

# Comparing Hostage-Takers

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Howard Van Till, Davis Young and Clarence Menninga are science professors from Calvin College who have recently collaborated on a book titled *Science Held Hostage*. For convenience I will refer to Van Till as if he were sole author, which is appropriate because he personally wrote the chapters with which I am most concerned and he has advanced the same line of reasoning in his earlier book, *The Fourth Day*. Van Till's most important premise is that science properly understood is autonomous, in the sense that it can be carried on without regard to the personal religious or philosophical beliefs of scientists. Some scientists may be theists who regard the physical world as subject to the governance of God, and others may be materialists who regard God as a virtually meaningless concept, but all can participate in science without either compromising their beliefs about God or imposing them upon the scientific enterprise.

Autonomous science is possible, according to Van Till, because science does not deal with either the "ultimate origin" of the physical universe or its "governance." Except when it is being held hostage, science restricts itself to describing regular patterns of behavior in the physical universe which are the same for all observers. Whether to attribute these patterns to a nature which is as autonomous as the science which describes it, or to a nature which is "theonomous" (i.e. God-governed) is a question outside the domain of science.

From that premise Van Till goes on to explain that the autonomy of science is being threatened by two sets of ideologues. These hostage-takers are on the one hand "scientific creationists" such as Henry Morris and Duane Gish, and on the other hand "evolutionary naturalists" such as Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, and (occasionally) the evolutionary biologist Douglas Futuyma. According to Van Till, what these two groups have in common is that both have tried to capture the authority of science as support for an extra-scientific religion or philosophical position, and both have thereby failed to respect the appropriate boundaries of the scientific enterprise.

It is important to be clear about how the categories are defined. Van Till defines scientific creationism as the doctrine that it is possible to employ scientific research to confirm that the universe was created recently and in a mature form. To put it more specifically, a creationist is a Biblical literalist who tries to use scientific evidence to show that creation took place in a single week a few thousand years ago. This use of the term is common, and therefore understandable, but it confuses analysis by implying that the fundamental point at issue is not whether God creates but how long a time He took to do it.

In the most important sense a creationist is a person who believes in creation, and that includes people who believe that Genesis is a myth and that creation involved a process called evolution and consumed billions of years. The essential point is that the Creator actually did something important to control the process by, for example, applying intelligence to make one thing happen rather than another. A "First Cause" who merely sets the natural mechanism in motion and then leaves everything to chance is not a Creator, just as a person who sets an automobile in motion downhill but neither steers nor brakes is not a driver. As we shall see, this definitional point is not a quibble, but an essential step towards understanding what is most fundamentally in dispute.

Van Till defines naturalism as the philosophical and religious doctrine which asserts that "nothing but" the material world exists, there being no divine being capable of influencing physical phenomena. Evolutionary naturalism asserts more specifically that the scientific concept of evolution provides a sufficient basis for rejecting the religious idea that natural processes are governed by God. Some other authors use the terms "materialism" and "scientific materialism" to express the same concepts. The point of the modifier "scientific" (or "evolutionary") is to imply that the philosophical position (naturalism or creationism) can be proved by scientific investigation.

Understanding the terms is so important that I ought to provide a concrete illustration of what naturalism means in practice. George Gaylord Simpson was one of the founders of neo-Darwinism, a pure evolutionary naturalist, and a gifted writer who made his points clearly. The following passage from Simpson's *The Meaning of Evolution* is a typical statement of evolutionary naturalism:

"Although many details remain to be worked out, it is already evident that all the objective phenomena of the history of life can be explained by purely naturalistic or, in a proper sense of the sometimes abused word, materialistic factors. They are readily explicable on the basis of differential reproduction in populations (the main factor in the modern conception of natural selection) and of the mainly random interplay of the known processes of heredity. ...Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind." [rev. ed. 1967, p. 344-45]

Naturalism is not necessarily opposed to "the existence of God," provided that God is understood as a First Cause and not as a Creator. Here again is Simpson:

"There is neither need nor excuse for postulation of nonmaterial intervention in the origin of life, the rise of man, or any other part of the long history of the material cosmos. Yet the origin of that cosmos and the causal principles of its history remain unexplained and inaccessible to science. Here is hidden the First Cause sought by theology and philosophy. The First Cause is not known and I suspect it will never be known to living man. We may, if we are so inclined, worship it in our own ways, but we certainly do not comprehend it." [p.279]

A problem with Van Till's even-handed condemnation of young-earth creationists and evolutionary naturalists is that the latter group includes some of the most influential leaders of the scientific community, and the former consists entirely of outsiders whose ability to affect science in the slightest degree, let alone hold it hostage, is doubtful. That Gish and Morris are misguided in pursuing the young earth thesis I do not dispute, and I can understand that science professors at Christian colleges may feel threatened by fundamentalist influence among trustees and alumni. Otherwise, however, the scientific creationists are thoroughly marginalized figures who are excluded by law from the public schools and who appear in the secular media only as targets of attack.

Carl Sagan, by contrast, is a powerful leader of the scientific establishment as well as an effective propagandist for naturalism with vast public resources at his disposal. His television series *Cosmos* has been seen by millions of school-children, with strong official endorsement. When those children heard that "The Cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be," they learned that the most authoritative voice of science endorses naturalism. The National Academy of Sciences is not likely to pass a resolution correcting this misunderstanding, if it is a misunderstanding. The imbalance of power and prestige suggests the question: If Henry Morris and Carl Sagan are both holding science hostage, why does the hostage object in one case and not in the other?

I infer that Van Till's answer would be that evolutionary naturalists who maintain a high scientific reputation practice good science, up to the point where they start to draw explicit conclusions about theological questions such as ultimate origins and governance. The young-earth creationists distort the scientific evidence to make it appear supportive of their Biblically-derived position, whereas the evolutionary naturalists paint the scientific picture accurately and then draw unwarranted philo-sophical conclusions. To satisfy Van Till, Gish and Morris would have to abandon altogether their futile effort to reconcile the scientific evidence with literal Genesis. Sagan and Simpson would only have to restrain themselves from stating explicitly their belief that the evidence of science discredits the notion that the universe and its living organisms owe their being in any meaningful sense to the plan of a Creator.

The question I want to examine is whether the influence of naturalist philosophy upon science is really as limited as Van Till implies it to be, or whether scientists under the influence of naturalism have distorted the scientific description of the physical universe to support their philosophy, much as the scientific creationists have done. To explore that question I must confront evolutionary naturalism with its true opposite, which I will call theism.

As a theist I believe that God exists and that God creates. Although I insist that God has always had the power to intervene directly in nature to create new forms, I am willing to be persuaded that He chose not to do so and instead employed secondary natural causes like random mutation and natural selection. I have no preconceived idea about how long God took to produce the universe and all its forms of life, and no objection to the possibility that the process was sufficiently gradual to be termed "evolution." Most importantly, I agree that the truth of these matters should be determined by interpretation of scientific evidence --experiments, fossil studies

and the like. Given these presuppositions, what should be my attitude towards the contemporary neo-Darwinist theory of evolution?

The final sentence of the first passage from Simpson provides as explicit a denial of God's governance as one could ask for. "Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind." The first two sentences provide the picture of physical reality that supports that conclusion, and the picture is simply a summary of neo-Darwinism. All the observable phenomena of life can be explained as products of naturalistic processes, especially chance mutation and natural selection. For Simpson it follows that after the ultimate beginning there was never anything for a Creator to do, and it is pointless to discuss such a superfluous entity about whom we can have no knowledge. If those of us who understand Simpson's logic continue to call ourselves theists, is it because we think that God actually did something to bring us into being or because we are content to believe in a God who never seems to have made a difference?

In commenting upon a statement by Douglas Futuyma that is very similar to what I have quoted from Simpson, Van Till insists that "from a theological perspective" God predestined humans to come into existence, and that "human beings, on the Christian view, are not solely the product of these [material] mechanisms." So far I agree, but what did God ever actually do to bring this predestined plan to completion? When things get to this point naturalists do not usually try to prove that God does not exist; they are content to rest upon the observation that this shadowy being never seems to have found gainful employment. They speak of an "infinitely lazy" Creator, a deity whose style of governance is the ultimate in "hands off" management.

Van Till writes that evolutionary biologists are not necessarily hostile to "the idea of God." There is no need for them to be. To philosophical materialists God is no more than an idea in the human mind, and not a very important idea. Compassionate evolutionary naturalists are not hostile to the human weakness that causes people to cling to outmoded concepts like "God," because they recognize that it takes more courage than most people can summon to embrace fully the naturalistic implications of contemporary science. As long as they are assured that the theism in "theistic evolution" is reserved for private life, and has no application in science (where we talk about what really happened), they see no need to fight.

Let the theist threaten to make trouble, however, as by proposing that the cell's genetic information may be the product of pre-existing intelligence rather than random processes, and the profession will quickly close ranks and repel the intrusion. Some theists in evolutionary science acquiesce to these tacit rules and retain a personal faith while accepting a thoroughly naturalistic picture of physical reality. I respect such persons for their tenacity but I am not surprised that there are very few of them, and very many evolutionary naturalists, among persons who take neo-Darwinism seriously.

There is a better way to deal with the problem, but it requires that we screw up our courage to challenge not just the explicit philosophical conclusions of neo-Darwinists, but also the far more important implicit philosophical premises that enable them to produce a theory that explains all life as the product of material mechanisms. Philosophical naturalism is not merely a gratuitous conclusion that neo-Darwinists draw from their scientific theory; rather, it is the powerful

metaphysical basis of the theory itself. How do Darwinists know that natural selection, in combination with random mutations, can produce such apparent wonders of design as the wing, the eye, and the brain? How do they know that preexisting intelligence was not required to produce life in the first place, to guide unicellular life in its progress to more complex forms, and to develop eventually the human mind? In fact Darwinists do not know these things by experiment, or by any other form of scientific investigation. They know them by philosophical presupposition, because their naturalism tells them that nature cannot be affected by anything outside nature. Darwinism is not merely a support for naturalistic philosophy: it is a product of naturalistic philosophy.

If the matter were considered open to question, there would be plenty of reason to doubt that natural selection has the vast creative powers Darwinists attribute to it. What we actually know from scientific investigation is information like the following: artificial selection can produce diverse varieties of dogs and monstrous fruitfly variants; the relative frequency of dark and light peppered moths in a population was observed to vary as the trees became lighter and darker; differential survival causes bacterial populations to develop resistance to antibiotics; living forms share a common biochemical basis and genetic code; new body plans tend to appear in the fossil record fully formed with no record of the transitional intermediates that should connect them to presumed ancestors; and finally, the prevailing pattern of fossil species is stasis, meaning that observed evolutionary change is limited and directionless.

These observations and others like them do not compel the conclusion that random genetic change and selection can or did produce a flower, a moth, and a human from a common microbial ancestor. When Darwinists affirm that natural selection has the kind of creative power formerly attributed to God, they are describing not what the evidence shows but what their naturalistic philosophy demands. Unless the material Cosmos really is all there is or ever was, there is no reason to believe that the naturalistic alternative to creation is true. No wonder Henry Morris gets brickbats, and Carl Sagan gets money to carry the message to schoolchildren.

In short, it is not that evolutionary naturalists have been less brazen than the scientific creationists in holding science hostage, but rather that they have been infinitely more effective in getting away with it. The philosophical confusion that has permitted the kidnapping to succeed is a misunderstanding over what it means to say that science is limited by its methods to studying natural or material processes. No doubt it is true that science cannot study God, but it hardly follows that God had to keep a safe distance from everything that scientists want to study. Evolutionary naturalism takes the inherent limitations of science and turns them into a devastating philosophical weapon: because science is our only real way of knowing anything, what science cannot know cannot be real. Genetic information cannot have an intelligent source because the source might be the kind of thing science cannot examine. Philosophical naturalists therefore know a priori that life and mind are the product of random chemical combinations, and the only task for science is to try out the various possibilities and discover which is the least unlikely.

What I have just described is sometimes called scientism, which is another name for scientific materialism or evolutionary naturalism. Scientism is vulnerable to criticism when it is stated explicitly, but it can be extremely potent when it is silently assumed as "the scientific outlook"

and then used as a basis for generating descriptions which appear to be the independent products of autonomous science. That is the technique employed in the National Academy of Sciences' 1984 pamphlet "Science and Creationism," which assumes naturalism throughout and then blurs the religious implications with the bland reassurance that there is no "irreconcilable conflict" between religion and science because "many religious leaders and scientists accept evolution on scientific grounds without relinquishing their belief in religious principles." When evolutionary naturalists say something like that, they mean that some people reconcile the conflict by basing their religion on evolution rather than God (Dobzhansky, Julian Huxley, Teilhard de Chardin), and other religious people are untroubled by self-contradiction.

I hope I have made it sufficiently clear that nothing in this analysis is meant to be anything but respectful towards Van Till and other scientists who have been trying their best to be faithful both to God and to the integrity of the scientific method. Christians who are scientifically inclined have been faced with an apparently hopeless dilemma: either accept a rigid Biblical literalism or accept a science whose assumptions are fundamentally naturalistic, whether those naturalistic assumptions are explicit or implicit. What any sensible person wants to do in such a situation is to find a third alternative, and it is in that spirit that Van Till attempts to separate an autonomous realm of science from its association with naturalism.

The intention is admirable, and Van Till's critique of naturalism is excellent as far as it goes, but to do the job we need to cut deeper. Much of what passes for empirical knowledge, at least with regard to neo-Darwinist evolutionary biology, is established not by scientific testing but by deduction from naturalistic philosophy. When a Darwinist insists that "science knows" that natural selection can craft complex organs that look as if they were the products of intelligent design, he is saying that differential survival is naturalistic philosophy's most plausible substitute for that unacceptable intelligent designer. And when George Gaylord Simpson spelled out the conclusion that man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind, he was not saying anything that was not already implicit in his description of the power of natural selection.

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