

Resolved: Science Has Made God Redundant

by James Como (October 2015)

As I write I am invited to speak at the Belfast C. S. Lewis Festival in November. The gig may yet fall through, but if it does not, then, in addition to the opening address and an after-breakfast talk, I am expected to debate, speaking in opposition to the title above. Now, if this were an academic debate, the affirmative side would have spoken first, making (we would expect) at least a *prima facie* case in favor of the proposition, in which light I wonder: Would it have treated God as our omnipotent, omniscient, loving creator? Would it have shown Him to *be* redundant? Would it have demonstrated science to be the *agency* of that redundancy? These are their requirements for proof.

But what of God's existence in the first place? The proposition makes that stipulation, but the opposition might nevertheless go so far as to claim there is no God. In that case I at once invoke an unlikely figure. The once-notorious atheist Anthony Flew has come around and told us, convincingly, why he did so in his *There is a God*. There Flew concludes that "the idea of an omnipresent Spirit is not intrinsically incoherent if we see such a Spirit as an agent outside space and time that uniquely executes its intentions in the spatio-temporal continuum." He ends by quoting David Conway, from *The Rediscovery of Wisdom*:

. . . there are no good philosophical arguments for denying God to be the explanation of the universe. . . . This being so, there is no good reason for philosophers not to return once more to the classical conception of their subject.

My final preliminary would be a caveat. It matters that we not confuse technology with science: invention is not discovery. If the affirmative side claims that because our robot overlords can beat good players at chess or at Jeopardy and therefore those overlords have replaced God, then I say to them: happy praying, and maybe change your reading and movie-going habits.

Now, I am after a Cerberus, that three-headed Hound of Hell. Its *first* head is that old dog Scientism – science *as a tool in the service of this or that cause*

rather than for its own sake. Its *third* head is more ferocious still, science (much of it) as it represents itself today: a crypto-theology, *science no longer a Method but a Movement*. And the second head, the one in the middle? Well, that is this Congregation of scientists, of course, and their fellow-travelers (philosophers, faux-philosophers, arrogant academics, agitprop meisters, and the like) who command the other two and do the biting.

And it is precisely the barking of that second head that compels me to ask: Are you as amused by our proposition as am I? For surely it is not God who is redundant (let alone dead) but Movement Science that is becoming more irrelevant with each half-generation, and obviously so. It doesn't know it yet, of course. And Lord knows what more damage it will have wrought before it bows down; but it is on its way. I affirm that belief confidently because of ludicrous statements like the following, made with a straight face in "The Moral Imperative for Bioethics" (the *Boston Globe*, August 1, 2015) by Steven Pinker, the experimental psychologist and cognitive scientist:

A truly ethical bioethics should not bog down research in red tape, moratoria, or threats of prosecution based on nebulous but sweeping principles such as 'dignity,' 'sacredness,' or 'social justice.' Nor should it thwart research that has likely benefits now or in the near future by sowing panic about speculative harms in the distant future. These include perverse analogies with nuclear weapons and Nazi atrocities, science-fiction dystopias like *Brave New World* and 'Gattaca,' and freak-show scenarios like armies of cloned Hitlers, people selling their eyeballs on eBay, or warehouses of zombies to supply people with spare organs. Of course, individuals must be protected from identifiable harm, but we already have ample safeguards for the safety and informed consent of patients and research subjects.

I'm delighted to know, really, that Pinker considers the harvesting and selling of spare organs a "freak show," not least since Planned Parenthood is doing just that; so for the moment I will lay aside his inventory of "perverse analogies." Instead I will ask about those words that he encloses in sneer quotes: *dignity*, *sacredness*, and *social justice*. How can a science based on such a philosophy – Nihilistic? Solipsistic? Atheistic? Demented? – last? Last, that is, as long as thinking people understand it for what it is?

Here I anticipate two objections. The first is that Pinker provides low-hanging fruit (no matter his prominence), C. S. Lewis pre-emptively having pinned him to the mat long ago in his *The Abolition of Man*. There Lewis warned against the end of “freedom and dignity” – a decade or so before B. F. Skinner wrote a book promoting just that called *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. (*Plus ça change . . .*) Sure, these days who remembers Skinner (though his Behaviorism did have its day), but people who do not know the particular Lewis book do know Pinker. Meanwhile, the Princeton Professor of Bioethics (Peter Singer) advocates infanticide . . .

The second objection is that my tri-partite charge – always mischievously represented as attack against science per se – is a defensive contrivance. “Natural Philosophy” was not always suspect, might say the affirmative side, but, as a self-conscious tool of discovery, from its modern, empirical, experimental re-boot in the seventieth century through its full-flexing all-there-is-to-know-is-ours-to-find mode during the Enlightenment, it became more and more suspect – but only because it became more and more robust. *And a good thing it did, too*, we are told. We stopped burning witches, didn’t we? And invented all sorts of wonderful machines and medicines that could accomplish what prayer to Him did not. How fitting, then, that in the nineteenth century Natural Philosophy (Peter Harrison tells us in his superb *The Territories of Science and Religion*) became Science proper, that is, assumed its own identity.

. . . and then discovered evolution. That last was big, because then we really could claim God’s redundancy, because now he was replaced by “Nature.” Why, even Darwin himself, who had trained for the ministry, became an atheist. Of course, Darwin was attacking the straw man of Six-Day Creationism as though it were all of religious, or Christian, belief and became (in *The Descent of Man*) a dangerous pioneer of Social Darwinism, some decades later giving rise to the Left’s enchantment with eugenics, and then to . . . well, to Skinner, Pinker and Singer. But none of that ugliness matters, nor should it, because the Movement gained momentum and we zoomed past Newton (who because of the elliptical orbits of the planets thought God “very well skilled in mechanics and geometry”) into a new age, first of Relativity and then of Quantum Mechanics, with a splitting of the atom along the way – in the service of a Good Cause (that is, winning World War Two, maybe not as urgent a cause as Global Warming but still pretty urgent).

Well, not so fast. Remember, the hound from Hell comes with that middle head,

that congregation. For example, in the 1970s some of them predicted a global cooling so severe that we would soon enter a period of global glaciation. It didn't happen, of course, but for some at the time the science was "settled." Now we're hearing of climate change so severe that, within several decades, the effects will be catastrophic. Again the "science is settled." In fact, however, not even the *data*, let alone the science, is settled. For example, according to the *Wall Street Journal* 97% of scientists do not (as claimed) agree with the prediction or its corollaries, and the globe has not warmed at all since 1998 (thus the change from "global warming" to "climate change").

In the *End of Doom* Ronald Bailey (who is concerned about warming but not urgently alarmed) sums up the data on both sides respecting climate change. His reasoning is telling. He concludes that climate computer models are running "four times hotter than observed temperature trends." Crucial to calculation, and thus to our alarm, is a variable called climate sensitivity. Not only are the methods for determining that element disputed, but the consensual trend is towards lower sensitivity and thus towards lower temperatures. Moreover, the claim that climate change is causing extreme weather is also disputed: "researchers can find no such trends with respect to the damage caused by tornadoes and hurricanes." Still, in support of The Cause the Movement agitpropsters have had to demonize, and even censor, the opposition.

Then there is the notorious example from in 1980 of unreliable computer modeling and the prophecy ensuing there. In 1981, I (with my Peruvian wife and children) would be living in Lima, Peru, so it was with great interest that I heard – then saw on *60 Minutes* – that an earthquake of such force would strike Lima in 1981 that the city would fall into the Pacific. This was from one Brady, of the United States Bureau of Mines, and agreed to by the U.S. Geological Survey. Computer models told them so. The science was settled. But, like global glaciation, it never happened.

In other words, Heisenberg's uncertainty applies to more than just sub-atomic particles. We scoff at Nostradamus and those who make a literal application of biblical prophecy to current events, and yet we dance to the tune of social, geographic, biological and economic predictions a century away (e.g. the prediction of species extinction, which, Bailey shows, have almost all been mistaken, some by orders of magnitude). As Friedrich Hayek has argued, "Human reason can neither predict nor deliberately shape its own future. Its advances

consist in finding out *where it has been wrong.*" (My emph.)

Now, I understand (as I've suggested) that these errors may be blips, anomalies explained by perceptual or computational error, or by a sort of psychological filtering (for example, simple wish-fulfillment), or by social, political, professional or financial pressure. Scientists are people too, right? But I'm asking: Isn't *that* – that conglomeration of weaknesses: methodological, sociological, psychological, characterological – a big part of the problem I'm attempting to diagnose?

Take the great Galileo. His *Sidereus Nuncius*, or *Sidereal Messenger*, is filled with wonders. In it this great mathematician and even greater physicist (who nevertheless overlooked the theoretical nature of the Copernican model of the solar system and seems never to have bothered with Kepler's elegant – and accurate – elliptical model) describes the marvels of his lenses and what peering through them has revealed (with particular attention to Jupiter's moon and our own). The book is brief, clear, compelling and even helpfully illustrated by Galileo's own hand. And yet . . . on the first page he makes two statements he knew to be fraudulent: that the distance of the earth to the moon is sixty terrestrial diameters (rather than terrestrial radii), an error both in the manuscript and the printed book; and that he's using an instrument with a thirty power magnification, which was not yet the case.

During all of my professional life as a college professor I have been surrounded by scientists the preponderance of whom regard religious belief as superstitious. They dismiss such belief as, at best, a matter of "faith" – of which they have virtually no mature conception – and when they say so they do all but hook the air with their fingers. To be sure there are exceptions, and not a few – I wish I knew the Evangelical Christian Francis Collins, who headed the genome project. But in that same light I also wish I knew Sir Martin Rees, who has given us the splendid *Just Six Numbers*. The universe, he teaches us eloquently and understandably, is so fine-tuned that were even one of those six numbers off by a ten-thousandth of a percentage point, then we would not have the universe we do, largely because there *could not be* any "we." And yet this sorry man cannot allow design, for design requires a designer, and that possibility is ruled out. Instead he quotes E. O. Wilson favorably, apparently agreeing that, if *material* evidence is offered for the existence of a creator, then the game would be changed.

Of course neither Wilson nor Rees seems to realize that he is begging the question against the existence of non-material reality. They simply cannot break the bounds of their tightly-fitted box. So instead of a creator Rees offers a multiverse, which somehow, by deflating our presumption of singular importance, is supposed to deflate the role of a Creator. Stephen Hawking, in his blockbuster (and superb, I think) *A Brief History of Time*, concludes similarly, ending his book with a pitch for all twenty-six dimensions of String Theory. Rees and Hawking tergiversate as necessary to get around the Big Bang; that is, around Genesis. They prefer – as Hawking puts it – bewilderment, which at least shows some intellectual honesty, given their denial of anything resembling religious faith.

If I seem to have been cherry-picking it's because there are so many cherries and so little time. And I know that none of this indicates that God is not redundant, only that those who would make Him so are. And not merely redundant, like that thumb drive you keep just in case your computer dies. Rather *they* are the "ghost loose in the computer hatch" – the glitch.

Other thinkers, including scientists, form an A-team of their own. I've already mentioned Francis Collins; now I would look further, all the way to Curtis White's *The Science Delusion*. Here White (not a theist but a Romantic, a stance he explores both historically and analytically) takes on the linguistic distortions, unexamined assumptions, and the faulty logic marked especially by such fallacies as red herrings and straw men, as well as the self-righteous smugness, of certain popularizing scientists (e.g. Pinker, Feynman, Sagan, Lehrer, Seung, and of course that slap happy duo Dawkins and Dennett). His dissections are a joy to behold. From the Big Bang to DNA and on to the problem – and a very big problem it is – of human consciousness, White takes no prisoners. Along the way, he achieves gravitas and substantiveness by adducing just the right amount of context: historical, philosophical, *and scientific*. At the end of the day, the New Atheists and the Movement Scientists lie about the battlefield like so many wounded. (But the best summary comment on Dawkins, by the way, came from Terry Eagleton, in his review of Dawkins' *The God Delusion* for the *London Review of Books*: "Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology.")

Then there is David Bentley Hart, a philosopher and Eastern Orthodox scholar of

religion. His two dispositive books are *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* and *God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. The sub-title of the former speaks for itself, I think. Hart brings formidable learning to the debate, a depth of scholarship and forensic skill so far beyond that of his antagonists that the over-match becomes ludicrous. The second book has a richness of theological thinking absent from *Atheist Delusions*, beginning where it leaves off. There, commenting on the physicist Vincent Stegner, who wrote *How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*, Hart writes:

Had he only inquired any decently trained philosopher with a knowledge of the history of metaphysics, ontology, and modal logic could have warned him of [his] catastrophic category . . . but apparently he did not inquire, and as a consequence the book . . . turned out to be just a long non sequitur based on a conceptual confusion and a logical mistake.

The rest of the book both resolves the confusion and corrects the mistake. It reminds me of the tiresome fact that the Movements Scientists, like the New Atheists, have not bothered with the opposition, have not done their homework. Does any one realistically suppose that the morally impoverished Pinker has read *The Abolition of Man*?

Science has nothing more to do with God than eyeglasses with light. My stance is similar to Amir Aczel's in his *Why Science Does Not Disprove God*: namely, "to defend the integrity of science." (Ital. orig.) Aczel, a science writer and mathematician most famous for his internationally best-selling Fermat's Last Theorem and has done his homework, was prompted to write his book by the claim that the universe could have come from . . . nothing, a belief that requires bad math, worse science, and embarrassingly twisted logic. Quantum, Probability and Chaos Theories are all within Aczel's ambit; his refutations are never facile; his language and knowledge of intellectual history precise; and his spiritual devotions . . . virtually non-existent. His conclusion is modestly devastating:

[Science] engages the world and inspires the best in us. But the pursuit of truth should not be driven by zealous agenda. Now should it overreach and speak with righteous authority where it??s on unsolid ground. That??s not science ?C and let??s not allow those who falsely invoke its name to diminish us.

Still, a question remains open: is God redundant, even if He has not been so rendered by science? Surely the answers are subjective, and there is the rub. If He is, then we, collectively, have done the deed. I am reminded of Michael Shermer, who edits *Skeptic* magazine. I had occasion to debate him once (online, sponsored by the *Washington Post*). He claimed that, yes, he did indeed feel a sense of awe when he beheld the night sky; but so did he when he beheld the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Can it be this easy, I wondered? But I asked anyway. I know why the ceiling would inspire awe, I said, since it is a magnificent achievement, not a random splattering of line and color but the deliberate product of the mind, imagination and skill of a very great artist. But the night sky? That random collection of sub-atomic detritus? And anyway, I went on, if creation is accidental, and you are part of creation (just like Michelangelo), and what you are thinking and saying are parts of you, then . . . Of course, I was doing nothing more than channeling Lewis' *Abolition of Man*. I received no answer, and circumstances made it impossible to pursue this line of thinking (for example by asking Whence and Wherefore our capacity for awe in the first place?).

Beginning some seventy-five years ago and for more than a decade thereafter the most exciting club at Oxford University was the Socratic Club (where Flew first advertised his atheism), a venue in which Christians took on all comers. The very first paper read there was by Lewis' own physician, R. E. Havard, on January 26, 1941; its title: "Won't Mankind Outgrow Christianity in the Face of the Advance of Science and of Modern Ideologies" (. . . *plus c'est la merde*). To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, scientists can discover more and more notes played on the instrument of creation, but the tune is God's composition and remains in the key He has struck; or, alternatively, a popular favorite of his: one does not believe in the sun because he sees it, but because by way of it he can see everything else.

Nevertheless, the Movement scientists and their entourage – with on the one hand their models, predictions, and (credit be given) powerful technologies, and on the other their ignorance, strawmen, question-begging, and arrogance – soldier on. That is why if an opponent claims that I haven't adumbrated a suitable case against the proposition, then I invite such a person to go ahead and make one for it. But, really, try to do better than Dawkins, Dennett, Hawking, Feynman, Pinker, maybe bring a bit of homework to the table, won't you? And dignity?

I conclude with Robert Jastrow's own conclusion to his God and the Astronomers. It helps to keep in mind that Prof. Jastrow was the founder and former director the NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, Professor of Astronomy and Geology at Columbia University, and Professor of Earth Studies at Dartmouth College.

It is not a matter of another year, another decade of work, another measurement, or another theory; at this moment [Do you see? The science is not settled after all] it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream [or, I add, in hallucinatory conceptual contraptions like multi-verses and strings]. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.

– waiting for the scientist to catch up.

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