

A FEW LAST WORDS—UNTIL THE NEXT TIME!

by *Michael Ruse*

Abstract. Appreciative as I am of my critics' comments, I find, to no one's surprise, that I can bear them with equanimity, even complacency. The wide spread of opinions surely justifies my intellectual composure.

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My gratitude to those who have taken the time to comment on my thinking about science and religion is equalled by my puzzlement as to what I should say in response. Indeed, my own doubts and difficulties are equalled by the complete range of positions one finds in just four thinkers, from George Williams's outright atheism and hostility to religion, through Michael Bradie (also skeptical but not quite as violent) and Richard Busse (wanting to believe but not quite confidently there), to Philip Hefner, who here, as elsewhere, tries to articulate a theology for the Christian who is yet sensitive both to science and to the many issues which trouble traditional belief. In a way, it would be best for me to say nothing. The different views, from intelligent and sensitive thinkers, speak more eloquently than I can about the task of finding an adequate resolution to the science/religion question.

But, of course, like my good friend Philip Hefner, I can never resist the temptation to use two words when one will do, so I would like to make some brief comments. I suspect that intellectually, with respect to the science/religion relationship, there is very little to choose between George Williams and myself. We do have some differences about the workings of evolution. Although we are both ardent selectionists, he is much more inclined than I to see the dark side to nature. It is interesting that he speaks of himself as a

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(sometime) Roman Calvinist. I have elsewhere referred to him as a Jansenist. But our major differences are essentially emotional. He hates religion—I will long savor his quip about the “key to the exit”—whereas I am more tolerant, to some forms of religion at least. As I explained, in my case this feeling is a function of my upbringing.

There is one thing that I do want to say, as much a cautionary note to myself as to Williams: that we must be careful with the claim that selection cares only about reproductive success and not at all for fidelity to the truth. If you push this argument to the limit, then you end up with one of those nasty self-referential problems, where you have undermined your reasons for believing that selection itself is an effective mechanism, the very force on which you are basing your skepticism! I think you can get out of this problem, but only by dropping thoughts of some absolute correspondence theory of truth, where you claim you can get in touch with some metaphysical reality (the Kantian *Ding an Sich*). You must work from a coherence position, recognizing that the best one can achieve is some sort of overall consistency. It could be that intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe think in ways dramatically different from us—and it almost certainly will be, if such exist. This all means that agnosticism or skepticism about the ultimate meaning of life is the only proper attitude while conventional Christianity (Islam, etc.) is undoubtedly false. (Perhaps I am just saying this to reassure myself, because that seems to be the point on which Williams ends.)

Parenthetically, I consider these issues just discussed in *Taking Darwin Seriously* (1986), advocating (after Hilary Putnam) “internal realism” as the proper epistemological stance. The importance of dealing with them adequately was recently brought home to me vividly by a powerful critique of evolutionary naturalism—my philosophy—by the brilliant philosopher of religion, reformed Christian, and avowed creationist Alvin Plantinga. Everyone who thinks like me should read Plantinga. In philosophy, as in science, a critic is far more important than a friend.

Michael Bradie and I have long agreed on the significance of metaphor in science (as well as in every other aspect of human thought), and I have indeed learned much from him. I would just want to remind him—although really once again I am truly reminding myself—that if science is metaphor (I prefer to say that rather than “science is metaphor impregnated,” to stress how seriously I take the relationship), we have yet further reason to accept the conclusion of my response to Williams. Our metaphors are human metaphors—how could they not be?—like design and struggle and selection. This does not make them invalid or inappropriate. It does

mean that our understanding stems from (and returns to) us. We have no access to a “God’s eye” (Putnam’s phrase) independent truth. This does not mean that anybody else has such access (especially not Christians). It does not mean (as Mary Hesse thinks) that, since all is metaphor, religion is just as good as science. It does mean that we cannot make absolute claims about existence and meaning or nonexistence and nonmeaning.

Richard Busse gives a detailed exposition of my general position. I found myself nodding in happy agreement as I read his response. It was somewhat of a surprise, therefore, to find that at the end he did not agree with me! Part of our disagreement may be misunderstanding, and I admit full liability here. He ends his exposition by remarking: “Evolution may tell us a lot about ethics, but not the whole story.” To this—which Busse intends critically—I would agree wholeheartedly. Of course, one must consider culture when one turns to humankind, and nowhere more so than in dealing with such crucial matters as ethics and religion. The point is that everybody knows this. It has been my aim in writing about ethics to redress the balance and to stress, what everybody does know, the significance of biology.

Indeed, so seriously do I take culture, I am loathe even in the most extreme cases simply to invent convenient genes. To put the matter bluntly, with respect to ethics I may well be on a genetic par with Hitler—although in other respects I would be very surprised if our personalities were not genetically diverse. My belief is that because of cultural factors, historical events, and incidental effects, Germans in the 1930s thought (generally in the name of morality) very negatively about Jews. But every beginning philosophy student knows that moral claims derive from ultimate principles (where I would plug in biology) and subsidiary beliefs, generally about matters of purported fact (which are cultural). Hitler and I are no different in this respect. Where Hitler and I differ is over our assessment of the human status of Jews, and not over the need to care about people. (Perhaps, given his disregard for individuals in his quest for social and political ends, Hitler is an impossible case. Perhaps he was, genetically, a moral defective, as some people are genetically imbecilic. But this case is not true of everyone who has been a thoroughgoing anti-Semite. What makes the Nazi story so chilling is that so many participants were decent, ordinary people, who would never have let a child cry without cause; yet when it came to Jews and gypsies and homosexuals. . . .)

There is not much else I would say to Busse. He will think I have already said enough. I do think, however, he misunderstands me

when he accuses me of having a closed mind about the foundations of ethics, even though I have an open mind about the foundations of religion. Let me assure him that, in the sense that I have a mind closed (not “closed mind,” as in “prejudiced mind”) about the foundations of ethics, I have a mind closed about the foundations of religion. I am at one with Williams on this. Jesus did not die on the cross for my sins. Where I am open, as I have just tried to explain again in responding to Williams and Bradie, is when faced with ultimate questions about the metaphysical meaning of it all. I am an evolutionary naturalist. I believe that we know what we know because of our biology. Unfortunately—although why express regret about that which is an impossibility?—adaptations for getting out of the jungle do not necessarily guarantee insights into ultimate reality. But I do not even know if there is an ultimate reality, so do not try to catch me on that one.

And so, last but not least—very much not least, for like beverages at the marriage at Cana, the best is left until the end—I come to Philip Hefner. Let me say that I am proud to have such a man as a friend, and I feel privileged that he would want to have me as a friend. Which is not to deny my state of total bewilderment that a man of such transcendent goodness can persist in believing in such ridiculous things. Perhaps Kierkegaard was right and there is a connection here.

What am I to say? Perhaps it is best to let Hefner speak for himself. He writes: “It is genuinely beside the point for the critics to dismiss the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent on the grounds that snakes do not talk and that condemnation for eating forbidden fruit is too trivial a proposal to be entertained by serious persons. These judgments do not even touch the heart of what the myth is telling us” (Hefner 1994, 69). Fair enough! But what do we have left, if we strip away the myth and metaphor? (Probably like Hefner himself, I doubt we can strip away all metaphor, revealing some hard-core literal meaning.) Forget apples. Forget snakes. Forget seductive women. Forget gullible men. Either humankind is in a state of original sin or it is not. If it is, then there was reason for Jesus to die on the cross. If it is not, Calvary has as much relevance as a gladiator’s death in the Colosseum. But if we are in original sin, then either someone, sometime, put us there—and I am damned (in all senses of the word) if I am going to accept responsibility for that act—or we are all naturally in sin. Which does not say much for an All-Loving, All-Powerful God, quite apart from 99.9 percent of the rest of Christian theology. Williams is right. You cannot have the New Testament without the Old.

Or what am I to respond when Hefner writes: "To say that Jesus saved the world on the cross is to say that in Jesus' life and death the fundamental character of the cosmos was manifest in a way that grasped the attention of Western culture and, beyond that, that of other cultures, as well. (This statement says nothing about the value or disvalue of other religions)" (p. 71).

Come off it, Phil! You are running with the Christians and hunting with the humanists. Either Jesus Christ was the Son of God or He was not. If He was, other religions are false. Missionaries — Jesuits past and Evangelicals present—are right about this. If He was not, Christianity is a fraud—no salvation, no heaven, no nothing. You cannot be a Christian on Sunday and a Hindu on Monday.

I am sorry to be so rude about this (not that sorry!), but perhaps my indignation is a good point on which to go out. Unlike George Williams, I really want to believe. I find the goodies offered by Christianity extremely attractive. But I am damned (again!) if I am going to sell my evolutionary birthright for a mess of religious pottage. We see through a glass darkly; but, thanks to Charles Darwin, it is no longer so dark as when Saint Paul was penning a few thoughts to the Corinthians.

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