

Rejoinder to Stephen J. Sullivan

Herman E. Daly

Introduction

Stephen J. Sullivan's comments are thoughtful and deserve a reply. He understands me well enough, but simply disagrees. Members of the group that he tellingly labels "nonsuicidal skeptics" are likely to be both numerous and sympathetic to his complaints. But that insightful label raises the question of why other skeptics might be suicidal, and why do we drop them so quickly from consideration? Because the cosmic meaninglessness that follows from the skeptic's materialism is very bad news for the individual who seeks meaning, purpose, and value in his personal life, as well as for a society that tries to enact policy for the common good. A moral individual in an amoral cosmos is like a compass needle in a world without magnetic north. It doesn't matter which way it points. This

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is not at all a complicated or dubious inference. Furthermore, individuals are part of the cosmos, and if we have value and meaning then so does the cosmos, at least to that extent. If the cosmos has no value or purpose then neither do we who are part of it.

The Modern Skeptic

If scientific naturalism (neodarwinism) is a true metaphysical worldview, as the modern skeptic believes, then he must come to terms personally with the very bad news it entails. If the skeptic is logically consistent then depression, apathy, a lack of interest in policy, and perhaps suicide are the likely consequences, even if it is suicide by "entertaining ourselves to death." To remain nonsuicidal it helps if the skeptic is willing to

fudge a bit on logical consistency. Many skeptics admirably serve values that they absorbed with their mother's milk, never questioning where these values came from or how long they will survive once their spiritual roots have been thoroughly extirpated from the culture. Darwinian selection naturally favors the nonsuicidal, which is perhaps why logical inconsistency is so common among surviving skeptics! Of course faith in reason does not come easily to a skeptic who is led by logic to suspect, as Darwin himself did on occasion, that his own convictions may merely be the random long-term product of a "monkey's mind." This is not just a quip, but a real problem that neodarwinists have not faced up to.

As an example of Sullivan's tolerance for inconsistency I cite his willingness to believe, on the authority of "a great many philosophers," (Dennett is specifically mentioned) that free will and determinism are compatible. I defined free will, consonant with most dictionaries, as the view that "there is room for purpose as an independent cause in the real world." Determinism is the view that purpose or will is not independently causative, and that it is an illusion to believe that it is. These two views are opposites, and I would be justified in assuming their incompatibility "without argument." But for good measure there is an argument contained in the quote from Wendell Berry and the related discussion.

Sullivan also provides an example of what I, following John Haught, called "metaphysical impatience." My characterization of macroevolution as a "reasonable conjecture" and a "good working hypothesis" is not reverent enough for Sullivan. He calls it a "hugely restrictive account of scientific knowledge." First, I was talking specifically about macroevolution, not "scientific knowledge" in general. To suddenly put macroevolution in the same category as the Second Law of Thermodynamics rather begs the question at issue. Second, as Karl Popper has argued, "conjecture and refutation" are the very soul of science. I was calling attention to the fact that microevolution is a convec-

ture that has survived many attempts at directly observable refutation. Macroevolution is a far grander conjecture for which it is much more difficult to design empirical attempts at refutation—we simply don't live long enough, and just-so stories, plausible though some may be, are not refutable hypotheses. Sullivan conflates micro- and macroevolution, calling them both "neodarwinist evolutionary theory" and implicitly attributes to macroevolution the higher level of scientific confidence that one is justified in attributing only to microevolution. Sullivan is impatient to take a short cut to the truth by promoting a reasonable extrapolation to the status of a "theory," a tested conjecture that has survived many attempted empirical refutations.

It is reassuring that Sullivan has "some sympathy" for the primacy of direct experience. I do not "dismiss even the bare possibility that core experiential beliefs could be mistaken," but I do require stronger evidence and arguments than does Sullivan for going against Whitehead's radical empiricism. And if one concludes that core existential beliefs are mistaken, then one really must live with the crippling logical consequences. Further, it is quite a stretch to claim that my position (Whitehead's) would nullify theoretical

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physics! Of course science makes use of highly abstract and nonobservable concepts, but at some point they must yield a prediction or conjecture that could be empirically refuted. And it is arbitrary to rule out direct experience as admissible empirical evidence.

Nor do I claim that an "evolutionary account of moral experience and belief is unacceptable"—only that a materialistic and deterministic account is unacceptable. To be sure, the *neodarwinist* evolutionary account is materialistic and deterministic and for that reason unacceptable. But the concept of evolution *per se* is not the problem—the problem is the accompanying metaphysics of materialism.

The Interesting Question

As for Feynman's atheism, I believe he said he was an atheist because he thought atheists ask the more interesting questions. Well, in this instance Feynman has indeed asked the interesting question. I think it derived from his honesty more than from his atheism, but be that as it may, my intention was to reconsider the question itself. Nevertheless, Sullivan's point is

interesting—that Feynman's considered view was that "for most people" religion is a source of morality and inspiration. Does Feynman mean here to distance himself from most people, to suggest that most people are deluded and he is not, that he possesses a better source of morality and inspiration? Perhaps, but he made no attempt to instruct or correct the mistakes of most people in this regard, something he was usually not reluctant to do in other areas. Furthermore, he said he did not know the answer to the question he was raising. At least he was a metaphysically patient atheist!

Philosophy and Public Policy

Finally, a word about my more proximate motivation for writing this essay may help, even though it is not a response to any specific point that Sullivan raised. I teach economics in a School of Public Policy. This journal is dedicated to "Philosophy and Public Policy." If one is to be seriously interested in policy as a student, teacher, or policymaker, one must make two presuppositions. First, one must believe that there is more than one possible future (nondeterminism). If the future is completely determined then policy is nonsense. Second, even if there is more than one possible future, policy would still make no sense unless there were a criterion for choosing one future as better than another (nonnihilism). Determinists and nihilists have a right to exist (to be nonsuicidal), but they also have a logical debt to the rest of us to remain silent on matters of public policy. Neodarwinism is the major home of modern determinists and nihilists. Far from recognizing their logical obligation to remain silent on matters of public policy, many neodarwinists are loud and opinionated on the subject. One hopes that they will eventually abandon their skepticism instead of their logic. In the meantime putting up with their inconsistencies may seem not too high a price for the rest of us to pay to help them avoid suicide. However, a society unable to enact and enforce serious policies because it is lured by the lurking fecklessness of neodarwinism, runs its own larger risk of suicide. The survival value of neodarwinism is likely negative for the society that adopts it as its worldview.

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Sources: Leon Wieseltier, "The God Genome," *New York Times*, February, 2006; Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 1963; Herman E. Daly, "Policy, Possibility, and Purpose," *Worldviews*, September, 2002.