

## A Comment on Alvin Plantinga, “Evolution vs. Naturalism”

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“With me,” Darwin wrote in a letter to William Graham (Down, July 3, 1881), “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?”<sup>1</sup>

For many years now Professor Plantinga has argued convincingly (and of course in much greater detail than in his article in this issue of *AntiMatters*) that the belief in the combination of naturalism and evolution is self-refuting; it may be true, but it is irrational to hold it. He goes further than this when he declares that Darwin’s doubt does not arise “for those who believe in God,” by which he means the Christian God, who is believed (by Christians) to have created us in his image:

if God has created us in his image, then even if he fashioned us by some evolutionary means, he would presumably want us to resemble him in being able to know; but then most of what we believe might be true even if our minds have developed from those of the lower animals.

By leaving the door open for a non-evolutionary creation, Plantinga runs the risk of being dismissed as a creationist. This risk is increased by his using the word “evolution” as if it were synonymous with “evolution by random mutation and natural selection,” e.g., when he refers to Dawkins’ claim that evolution made it possible (for Dawkins, at any rate) to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist. (The basic meaning of “evolution” — descent with modification — is obviously insufficient for this kind of fulfillment, inasmuch as it says nothing about the causes of modifications.) This is unfortunate, for Plantinga’s demonstration of the irrationality of the belief in evolutionary naturalism (or naturalistic evolution) deserves a wider audience. It is important not only for those who believe that God has created us in his image and/or presume that he wants us to resemble him in being able to know, but also for those who, like this commenter, believe (i) that what evolution has in the works is not merely an image of God but God himself and (ii) that the human species is only a step in this direction, albeit an important one. As Sri Aurobindo wrote,<sup>2</sup> “man is ... a middle term of the evolution, not its end, crown or consummating masterpiece.”

Man is a transitional being, he is not final. He is too imperfect for that, too imperfect in capacity for knowledge, too imperfect in will and action, too imperfect in his turn to-

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin (London: John Murray, 1887), Volume 1, pp. 315–16.

<sup>2</sup> *Essays Divine and Human*, p. 222. Puducherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997.

wards joy and beauty, too imperfect in his will for freedom and his instinct for order. Even if he could perfect himself in his own type, his type is too low and small to satisfy the need of the universe. Something larger, higher, more capable of a rich all-embracing universality is needed, a greater being, a greater consciousness summing up in itself all that the world set out to be. He has ... to exceed himself; man must evolve out of himself the divine superman: he was born for transcendence. Humanity is not enough, it is only a strong stepping stone; the need of the world is a superhuman perfection of what the world can be, the goal of consciousness is divinity. The inmost need of man is not to perfect his humanity, but to be greater than himself, to be more than man, to be divine, even to be the Divine.<sup>3</sup>

Man in himself is hardly better than an ambitious nothing. He is a narrowness that reaches towards ungrasped wideesses, a littleness straining towards grandeurs which are beyond him, a dwarf enamoured of the heights. His mind is a darkened ray in the splendours of the universal Mind. His life is a striving exulting and suffering wave, an eager passion-tossed and sorrow-stricken or a blindly and dully toiling petty moment of the universal Life. His body is a labouring perishable speck in the material universe. An immortal soul is somewhere hidden within him and gives out from time to time some sparks of its presence, and an eternal spirit is above and overshadows with its wings and upholds with its power this soul continuity in his nature. But that greater spirit is obstructed from descent by the hard lid of his constructed personality and this inner radiant soul is wrapped, stifled and oppressed in dense outer coatings....

This imperfect being with his hampered, confused, ill-ordered and mostly ineffective consciousness cannot be the end and highest height of the mysterious upward surge of Nature.... A godhead is imprisoned in our depths, one in its being with a greater godhead ready to descend from superhuman summits. In that descent and awakened joining is the secret of our future. Man's greatness is not in what he is but in what he makes possible.<sup>4</sup>

If we want to resemble God in being able to know, we still have a considerable distance to travel, for mind (as we know it) is but "a clumsy interlude between Nature's vast and precise subconscious action and the vaster infallible superconscious action of the Godhead".<sup>5</sup>

Plantinga concludes with the words: "It is evolutionary naturalism, not Christian belief, that can't rationally be accepted." Regardless of whether Christian belief can or cannot be rationally accepted, and regardless of whether it is even desirable for a religious faith to be rationally acceptable, it is fair to say that evolutionary naturalism indeed cannot be rationally accepted.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159-160.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.