

Making Elbow Room for Faith

Christian Theism in the Science Classroom

John D. Mays

I wonder if I must be nuts for publishing this article. Even the smartest Christians in the world—people like Alvin Plantinga, world-renowned philosopher of religion at Notre Dame—are mercilessly attacked by other smart people when they make claims like the claims I will make here.

But as a science teacher and writer who is a Christian, correctly understanding the relationship between science and faith is of utmost importance to me. I have often said that Christian schools have not done an adequate job of articulating the way science and faith relate, and I have tried to contribute to discourse on this topic in my books and public speaking.

Another thing I am serious about is improving the quality of science instruction in Christian schools. I want science instruction in Christian schools to be of such high quality that even non-Christians will admire it! But this raises the question: If we are to be serious about teaching science well, in an objective sense, is it necessary that we leave God out of the science classroom? Or must our comments about the Creator be limited to non-scientific content? Many secularists would have it so. In this article I argue otherwise. My main thesis is that while much scientific discourse can be conducted without overt reference to a creator (discussions about molecular bonding theory, for example), a discussion

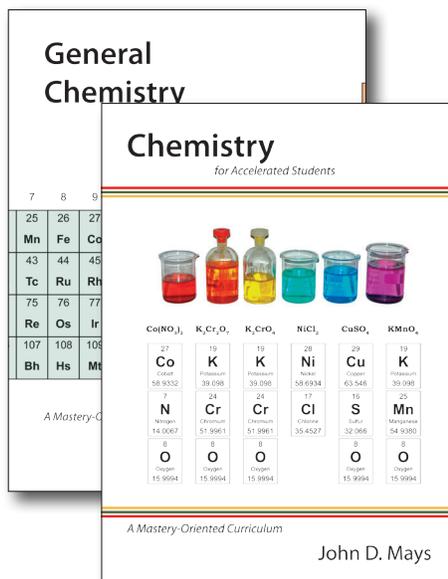
that goes wide enough or deep enough will eventually, necessarily reach a point where the teacher must either say, “science cannot address that question,” or, “the answer to that question is where science and faith converge.”

One of my close friends is a world-class scientist. He is also an atheist. Over the years of our friendship this has led to many very interesting conversations—and we converse a lot.

My friend has told me it is a category error to bring God into a scientific discussion. But I find it impossible to leave God out, although it seems to me that there are different classes or categories of questions. Whether or not the discussion must reference a creator depends on the type of question involved. So to help clear the air as we try to make some elbow room for faith in the science classroom, I will describe four different classes of questions.

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The Questions

Class / Questions:

- What causes thunder?
- Why does cotton absorb moisture?
- Is there dark matter?
- How are methane molecules shaped?

Questions like these have scientific answers. The answers may be based on vast amounts of data, as with the methane molecule question. Alternatively, as with the dark matter question, our scientific answers may be preliminary and uncertain, but with reasonable hope of increasing in confidence as research advances in coming years. Addressing questions like these does not require an overt appeal to a creator; the data we need to develop a solid theory are accessible, and it is simply a matter of con-

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"I do not believe that the human mind is reducible to brain biochemistry, and consequently I do not expect that science will ever have an answer to the question."

ducting enough research to understand the physics and chemistry involved.

Of course, the splendor of creation (lightning, nebulae, etc.) should always call forth from believers wonder at God's handiwork, thanks to God for the gift of creation, and praise to Him for His wisdom and power, but that is a separate issue. We are filled with awe when we see lightning, but when we explain the physics of lightning to students we can stick to the physics. The physics alone can address the question. (Please mentally bookmark this last statement. There is more to say on this. I hope to come back to it in another article in January.)

Class II Questions:

- What causes Alzheimer's disease?
- How are the theories of quantum mechanics and general relativity to be reconciled?
- Is there life on other planets?
- Why is the expansion rate of the universe increasing?

Questions of this sort do not presently have scientific answers. The best we can do at present is say, "we have no idea, but a lot of smart people are working on it." But even though we don't presently have answers to these questions, they are the kinds of questions science has been able to tackle in the past, and it is reasonable to assume that scientific answers to the questions will eventually emerge. Once again, there is nothing inherent in these questions that forces us to bring God into the discussion, other than our continuous desire to give him praise in all things.

Class III Questions:

- Why does purposefulness, specifically human purposefulness, exist?
- Why do people weep when they listen to Handel's Messiah?
- How did life arise?
- What is the source of the intelligence that pervades the coding in DNA?
- How did human nature arise, including self awareness, use of language, rationality, the ability to produce art, humor, and self-denying love?

Science does not have answers to these questions. In my opinion, and in the opinion of many scientists and philosophers who are a lot smarter than I am, science will never have answers to these questions. Christian faith has answers, but both my reading of Scripture and my faith-informed intuition lead me to believe that there are no scientific answers—and never will be—because the phenomena involved transcend the boundaries of the physical world. Let me be completely honest here and admit that *I could be wrong*, but that is my view.

Now, even though I have said that I could be wrong, those who insist that God must be kept entirely out of scientific discussions will cry foul at this point. They will say that saying "God did it" when there is no scientific explanation is a so-called "God-of-the-gaps (GOTG) argument." Such arguments are regarded as out of bounds by secular scientists. Their objection is the following. In the history of humanity it has often been the case that there is a gap in our knowledge. Repeatedly, religious believers have filled that gap by saying "God did it," only to have science come along later with a naturalistic explanation that doesn't require supernatural intervention. (In fact, intervention by God is often viewed as a violation of the laws of nature, a notion materialists will not abide.) Thus, the secularists conclude, GOTG arguments are not acceptable to scientists. Instead of appealing to acts of God for answers, they say, we will simply continue our research, expecting to have answers in the future.

In his 1998 book *Conciliance*, Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson made the claim that human emotions and mind, including things like weeping over Handel, boils down to brain biochemistry—nothing more. Of course, he cannot know this for a fact; the scientific understanding of the human brain is far from complete. But if one is an atheist, then one must also necessarily believe that the human mind and emotions are reducible to brain chemistry. What else is there?

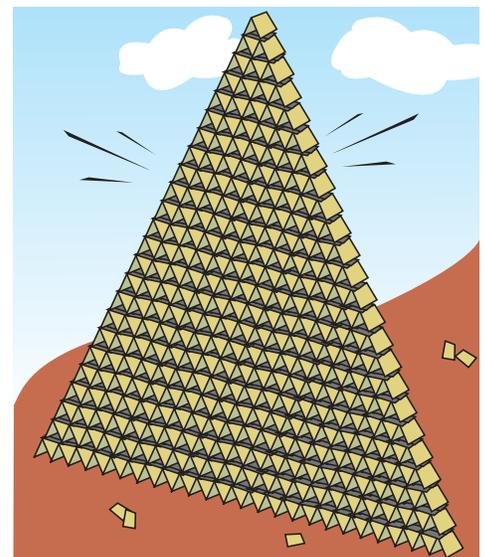
But Holy Scripture, which Christians accept as revealed truth from God, teaches that humans have souls that were known

to God even before we were knit together in our mothers' wombs (Ps. 139), and that we will live on after departing this world (1 Thes. 13–18). So, I do not accept Wilson's position. I do not believe that the human mind is reducible to brain biochemistry, and consequently I do not expect that science will ever have an answer to the question.

The same goes for the emergence of life. Despite the super-astronomical odds opposing it, the naturalistic scientific view is that self-replicating proteins formed by themselves by chance. Full intellectual honesty requires me to say that maybe they did, and maybe it happened according to the normal laws of physics and chemistry without God's supernatural intervention. But I do not think so.

The reasons I do not think so are (1) because Scriptural teaching about God's creative acts affirms his direct involvement in the origin of life, (2) because scientists have been working on seeking a naturalistic explanation for the emergence of life for some 60 years and still have no theory that has been able to stand up under scrutiny for more than a few years without collapse, and (3) the odds against such an event are far, far, far greater than the odds against a house of cards being set up by a sudden gust of wind. The naturalistic argument goes that even against tremendous odds amazing things can happen given enough time. But just as I do not accept that a platoon of monkeys at typewriters for a billion years will ever produce *Hamlet*, I don't believe that a billion years of wind gusts would ever result in a stack of cards like the one below. They just won't.

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Please stick with me, even if you are one of those who hate arguments like this. Is my argument a God-of-the-gaps argument? I do not think so. I have good reasons for my appeal to God's supernatural act in causing life to come into existence. Also, let me repeat that intellectual humility requires me to admit that I could be wrong about the origin of life. If scientists eventually come up with an explanation that accounts for the biogenesis without appeal to mind-bending luck and without covertly smuggling in non-random intelligence to drive the process, I will admit it and remove this issue from my list of Class III questions.

Apart from an act of God, the origin of human nature, it seems to me, is just as inexplicable as the biogenesis. (FYI, Walker Percy often wrote on this.) That rationality, consciousness, love, art, and language could evolve from unintelligent, unconscious sources is a nonsensical proposition. The difference between the human mind and the cognitive processes experienced by animals is not just a matter of degree. Our minds are different *in kind*, and I do not accept that one could evolve into the other. (Well, downward perhaps, but not upward.)

Now, even though intellectual humility requires us Christians to admit that we may be wrong on the Class III questions and that science could end up with answers to those questions, such is not the case with the Class IV questions. Answers to these are not accessible to scientific inquiry.

Class IV Questions:

- Why does the universe exist?
- What caused the Big Bang?
- Why are there laws of nature?
- Why are the laws of nature orderly, even highly mathematical?

Apart from appeal to a creator, the only answers science can give to these questions are along the following lines:

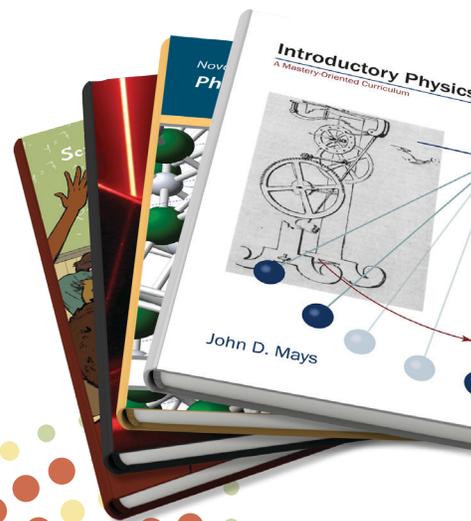
- That's just the way it is. There is no reason. ("Can you say that with a straight face?" "It's hard, but yes.")
- We have no idea, and never will. But aren't we lucky? ("Since when is life without purpose 'lucky'?" "Don't think about that. Just be glad you are here.")
- It's in the nature of the universe that it must be that way. ("But what do you mean?" "I don't know.")¹

1 I hope my readers can take the satyric banter here as all in good fun; I do not



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When staring at the indisputable facts that the universe had a beginning, that the laws of nature were there at the beginning, and that the laws are mathematically structured, science without faith is struck dumb. Yet each of these facts has been firmly established within the scientific community!

This is where the wise teacher will reject the false mandate to keep God out of the science classroom and say to her students:

Science and faith in the Creator converge right here. Scripture declares that God created the heavens and the earth. Science establishes that, yes, the universe had a beginning but cannot explain the beginning. Faith comes right back and says that's the part we can answer. There is One, revealed to us in the Bible, who made everything. In the beauty of his holiness and in his great wisdom God fashioned his creation with exquisite grace and beauty, for his own glory and as a precious gift to us, his image bearers. This gift should evoke from us thanksgiving, praise, and worship: 'it is he that has made us and not we ourselves.' Further, God is the one who superintends all things at all times, constantly holding the creation together (Col. 1:17) and lovingly acting within creation to direct it according to his own inscrutable purposes (Ps. 104). And amazingly—astonishingly—as we learn more about his creation, we learn more about *him*.

mean to be offensive. I have, in fact, often seen comments similar to these in print.

Think about *that* when you are reading your chemistry assignment tonight. Thanks be to God.

Defining Science

Who gets to define science? The definition insisted upon by secularists is based on *methodological naturalism*. According to this approach, scientific inquiry must be pursued strictly on the basis of explanations from natural principles, without any appeals to God. Such appeals are always condemned as GOTG arguments. Those who define science this way are emphatic about the claim that the very essence of science is that it is the effort to understand nature strictly from natural processes and laws without any appeal whatsoever to divine action. This is what science *is*, they say, and whenever faith enters scientific discourse, that discourse ceases—by definition—to be scientific at that moment.

I agree that methodological naturalism should guide our inquiry as far as it can. I am not denying that the expectation of finding natural explanations has led many scientists to keep investigating until they found one. Methodological naturalism is an effective approach as far as it goes.

But as I have attempted to show, it can only go so far, and where science cannot go, revelation from Scripture about the nature of the universe and humankind comes in.

I have been thinking, teaching, and writing along these lines for quite a while. But I was very happy to learn recently that Alvin Plantinga, the Christian philosopher

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I mentioned at the beginning, has written the same thing. This is exciting, because Professor Plantinga is not only a Christian, he is one smart cookie. In the July 1996 issue of *Faith and Philosophy* Plantinga published a lengthy article devoted to this subject.² In the article, for reasons we need not go into here, Plantinga refers to the approach of methodological naturalism as “Duhemian science,” and to the approach I have advocated here as “Augustinian science.” I will quote two relevant paragraphs:

Consider, for example, the question of how life originated: theists know that God created it in one way or another, and now the question is: how did he do it? Did he do it by way of the ordinary regularities or laws of physics and chemistry (the ordinary behavior of matter, so far as we understand it) or did he do something special? If, after considerable study, we can't see how it could possibly have happened by way of those regularities—if, as is in fact the case, after many decades of study the enormous complexity and functional connectedness and integrity of even the simplest forms of life make it look increasingly unlikely that they could have originated in that way—the natural thing to think, from the perspective of Christian theism, is that probably God did something different and special here. (Such a conclusion, of course, would not be written in stone. All we can say is that is it likely with respect to our *present* evidence; perhaps things will change; the inquiry is never closed.) And why couldn't one draw this conclusion precisely as a scientist? Where is it written that such a conclusion can't be part of science? Why should we accept methodological naturalism?

...

So to return to the current ques-

2 Vol. 13 No. 3. The article is available for \$20 from the Philosophy Documentation Center at pdcnet.org. Select Products/Journals & Series. Select *Faith and Philosophy* and Browse Contents, then enter the volume and number. Finally, select the article by Plantinga.

Postscript

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“ ‘But nothing here suggests that the Christian scientific community should not also pursue non-Duhemian Augustinian science where that is relevant. There is nothing here to suggest that if it ain't Duhemian, it ain't science.’ ”

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tion: should the Christian scientific community observe the constraints of methodological naturalism? So far as this argument is concerned, the answer seems to be: yes, of course, in those areas where Duhemian science is possible and valuable. But nothing here suggests that the Christian scientific community should not *also* pursue non-Duhemian Augustinian science where *that* is relevant. There is nothing here to suggest that if it ain't Duhemian, it ain't science.

[Italics in the original.]

Conclusion

My purpose in this article has been to make room for Christian theism in the science classroom—elbow room, if you will. The desire to build excellent science programs does not necessitate leaving our Christian faith at the door of the classroom. Granted, Christian schools have come under fire for ignoring or discounting scientific claims and for supporting pseudo-scientific claims that enjoy little to no acceptance in the wider scientific community. Much of that criticism has been deserved. The question raised here is: if we are to be serious about building up the integrity of our school's science program, does science, properly understood, require us to leave our faith out of it? The answer I have tried to establish here is: no, we don't.

This is good news. Because, for a Christian believer, it is simply out of bounds to leave Christ out of the science classroom. In fact, it is out of bounds to leave Christ out of any classroom, or of any domain of human endeavor or inquiry whatsoever. For the biblical claim is that the Lord Jesus Christ is

the absolute center of the created order, that it exists by him, for him, and through him. If we have adequately submitted ourselves to him we will find ourselves focusing on him constantly as the central ordering principle of the cosmos and of God's revelation to us, and the central ordering principle of our lives and our teaching.

The centrality of Christ is the greatest of all magnificent themes, and I can say no more than to end on this pastoral note. The implications of Christ's centrality for our own personal views about ourselves in relation to others are immense beyond words. When taken seriously, the injunctions to seek justice, to love others, to serve others sacrificially, and to forgive others will radically alter a person's views about every single thing, and will also radically alter the person's attitudes, behavior, preferences, tastes, and habits. May Christ radically alter each one of us, and make us more like himself. ▲

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