

Information, etc OT

The Urth list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 19 Apr 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4571>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

James Wynn — 19 Apr 2006, 17:29

Alright then, I shall unabashedly walk out into the weeds...

Chris said:

The problem you get into there is ...When you say that ["love" and "altruism" are] evolutionary tricks, you have not explained love or altruism, you've claimed that they do not exist and gone on to replace them with two homonymous terms.

Agreed. However...

In recent years the natural origin of altruism has become an extremely popular branch of evolutionary biology, complete with its own ecosystem of competing theories naturally selecting for grant money and attention. I've never before met a 'secular' who claimed such scientists were engaged in a lark. Perhaps you are the first.

but many other "seculars" who are not particularly interested in "faith" don't accept this view. All that aside, I think that the modern secular view is, like Dan'I said, that faith and reason are complementary. After all, you have to get your first principles from somewhere, and Reason can't give them to you. Faith is one place you can start from.

Yes, Faith is one place to start from...but I said: to observants all such sources of first principles are matters of Faith of one sect or another.

There's two things going on here in the alternate or "moderate" secular view of Faith as you describe it.

1) While, it does view Reason and Faith as complementary, it ascribes to Faith the role of mental caulking for gaps that Reason cannot or *has not yet* fully delineated. That's not a great difference from the secular position I described.

Of course, if one means by that that "God gave us a brain and expects us to use it" then it is totally beside the point since the most literal-minded fundamentalist believes that.

2) It is true that many seculars retain a firm belief in the *objective reality* of transcendence, but in doing so they are taking advantage of a religious heritage to which (one can reasonably argue) they have no right. When one diminishes Faith as superstition, as a "God"-meme, as device to ameliorate our moral, emotional, or human deficiencies, as mental caulk, or as George Carlin described it "like lifts for your shoes", it is inconsistent to simultaneously latch on to something as subjective as Love or Altruism as uniquely transcendent. Someone in that case might not admit that he is choosing to do something flatly *contrary*, not complementary, to Reason (as he would define it under other circumstances), but he is.

It's not my habit to make strong statements like this, but I'll go out on a limb and say that while [the view of Faith that James Wynn described] is distinctly modern - in fact it's the one Kierkegaard railed against - it is only "faith" in a degenerate sense, and certainly captures little of the primordial meaning of the word. What you're describing is simply unreflective belief, which is a set that is not co-extensive with faith.

I don't consider the observant view of Faith as I've described it modern at all, nor am I certain it is the faith Kierkegaard railed against (although I am well aware that the view of Faith I have ascribed to seculars is very much *derived from* Kierkegaard and Existentialism). I confess I am ignorant of the "primordial" meaning of Faith you are talking about. However, surely the Egyptians truly believed they would literally be judged by Osiris. Surely the Icelanders of the sagas believed they would actually share in a special favored fate for dying bravely in battle.

The Faith of observants I've described is also not unreflective at all. It starts with a first premise (as you agree all must do) --in this case I'll continue to use seven-day Creationists as an archetype-- that the Bible, all of it, is plainly true in the original text, that the writers did not intend to deceive, and then to come to a conclusion based on a reading of the first chapter of Genesis that the mostly like intention of the author was to describe seven 24-hour days (this despite lots of evidence contrary). It is no more unreflective than to start with the premise that the universe consists entirely energy influenced solely and uninterrupted by natural forces, despite the fact that he persists in attesting his love for his girlfriend or his country.

My point is that observants (as I'll persist in calling them although I realize many secular-minded people attend church regularly and many who do not attend still believe in revealed Truth) believe Faith and Reason will *validate*, not merely complement, each other...that they both exist equally in the *objective* world, as do "means and motive" to criminal investigator. Their Faith IS a continuous intellectual endeavor. However, their Faith tends toward the Scholastic view of Faith and Reason: they are adamantly against giving human *reasoning* a trump over Revealed Truth (or Faith), since they argue (rightly, it must be admitted) that humans can rationalize absolutely anything.

it would be better I think to say
that [Hume] claimed that our *real* criteria for what we call "certainty"
in the daily course of our lives is not quite so strict as rationalists
suppose. Science has come to grips with this quite easily - you won't find many
scientists claiming the necessary, absolute truth of their theories.

Heh, heh, heh. I've heard many secular scientists *remind* us that science does not ascribe absolute truth to its theories...but only when comparing it favorably to religion. As a voracious reader of popular scientific literature, I am pretty certain that that caveat is not mentioned otherwise. One only needs to look at the current Climatology debate or read transcripts of conferences on competing Darwinian theories to see that, for those who make a name for themselves in research-related endeavors, hubris in advertising one's theories and pig-headedness and nasty politicking in defending them are the norm. One does not get grants or attract attention to one's published articles by concluding "Maybe I'm wrong and maybe I'm right".

I've yet to read an article by a scientist (I might have missed it) in which any consideration is given to the fact that scientists themselves (the fields they study, the conclusions they draw, and the overall scientific consensus at any given time) are as subject to environmental pressures and natural selection as the colors on a butterfly's wings.

The science writer Richard Dawkins came up recently. Nothing in his books betrays any self-doubt on the subject of Religion. He is an extreme example of a typical mindset.

On the subject of Hume, both Francis Schaeffer and Alan Bloom ("Closing of the American Mind") have fingered Hume as a prophet of skepticism toward Reason however both name Nietzsche as the one who irretrievably stripped human understanding of its pretenses. Schaeffer said he "crossed the line of despair". Bloom (writing over a decade later to a different audience) said he "pulled the floorboards from the basement and found nothing underneath", even when applying his own theories of human understanding to his theories themselves.

I don't agree that Science has truly come to grips with the concept that there is no empirical reason that human observation is anymore valid than mitochondrial observation. Secular scientists merely ignore it, since they have to. It is simply not an issue for observant scientists since most believe humans were created by a reasonable God who made them to appreciate his work. It certainly would become an issue if educated people affirm, as a matter of course rather than idle speculation, that the concepts of human observation and understanding belong in the category of abstract nouns like "God" and "Soul".

In any event Reason does not become unreasonable by starting from a premise that itself has no rational justification - if that were so, logic could never have gotten off the ground even with the ancients. The same charge could be levelled against the very first geometers and mathematicians, it's not characteristic of the modern age.

No, no! I don't agree with this at all. The ancients were of course notorious believers in the transcendence of Reason. It was --like the definition of a triangle-- beyond justification, and therefore beyond subjective influence. The Pythagoreans in fact believed that mathematics itself was a transcendent, holy thing, full of divine secrets.

Hmmm...I sense here the presence of unknown preconceptions about observants that I will not be able to allay in an email.

J

Chris — 20 Apr 2006, 03:36 · in reply to James Wynn

James said:

In recent years the natural origin of altruism has become an extremely popular branch of evolutionary biology, complete with its own ecosystem of competing theories naturally selecting for grant money and attention. I've never before met a 'secular' who claimed such scientists were engaged in a lark. Perhaps you are the first.

I am I suppose what you would call an anti-church Christian (not against one particular denomination, but all the organized forms on general principle). As such I admittedly make a very poor example of either "secular" or "observant". That said I wasn't strictly speaking for myself.

You're correct in that it's sort of popular to think in terms of evolutionary biology. But *very* few people, in secular circles or otherwise, are particularly comfortable with the aftermath of the whole Social Darwinist phase. And on a more abstract level the philosophers who deal specifically with such issues are very cognizant that evolutionary biology gives an account of "what we DO", but that "what we OUGHT to do" (if anything) is another question which scientific theories don't really speak to. There are arrogant and ignorant scientists out there, of course, but I'm not especially concerned with them here any more than I would be any other arrogant or ignorant person.

Yes, Faith is one place to start from...but I said: to observants all such sources of first principles are matters of Faith of one sect or another.

Perhaps. And perhaps they're actually right about that... but only if what they mean by "faith" is a weaker notion than I prefer.

1) While, it does view Reason and Faith as complementary, it ascribes to Faith the role of mental caulking for gaps that Reason cannot or *has not yet* fully delineated. That's not a great difference from the secular position I described.

I have to say that this is absolutely not what I was getting at, and I think that this misunderstanding probably gets right to the root of our disagreement here. It is not at all a matter of filling in gaps; the roles of the two are not even of the same type at all. The important point is that Reason alone is *empty of content*. Nothing at all can be concluded from it alone - nothing - if you want to talk about gaps, it is ALL gap and no information. Actual content is dependent on your axioms.

My point is that observants (as I'll persist in calling them although I realize many secular-minded people attend church regularly and many who do not attend still believe in revealed Truth) believe Faith and Reason will *validate*, not merely complement, each other...

I don't at all dispute that there are a lot of people who think so, and who have thought so, going a long way back. However I think such people paint themselves into a corner in which there is nothing left to have faith IN: you are left with only flat, known facts. Recall that you (rightly) brought up the biblical quote calling faith "the evidence of things UNseen".

equally in the *objective* world, as do "means and motive" to criminal investigator. Their Faith IS a continuous intellectual endeavor. However, their Faith tends toward the Scholastic view of Faith and Reason: they are adamantly against giving human *reasoning* a trump over Revealed Truth (or Faith), since they argue (rightly, it must be admitted) that humans can rationalize absolutely anything.

Well, just to fit this in with what I said above about the suspected focus of our disagreement, I think that when most people talk about a conflict between faith and reason, what they really mean by "reason" is combination of reason with certain everyday empirical assumptions/premises that we need to get by in our everyday lives - reason itself being empty of content. A conflict between faith and "reason" in that sense would be one where to believe in the object of faith would be rationally incompatible with the everyday premises which nonetheless one cannot dispense with. To continue to hold to both in the face of the rational impossibility of this is what provides the real difficulty of faith.

Heh, heh, heh. I've heard many secular scientists *remind* us that science does not ascribe absolute truth to its theories...but only when comparing it favorably to religion. As a voracious reader of popular scientific literature, I am pretty certain that that caveat is not mentioned otherwise.

I've yet to read an article by a scientist (I might have missed it) in which any consideration is given to the fact that scientists themselves (the fields they study, the conclusions they draw, and the overall scientific consensus at any given time) are as subject to environmental pressures and natural selection as the colors on a butterfly's wings.

I suggest Polanyi and Kuhn. These scientist/thinkers are not at all marginal figures, and their thought has been more or less incorporated into the modern idea of what science IS. This weighs more heavily with me than talk from guys like Dawkins, whose scientific work itself may be brilliant enough, but...

One only needs to look at the current Climatology debate or read transcripts of conferences on competing Darwinian theories to see that, for those who make a name for themselves in research-related endeavors, hubris in advertising one's theories and pig-headedness and nasty politicking in defending them are the norm. One does not get grants or attract attention to one's published articles by concluding "Maybe I'm wrong and maybe I'm right".

Well, one shouldn't have to SAY it - it should be implicitly understood by everyone involved. After all, scientists do bother to spend the effort to try and reproduce the experiments of their colleagues, so they seem to have some grasp of the idea.

Of course, whether they choose to make a point of relaying this to the public is another point entirely. But I think they have to understand it themselves perfectly well.

James Wynn — 20 Apr 2006, 17:15 · follows Chris

Chris said,

A conflict between faith and "reason" in that sense would be one where to believe in the object of faith would be rationally incompatible with the everyday premises which nonetheless one cannot dispense with. To continue to hold to both in the face of the rational impossibility of this is what provides the real difficulty of faith.

I think you have described the "secular" view of Faith quite nicely here. It is greatly influenced by the founding Existentialists who said that true Faith must be "absurd" -- by definition. But that definition of Faith is barely even conceivable to modern observants and would not have been prior to mid-late 19th century.

You're correct in that it's sort of popular to think in terms of evolutionary biology.

It is evidence of the robust quality of the theory of Natural Selection, the true engine of Darwinian evolution, that it useful for explaining (though rarely predicting) activity in biology, psychology and the changes in teddy bears. Almost any field of research, really.

But *very* few people, in secular circles or otherwise, are particularly comfortable with the aftermath of the whole Social Darwinist phase.

Well, Social Darwinianism is dead. I didn't say anyone was backing *that*. Eugenics was never really gone...only dormant for two or three decades, but that is not relevant, I think, to considering the 'secular' or 'observant' side.

And on a more abstract level the philosophers who deal specifically with such issues are very cognizant that evolutionary biology gives an account of "what we DO", but that "what we OUGHT to do"

(if anything) is another question which scientific theories don't really speak to.

Observants will point out that what we ought to do is greatly determined by where we come from. That, I think, is at the heart of the debate over "big-E" evolution.

I said:

Yes, Faith is one place to start from...but I said: to observants all such sources of first principles are matters of Faith of one sect or another.

My point is that observants believe Faith and Reason will **validate**, not merely complement, each other...

Chris said

Perhaps... but only if what they mean by "faith" is a weaker notion than I prefer. I have to say that [speaking of Faith as mental caulking for Reason] is absolutely not what I was getting at, and I think that this misunderstanding probably gets right to the root of our disagreement here. It is not at all a matter of filling in gaps; the roles of the two are not even of the same type at all. The important point is that Reason alone is **empty of content**. Nothing at all can be concluded from it alone - nothing - if you want to talk about gaps, it is ALL gap and no information. Actual content is dependent on your axioms.

I think it is very astute of you to identify this difference as an important key to this discussion. I wonder if you realize (as it seems to me) that your definition of Reason in this context causes you to come to the same conclusion about Faith? Let me explain.

If you tell me "I think my wife doesn't love me anymore" or "My son admires me", those statements can be critically examined. I can respond "Why do you think that?", and that question will make sense in our conversation. For observants, the statement "I believe in God" belongs in that category. The observant has an effable definition of the words "believe" and "God" that he can communicate to us. It does not require that he believe his definitions detail every thing about those words. However, it does mean that he will assert that he believes to be **untrue** any definition contrary to his definition.

For the seculars whom I am describing the statement "I believe in God" is simply not of the same category as "I think my wife has fallen out of love with me" or "My wife thinks I hang the moon". Thus, they have a moral repugnance to "supersessionism" or "absolutes" in matters of Faith.

Allow me to take the observant side and attempt to show its value. For an egregious example, when Bishop John Shelby Spong used to chronically speak of "the Christ", it was NOT typically clear what he meant by that. It was only clear that he was not referring to any 1st century Jew who was executed in Jerusalem, nor even to an unnamed prophesied leader expected by some Jewish adherents. "The Christ", for him, had fallen into the category of ineffable qualities that mean many things at once and never the same thing to two people.

Here is how that sort of thinking can go seriously wrong. In Monica Lewinsky's televised interview, she was asked if she felt any guilt over having an affair with a married man. Her response was "Well, I'm not a religious person. I'm a spiritual person. But I'm not a religious person." Exegesis: "Religion", for Lewinsky, represented a communicable structure of sin, righteousness, and a real live God whose existence requires something from us. To be "Spiritual" represented a respect for ineffable qualities that have no content in themselves. "I am a spiritual person" might

realistically mean only "I believe in Love" in which the words "believe" and "love" are not only undefined, but *cannot* be ultimately defined. While we can agree that her response and point-of-view was shallow, it was also philosophically correct.

I don't at all dispute that there are a lot of people who think [Faith and Reason will *validate*, not merely complement, each other], and who have thought so, going a long way back. However I think such people paint themselves into a corner in which there is nothing left to have faith IN: you are left with only flat, known facts. Recall that you (rightly) brought up the biblical quote calling faith "the evidence of things UNseen".

Well, the quote says "unseen", not unknown. And in fact verifiable *knowledge* is an important underpinning to almost the entire New Testament canon. I suspected this was true and did a quick search on the words "know" and "known" in the NT. The fact that Jesus of Nazareth lived and died in verifiable history and geography was very important to early Christians, to the 4th century seekers of relics, and to every religion that was founded even in part on NT writings. It still is today.

It is also why the pagan authorities considered it "superstition" rather than "religion". Yet, even such ancient pagans would not have considered the basics of true religion ineffable even though they were often kept secret.

I suggest Polanyi and Kuhn.

Thanks I'll check them out.

Chris — 20 Apr 2006, 20:11 · in reply to James Wynn

I said:

disagreement here. It is not at all a matter of filling in gaps; the roles of the two are not even of the same type at all. The important point is that Reason alone is *empty of content*. Nothing at all can be concluded from it alone - nothing - if you want to talk about gaps, it is ALL gap and no information. Actual content is dependent on your axioms.

James said:

I think it is very astute of you to identify this difference as an important key to this discussion. I wonder if you realize (as it seems to me) that your definition of Reason in this context causes you to come to the same conclusion about Faith? Let me explain.

Yes and no. If what you mean is that the two are incomplete by themselves, then yes; if what you mean is that Faith is empty of content, then no. What you would lack if you take faith without reason is the ability to draw inferences - logical relations - between your premises. Your thought would have content, but it would be "blind" in that your core premises would not give you access to anything more than you already believed. Euclid's axioms, taken in a vacuum so to speak, would not give you Euclidean geometry - but you would nonetheless have the axioms themselves, even if you could construct no theorems from them.

Of course, you never actually *do* run into one of these without the other.

Note that this point really is mostly about the notion of reason, and not necessarily the notion of faith (if one remains agnostic on the subject of whether all axioms are taken "on faith", or

whether faith requires something more than what we do most of the time).

For the seculars whom I am describing the statement "I believe in God" is simply not of the same category as "I think my wife has fallen out of love with me" or "My wife thinks I hang the moon". Thus, they have a moral repugnance to "supersessionism" or "absolutes" in matters of Faith.

Well, of course many people are not systematic about such things, but the logically consistent version of what you're talking about is some kind of non-cognitivism or emotivism, and it isn't so much about faith, it's about value statements and normative propositions in general (and thus the second sentence about love would get put in the same category as the first). Of course religious issues are value issues, but not all value issues are religious, and this doesn't essentially have to do with faith. [This also connects directly back with the evolutionary biology thing earlier, because an easy way to deal with the objection that you haven't explained normative concepts is to claim that they're not really concepts, or at least not of the same kind as our other concepts].

other], and who have thought so, going a long way back. However I think such people paint themselves into a corner in which there is nothing left to have faith IN: you are left with only flat, known facts. Recall that you (rightly) brought up the biblical quote calling faith "the evidence of things UNseen".

Well, the quote says "unseen", not unknown. And in fact verifiable *knowledge* is an important underpinning to almost the entire New Testament canon. I suspected this was true and did a quick search on the words "know" and "known" in the NT. The fact that Jesus of Nazareth lived and died in verifiable history and geography was very important to early Christians, to the 4th century seekers of relics, and to every religion that was founded even in part on NT writings. It still is today.

Knowing that a guy named Jesus lived in about that place and time has little to do with having faith that said guy is the savior and son of God. His disciples could see him, they didn't need faith to know he was physically there; nonetheless they needed faith that he was the Messiah, which is something that could not be seen/proved.

When you're holding a newspaper in your hand your evidence is right there in front of you - you SEE it - faith is not required. When your mailbox is closed and you have no evidence as to whether a newspaper is in there or not, then you might nonetheless believe there was a newspaper in there. And if someone asked you why you believed that - on what grounds - you might say that you simply have faith that there is. (Or, of course, if your belief isn't of that kind, then you might modify your statement and say that you believed there MIGHT be a newspaper in there, etc.)