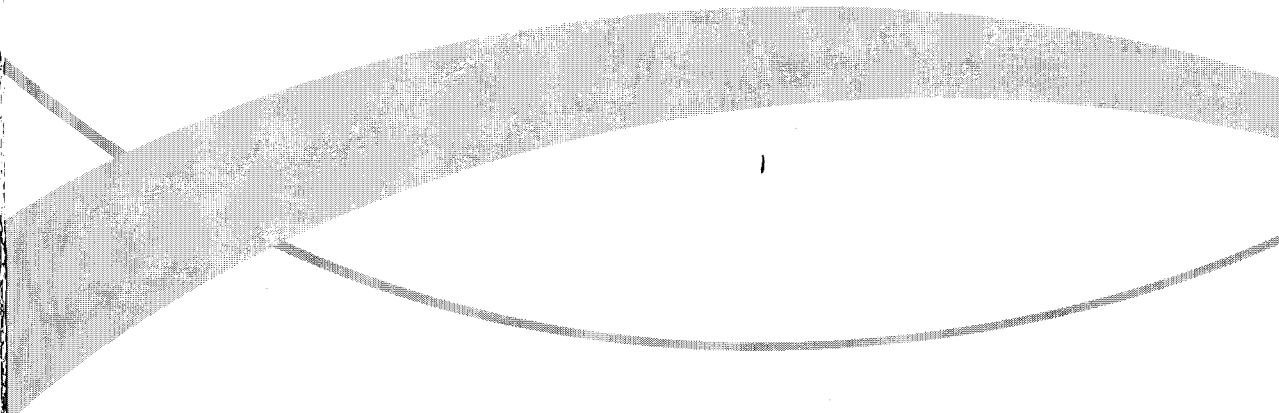


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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

Faith and Atheism

ARTICLES

- 1 Understanding Atheism—Theological Perspectives
David Fergusson
- 15 Jesus, God and Atheism: Sharing a cultural space for conversation between faith and unbelief
Geoff Thompson
- 29 After the Dust has Settled: On Dawkinsian scholarship in *The God Delusion*
Garry W. Trompf
- 41 From Religion in Politics to the Politics of Religion: Beyond liberal obfuscation
Remy Low
- 51 God Under Gillard: What difference does it make when the nation's leader is an atheist?
Marion Maddox
- 65 The Paradoxical Self and the Necessity of God: Reading Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of non-theism as a critique of theism
Mark Gingerich
- 75 Does Scientific Inquiry Preclude Belief in God? Science and religion in Australian media
Neil Ormerod
- 83 Uncertainty in Science and Belief in God
George Emeleus
- 91 Questioning the Gods? Religious diversity and atheism in public life
John G. Quilter

CONTRIBUTORS

ABOUT UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

What is important in this vignette is that it was the man of faith, a Jesuit priest, who provided the theoretical account that matched the empirical evidence, while it was the atheist who resisted that account because of his ideological commitment to atheism, developing an alternative account with no empirical basis, and holding on to it well after conclusive evidence had convinced most in the field of his error. This is not a story of atheistic and scientific reason slaying the irrational man of faith, but quite the opposite. Hoyle's atheism blinded him to the evidence and caused him to reject the scientific advance made by Lemaître. Commentators have indeed suggested that Lemaître's faith made him more open to the possibility of a universe with a finite existence, and hence more open to follow where good theory and mounting evidence took him.

The other interesting thing to note here is that the notion of a Big Bang allowed the metaphor of evolution to be extended well beyond the realm of the biological world where it originally resided to provide an account of the universe as a whole. Not only did life evolve on our planet, the whole universe 'evolved' over a period of some 13 to 15 billion years. This goes beyond theories of natural selection and genetic inheritance, to uncover a dynamic within the cosmos towards greater complexification.²⁵ It is precisely this sort of possibility that inflamed the religious vision of Teilhard de Chardin, and continues to inform the thinking of theistic evolutionists ever since. Lemaître's discovery has changed the way we view the whole universe, far beyond the original scope of Darwin's insight into biological evolution.

Conclusion

These three stories are good examples of people of faith making significant contributions to the development of modern science and the way we look at the world, Mendel in the field of genetics, de Chardin in the area of human evolution, and Lemaître in the area of modern cosmology. One might go so far as to say each contribution was ground-breaking. Each was supported by their religious community to pursue their scientific endeavours, and each was deeply committed to their Christian faith, leading lives of regular prayer, liturgy and other forms of religious observance. Their scientific work was not seen as problematic or outrageous by Church authorities, though de Chardin's non-scientific writings did cause him problems.²⁶ In fact the Catholic Church in particular has a long history of supporting people in scientific research, a point tacitly admitted by Dawkins, particularly through religious orders such as the Jesuits. There is a larger story here to tell of Christian support for scientific research and we need to reappropriate this history as a counter-narrative to the dominant ideology that faith and science are implacably opposed.

²⁵ Here one could refer to Bernard Lonergan's metaphysics of emergent probability as providing a more precise and systematic metaphysics to account for the larger process of complexification observable in the universe. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Crowe Frederick E. and Robert M. Doran, Vol. 3, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992, esp. ch. 4.

²⁶ In fact Lemaître was elected to the Pontifical Academy of Science in 1934, and became its president in 1960. His work on the Big Bang received special mention by Pope Pius XII.

Uncertainty in Science and Belief in God

George Emeleus

The elusive horizon of the sublime

One obvious argument for the plausibility of atheism is the ability of science to provide natural explanations of phenomena once regarded as supernatural, and once responded to in superstitious ways. If a person takes the position that anything we can give meaning to is at least in principle accessible to scientific investigation, then scientific progress dooms the supernatural to inevitable and final redundancy. Such atheist belief is in tension with the belief shared by many people that human awareness and ability to understand will always encounter boundaries and limitations. It is also in tension with the widely shared intuition that the universe and all in it, including human life, have some sort of deeper meaning and purpose. Scientific method, however, neither invokes nor explores questions of ultimate purpose or meaning. In this paper I raise questions about limits of scientific methodology, about the uncertain nature of nature itself, and about how we use language in scientific and religious discourse. I argue that it is consistent with scientific insights that on their own they will continue to leave humankind in a position of agnosticism, and that intuition and imagination will for ever point beyond current knowledge. When imagination is open to the unknown and unknowable, whether in science or religion, productive conversation between them is possible.

In his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins writes that it may be possible to be religious without belief in the supernatural. Many people would identify with his observation that 'a quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists'.¹ He then makes the more questionable assertion that such a response has 'no connection with supernatural belief'. Dawkins himself, as a scientist and rationalist who shares that common sense of awe, recognizes it as religious in character. To make this point he quotes Einstein's thoughts on what religion meant to him, and finds resonance with his own religious experience.

To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. In this sense I am religious.' Dawkins continues: 'In this sense I too am religious, with the reservation that 'cannot grasp' does not have to mean 'forever ungraspable'.²

I sense a certain wistful faith on Dawkins' part—a hopefulness that humankind is, at least in principle, on the road towards a grand 'theory of everything'. However, I believe that to be highly unlikely, for at

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London, Bantam, 2006, p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

least three inter-related reasons.

Firstly, the human mind may remain inescapably limited, even amongst the most creative and technologically supported parts of humankind. Indeed, it may be incapable of ever constructing a true 'theory of everything', even if 'everything' is assumed to be limited to that which is potentially accessible to scientific investigation. No doubt there will be insights and understandings developed in the future which are beyond our imagination today. Questions for research will arise that we do not even know to ask today. However, on experience to date, answers to research questions are more likely to raise more questions than to bring knowledge to some sort of satisfactory completeness.

Secondly, there is much in human experience that resists rational explanation, and may well for ever do so. It is, for example, perfectly possible to construct an explanatory scaffold of sociological, psychological and other scientific insights around the deeply significant experiences of relationship which are so important to being human. However, these insights do not make up the experiences themselves.

Thirdly, nature itself is often on trajectories that are open-ended, for ever creating and revealing the new and the unpredictable. In that case too, that 'something that our mind cannot grasp' may for ever alluringly appear on the retreating horizons of human awareness.

Reducing anything and everything to laws and component parts of which we have understanding—be they laws of physics, atoms, neurons, or something else—is increasingly understood as an inadequate way of understanding much in nature. The last few decades have seen development of a deeper understanding of how and why so much we are aware of has inherent uncertainty and open-endedness. It is to this contemporary challenge to reductionist thinking which we now turn.

The end of certainty and some limits of science

In the last few hundred years, there have been several occasions where particularly successful science has led to popular extrapolation of ideas well beyond where their applicability was properly established. For example, in the mid seventeenth century, Descartes speculated that the bodies of animals, including humans, could be regarded as complicated machines governed by the laws of physics.³ By the end of that century, the extraordinary success of Newton's mathematical formulation of mechanics further encouraged mechanical, deterministic, reductionist ways of imagining nature. In such a view, since universal laws determine how the universe changes over time, if sufficient is known about its present state, its history may be deduced and future predicted. Similarly, the laws of physics which control man-made machines were supposed to control all features of nature imagined as machine-like. Most of nature, however, is immensely more complicated than the gross astronomical features dealt with by celestial mechanics, or than machines ever devised by humans. This is particularly obvious with life.

³ John Hadley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, ch. IV, 'Divine Activity in a Mechanical Universe', pp. 117–51.

The tension between a deterministic world-view and the behaviour of living beings reaches its most acute form in human decision making and action. It is a tension which has exercised philosophers and theologians alike. As Ilya Prigogine, who was awarded the 1977 Chemistry Nobel Prize for his work on non-equilibrium thermodynamics notes:

Again and again, the great thinkers in Western traditions, such as Immanuel Kant, Alfred North Whitehead, and Martin Heidegger, felt they had to make a tragic choice between an alienating science or an antiscientific philosophy. They attempted to find some compromise, but none proved to be satisfactory.⁴

A possible reason for the lack of satisfactory deterministic explanation of how living organisms function is to say that the amount of information required is simply too great to retrieve or to compute. However, the assumption that underlying determinism exists and is only hidden by human limitations is not necessarily correct. If it is not correct, it becomes a barrier to deeper insights into the relationship between the behaviours of living organisms and their underlying physical functioning. Karl Popper identifies the depth of this problem when it comes to understanding what it is to be human:

I regard Laplacian⁵ determinism—confirmed as it may seem to be by the prima facie deterministic theories of physics, and by their marvellous success—as the most solid and serious obstacle to our understanding and justifying the nature of human freedom, creativity, and responsibility.⁶

During the last century, the limits of conditions under which the laws of physics support determinism have been increasingly understood. In the 1920s, the development of quantum mechanics showed that on the atomic scale matter behaves probabilistically, and the determinism assumed by classical physics depends on averaging atomic-level probabilities over the very large numbers of atoms found in everyday size objects. By the last few decades of the twentieth century, it became increasingly apparent that deterministic descriptions also fail for many complex entities, including all living things. Determinism is typically derived from 'bottom up' descriptions. With a machine this works, because its behaviour is determined by how its parts are designed, how they interact and what energy is available. For a machine, a complete description of behaviour in terms of matter, energy and design is possible. Such a description is, however, complete in a specific and limited sense. In particular, it does not address the almost limitless context of human consciousness and inventiveness which led to its conception and construction, and the multiple ways in which its construction and use affect the total earth environment. A great many things in nature, including ourselves and our human affairs are not even amenable in principle to a closed, reductionist description of behaviour. We say they have 'irreducible complexity', meaning that we cannot simply reduce how they are and what they do to the sum of their parts, and ultimately to

⁴ Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos and the New Laws of Nature*, New York, Free Press, 1997, p. 10.

⁵ The idea that an intellect with sufficient knowledge to use the laws of physics to determine the future is formally ascribed to Laplace.

⁶ Quoted in Prigogine, *The End of Certainty*, p. 14.

their atoms, and how they are put together. Disciplined study 'of the whole' is providing some insights into how and in what ways the whole is more than the sum of the parts. In human decision making, for example, it is increasingly cogently argued that it is quite inadequate to claim 'my genes made me do it', or even that 'my neurons made me do it'.⁷ There are higher levels of reality at play, in which the very complex interaction between our physical bodies, or total environment and an immense domain of coded information (language, culture and much else) makes genuinely unpredictable choice possible, at least to some extent. Scientific method itself has, of course, advanced and developed to take this complexity into account so that it is now at least partly possible to integrate coded information into scientific descriptions of what is going on. It requires holistic disciplines which have particularly flourished in the last few decades. These range from the big picture disciplines of ecology, through to more detailed work with complex systems theory, cybernetics, non-equilibrium thermodynamics and non-linear mathematics. Because complex systems occur so widely, including entities as diverse as global weather, human affairs such as financial markets and, as already noted, all life, complexity and how the new emergences have become a major area of research.⁸

In humans, as in all living organisms, the material domain is represented by many layers of complexity, from atoms and molecules to cells and the body as a whole. The domain of coded information is present at the molecular level as accumulated 'memory' of evolutionary past recorded in genes and related body chemistry. Coded information is also present at the higher and more rapidly responsive level of memory, consciousness and culture. Carolyn King describes these two domains as 'two different forms of reality', each of which is essential to life:

The interactions between (the material and coded information domains) are unimaginably complicated, but essential to life in the every day. Over time they are the source of all natural, historical and cultural diversity.⁹

Her statement is widely accepted science, but her reference to 'source' may also be read as pointing to a theological significance, as Arthur Peacocke suggests:

Would it be too much to suggest that these new, emergentist monist insights into the inbuilt creativity of our world through its complexifying and self-organizing capacities open up a vista of continuity between the physical, the mental and the spiritual which could in this new century, break down the parallel barricades mounted in the last, both between the 'two cultures' of the sciences and the humanities—and between the experiences of nature and of God, the sciences and religion?¹⁰

⁷ Nancy Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁸ 'Santa Fe Institute', <http://www.santafe.edu/>. Accessed 15 June 2011. One research centre is the Santa Fe Institute for the Study of Complexity. A search of its resident and external faculty gives insight into the scope of current research on complex systems.

⁹ Carolyn M. King, 'Interpretation of Complexity in Nature: Teilhard to Maynard Smith', in *Creation and Complexity: Interdisciplinary Issues in Science and Religion*, ed. Christine Ledger and Stephen Pickard, Adelaide, ATF Press, 2004, p. 59.

¹⁰ Arthur Peacocke, 'Complexity, Emergence, and Divine Creativity', in *From Complexity to Life: On the Emergence of Life and Meaning*, ed. Neils Henrik Gregersen, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 202.

Embracing unity and an open-ended future

Developing insight into how complex entities evolve and new forms of being emerge, offers a conceptual framework which draws the physical sciences, life sciences and humanities into a single unity. In particular, it offers a way of conceptualizing continuity between biological and cultural evolution, including evolution of human reflective consciousness.¹¹ Once reflective consciousness is recognized as an emergent attribute, so too is spiritual awareness, at least in the sense which Peacocke describes:

These emergent properties include...mental and personal ones and, I would add, spiritual ones—by which I mean the capacity to relate personally to that Ultimate Reality that is the source and ground of all existence...and in English that reality is 'God'.¹²

The concepts of complexity and emergence challenge the view that that the total universe may ultimately be explained in terms of matter, energy and the laws of physics. Science does give a robust description of how material things, whether living or non-living, do depend on this underlying physics for their embodiment. However, there are also emergent characteristics which do not follow these laws or, indeed, any specific laws,¹³ and which may take on a 'life of their own', independent of their original embodiment. Human creativity, for example, leads to abundant cultural expressions which evolve in different ways in different cultural environments. Such cultural expressions may be preserved and transmitted on many platforms, and there is no obvious reason why some could not continue to evolve in non-human environments of consciousness which may yet evolve, or of which we are unaware.

Even in its present form, understanding of complexity points towards open-ended trajectories of evolution of life and culture. It is credible that in future new and currently unimagined levels of being may emerge, or may be recognized as present all along. So imagined, the age-old intuitive dualisms between body and soul, the natural and supernatural and the material and spiritual may be subsumed into evolving awareness of a greater reality. Neither the natural nor the supernatural needs be subordinated to or explained by the other, but each as presently conceived may be seen as a limited expression of that something greater which Einstein expressed—'something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection'. Others may choose the language of religious tradition.

An open door for conversation?

Recognition that there are limits to human comprehension and that there are deeply embedded uncertainties in nature itself are no reason to hold back from exploring issues often held to be particularly sacred, such as the origins of the universe or the beginnings of life. Rather, it is recognition that there is no fundamental incompatibility between scientific thinking and belief that, in and beyond that which

¹¹ The emphasis here is on 'conceptualizing'. Many features and significant gaps, such as the beginnings of life and the nature of consciousness, remain scientifically unresolved foci of active research.

¹² Peacocke, 'Complexity, Emergence, and Divine Creativity', pp. 197–98.

¹³ James Crutchfield and Karoline Wiesner, 'Simplicity and Complexity', *Physics World*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2010, pp. 36–8.

is accessible to scientific investigation, there is something more enduring and ultimate. Such recognition also suggests that it would be unwise to shut out the possibility of deeper layers of being and becoming, for there is likely much more going on than we currently have a rational grasp of, or indeed may ever have. It also is no excuse to avoid critical thought on the perceived supernatural in religious traditions. In engaging with our religious heritages, there are numerous questions which need to be asked, and are asked. These include questions about the cultures and world views within which sacred scriptures were formed, the use of language in religious tradition and expression, the evolution of liturgy and ritual, the many ways in which these are received and given expression today, and how beliefs influence how people live individually, in community, and in the wider world. Indeed, variations of these questions may be asked of all human heritage.

I believe that I am not advocating for belief in God based on unresolved gaps in scientific knowledge, nor from belief in imprints of intelligent guidance in evolution. Rather, I believe that the 'something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection' permeates *all* that we can be aware of—the physical universe and all in it—and that which humans might yet become aware of, and indeed that which humans may never be aware of. When the limitations of both science and religion are accepted, and each is open to critical thought and creative imagination, I am convinced that each has much to learn from the other. However, even when there is such openness, there is still much work to do in order to enable constructive conversation, not least in exploring how language is used in different kinds of discourse. Scientific use of language is quite specific and limited in aim. Scientific work depends on observational evidence which may either support or not support a hypothesis or a theory. In this context, true or false, real or imaginary, or probable within limits, are all descriptions with specific meaning, usually linked to mathematical modelling and statistical analyses. In contrast, the language we use for how we feel about each other, or how we experience much else in life, commonly requires metaphor, analogy and other ways of speaking which are not literally true. The fruits of imagination so expressed attempt to describe experientially real and often shared feelings and perceptions for which the language of true and false may be entirely inappropriate. The difficulty of finding language to express intuition of the unknown and unknowable is even greater. In Einstein's saying which we have already quoted, he uses the metaphor of a 'feeble reflection' to express his intuition that there is a greater, sublime and beautiful 'something' which is beyond our human understanding. It is the same metaphor used by St. Paul long before, when he described his awareness of God as like 'puzzling reflections in a mirror'.¹⁴ As Simon Oliver observes:

One of the most obvious ways in which we speak of God is figuratively or metaphorically. We might understand metaphor in a number of ways, but most generally it should be observed that metaphors are literally false. Yet they certainly carry a weight of truth which we would struggle to express in purely literal speech.¹⁵

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 13: 12. New English Bible translation.

¹⁵ Simon Oliver, 'What is Radical Orthodoxy?' in *The Radical Orthodox Reader*, ed. John Milbank and Simon Oliver, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 14.

This openness to accept a possible 'weight of truth' beyond rational thought and literal speech did not present difficulty to theologians and philosophers in pre-modern times. In modern thought, however, the tendency to deny reality to anything that cannot at least in principle be grasped using scientific methods is an expression of the limiting power with which concepts, and particularly scientific concepts, sometimes are endowed. James K. A. Smith reflects on what he sees as the 'violence of concepts' in limiting imagination and in failure to accept the limitations of language in a great many areas of human consciousness, including religious consciousness. Writing on this inadequacy in language he observes that:

In modernity ... philosophy attempts to make up for this failure by reducing the phenomenon to the measure of the concept. In other words, while the medieval accept, even celebrate, the inadequacy of the concept, moderns cannot tolerate it. They refuse the inadequacy of concepts and guarantee their adequation by reducing the object to the measure of the concept. And it is precisely this 'cutting-down-to-size' which constitutes what I am describing as the 'violence' of the concept.¹⁶

It is this denial of any sort of reality to that which does not fit in to scientific concepts¹⁷ which fuels much of the current conflict expressed in public forums and in writings on atheism which are dismissive of belief in God. The unknowns and uncertainties exposed and celebrated in sciences in the last few decades, and postmodern critiques of how language is used each make it both possible and reasonable to move on from the dead hand of such expressions of modernity. In theology, too, contemporary understanding of the cosmos presents immense challenges to how we imagine God to be, and how we imagine God to be present and active within it. It is one thing to be open to belief in 'something which our minds cannot grasp' and which nevertheless pervades all that we are aware of. It is quite another to re-imagine the God of religious traditions in ways coherent with contemporary scientific cosmology, and to interpret those traditions in ways which may be clearly recognised as important and life-changing today. That is an ongoing task on which theologians have been engaged in every age. Reflecting on the seminal, or 'axial' period of development of human consciousness two to three millennia ago, and the great world religions, including Judaism and Christianity which were founded in that period, Ilia Delio states the challenge to contemporary Christian belief in stark terms.

We are faced with an immense problem today if Christianity is to survive. We are operating out of a Christology of the first axial period consciousness, devised in an outmoded cosmology that is no longer relevant to our world.¹⁸

This challenge has been taken up over many years both by theologians who are well informed on contemporary scientific cosmology, and by people with scientific background who have transitioned

¹⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of the Incarnation*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 5.

¹⁷ Scientific theories and models present a similar problem. They provide frameworks for deducing new possibilities, but how they are formulated imposes limits on what is deducible from them. Sometimes progress requires imagining beyond the theory, no matter how successful and well accepted it is.

¹⁸ Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 2008, p. 31.

into theological studies and research. To those who will see, there is already lively and productive critical discourse between science and theology supported by a wealth of resources and continually challenged by new ideas.