THE SKEPTIC ARENA

July 11, 2015

Does Evolution Explain Religious Beliefs?

Gary Gutting's interview of Michael Ruse

(a professor of philosophy at FSU)

I will ignore Gutting's questions and only respond to Ruse's answers.

*I don’t think science as such can explain everything.*

Michael, that is a claim that no sane scientist has ever made. Since science cannot explain everything now, the only way a scientist could make such a claim is if they also claimed to know the future.

*Therefore, assuming that the existence and nature of the world can be fully understood (I’m not sure it can!), this is going to require something more than science.*

Michael, like what?

*As far as I am concerned, if you want God to have a crack at the job, go right ahead! In my view, none of our knowledge, including science, just “tells it like it is.”*

Michael, how would you know?

*Knowledge, even the best scientific knowledge, interprets experience through human cultural understanding and experience,*

Michael, Einstein's Theory of Relativity qualifies as the best scientific knowledge. How does that theory interpret reality through human cultural understanding?

*and above all (just as it is for poets and preachers) metaphor is the key to the whole enterprise.*

Michael, how do you link "metaphor" with "key to knowledge?"

*As I developed my own career path, as a historian and philosopher of evolutionary biology, this insight grew and grew. Everything was metaphorical — struggle for existence, natural selection, division of labor, genetic code, arms races and more.*

Michael, you seem more divorced from reality than most Ghost Worshipers. For an Atheist ... that is quite embarrassing.

Now Gary asks him a question that should show Michael where he is going wrong:

*Gary: It’s clear that metaphors are useful when scientists try to explain complex ideas in terms that nonscientists can understand, but why do you think metaphors have an essential role in the development of scientific knowledge?*

Nice question Gary. But why do I have the sinking feeling that we are about to be snowed?

*Because metaphor helps you move forward.*

Gary, break out the skis ... it's snowing. I told you something absurd was coming.

*It is heuristic, forcing you to ask new questions.*

Michael, science isn't the question part - science is the answer part. We receive all the questions we can handle from our environment. So why do you think we require metaphors to encourage us to ask questions?

*If your love is like a rose, what color is the rose?*

Michael, didn't your philosophy training include any logic classes?

To answer that question you would first have to know the color of your love ... which is obviously nonsensical.

*But note that it does so at a cost. A metaphor puts blinkers on us. Some questions are unanswerable within the context of the metaphor. “My love is a rose” tells me about her beauty. It does not tell me about her mathematical abilities. Now combine this fact with history.*

Michael, what fact?

If there was a fact in there somewhere - I must have missed it.

*Since the scientific revolution, one metaphor above all — the root metaphor — has dictated the nature and progress of science.*

Actually Michael, the nature and progress of science has been dictated by many things including funding, resistance by religion, and the personal motivations of individual scientists. All of these are demonstrably true.

The "root metaphor" by contrast, is not factually supportable ...

by definition.

*This is the metaphor of the world as a machine, the mechanical metaphor. What questions are ruled out by this metaphor? One is about ultimate origins. Of course you can ask about the origins of the metal and plastics in your automobile, but ultimately the questions must end and you must take the materials as given.*

Michael, why must we give up and take them as given? Why can't scientists continue to pursue the answers to the question of origins? Why can't the questions end with answers?

*So with the world. I think the machine metaphor rules out an answer to what Martin Heidegger called the “fundamental question of metaphysics”: Why is there something rather than nothing? Unlike Wittgenstein, I think it is a genuine question, but not one answerable by modern science.*

Michael, I can give you a ton of evidence that there is something. What evidence do you offer that it is even possible for there to be nothing?

*Coming now to my own field of evolutionary biology, I see some questions that it simply doesn’t ask but that can be asked and answered by other areas of science. I think here about the natural origins of the universe and the Big Bang theory. I see some questions that it doesn’t ask and that neither it nor any other science can answer. One such question is why there is something rather than nothing, or if you like why ultimately there are material substances from which organisms are formed.*

Michael, what evidence do you offer that science cannot answer those questions? Can you see into the future?

*If the person of faith wants to say that God created the world, I don’t think you can deny this on scientific grounds.*

Michael, true - but you can, and should, reject it on logical grounds, specifically: the unmet burden of proof.

*But you can go after the theist on other grounds. I would raise philosophical objections: for example, about the notion of a necessary being. I would also fault Christian theology: I don’t think you can mesh the ancient Greek philosophers’ notion of a god outside time and space with the Jewish notion of a god as a person.*

Michael, they've already been meshed: Christians and Jews now claim that their God is also "outside of time"; though none have ever been able to explain what that nonsensical concept means.

*Like every first-year undergraduate in philosophy, Dawkins thinks he can put to rest the causal argument for God’s existence.*

Michael, nice childish insult directed at a fellow evolutionary biologist. Am I sensing some professional jealousy here? Or did he hurt your feelings once?

*If God caused the world, then what caused God? Of course the great philosophers, Anselm and Aquinas particularly, are way ahead of him here. They know that the only way to stop the regression is by making God something that needs no cause.*

Michael, creationists claim that everything that exists needs a cause. Then they break their own rule by resorting to the logical fallacy of Special Pleading, and destroy their own argument in the process. So, as you so aptly put it, Anselm and Aquinas could have used some "first-year undergraduate" logic courses.

*He must be a necessary being. This means that God is not part of the regular causal chain but in some sense orthogonal to it.*

Michael, that was more nonsensical crap. What do you mean "in some sense?"

*He is what keeps the whole business going, past, present and future, and is the explanation of why there is something rather than nothing.*

Michael, fairy tales can't explain why there is something rather than nothing; only a theory with strong supporting evidence could do that. And you still need to explain how you know that a state of nothingness is even possible. And you also need to explain what you mean by keeping the past going; and while you're at it, please explain how God keeps the future going.

*Also God is totally simple,*

Michael, can you support that assertion?

*and I don’t see why complexity should not arise out of this, just as it does in mathematics and science from very simple premises.*

Michael, what complexity are you claiming is arising out of God?

Christians don't claim that complexity arose from God - they claim that God created the complexity. That is hardly the same thing.

*Traditionally, God’s necessity is not logical necessity but some kind of metaphysical necessity, or aseity. Unlike Hume, I don’t think this is a silly or incoherent idea,*

Michael, feel free to present your evidence that metaphysics is neither silly nor incoherent.

*any more than I think mathematical Platonism is silly or incoherent. As it happens, I am not a mathematical Platonist, and I do have conceptual difficulties with the idea of metaphysical necessity. So in the end, I am not sure that the Christian God idea flies, but I want to extend to Christians the courtesy of arguing against what they actually believe, rather than begin and end with the polemical parody of what Dawkins calls “the God delusion.”*

Michael, did you happen to read the part in the Bible about the sun freezing in the sky for a whole day (which went unrecorded anywhere else in the world); or the part about the sun going backwards?

Michael, exactly what would it take before the Christian idea of God "stops flying" in your mind?

*As an ardent Darwinian evolutionist I think that all organisms, and I include us humans, are the end product of a long, slow process of development thanks to the causal mechanism of natural selection.*

Michael, we, and all other life forms, are not the "end product" of evolution - we are the constantly changing products of the evolutionary process. The "end product" will be the final life forms that go extinct without reproducing.

*I think you have to judge religion on its merits.*

Michael, why only on its merits? Why not judge religion on both its positive and negative contributions? Wouldn't that reveal a more accurate picture?

*I don’t buy the moral argument for the existence of God. I think you can have all of the morality you need without God. I am a follower of Hume brought up to date by Darwin. Morality is purely emotions, although emotions of a special kind with an important adaptive function. I don’t, however, think that here I am necessarily denying the existence of God. Were I a Christian, I would be somewhat of a natural law theorist, thinking that morality is what is natural. Caring about small children is natural and good; killing small children for laughs is unnatural and bad. If you want to say that God created the world and what is good therefore is what fits with the way God designed it, I am O.K. with this.*

Michael, you stopped before addressing the bad: if God created the world and what is bad therefore is what fits with the way God designed it ... you are okay with that too?

Michael, what are you not okay with?

*People often accuse me of being contradictory, if not of outright hypocrisy.*

Michael, maybe you should listen to them. Maybe they are telling you that to help you get your train back up on the rails.

*I won’t say I accept the ontological argument for the existence of God — the argument that derives God’s existence from his essence — but I do like it (it is so clever) and I am prepared to stand up for it when Dawkins dismisses it with scorn rather than good reasons.*

Michael, Dawkins doesn't need to dismiss it with scorn - it dismisses itself because it violates the laws of logic by assuming its conclusion in its premise. If God exists because we can conceive of Him, then Santa Claus is real.

So Michael, you find that argument clever? Seriously?

*In part this is a turf war. I am a professional philosopher.*

Michael, I think philosophers everywhere just cringed in their armchairs.

*I admire immensely thinkers like Anselm and Descartes and am proud to be one of them,*

Michael, my guess is that if they were still alive ... the feeling would not likely be mutual.

*however minor and inadequate in comparison.*

Michael, false humbleness ... duly noted.

*I am standing up for my own. In part, this is political. Religion is a big thing in America, and often not a very good big thing. I don’t think you are going to counter the bad just by going over the top, like in the Battle of the Somme. I think you have to reach out over no-man’s land to the trenches on the other side and see where we can agree and hope to move forward.*

Michael, the mistake you are making is that you are painting all Christians like your parents. Fundamentalists are a different species entirely. You go ahead and continue to comfort the "nice" Christians, and leave the bad guys to those of us willing to fight. You criticize Dawkins for doing something that you obviously lack the courage to do: actually face the enemy and try to stop them.

*I should say that my Quaker childhood — as in everything I do and think — is tremendously important here.*

Michael, "important" is not the word I would have chosen.

*I grew up surrounded by gentle, loving (and very intelligent) Christians. I never forget that.*

Michael, keep playing nice with the good Christians. Dawkins and others aren't interested in them anyway.

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/07/08/does-evolution-explain-religious-beliefs/?_php=true&_type=blogs&emc=eta1&_r=0>

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

The "Moon Jelly" surprises researchers

When researchers amputated two arms from the common moon jellyfish to watch them grow back, they were shocked when that didn't happen. Instead, the moon jellyfish, which relies on being symmetrical to move about, didn't regenerate the missing arms but rather rearranged its remaining six limbs so that they were symmetrical again. The phenomenon, dubbed symmetrization, has never before been observed in nature.

The jellyfish was using its own muscles to push and pull on its remaining six arms to space them out evenly again. This was confirmed by observing that muscle relaxants made the jellies unable to rearrange their arms, while increasing muscular pulses allowed them to rearrange their arms faster. And the discovery was accidental; researchers had only been cutting into the moon jellyfish to practice for their future study on what are called immortal jellyfish, which had yet to arrive in the lab. They've since observed symmetrization in moon jellies many times, and it takes anywhere from 12 hours to 4 days to complete.

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FAMOUS QUOTES

Thomas Paine (no biography - previously quoted)

"The whole religious complexion of the modern world

is due to the absence from Jerusalem ... of a lunatic asylum"