Science, Religion, and Morality: A Reply to Herman E. Daly

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Introduction

In 1963 the brilliant physicist and atheist Richard P. Feynman raised the following question about the relationship between science and religion: how is it possible to preserve "the real value of religion as a source of strength and courage to most men while at the same time not requiring an absolute faith in the metaphysical (i.e., theistic) system" that partially constitutes religion and that "sooner or later" will turn out to be scientifically mistaken? According to Herman E. Daly (writing in the previous issue of *Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly,* vol. 26, no. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 2006)), Feynman's question remains unanswered, especially when understood as the problem of "how to maintain inspiration to provide the strength to do good in the face, not of a slight doubt as to the existence of God, but . . . of aggressive assertions by the high intelligentsia that the very idea of God is an infantile suggestion." The intellectuals he has in mind include Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, Edward O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett.

Daly's central claim is that from a "scientific materialist" or "neodarwinist" perspective, human life is meaningless, human action is pointless, free will and morality (especially objective morality) are illusory, and reason cannot be trusted. He asserts that theoretical abstractions are never well-supported enough to overturn beliefs in the objects of concrete, "direct experience," and that in fact we have such experience of free will, efficacious human purpose, and good and evil. Holding that "Feynman's question . . . underlies the culture war over the issue of intelligent design versus neodarwinism," he sides with or inclines toward (theistic) intelligent-design accounts of evolution, the origin of life, and the anthropic principle.

Daly's essay is interesting, complex, and provocative—and, it seems to me, chock full of dubious assertions and shaky reasoning. In what follows I will highlight some of these difficulties. I will begin by questioning Daly's understanding of Feynman's question, continue by challenging his account of the implications of scientific atheism, add some doubts about his appeal to direct experience, and close with some remarks about the intelligent-design debate.

What Feynman Says

Contrary to what Daly seems to suppose, Feynman does not say that without religious inspiration ethical knowledge "is powerless to produce action," nor that morality requires a theistic foundation. Feynman recognizes that religious skeptics are non-religiously motivated to act morally; indeed he himself is such a skeptic given his active support for freedom of thought and expression, and for some of the values of Pope John XXXIII's *Pacem in Terris.* And while denying that science by itself can answer ethical questions, he never asserts that only religion can do so. His considered view seems to be that for most people religion is "*a* source of moral code [*sic*] as well as inspiration to follow that code" (emphasis added).

A Blurring of Distinctions

Daly's discussion of the implications of scientific atheism blurs many important distinctions. In this respect he is at least in good company: some of the intellectuals who arouse his ire—Edward O. Wilson first and foremost—are pretty confused themselves. Let me call attention to four problems.

First, Daly repeatedly conflates two different ways in which human life might be said to be meaningful or meaningless. On the one hand, human lives might possess or lack a cosmic (transcendent, superhuman) purpose—one provided, for example, by a divine plan. On the other hand, human lives might or might not be worth living—they might include or lack goals and purposes worth pursuing. From absence of meaning in the former sense Daly somehow infers absence of meaning in the latter sense. But to non-suicidal skeptics about cosmic purposes (other than Arthur Schopenhauer), this will appear to be a non-sequitur: despite their awareness of human mortality, they find

life worth living for familiar reasons involving love, work, personal achievement and commitments, and so on. At the very least Daly owes us an account of where they supposedly go wrong. I highly recommend Iowa State University philosopher E.D. Klemke's anthology *The Meaning of Life* (second edition), which includes contributions both from Schopenhauer, Leo Tolstoy, and William Lane Craig (two psychologically troubled thinkers and one fundamentalist Christian philosopher who make the same inference Daly does) and from skeptics such as Albert Camus, Kurt Baier, Paul Edwards, and Antony Flew (who reject it altogether).

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Second, Daly seems to conflate metaphysical and epistemological issues while engaging in a very confusing discussion of the metaethical implications of scientific atheism. He reasons that if scientific atheism is true then so is moral nihilism: no actions have any moral value, merely survival value. He defends this contentious metaphysical inference not by appealing to the controversial (and in the present context probably question-begging) divine-command theory of morality, but apparently by maintaining that an evolutionary account of moral experience and belief is unacceptable. This statement in turn depends on the partly metaphysical claim that if moral value were "reducible to the random" then we would have no reason to act morally.

Third, this last claim is muddled even if we put aside the metaphysical/epistemological conflation. What would it mean for neo-Darwinist atheism to reduce moral value to the random, and why does Daly suppose that it does so? Presumably his point is something like this: (a) from this atheist perspective moral value can only be survival value, (b) survival value is central to natural selection, and (c) natural selection is based on random mutations and random changes in the environment. But (a) is at best problematic. The difficulty is not merely that it conflicts with Daly's claim that neo-Darwinist atheism leaves no room for moral value.

More important, (a) is highly implausible on its face: neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory itself takes no stand on the nature of moral value, and supporters of neo-Darwinism can and do adopt any of a variety of skeptical and non-skeptical positions on it. Furthermore, surely we would have obvious reasons of self-interest to act morally even if moral value were nothing but survival value.

Even if irreducibly random processes at the quantum level govern our actions, it does not follow . . . that in virtue of this randomness we lack free will; those processes may still conform to probabilistic laws that strongly limit the randomness.

Fourth, whether scientific atheism excludes free will depends on what free will is and whether, for example, it is compatible with determinism and with indeterminism. Daly assumes without argument that free will and determinism are incompatible; but a great many philosophers disagree, including "high intelligentsia" member Daniel Dennett. Moreover, even if irreducibly random processes at the quantum level govern our actions, it does not follow—at least without further argument—that in virtue of this randomness we lack free will; those processes may still conform to probabilistic laws that strongly limit the randomness.

Mistaken Experiential Beliefs?

I have some sympathy for the appeal that Daly makes—influenced by the logician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead—to the primacy of direct experience. But in Daly's hands this appeal seems dogmatic and infallibilist: he dismisses even the bare possibility that core experiential beliefs could be mistaken. And he seems unaware that his position would nullify much well-established scientific belief, especially in theoretical physics since the advent of relativity theory, quantum mechanics, and string theory. Indeed, the Flat Earth Society would surely have many more members if most people adopted Daly's position!

The Intelligent Design Controversy

Finally, Daly's discussion of the intelligent-design controversy is marred by major and minor flaws. Here are two of the more serious ones.

First, in contrast to most biologists, Daly treats neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory as merely a "reasonable conjecture" or "good working hypothesis"—apparently because macroevolution is not directly observable. By this logic, every scientific theory that posits unobservables—for example, the theory of gravity—is conjectural, no matter how well supported it is. This is a hugely restrictive account of scientific knowledge that cries out for defense; Daly offers none.

Second, Daly claims that defenders of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory have failed to respond adequately or even forthrightly to scientific objections from intelligent-design theorists concerning irreducible complexity and facts about the fossil record. But in fact there is a substantial and growing literature going back several decades that does contain serious replies—for example, by Philip Kitcher, Kenneth R. Miller, Niles Eldridge, and Robert Pennock—to these (and other) creationist and neo-creationist objections.

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Sources: Herman E. Daly, "Feynman's Unanswered Question," *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly* vol. 26, no. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 2006); Richard P. Feynman, *The Meaning of It All: Thoughts of a Citizen Scientist* (Perseus Books, 1998); *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd edition, edited by E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003); Philip Kitcher, *Abusing Science: The Case Against Creationism* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1982); Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999); Robert T. Pennock, *Tower of Babel: The Evidence Against the New Creationism* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1999); and Niles Eldridge, *The Triumph of Evolution* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000).