

Daniel Cox
Religion and Evolution – Why I’m not a “New” Atheist

As someone who studies philosophy, physics, and biology, even at the undergraduate level, I honestly have very little interest in the alleged “controversy” between evolution and religion. One might expect someone who studies both philosophy and science to be wholly mesmerized by this debate—which some might see as the two disciplines’ only point of contact—but the more I study the philosophy of theology and the science of biology, the more the desire to engage in this debate fades away.

However, this was not always the case. Not even a year ago, I was captivated by these debates and thought this really was a significant cultural battle worth my attention. Along the way from then until now, I have acquired some new ideas and ways of thinking about theology, and these have ultimately reinforced the idea in my mind that, although this indeed is a cultural battle sweeping the West, the debate between religion and evolution is a complete waste of my time. This is the case because I am now convinced that the entire argument relies upon a misunderstanding of the classical concept of God, a misunderstanding that has ultimately led to the “creation science” movement, on the one hand, and to the rise of “new” atheism, on the other.

Initially, there appears to be at least two different angles by which one can approach this topic: the scientific and the theological. Up until about a year ago, I had only approached from the scientific angle. From this side of the controversy, I found it extremely difficult to see how evolutionary theory was somehow wrong in one or all of its most fundamental claims, and I also found it extremely difficult to see how one could support a conception of God that was somehow at odds with this theory in biology that I found so compelling in its explanatory power. I was ultimately led to embrace atheism (or agnosticism, depending on their definitions) in response to this conception of God that I thought was the last living remnant of ancient superstition and myth. I was fully ready and willing to subscribe to the fundamental canon of “new” atheism: “Everyone is an atheist to Zeus, Apollo, and Thor. Atheism simply goes one god further.”

In the past year, however, I’ve turned my attention much more closely to the theological angle and to the topic of God. My research in philosophy has revealed ideas that have completely changed my attitude and understanding of the concepts of God and theology, while also further cementing my endorsement of evolutionary theory in biology.

First, I’d like to briefly sketch out some of the reasons I continue to endorse evolutionary theory from the scientific angle. If asked, I would have given these same reasons a year ago.

The more I study biology, the more convinced I become that evolutionary theory is the most supported and foundational idea in all of biology. In other words, the vast, vast majority (if not all) of scientific findings in biology make absolutely no sense unless the paradigm of evolutionary theory is available to provide a context within which these findings can be situated. In biology, evolutionary theory is not a small fruit of an idea that sits at the top of the “tree of biological science,” so-to-speak, that remains more-or-less irrelevant to the entire tree and that may simply be plucked out and replaced eventually with a budding new one. Instead, evolutionary theory is at the very base of the tree, serving as its trunk and roots, and to remove it would be to change everything at the top.

It has been said before and I will repeat it now: if anyone can look at the available evidence in biology, or perhaps acquire new evidence, and use it to show how and why evolutionary theory is wrong in its most basic and fundamental claims—that the expressed traits of an organism are related to the organism's genes, that within a population of a species the genes will be slightly different from organism to organism due to genetic mutations, that genes are heritable, and that organisms with different expressed traits will have different levels of success when trying to reproduce—then this individual would change the world, in addition to winning a Nobel prize. In more than a century and a half, no one has yet to unearth the roots of evolutionary theory, and I am convinced that this will never occur. Is it possible that evolutionary theory could be overturned? Every scientist would have to say yes. But this is in fact why the scientific method has worked so well: science does not deal in the black and white dichotomy of “certainly true” or “certainly false,” but rather in the grey area between them, in the area that tries to fit the available data into the *most likely* explanatory model, which, at best, can provide us with “most likely true” or “most likely false.” Scientists endorse evolutionary theory because it is the *most likely* explanatory model for virtually all observations made in the realm of biological science.

Believe it or not, I am actually not here to approach this topic from the scientific angle, although I would be willing to discuss the scientific angle more thoroughly with anyone who has any questions after this is over. I am here to talk about the theological angle, and how my understanding of the relationship between God and science has changed over the past year.

The more I study the philosophy of religion and theology, the more convinced I become that, in order for God to be in opposition to evolution, God would need to be defined in a very specific way, a way that breaks away from the classical understanding of God. If God is defined such that, by its very nature, God is incapable of physically interacting in our universe—i.e. God is incapable of being the “efficient cause” of phenomena like Dr. Hassell mentioned—then there would not and could not be a controversy between this conception of God and evolutionary theory, because the entire basis of “creation science” relies upon a conception of God that physically interacts in our universe and specifically crafted all of the organisms we see on planet Earth. In the end, it all comes down to what the word “God” is referring to.

Like I've said, I considered myself among the most fundamental of atheist's about a year ago. I had to know whether or not God exists, and so I was on a mission to seek out all of the arguments for the existence of God and systematically destroy them. One by one, I used my understanding of science and logic to knock down each successive argument. But one does not judge an army by its weakest soldier, and similarly, I thought it dishonest to judge the entire edifice of theology by the arguments given by creationists, which I saw as the weakest arguments for the existence of God. On this mission to find and dismantle the strongest arguments for God, I eventually encountered a book—no not *that* book—that changed my entire thought process about what it is that classical theology and the study of God is aiming to do. This book is called *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* by David Bentley Hart, and I highly recommend everyone interested in the topics of God, science, philosophy, and their relationship to read it immediately. I have read many books since then that have further developed my understanding of classical theology, but Hart's book was the first and thus had the most profound impact. The main aim of the book is to introduce a conception of God that was mainstream before the period of history known as modernity, and in so doing, explain why this concept affords us with a much richer ability to explain reality when compared with the inevitable conclusions that result from the ideas expressed by the “new” atheists.

We've already heard from Dr. Hassell about some of the ways in which pre-moderns like Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Avicenna, and others understood the concept of God, which should strike us all as extremely different than the ways in which God is predominantly understood in the Western world today. The main implication that should be taken from the pre-modern concept of God is that it was in no way at odds with scientific findings (or "natural philosophy," as it was called). Looking out into nature and trying to explain phenomena was seen as one method among many of reaching out to God by striving towards Understanding and Truth.

In contrast to the creationist agenda seen in America, the pre-moderns did not try to prove the existence of God by subjecting God strictly to deductive or inductive analysis. God was not conceived of as some sort of contingent being that was out in the universe somewhere and that existed and interacted alongside planets, stars, humans, and bacteria, waiting to be identified by a rigorous process of cataloging nature. Instead, God, as an abstract, metaphysical concept, functioned as a way to make sense of the predicament of reality. Without their understanding of God, the pre-moderns would have lost their ability to explain Existence, Beauty, Truth, Knowledge, and other abstract concepts.

In essence, the pre-modern conception of God and theology was their way of understanding the reality of nature and thus the nature of reality. As we've heard, this concept was changed as history progressed following the preeminent scholars of classical theism. The abstract, qualitatively transcendent concept of God was eventually replaced with a God of imminence, which began to be conceived of as an anthropomorphic being out in space and time that is able to physically interact with nature. It is this relatively brand new conception of God that has led to the creationist position that God is a type of "thing" out in the cosmos that literally creates organisms independently of evolution.

It is safe to say that the pre-modern theologians would reject the conception of God that is present in religion versus evolution debates, immediately labeling it as a false idol. This claim can be made because the God of American creationism, in virtue of its contingent characteristics, would have been automatically put in the same category as other contingent beings in the universe that subsist in time and space.

The entire debate of religion versus evolution would not have been seen as an activity that was related at all to the pre-moderns' understanding of God, except perhaps insofar as each side of the debate is striving towards Truth, which alone would have satisfied an acknowledgement of God, as the pre-moderns understood it. The debate over evolution would have been seen as an activity in natural philosophy regarding the cataloging of nature to the classical theologians, and so there would have been no motivation for the pre-moderns to reject the findings of science in response to their theological commitments.

To the pre-moderns, God was not a concept that was simply thought up one day to explain the diversity of life or to name the first efficient cause of the universe. God was seen as the transcendent source of Meaning, Truth, Beauty, Existence, and more, and was a concept reached by many different theologians in many different parts of the world in many different ideologies. While this definition is likely to strike us moderns as a completely esoteric and irrelevant conception of God that is striving toward vacuity—and it certainly seemed that way to me for a while—I am now of the opinion that the pre-modern conception of God is not only comprehensible but potentially offers us a much richer philosophical methodology for explaining reality.

So, why am I not a “new” atheist? Because the question of God that interests me is not regarding whether or not *one more god* alongside Zeus, Apollo, and Thor is out in the universe waiting to be identified by science. With respect to the conception of God that is capable of being a competing explanation for the diversity of life we see on planet Earth, I join the atheists and the pre-modern theologians in denying the existence of such a thing.

The real question that interests me is how to avoid nihilism. This is ultimately what separates the “new” atheism embodied by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and the rest from the atheism seen in the writing of Friedrich Nietzsche, who we can say represents “old” atheism. Nietzsche realized that with the death of God came the death of meaning itself, and so atheism, as Nietzsche saw it, was really a mask for nihilism, which is the inevitable result of the loss of God’s transcendence. In *A Short History of Atheism*, Gavin Hyman writes:

“It has been common to present Friedrich Nietzsche as the thinker who brought atheism to its final fruition. But this is misleading. For Nietzsche, ‘truth’ was an effect of theism, and the death of the latter entails also the death of the former. Insofar as atheism represents a truth claim, it is as problematic as is theism. Both theism and atheism, therefore, are casualties of Nietzsche’s death of God.”

I am not a “new” atheist because “new” atheism is a reaction to a specifically modern conception of God that would have been seen as a false idol to the pre-moderns. The “new” atheists have yet to realize that a full-fledged atheism, Nietzsche’s atheism, which is the denial of God’s transcendence, entails a strict nihilism once fully illuminated and brought to its inevitable conclusion.

Until the pre-modern concept of God comes under fire by the “new” atheists, “new” atheism is not actually about any sophisticated or interesting version of theology at all. It is targeting the weakest arguments for the existence of some thing out in the universe named “God” and painting all of theology with the same brush. Insofar as “new” atheism acknowledges theology that is not in conflict with evolution, this theology is labeled as a watered-down and diluted version of American creationism, which to them represents theism in its fullest form.

In the end, “new” atheism is predominantly engaged in an activity of trying to educate a group of people about basic concepts in biology and science, which is a task that can be done with equal force by those that align themselves with the classical conception of God seen in the pre-modern era. While the task of educating the public about basic science is indeed needed in our country where almost half of the citizens believe that the earth is only 6,000 years old and was crafted by an autonomous and aware super-being named “God,” it is not a task that requires one to abandon any notion of God or theology as such. As the pre-moderns would have it, the task of educating the public about science requires an acknowledgement of Truth and thus an acknowledgement of God.

Paper presented to the “Religion and Evolution” event,
Religious Studies, Oakland University February 12, 2015

