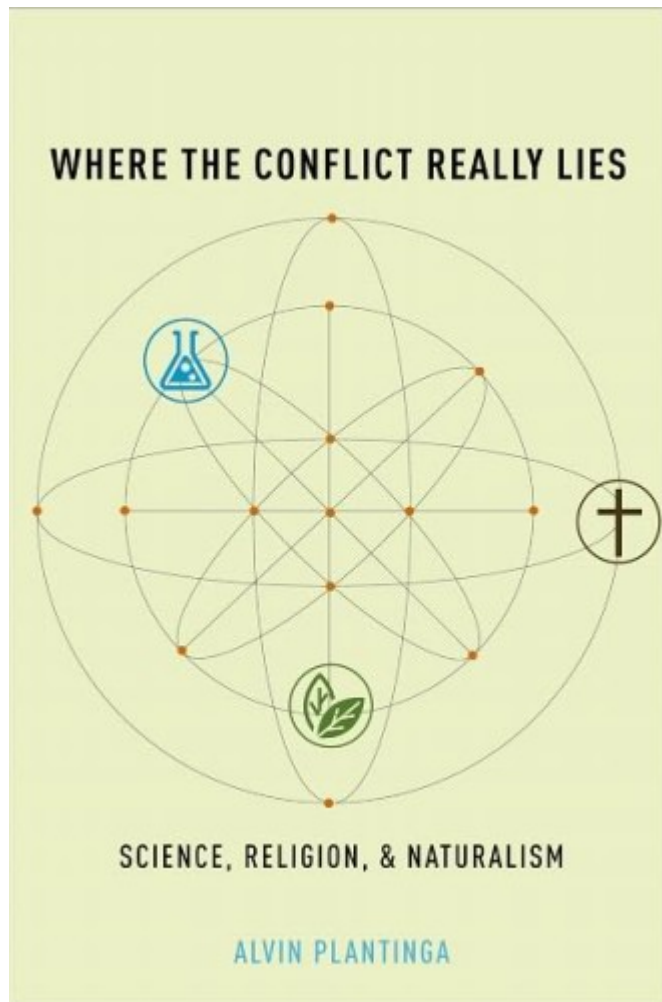


Where the Conflict Really Lies, by Alvin Plantinga

reviewed by [Karl W. Giberson](#) in the [September 5, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Where the Conflict Really Lies

By Alvin Plantinga

Oxford University Press

I once heard Isaac Asimov tell the great physicist Freeman Dyson that Newton's laws are trivial—so trivial that his dog could understand them. Asimov challenged Dyson to explain how his dog could leap in the air and catch a tennis ball in midflight if the

dog didn't understand the physical laws controlling the motion of the ball.

At some level Asimov was right. A dog, and a center fielder for that matter, must understand something about physics to catch a ball in flight. But this level of understanding—for both dogs and professional baseball players—rarely, if ever, includes knowledge of the differential equations Newton developed to describe the trajectory of masses in gravitational fields. In fact, such knowledge would prove of no value to a baseball player who took the time to acquire it.

According to evolutionary theory, our minds, and those of our dogs, developed in response to reproductive challenges. Genes for greater intelligence spread through the gene pool when those genes enhanced reproductive success. This seems straightforward: dodging projectiles launched by enemies and catching coconuts as they fall from trees certainly seem like useful survival traits. In what sense, however, is one's reproductive success enhanced by solving the differential equations associated with falling coconuts? Surely we have learned from the social structures of our high school lunchroom and from sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory* that such skills actually interfere with reproduction. Our brains, it seems, have been shaped to develop beliefs about the world that are relevant for reproduction but have little to do with truth. So if purely evolutionary forces are entirely responsible for the production of our brains, we have no reason to suppose that the beliefs produced by those brains—including belief in evolution—are true in the traditional sense.

The celebrated and controversial philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga suggests, in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, that when such problems are pursued to their logical conclusion, they lead to a profound conflict between naturalism and science. This extraordinary claim is deeply counterintuitive. Naturalism and science are typically seen as bedfellows—or even as the same thing, with two different names. Not so, says Plantinga. He contends that naturalism (the belief that nothing exists beyond the phenomena of nature which science studies) and science itself (which includes our conceptual models of that reality) conflict so profoundly that we can't embrace both of them.

A worldview that contains only science and naturalism, Plantinga contends, lacks adequate grounding for the rationality of that science. If scientists are nothing but collections of molecules of the sort they study in the lab and are governed by the same laws of chemistry, on what basis should we suppose that their pronouncements about those molecules are true? In such a world, scientists are

equivalent to robots or talking smart phones. If we hear our GPS-equipped phone tell us “your destination is on the right,” we take it seriously only because we know there is a larger world of satellites, programmers, mapmakers and engineers out there. There is a rational grounding for the pronouncements of our talking phones. But what is the rational grounding for the pronouncements of talking scientists?

Plantinga rejects as irrational the position held by people like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens that naturalism and science can be simultaneously embraced as true. “If my argument is cogent,” he writes near the end of the book, “it follows that there is a deep and serious conflict between naturalism and evolution, and hence deep conflict between naturalism and science.”

Though it is provocative and counterintuitive, Plantinga’s argument is not new. Darwin himself expressed a similar doubt in an 1881 letter to a friend:

With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?

In 350 pages of lively, if occasionally dense, prose—sprinkled with logic equations and corny jokes, and occasionally presented in a smaller font when the discourse is more specialized—Plantinga wields his logical rapier across much of the terrain where battles are being waged between traditional believers and the New Atheists. On various grounds he challenges the widely embraced belief that evolution is “unguided.” For starters, evolutionary theorists have certainly not shown that it is. Until such time as actual—or at least plausible—pathways from, say, a light sensitive pigment to our complicated eye have been specified, we should not say we know that God was not guiding the process in some way. There is no need to define evolution as if it requires a belief that it is unguided. Furthermore, if the evolutionary process is driven entirely by unguided natural selection, how can we have any confidence in the brains making the assertions in the first place? How do we avoid Darwin’s horrid doubt?

Plantinga points to evidence in the fine-tuning of the universe and in the work of intelligent design theorists like Michael Behe that some sort of guidance is at work in natural history and that unguided, purely natural processes cannot do everything on their own. However, I don’t think that Plantinga should be so impressed with

intelligent design arguments of the sort made by Michael Behe, and I wish he had been more careful in his own arguments in this regard. In one place he rebuts Behe's critics with a single reference that is more than 15 years old. On the other hand, I do find Plantinga's cosmic fine-tuning argument provocative.

Whatever we think of Plantinga's arguments, we have to take him seriously. This is the greatest strength of the book. One of the preeminent philosophers in the world, Plantinga has written more than a dozen books, many of them published by Oxford University Press. He held a chair at Notre Dame for many years, and he has given the Gifford Lectures three times. A dozen books have been written about Plantinga, analyzing his ideas and his contributions to philosophy.

Unfortunately, Plantinga's New Atheist dialog partners—Dennett, P. Z. Myers, Jerry Coyne—often respond to him with superficial hyperbole rather than careful philosophical arguments, so his philosophical arguments don't get much of a hearing. Consider the ontological nature of God, which Plantinga discusses in a few places in this book. Consistent with traditional philosophy of religion, he notes the implications of God's being a necessary being—a being that exists by definition. Philosophers have long wrestled with this nuanced, complicated and elusive idea. Many philosophy students are not sure what to make of it, but it is far from trivial.

New Atheist Jerry Coyne, author of the acclaimed book *Why Evolution Is True* and of an entertaining and bombastic antireligious blog of the same name, writes of Plantinga's discussion of the possible necessity of God: "No theologian in the world is going to convince me that it's impossible for God to fail to exist because he's a 'necessary being.'" How does Coyne know that God does not have this deep ontological property of being necessary? Because of science, of course: "Science has shown that he's not 'necessary' for anything we know about the universe." Apparently, for Coyne God is nothing more than one of various entities in the universe that may or may not exist, depending on what science has to say. God is like an Internet cable that is no longer necessary once you have wireless. Needless to say, this is not the philosophical meaning of the word *necessary*.

Where the Conflict Really Lies is an ambitious volume. Although it is unnecessarily demanding in places, a careful reading repays the reader with insights developed by one of the sharpest minds in the conversation.