

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE—TOPIC SESSION

Convener: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame
Moderator: Celia Deane-Drummond, University of Notre Dame
Presenters: Robert Masson, Marquette University
Brian Robinette, Boston College

The papers presented at this session considered two different avenues for challenging the materialist presuppositions of some of the so-called “new atheists,” who argue that modern science unmasks the incoherence of theist discourse about God and about the cosmos understood as creation. One presentation drew on recent work in neuroscience and cognitive linguistics, while the other started with Thomas Nagel’s recent and controversial book, *Mind & Cosmos*, and then outlined a response grounded in the phenomenology of Hans Jonas.

Robert Masson began with a presentation entitled “A Universe from Nothing? How Cognitive Linguistics Can Clarify the Difference between Scientific and Theological Questions.” He argued that, however flawed they may be when considered on their own logical merits or by their representation of the richness of the theological reflection on God they oppose, new atheists’ arguments against theism have a popularity and a presumptive reasonableness that reflect a widespread cultural misunderstanding about how religious language and reasoning functions, in distinction from science. His presentation combined an analytic thread and a historical-etiological thread. On the one hand he suggested that the most productive way to frame the dispute between new atheists and believers is not to start with the question of whether a supernatural agent (named “God”) exists, but with the question of how to conceptualize the kind of existence and agency that Christian faith affirms of God, as well as the question of the kinds of discernment and warrants that prompt the believer’s affirmation that God is and acts and the ways these kinds of discernment and warrants differ from scientific discernment and warrants. While distinct, these two inquiries must be pursued together in order to do justice to the embodied character of human intelligence. To this end Masson offered an analysis of religious language and reasoning by unpacking the notions of tectonic conceptual integration and metaphorical and tectonic blending, drawing on research in cognitive linguistics. Such research insists on respecting the embodied character of mind by consistently keeping the underlying tacit contexts made up of processes of mapping and blending of realms of meaning in play when one discusses and evaluates the affirmations that result (such as “this is Paul’s daughter, Sally;” “Jesus is the Messiah;” “God’s essence is TO BE”). Ironically, in their failure to do this the new atheists fail to do justice precisely to the physicality of human mental processes, and thus are not “materialist” enough. In a complementary historical analysis, Masson considered how the gradual preeminence of a “folk model of God as creator,” assumed by new atheists and many believers alike, was one of the results of the scientific revolution. He detailed the characteristic claims of a “folk model of God.” For example: science’s ability to give causal explanations make it paradigmatic; all causal explanations are literal; alternative accounts (metaphorical or symbolic) do not give genuine knowledge; God’s causal agency must, therefore, be literal, a matter of direct inference from observable evidence and thus subject to verification or

falsification by science. He then drew on the work of Michael Buckley to argue that this folk model is indebted to a Newtonian view of the world, which theologians have (mistakenly) conscripted into their own arguments. Aquinas's was a far more subtle understanding, which actually coheres better with the understanding of human cognition from cognitive linguistics and provides a more apt basis for modern theologians concerned to contest the (allegedly science-based) claims of the new atheists.

Brian Robinette, in "Mind All the Way Down? Towards a Theology of Biological Facts," began with a discussion of the hostile response to Thomas Nagel's *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Concept of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, which argued that a materialist Neo-Darwinism is inadequate to the extent that it dismisses or fails adequately to account for mind (defined in terms of consciousness, perception, desire, and the formation of beliefs and intentions). Robinette then drew on Hans Jonas's "philosophy of biological facts" to flesh out an account of life in which mindfulness and interiority (particularly as manifested in teleological thinking) is not, as new atheists aver, explicable without remainder by non-teleological mechanistic explanations, or a perverse oddity confined only to human beings, but rather is present germinally in all of life as a constitutive character of what it means to be alive. Therefore "mind" can (and must) be integrated into evolutionary histories of the origins of new species. Several consequences follow. Such an integration of history of life and history of mind allows one to discern a "scale of being" in which more inward forms of life (= "higher") emerge from yet remain dependent upon lower levels. Second, one is in a better position to cultivate a "cosmic piety," a reverence for life as a good-in-itself, which serves in turn as the soil out of which a moral imperative to care for a "threatened plenitude of the living world" can germinate and grow. Third, and more focally theological, one can better correlate God's creative activity and a threatened world, constructing a mythos of God's creativity-through-renunciation. While the Jewish affirmation of God as "the one who wills life" best encapsulates this view, it is a view that also has room for the exhilarating but often also horrifying contingency of the story of the cosmos's and life's unfolding, accounting for the increasing risks in the gamble of "willing life" in a history marked by this contingency. (Robinette highlighted in this regard the centrality of the Shoah in Jonas's thought.) Finally, and most specifically Christian, the integration of life and mind allows and indeed requires an expansion of the significance of the Incarnation (as thinkers such as John Haught and Denis Edwards have stressed) to include (minimally) the almost 4-billion-year history of life on this planet. This better enables us to recognize our participation "in a community of creation, humbly sharing this 'adventure in mortality' with other creatures, yet buoyed by the hope of resurrection."

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