturalism is false. Now, the seeming plausibility of naturalistic evolution is that it involves *only* a series of blind processes working on just physical stuff to produce physical changes. But now we would have to factor in nonphysical stuff, including things like human souls, or dogs' "dogness."¹¹ To conclude that we could get these nonphysical things from a purely physical process seems to be wishful thinking.

Second, just having many mental states will not give us knowledge. We also must be able to *use* them. For example, from many experiences, we can form concepts and theories, fix the meaning of terms, and even form beliefs. We also can recall those concepts and beliefs to mind and correct them. But how is that possible? It seems there

must be a deep unity to our minds. And, there must be a strict sameness to who we are throughout time and change, so that we can follow through on a train of thought.¹² We also must be agents who can ponder these things, alter our beliefs, seek out new experiences, and more. In short, it seems we need souls to do all these things.

So, third, this suggests that the best explanation is that there is a God who has endowed us with souls and their abilities to know what is real. And, God has designed us in a way that we can use our thoughts, experiences, and more to come to know many things that are true, which often requires the use of our brains and bodies. For instance, when we use our eyes to look at something, the light reflects off it, causing stimulation of cells in our retina, then in our optic nerve, and finally in the brain. Yet, it also involves nonphysical aspects, such as experiences, and our minds then use these experiences to compare them, draw inferences from them, and much more. We are amazingly and intricately designed, physically and nonphysically, it seems, even to know what is true and real.

All knowledge falls apart on the basis of naturalistic evolution and its closely related philosophy of what's real, naturalism. If you or someone else would like to probe more deeply into these issues, see my new book, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality* (Ashgate). But, please take action as well: pray fervently against this satanic stronghold (2Cor. 10:5); talk and reason with your school boards, especially about how naturalistic evolution that is being taught there cannot be a fact; and reason with people about the false naturalistic basis (i.e., that humans are evolutionary byproducts without an essence) being used to justify abortion and other grave sins in society.

R. Scott Smith, Ph.D., is associate professor of ethics and Christian apologetics at Biola University, and the author of *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality: Testing Religious Truth-claims* (Ashgate, 2012).

NOTES

- 1 Pantheism, the worldview that God and the universe are one and that God (or Spirit, or Mind) is all that exists, is also a type of naturalism, but in the context of Darwinism "naturalism" is used exclusively as a synonym for its subcategory materialism, the worldview that matter is all that exists.
- 2 Daniel C. Dennett, "Dennett, Daniel C.," *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind: Blackwell Companions to Philosophy*, ed. Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 239.
- 3 Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 3rd printing (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 40, 70–71. Note: while I cite from two of his earlier works, these still reflect his current thought. Dennett has told me in correspondence that he has not done "any revolutionary tinkering" with the intentional stance (e-mail, Dec. 1, 2010). He referred me to his essay, "The Evolution of 'Why?'" yet in it he does not seem to adjust his basic thinking on the intentional stance; rather, he seems mainly to use it to help engage with Robert Brandom's work (July 31, 2006, available at <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/Brandom.pdf>). He also referred me to his "Real Patterns," an essay from 1991, which was reproduced in his *Brainchildren: Essays on Designing Minds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998): 95–120). Yet, while that essay seems to clarify his own "stance" about the "reality" of things like beliefs, it does not seem to call into question his basic reasons for adopting the

intentional stance.

- 4 Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 299.
- 5 Ibid., 72–73, 342–43. See also Dennett, “Dennett, Daniel C.,” 239.
- 6 Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 300; see also 319, n. 8.
- 7 Ibid., 72–73.
- 8 Ibid., 239. See also Amy Kind, “The Intentional Stance,” *Dictionary of Philosophy of Mind*, <http://philosophy.uwaterloo.ca/MindDict/intentionalstance.html>, accessed June 27, 2012.
- 9 Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 73.
- 10 For more on postmodernism and this problem, see, e.g., my “‘Emergents,’ Evangelicals, and the Importance of Truth: Some Philosophical and Spiritual Lessons,” In *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent*, ed. William Henard (Nashville: B and H, 2009).
- 11 Here, I have in mind what biologists have called “natural kinds” — and I think this fits with the biblical statement that God made each living creature after its kind (e.g., Genesis 1:21, 24).
- 12 By a “strict sameness,” I am talking about how I can be the same person now who was married in 1984, used to have blond hair (but now it is graying), and used to not be able to understand much of philosophy, but now has developed that capacity. Sameness of body cannot keep me as the same person, for a body’s cells always are changing. So, what can maintain my sameness, or my “personal identity”? I think the best explanation is that I have an essential set of capacities (my essence) that remain the same through time and change, although those capacities can be developed or blocked. I have developed abilities to think philosophically, but I could lose them if, e.g., I develop dementia. Yet, I am the same person through all those changes due to the sameness of my essence, or soul.