

Book Review

Talking About God With The “High Priests” Of Evolution

A review of *Evolution, Monism, Atheism, and the Naturalistic World-View* by Gregory Graffin. Polyterus Press: Ithaca, NY, 2004.

by

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Every student who has ever taken a multiple choice test understands the frustration of ambiguous questions. Every teacher who has ever given a multiple choice test is familiar with the unpleasant task of having to justify ambiguous questions to frustrated students. These experiences might make a person reluctant to read a book based largely on the answers to a series of multiple choice questions, but in the case of Gregory Graffin's *Evolution, Monism, Atheism, and the Naturalistic World-View* (his dissertation for a PhD in Zoology from Cornell), such reluctance would be unfortunate. Although some of the questions are ambiguous, and the book suffers from an incomplete review of the relevant literature, these shortcomings are more than offset by the many strengths of the book. First, there is the importance of the subject matter. Many evolutionists might want to ignore the fact that their work exists within a social context where religion continues to play an important role, but confronting the relationship between evolutionary theory and religion is probably going to become increasingly difficult to avoid in both classrooms and the political arena of research funding. Second, the subjects answering the questions (149 evolutionists who are members of the National Academy of Science or the equivalent in other countries) represent a large fraction of the individuals who have formed our current understanding of evolution. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there are the transcribed interviews with twelve of the participants in the survey, including Richard Dawkins, Richard Lewontin, John Maynard Smith, Ernst Mayr, and George Williams (whose “anti-theist” view is perhaps the most interesting position stated by any of the participants). Although some of what these

interviews contain can be found in the participants' published works, it is interesting to read their opinions in the context of this particular subject. These factors combine to produce a book of potential value to people interested in philosophical questions related to religion and evolution, and also to anyone who simply wants to learn more about the individuals who have shaped our view of the living world.

The survey questions cover topics ranging from the existence of objective reality to a variety of possible relationships between morality and evolution, and Graffin's analysis of these issues is thorough and precise. However, the primary goal of the book is to determine if evolution serves as a "replacement" for religion (Graffin 2004:1). Specifically, the survey is designed to "determine whether evolutionary biologists use their science as a replacement for traditional theology" when it comes to providing intellectually satisfying answers to all of the "'big' questions" (Graffin 2004: 97). Unfortunately, the analysis of this topic stops frustratingly short of reaching its full potential. Graffin clearly demonstrates that most evolutionary biologists depend on evolutionary theory, observation, and verification to "explain the most significant aspects of human experience" (Graffin 2004: 98), but he never questions his assumption that religion exists to provide answers to big questions through belief in the supernatural (for reasons to question this assumption, see Evans-Pritchard 1965; Boyer 2000). This is particularly frustrating because Graffin's own analysis of the participants who did include various forms of claims about the supernatural in their answers calls this assumption about religion into question. Further, much of Graffin's analysis actually supports the alternative view that religious talk is a uniquely important form of communication, whether or not it is also the expression of belief in supernatural explanations (for examples of this approach, see Rappaport 1971; Needham 1972; Palmer and Steadman 2004).

Graffin first alludes to the possibility that religion does not serve as an intellectually satisfying explanation based on supernatural beliefs when he states that "a major factor driving compatibilism [between evolution and religion] is *desire to entertain theological discussions, not hope for an intellectually satisfying union of evolution and religion*" (2004; 51; emphasis added). He continues to point toward the importance of supernatural *talk*, as opposed to supernatural *beliefs*, when he refers to the "curious puzzle" of the seemingly contradictory statements given by a few respondents in order to include some form of supernatural claims in their responses. For example, Graffin points out that "some evolutionary biologists have a monistic naturalist belief system and at the same time believe in a deist god of some sort" (2004: 72). In attempting to explain such responses, Graffin suggests that George Williams' insistence of some sort of deism might be due to the "desire to accommodate some sort of *discussion of god*" (2004: 62; emphasis added). Graffin also points out that E. O.

Wilson's "provisional deist" position "leaves room for *discussion* of god" (2004; 71; emphasis added). Similarly, one anonymous respondent explained his agreement with the statement that organisms possessed both material and spiritual properties by stating that he saw the "spiritual as an emergent property of the material" (quoted by Graffin 2004: 73). In response to this statement, Graffin states "The reason, I suspect, that this participant uses emergent properties is because it allows him to take the concept of the spirit seriously when engaged in theological *discussions*" (2004: 73; emphasis added). Graffin adds that he sees the use of the term "emergence" as a "tool for *communication*" (2004; 75; emphasis added). All of these statements suggest that religious behavior may not necessarily imply supernatural beliefs about the big issues in life. Instead they indicate that religious behavior is a distinct form of communication that may have uniquely important influences on social relationships. This view is also consistent with the observation by Dawkins that "it's not polite to insult someone's religion, but you can insult their politics, or their views on this or that or the other, their football team or whatever" (quoted by Graffin 2004: 87).

Unfortunately, Graffin never follows through on these observations to the point of asking why discussions involving supernatural claims are so much more important to social relationships than are naturalistic discussions about topics such as evolution or football. Instead, he returns to the original assumption that religion consists of supernatural beliefs used to explain the world, and concludes that "[a]ll indications from this dissertation point toward religion and evolution serving the same role for people" (Graffin 2004: 98). This continued adherence to the view that religion and evolution provide similar stories for people to believe in, appears to be the result of Graffin's concern that "if scientists don't meet religion on the same level and do battle with religion, they're going to lose because scientists are the only people who can offer an equivalent kind of story for people to believe in, or young children to gravitate towards, for people to find purpose in life" (Graffin 2004: 200). However, if religion is more of a distinct form of communication than it is a belief in supernatural explanations, as much of Graffin's own analysis seems to suggest, then perhaps this concern over the need for science to meet religion "on the same level" needs to be re-evaluated.

In any case, the book provides many other insights into a variety of questions likely to be of interest to readers. For example, the numerous references to "just-so" stories in the interviews suggest that some of the leading actors in the sociobiology wars of the 1970s remain focused on those debates. There are also clear indications that some of the participants continue to speak about these issues in highly personal terms, such as Richard Lewontin's reference to "this guy Pinker who doesn't know sh** about biology" (quoted by Graffin 2004: 143; **added). On a more theoretical level, the diversity in answers concerning the concept of progress in evolution is sure to spark debate, as is the

large number of participants who agreed with the statement that humans possess free will.

Regardless of their specific interests, I suggest that readers of this book begin by turning to the appendix and filling out the questionnaire for themselves. This will make the discussion of the reasoning behind each question easier to follow, and it will put the reader in a better position to draw their own conclusions from the results. Although many of the findings fit expectations, this book deserves careful consideration. If the leading evolutionary biologists of our time are not in complete agreement about the relationship between religion and evolution, then surely this topic deserves further investigation. Hopefully, Graffin will continue to take part in attempts to identify the details of the relationship between evolution and religion.

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