

Agency, divinity, and scientism - part1

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This is part 1 of a series of articles on a singular theme - agency. We begin at a simple level and in subsequent articles will loosen assumptions and expand the theoretical and logical analysis. It is a natural human response to invoke counter examples to unusual results and when it comes to logic it is best dealt with at a simple level where the arguments can be kept focussed and relatively simple. Subsequent extrapolations will become more easily accepted and understood.

One of the fundamental claims of this series of articles is that when it comes to science and religion it is common ground for many not to take either science or religion seriously and engage in rhetorical exercises. What is required is to take BOTH very seriously.

There are those who believe that science or material explanations based on mathematical laws can explain everything. (Note 1) This form of scientism is not used here as a straw man but as an illustrator. This view of science gives rise to material determinism and at the level of human experience conflicts with our everyday experience of agency. Simple materialism generates formal determinism. If the series of effects $X_{1,2,3,\dots,n}$ are the consequences of prior causes $Y_{1,2,3,\dots,N}$ then ALL future effects are consequences from present causes $Z_{1,2,3,\dots,n}$. Formally all future and past events are caused by prior effects. This strict determinism renders 'history' incoherent as every act becomes necessary.

From the perspective of human experience we believe we have agency, that we can effect the world and can choose how we seek to do so. If we decide differently we can act differently. However there is an important point often overlooked: when we act on the world we do not do so assuming that our agency is contradicting nature or natural laws. We do not see ourselves as supernatural agents. We live and work within a rule like world but nevertheless are able to act upon it even if the consequences of our actions need not entirely reflect the intention behind them (as Marx famously said that men make their history but not as they please!). But if we can act on the world without breaking the natural laws then it is entirely plausible for a divine being to be able to act on the world without breaking the natural laws.

What this highlights is the conflation of divine, spiritual and supernatural. Supernatural is generally understood to be miraculous along the lines of Moses parting of the Red Sea (Note 2). When scientism rejects super natural events it hits a straw man. Much of modern science taught in schools is woefully inaccurate and grossly simplified. By the time students reach graduate school their understanding of their specialist field has been turned upside down. No one objects to the simplified children's stories taught as science in schools and the discovery that they were simplified children's version does not or should not lead a student to reject science as a whole as bogus. Most biblical narrative was written at a time when the vast majority of congregants were

illiterate and uneducated. The model of the divine used was equivalent to a noble or king who could over ride the local laws and do as he pleased. Such a divinity proposed was simply a larger version of their local noble/king who governed not the local principedom but the world.

It should be clear that even at this simplified level that divine agency does not require a violation of natural law anymore than does our human agency. It can be argued that at a theological level the status of divinity allows for the over riding of any natural laws. However despite the correct statement that any all powerful divinity could over ride what we consider natural laws it should be clear that there is absolutely no requirement for the existence of divinity that natural laws be overridden. As Keith Ward expresses it: “ I have held that God is indeed supernatural, in being non-material - non-natural- and of supreme value, therefore supernatural. But God is not an invisible ghost messing up the laws of nature” (Note 3.)

It should be clear that material determinism is simply too strong. It fails to have an explanatory power as whatever happens HAD to happen exactly as it did. There are no lessons to learn or choices to be made. Far worse for the theory is that there is no evidence for it as the statement that everything must have a prior fixed and sufficient cause is a slogan at worst and merely an assumption at best masquerading as a logic statement. It should be mentioned that the discovery of randomness in nature is irrelevant as randomness is not a ‘cause’. To say that something is random is equivalent to saying it i) has no apparent pattern and ii) we have no further or other explanation.

It should be clear that the target of material determinism is a form of supernatural belief - let us call it Biblical Code 1. This roughly has a white haired divine figure tampering with human events at will. Many religions do not resort to such anthropomorphism but in any case whether one accepts such a model or not hardly counts as deciding the viability of divinity. One can discard such childish things just as quickly as one can discard stories of Isaac Newton having an apple fall on his head.

A complication of many discussions of these issues is that those opposing scientism not only wish to critique scientism but also to establish their own school of dogma! No such interest exists here.

Even at this introductory level we should take matters one step/level further. It may be asked if the argument here is that any divinity must also obey the laws of nature. We must address this question. Current scientific consensus says that the laws of physics indicate that event B is not possible. However if event B were to happen what would be the consequence? As Feynman so well put it: if event B happens we have to alter our science! The world does what it does and that is that. This world does not obey the laws of physics. These laws are our attempts to understand the world. If the world does not obey the laws of physics why should the divine? Even in Biblical Code 1 a miracle relates to *the meaning* of the events not the mere event. Under Biblical Code 1 if someone prays fervently or goes on a pilgrimage and returns cured this

could be called a miracle. If they simply stayed at home without a care and had a 'spontaneous remission', as the medical profession calls it, there would be great reluctance for Biblical Code 1 to call it a miracle.

It is Leibniz who took this most seriously. He argued that scientific law, the regularity of the material world, was entirely dependent on the divine. There was no glue or force that could ensure that tomorrow would be like yesterday. In fact the continuity of matter from moment to moment was entirely dependent on the divine. In this view the suggestion that the divine would intervene in human affairs in a way that violated natural law is an absurdity given that the structure of the world from day to day is the will of the divine. To put it another way, if there is any miracle it is existence itself.

Politics of this debate

A final point at this stage 1 is to illustrate that these debates are highly political. When confronted with the consequences of absence of agency in human life if determinism were true only some other conclusions that they held more important could induce them to accept such consequence. In each case we find their anti-clericalism or anti-religiosity as a driving motivation. But the willingness to abandon our everyday experience to uphold a theory of determinism is no different than a 'true believer' abandoning his everyday experience to believe in miracles. In both cases the advocate has a serious investment in another point of view for which he is happy to abandon the evidence of his 'everyday experience'.

It should be clear that this intellectual space is highly political. The framing of the debate as between science and religion is in fact highly polemical. These supporters of varying forms of scientism portray themselves as merely 'objective' scientists as against the religious whose supporters have an agenda. In reality these polemicists from d'Holbach to Dawkins have a clear and provocative agenda which is shrouded in the jargon of science.

To accept the debate as being between science and religion leads to a corruption of the debate and is a disastrous concession. Much of the conventional intellectual history is, particularly when it comes to the story of the Enlightenment, a largely fabricated children's story, from absurd stories of apple's falling on Newton's head to a more serious misdescription of the conflict with Galileo. Here, apart from historical inaccuracies, the very nature of science is violently distorted. We are told the earth goes round the sun and that this is an indisputable fact. But science has never accepted 'indisputable facts'. It is conceivable that at some point in the future that an astronomer proposes that the sun goes 'around' some other celestial object possibly both moving at 'high speed' relative to other galaxies or other analogous astronomical adjustment and that the earth's progress only appears to be going around the sun but from the point of view of another celestial object or this new theory the earth does not make any elliptical motion around the sun. This might become of more than theoretical significance if it affected the speed and

accuracy of inter-planetary or inter-galactic ultra high speed navigation. What are we to make of this thought experiment? Where would the heliocentric system idea stand relative to the prior geo-centric view? Would we not see both as relative approximations and we would be hard put to see any great religious conflict between them? This takes us back to history (Note 4) and we then recognise that the heliocentric view has no intrinsic theological relevance until it is positioned within a controversy over sun worshippers who were considered heretics by the Papacy. Heliocentrism may give succour to sun worshippers but is hardly conclusive support! Now this story of the triumph of heliocentric view over the Catholic dogma as conventionally told as fact against Catholic superstition, is not credible other than as fairy tale. From the point of view that the sun may go around another celestial object, heliocentrism is simply not a factual issue but one of better calculation. One would hardly disagree with Osiander who is supposed to have added the suggestion that heliocentrism was merely a matter of mathematical convenience and Copernicus himself emphasised the aesthetic preference of his view point. (Note 5).

This point is worth emphasising. If a person believed that a certain text was not only a holy text, but literally the word of God, that God was always truthful, and that according to his interpretation of that text which he believes to be the only true and correct interpretation, the world should have ended last Friday, and yet we are still here. It is clear that there are some challenges with his beliefs. What should also be clear is that there is no conflict between science and religion involved. Either the world ended last Friday (and we are living in some suspended animation or dream etc) or the world did not end. If he accepts that the world did not end then, if he wishes to be coherent, he may need to amend at least one of his beliefs, but we cannot tell him which one should be amended. That is his choice .

In principle no scientific theory could determine the existence or non existence of the divine. If there is a divine it will certainly exist whether or not our current theories allow for it or say that it is impossible. In order to suggest that the trajectory of the sun could have any relevance to the existence of the divine one needs to have smuggled into the undisclosed assumptions of the debate enormous amount of egregious and disputable assumptions. For example if one could prove that the earth was not made in 7 days one is at a loss why that would say anything at all about the existence or non existence of the divine.

It is finally strange that many physicist have no hesitation in *predicting the past* even up to many millenia away without realising that any such deterministic prediction must be symmetrical and they should therefore be able to predict in similar detail millenia ahead. The effects of global warming should be necessary not optional as if there is agency for the future there must equally be for the past. On the basis of deterministic physics they ask us to make decisions and to exercise agency to day in respect of possible futures while arguing that we live in a deterministic world.

BY WAY OF PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

What is being argued for here is that the issue of agency arises in a context whereby many pretend to arrive at their conclusions for purely scientific reasons whereas in fact they share an agenda. Nothing else explains the willingness of physicists to allow asymmetrical explanations among a thousand extra absurdities. The mere fact of having an agenda does not make one's answers incorrect but it should allow for a better appreciation of the choices being made- that one recognises that scientific determinism is a political platform.

NOTES

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientism>
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supernatural>
3. "Is Religion Irrational?" Keith Ward - 2011
4. "The Copernican heliocentric model was not the victory of science over the religious superstition prevailing in the Middle Age. In fact his system was neither simpler nor more accurate than Ptolemy's geocentric model. Copernicus nonetheless proposed the heliocentric model and it was accepted by not a few astronomers, because Neoplatonism that worshipped the Sun was in fashion in those days."
(<https://www.nagaitoshiya.com/en/2012/copernican-revolution/>)
5. "Copernicus had been motivated to this theory by Neoplatonic and [Pythagorean](#) considerations. His reasoning seems to have been predominantly motivated by aesthetics. In his view, equally spaced planets in circular orbits would represent harmony in the universe. But Copernicus had made no observations and stated no general laws. His mathematics could describe the motion of the [planets](#), 🌟 but his theory was of a very ad hoc nature."
(<http://scienceworld.wolfram.com/biography/Copernicus.html>)