Rosenhouse on God-guided mutations again

Over at EvolutionBlog, Jason Rosenhouse continues his critique of Elliott Sober’s argument for the logical possibility of God-guided mutations. In “A follow-up to Tuesday’s post about God-guided mutations,” Jason succinctly establishes several points, two of which I want to underscore:

1. Despite Sober’s insistence that scientists contest the proposition that God-guided mutations are logically compatible with evolution, no scientist, including myself, takes issue with that proposition. Mutations that are guided so rarely as to be undetectable are of course logically possible, whether the “guider” be God, the tooth fairy, or the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

Sober further argued in his paper that both Will Provine and Dan Dennett espoused this view. But Jason shows, using quotations, that this claim is also wrong. Jason even provides us with a Marshall McLuhan Moment, provoking an email from Dennett to Sober demanding that Sober produce evidence for his claim.

Sober is wasting a lot of time arguing against a view that nobody holds. Indeed, virtually all of science is logically consistent with the proposition that God sticks his hand in from time to time, but rarely and undetectably. I’m still puzzled why Sober doesn’t give talks and write papers about how it’s logically possible that God sometimes affects the tosses of coins to favor given outcomes, like winning a football game. Imagine how sports fan would love that logical compatibility! Or how God could sometimes tweak electrons to guide physical processes in the real world (an argument that Kenneth Miller floated in his first book).

2. Sober argues in both his talk at the University of Chicago and in an earlier paper, “Evolution without naturalism,” that “evolutionary theory is silent on the question of whether God exists.” Sober’s claim is false. Evolution—and science in general—can’t absolutely refute God, but they can narrow the sphere of His influence to almost nothing. As Jason notes,

Let us first conceive of God merely as some sort of superintelligence responsible for creating the world. Prior to Darwin’s work we had what most people regarded as a slam-dunk argument for God’s existence: Paley’s version of the design argument. After Darwin, that argument is completely dead. Does that not imply that evolution has something to say on the question of God’s existence? Evolution does not resolve the question whether God exists, but it certainly must be included in any discussion of the question.

If we add to our thinking the usual assumptions that are made about God, the he is all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing, then the situation becomes more stark. Evolution poses grave challenges to common beliefs about God. As an analogy, we might say that no amount of evidence presented at a courtroom trial could ever establish to a certainty that the defendant is guilty. It would be strange to say that the evidence is silent on the question of the defendant’s guilt.

That’s how I would describe the relationship between evolution and religion. Evolution cannot prove that traditional religion is false, but it certainly has some very loud and important things to say on the subject.

Perhaps Sober has in mind some very precise notion of what it means to say evolution is “silent” on the question of God’s existence. For now, though, I’m inclined to say that evolution is definitely not silent on these questions, even though it ultimately does not resolve anything.

Evolution, science, and mere observation tell us that the evidence is strongly against the existence of an omnipotent, loving, and omniscient God. Indeed, the evidence is far more consistent with the notion—a notion that few theists hold—that God is either apathetic, malicious, or a weenie.

The history of science and theology together shows that the former constantly nibbles away at the ambit of the latter, forcing theologians into ever more abstract conceptions of God, in which He either disappears or His actions become undetectable. This rearguard action, consisting entirely of special pleading and post facto rationalization (also called “making stuff up”), is known as Sophisticated Theology. It is propped up by the lucubrations of philosophers like Sober and Michael Ruse. Only God knows why they do it.
This entry was written by whyevolutionistrue and posted on May 13, 2012 at 10:31 am and filed under Uncategorized. Bookmark the permalink. Follow any comments here with the RSS feed for this post. Both comments and trackbacks are currently closed.

» Holiday snaps Cat eats melon: seeds, rind, and all

110 Comments

1. 

pithom

Posted May 13, 2012 at 10:58 am | Permalink

Only God knows why they do it.

-To feel superior to both religious fundamentalists and New Atheists, of course.

2. 

Achrachno

Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:00 am | Permalink

“Only God knows why they do it.”

I’ll bet Sober & Ruse know, but they’re not gods.

My guess is that it must have to do with not wanting to get too out of the mainstream. They have a need to conform to social norms, instead of boldly following then evidence into places where few people ever go.

They can’t bring themselves to deny a role for “God” even if they know there’s nothing to deny or affirm. There’s no evidence that any “God” ever does anything, but why should that stop them from talking about all the fairy castles He might theoretically build? Or the genes he might tweak? This is philosophy, not science, after all.

3. 

Achrachno

Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:02 am | Permalink

“boldly following THE evidence”

Sorry.

Achrachno

Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:06 am | Permalink

“to get too FAR out of the mainstream”

I can’t type at all today. I wonder what else I did.

3. 

davidgerard

Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:04 am | Permalink

“a notion that no theist holds”

Dystheism: the belief that God exists and is out to get you.

Davros

Posted May 13, 2012 at 9:35 pm | Permalink

Did Jerry correct this? Because my in my reading it says ‘few’ not ‘no’.

An interesting link nonetheless. I always thought that capricious gods
were more believable than the Christian god.

4. 
Mark Joseph  
Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:13 am | Permalink

[ital]Only God knows why they do it.[/ital]  

Templeton money?  

PS: Can someone point me to a page that shows how to use bold, italics, etc. on this site? TIA.

   . 
    davidgerard  
    Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:22 am | Permalink

    Plain old HTML  
    (Like this: <i>italics</i> <b>bold</b> <a href="http://whatever">link</a>

   . 
    Mark Joseph  
    Posted May 14, 2012 at 8:22 pm | Permalink

    Thank you.

   . 
    Michael Fisher  
    Posted May 13, 2012 at 1:36 pm | Permalink

    If you are a Mozilla FireFox or Seamonkey user install the BBCodeXtra add-on  
    After installation, when you RIGHT-click the “Post a Comment” box, the pop-up context menu will now include  
    “…new commands to insert BBCode/Html/XHtml codes in an easy and fast way…”

   . 
    Mark Joseph  
    Posted May 14, 2012 at 8:28 pm | Permalink

    This is[i]da bomb[i]:

   . 
    Mark Joseph  
    Posted May 14, 2012 at 8:30 pm | Permalink

    Don’t worry; I’ll figure it out eventually…

5. 
andreschulteman  
Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:23 am | Permalink

‘The history of science and theology together shows that the former constantly nibbles away at the ambit of the latter, forcing theologians into ever more abstract conceptions of God, in which He either disappears or His actions become undetectable.’

Is God like the Cheshire Cat? In the work of the very last and most sophisticated theologian God will be a disembodied grin.

   . 
    Achrachno  
    Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:30 am | Permalink

    He may be there already — he’s looking a bit thin anyway.
A better, and perhaps more satisfying, analogy is “Evolution is a container full of hungry rats pressed against the belly of theology and being gradually heated.”

Achrachno

Posted May 13, 2012 at 4:14 pm | Permalink

With all due respect, I think I liked Andre’s analogy better.

JF Fortier

Posted May 13, 2012 at 10:55 pm | Permalink

God = uncreated consciousness.

When that consciousness is experienced within an organic machine on a space time plane, the world has no choice to be grasped on a dual mode, which means that the world is grasped mainly through opposites.

The problem of evil would be a real problem if it didn’t have its good counterpart. On a material plane, things come in pair. But the source that allows the dance of opposites to be danced is uncreated. What never began can’t end, it is beyond opposites, beyond time and therefore beyond language.

That we are borrowing right our consciousness from God’s consciousness (not and Old Man in the sky but just an uncreated conscious natural process, nothing magical here…) without knowing is normal because time, space and matter makes it hard to believe that the feeling of our individuality as a single origin that precedes the biological machine that could experience it and interpret it through an egotic lens, if you know what “I” means.

andreschuiteman

Posted May 14, 2012 at 1:25 am | Permalink

How are we to distinguish this from made-up gibberish? Perhaps you could start by providing some evidence, or at least give an indication of the source of your recondite knowledge.

Ant

Posted May 14, 2012 at 1:00 pm | Permalink

Well, I’m not sure it’s entirely gibberish…

JF Fortier

Posted May 14, 2012 at 8:25 pm | Permalink

I’m no inventing that consciousness might be uncreated. Nobel winners talked about it. This is central to many oriental traditions. If you look for it, you may find it…

andreschuiteman

Posted May 14, 2012 at 10:56 pm | Permalink

Ah, the old argument from authority. That is really not good enough.

Lynn Wilhelm

Posted May 15, 2012 at 5:04 am | Permalink

But…but…but they talked about it.
But from which orifice?

JF Fortier
Posted May 15, 2012 at 9:29 pm | Permalink

This is not an appeal to authority. I meant literally look for it. As if you do the job yourself. Even the buddha told to not believe what he said but experience it…

andreschuiteman
Posted May 16, 2012 at 1:01 am | Permalink

Excuse me? How is mentioning unspecified Nobel Prize winners in support for your assertions not an argument from authority?

Regardless, you are clearly unable to come up with any evidence or credible source for your ‘knowledge’, so for the time being I continue to classify it as made-up gibberish.

JF Fortier
Posted May 16, 2012 at 6:32 am | Permalink

If you experience the technics the oriental traditions developed in order to see the uncreated nature of consciousness, if you do that, you’ll know what it means. This is not an appeal to authority.

As for the nobel winners, yes, this is an appeal to authority, but don’t complain about it when you ask where the gibberish uncreated consciousness thing comes from. People like Heisenberg, Bohr and Pauli for example, won the Nobel prize and weren’t freaked out by the possibility that consciousness was uncreated.

andreschuiteman
Posted May 16, 2012 at 6:59 am | Permalink

Another Nobelist, Richard Feynman, once said: ‘The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool.’

Maybe you should take that to heart.

Ant
Posted May 16, 2012 at 8:11 am | Permalink

@ JF

I don’t think that anyone here is
“freaked out” by the possibility that consciousness is uncreated. We’re just inclined to dismiss it on multiple grounds:

- **Empiricism**: There’s no evidence for it. (Your “experiential” justification seems to fall into the same category of subjective experiences as OBEs and NDEs.)
- **Explanatory power**: It explains nothing better than conventional theories of consciousness as an epiphenomenon or emergent property of meat brains.
- **Parsimony**: It adds an unexplained entity.

When it comes to consciousness, I’d like to know how you can draw a line between objectivity and subjectivity.

If consciousness would be uncreated, it would solve a lot of philosophical problems, one being intentionality, meaning, qualia…

It doesn’t have to explain better what science finds. It just complete it. As you know, science still don’t get how consciousness is an emergent propriety, and still don’t get what is time.

If it doesn’t explain better what science finds, in what sense does it “complete” it? Really, explanatory power is the key characteristic of a good hypothesis; unless it has that, it’s not even worth testing empirically. As Peter Beattie would likely concur, please see David Deutsch on this issue.

If you’re appealing to uncreated consciousness to solve a lot of philosophical problems (intentionality, meaning, qualia, &c.), it’s not clear that you have a net gain. The existence of uncreated consciousness would seem to be a harder philosophical problem than the hard problem of consciousness!

From our dual perspective where things are grasped through opposites,
something uncreated poses a problem, that can be resolved by shifting the mode of consciousness where our usual binary logic isn’t relevant. But that wouldn’t change anything in the end. The way the world and the self would be perceived would change, but not the world itself. If a bi-dimensional being suddenly sees a 3rd dimension, the world still works the same way for him, he just have a wider, different view on it. In the end, it would only mean that the cerebral, chemical physiological process isn’t what causes consciousness but are indications of how consciousness interact with matter. That is huge because the main position stands opposite to that, but I think it would simplify a lot of things. And it would solve the problem of evil, morality, free will, ontology, meaning. There would be a no-ting in itself where those subjective matters objectively originates.

Ant
Posted May 15, 2012 at 12:29 am | Permalink

Just because you didn’t invent it, JF, doesn’t mean that it’s not made up!

@

martinanderson
Posted May 14, 2012 at 4:45 am | Permalink

This is a Sokal, right?

Lynn Wilhelm
Posted May 14, 2012 at 5:54 am | Permalink

This is hilarious. Can I steal it to use in discussions on the LinkedIn Freethinkers group?

I love “organic” and “biological” machines but you didn’t mention quantum once. Perhaps I can find a way to add that.

Kevin
Posted May 14, 2012 at 6:35 am | Permalink

Oh my yes. Gotta have quantum.

Wouldn’t be proper modern woo without quantum.

JF Fortier
Posted May 14, 2012 at 8:17 pm | Permalink

Ut is because I know nothing about QM. I just don’t get. But people like Bohr or Penrose, from what I’ve heard, aren’t that freaked out by the possibility that consciousness might be an uncreated property of the universe.
And the evidence to support your baseless assertions are?

JF Fortier  
Posted May 14, 2012 at 7:54 pm | Permalink

That consciousness is uncreated is noting new. Even nobel prizes endorses the idea. It is central in many oriental traditions that developed technics so you can check this by yourself. But no one and no machines can do the job for you because we talk about the process from which your “I” takes his substance.

Pour water in a glass of water doesn’t make water wetter. Using consciousness to verify its uncreated nature is not something that can be done easily too, and certainly not with machines. The only way to check this is by experiencing a non-dual mode of consciousness, only then you could realize that our average mode is a dual mode and that it is not absolute.

Dan L.  
Posted May 14, 2012 at 7:22 am | Permalink

First of all, this song and dance is getting boring. As I tried to tell you before, it would probably be more productive if you wrote in such a way as to try to help people understand your arguments instead of writing in such a way as to sound “deep” and “mysterious.”

That said, consciousness is created, and obviously so if you use just a little bit of introspection to explore it.

Can your “uncreated consciousness” idea explain why the color information in my visual field is limited to three degrees of freedom? Because my idea that consciousness is constructed and embodied in a physical substrate explains it quite nicely — we have three color receptors in our retinal neurons, and that is why color information available to consciousness has exactly three degrees of freedom (neglecting color blindness and animals with different numbers of receptors). That’s just one example. I have a bunch more.

JF Fortier  
Posted May 14, 2012 at 7:47 pm | Permalink

You are giving an example of how the human brain processes color and I certainly won’t argue against this. The water in an apple gives apple juice and the water in a pear gives pear juice just like consciousness when processed by the eye gives sight and when processed by the tongue gives taste.

But at its core, when not filtered by the brain, it works differently, on a non-dual mode because it is uncreated.

I think that it would be at least interesting to try to understand why if consciousness is truly uncreated, it is normal that we can’t be able to verify its original nature because of the lack of distance between Consciousness and our individualized consciousness.

I don’t ask you to believe the assertion but to see the logic behind it.

Lynn Wilhelm  
Posted May 14, 2012 at 7:56 pm | Permalink

So light is uncreated? On Earth light is created by the sun and other sources of light. Our eye sees it and color depends
on the wavelength our eye detects and our brain processes (filters?)

Consciousness is created by the brain.

I just don’t see your logic no matter the assertion.

JF Fortier
Posted May 14, 2012 at 8:14 pm | Permalink

It is like Godel’s incompleteness theorem that states a system cannot demonstrate its own consistency.

If consciousness is uncreated, it would be normal that we can’t detect this quality because we experience the world on a dual mode that is mainly fueled by a grasping of opposites. That is what gives birth to our egotic sensation. It is a very hard to doubt that there is something highly distorted in the way we grasp the world since it is the only way we know.

JF Fortier
Posted May 14, 2012 at 8:06 pm | Permalink

I’m not saying light is uncreated, I’m saying that consciousness is, and that when the physical conditions are reunited for sight stimuli, well, consciousness sees. It is a physical manifestation of how consciousness operates on a material plane.

But we have to understand that if consciousness is uncreated, it works on another mode than the one we usually experience. Oriental traditions call our mode a dual mode because we mainly grasp the world through opposites, which make us believe in return that this has an absolute dynamic. And because this is all we know, we can’t even imagine what is a non-dual mode, unless we experience it, just like a bi-dimensional being wouldn’t figure what is volume even if it would surround them.

Ant
Posted May 15, 2012 at 12:35 am | Permalink

“Just like a bi-dimensional being wouldn’t figure what is volume even if it would surround them.” – You’ve used this analogy before, JF, but it’s completely bogus, since we three-dimensional beings have certainly figured out the more-than-three dimensional nature of reality that surrounds us!

/@
An analogy is used so what is not understood can become understood. The example 2d vs 3d is easy to get. Some people may be able to figure how are the extra dimensions that surround us but certainly don’t know what they feel like…

Now you’re moving the goalposts. You said before, “we can’t even imagine”. Well, we can do better than imagine; we can describe higher dimensions mathematically and we can extract experimentally testable physics from the description (e.g., strong and electroweak forces).

I did work on that at one time and I haven’t a clue what those additional dimensions feel like either; but it is far from intractable.

So, if you were trying to convey some other understanding, your analogy was an egregious failure.

“First of all, this song and dance is getting boring.”
I know. But I’m also bored by the argument that God is refuted by mutations and evolution. So I’m just offering and repeating a very simple explanation why God and mutations don’t exclude each other.

The argument is not whether God exists or not, the argument is “let’s suppose God exists, how could he deal with evolution and random mutations?”

I’m only explaining how and why God doesn’t have to deal with that…

I guess you didn’t read the OP (or the comments) at all, did you?

I’m still puzzled why Sober doesn’t give talks and write papers about how it’s logically possible that God sometimes affects the tosses of coins to favor given outcomes, like winning a football game. Imagine how sports fan would love that logical compatibility! Or how God could sometimes tweak electrons to guide physical processes in the real world (an argument that
Kenneth Miller floated in his first book.

I think the physicists might have something to say about those propositions.

Those actions, of course, require energy (or at least equate to) an energy exchange. Where is this energy coming from and/or going to, and why is it undetectable?

Truth is, religion is nothing more than a perpetual motion machine scam, no more and no less.

Cheers,

b&

Ben Goren

Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:40 am | Permalink

My day for copy editing today this isn’t not….

b&

Achrachno

Posted May 13, 2012 at 11:47 am | Permalink

It’s magic. No energy required.

Of course it’s claimed that God controls everything and takes care of the lilies and the sparrows. Sparrows die only by God’s will. Mustard seeds too, I guess. If the goat-herder authors of the Bible had known about atoms or electrons they’d have doubtless claimed he’s in constant control of those too. It’s all by God’s will they think.

“God willing” is a constant qualifier even today, in some circles.

Roz

Posted May 13, 2012 at 1:58 pm | Permalink

I was satchting Serial Killer Sunday and learned that alot of their actions are attributable to God or Satan

Roz

Posted May 13, 2012 at 1:59 pm | Permalink

*watching!

Mike Lee

Posted May 14, 2012 at 10:48 am | Permalink

Yes, I can never understand why Christians haven’t learnt from Islam – “God Willing” is such a useful explanation for why he wasn’t listening to their “prayers”…….

Torbjörn Larsson, OM

Posted May 13, 2012 at 5:42 pm | Permalink

Ah, my que:

A claim that science makes or can’t make (is silent) logical statements on existence (whether of gods or of atoms) is, as Rosenhouse identifies, besides the point. The more interesting point is whether science can make empirical claims (whether of gods or of atoms).

Famously, an empirical claim is not based on logical exclusion but empirical exclusion. Such exclusion is almost always done by way of a generally accepted degree of certainty (“rejected beyond reasonable doubt”). Rejection is almost always provisional at first, it is often the case that competing observations or theory have to be compared by way of measures such as parsimony. The rare exception is when mathematical
comparison between accepted theories’ structures (Noether’s theorems) can make exclusion non-provisionally.

The state of biology is that creationistic evolutionism, such as agency directing mutations for a purpose, can be rejected in the same way creationistic atomism or creationistic falling is.

But here is where the gap between apologetics and science grows to be unbridgeable, as philosophy hasn’t kept up with the advances of science. It is no longer enough to tease out the difference between “directing” and “intervention” to push your gods into!

The problem is as far as I understand it as follows. Quantum mechanics specifically forbids hidden variables. This means that even an exchange of times, say for radioactive decay, which keeps the distribution intact breaks energy conservation. Energy is an expression for the microstate permutations a system can undergo without interaction with the environment.

Meaning that if there was no change in the environment, the laws of physics were locally interrupted. Well, duh – except that “local” means a tie to special relativity. Nothing, not laws nor gods can keep such a local event from unraveling the light cone physics.

We can see that the claim to “intervene” explodes to forcing a Last Thursday rewrite and reboot of the universe, or today likely the multiverse by way of that energy condition.

This is of course logically possible, but it is also empirically impossible to entertain. A more unparsimonious, outright ridiculous theory can’t be constructed. You would be laughed out of academy trying to support that one. And rightly so.

Torbjörn Larsson, OM
Posted May 13, 2012 at 5:44 pm | Permalink

Que? Try “cue”.

Hempenstein
Posted May 13, 2012 at 12:12 pm | Permalink

I posted this the when Sober came up this past Tues, but by then it was Thurs and I garbled part of it too, so again:

It would be well for those who want to argue for God-guided mutations to understand that a large percentage of the mutations that give rise to muscular dystrophy are spontaneous – de novo in the germ cell (or even, IIRC, somatic), not inherited. I believe this applies to hemophilia as well. So those must be God-guided too.

Those same people will more’n likely tell you that their God is all-loving. It might have been nice if Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and bin Laden, just to name a few, had acquired a dystrophin mutation.

Myron
Posted May 13, 2012 at 12:21 pm | Permalink

“Despite Sober’s insistence that scientists contest the proposition that God-guided mutations are logically compatible with evolution, no scientist, including myself, takes issue with that proposition.” – J. Coyne

Let’s not forget that the statement “p and q are logically compatible/consistent with one another” means nothing more than “p & q isn’t a formal contradiction and doesn’t imply a formal contradiction”¹. This is a very weak condition, telling us little about what is ontologically, really possible in reality.

David
Posted May 13, 2012 at 12:31 pm | Permalink

God may determine the fall of every dice (die?), provided his choices are indistinguishable from random chance at every level of analysis. In which case
they are of no practical interest.

Logical possibility means merely formal consistency (of propositions); but formal consistency alone entails neither nonabsurdity, non-nonsensicality, probability, plausibility, nor reasonability. So to grant that it is formally-logically possible for both Darwinistic evolutionism and theistic evolutionism to be true really isn’t to grant much.

I’m not sure why Jerry insists on describing things in a way that’s apt to confuse his readers when these discussions are more complicated than people are led to believe. Maybe it’s an oversight, but one would like to think Sober has some decent points to make in some cases even if Jerry doesn’t like everything he’s said in his talk and paper. It would seem fair to me to recognize this fact and get on with the discussion, rather than to cast Sober as misguided about the issue in all sorts of ways. Sober is trying to help us think through some issues and better understand what works and what doesn’t in this area.

As an example of this Jerry’s post above states the following:

“Sober argues in both his talk at the University of Chicago and in an earlier paper, “Evolution without naturalism,” that “evolutionary theory is silent on the question of whether God exists.” Sober’s claim is false…. As Jason notes [here is supporting material from Jason].”

Yet here is Jason’s more recent reply to some comments in his post:

“Please note that my discussion of what it means for evolution to be silent about God was far more tentative than what I said in the rest of the post. And yes . . . given the definition of silent [Sober accepts in his paper] I do agree with Sober that evolution is silent on the question of whether God exists.”

So you’re upset at Jerry because Jason isn’t consistent?

Well, Jerry appeals to Jason to support his claim that what Sober says is false. And I think it is somewhat confusing because Jason clearly thinks that in the way Sober understands the notion of “silent” Sober’s actually right. I think Jerry is smart and probably understands what Sober meant in his paper and so I don’t see the point of calling Sober out on this issue. I’m not trying to nitpick Jerry but I would like it if people were a little more careful in how they explain these issues because there is too much cross-talk going on.

So Sober’s right because words mean whatever he wants them to – no more, no less? This of course requires your own special definition of ‘right’, but that’s all ok.
Sober is misguided in at least one important way: he thinks we should be interested in things for which there is zero evidence. Worse, he talks at length about undefined terms (“God”) which he imagines could do this or that. He might as well tell us about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. It’s this sort of nonsense (I mean that literally, not just as a slight) that often gives philosophy a bad name among the scientifically inclined.

Right. So anyone who talks about the term “God” might as well be wasting our time, since this sort of nonsense doesn’t help anyone?

You would agree, then, that Dawkins’, Harris’s, and Hitchen’s books were really nonsense because they talked about God and might as well be talking about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin?

That is a problem, certainly with Dawkins’ book. It’s best to point out that theists (or even just Christians) cannot agree on what the word “God” refers to in reasonably concrete terms. One can look at the conflicts and contradictions in the ancillary stuff (“omniscient” etc.) and point out that any being with that sort of attributes cannot possibly exist. But, the lack of specificity about what the thing is that’s supposedly omniscient is really a bigger issue, IMO.

I’m pretty sure Dawkins always refer to the God’s creative powers when referring to God in his books.

Besides, I don’t think it is such a problem because Dawkins (at least) is doing just what Jerry and Jason describe; speaking loudly about what evolution has to say on religion. But in general he is speaking about religion and what it has to say about science and evolution.

More complicated than they’re made out to be? It’s is absolutely clear to me that Sober’s an idiot talking out of his ass – it is no more complex than that.

Sober’s not an idiot and, based on the posted video from a few days back, he definitely talks with his mouth. He’s just not thinking clearly about this issue at all. Jerry was entirely correct to “call out” Sober, IMO. [News Flash: famous U of Chicago biologist receives support from anonymous bozo on the internet! Full story at 10:00.]

“He’s just not thinking clearly about this issue at all.”

Right. That’s why the Jason Rosenhouse agrees with him about certain things. They must both be really confused.
Achrachno  
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 3:35 pm | Permalink*

Try being more specific and I think you’ll see what the problem is. “Certain things”?

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couchloc  
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 3:27 pm | Permalink*

Well, then, it’s absolutely clear to ME that you are an ass talking like an idiot — it is no more complex than that.

(Gee….that was productive.)

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whyevolutionisttrue  
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 3:37 pm | Permalink*

All right, couchloc, knock off the invective and apologize right now. If you don’t, you can go somewhere else to post. I won’t tolerate readers calling each other names.

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couchloc  
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 3:58 pm | Permalink*

You are of course right. If you read MadScientist’s post, you’ll see that I was playing with him, really, and repeating back to him his own words in an ironical way.

In any case, MadScientist, I apologize. I wish we could have a more constructive discussion.

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vHF  
*Posted May 14, 2012 at 3:00 am | Permalink*

Why didn’t you react when MadScientist wrote the exact same thing about Sober?

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MadScientist  
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 1:20 pm | Permalink*

What is not logically impossible is not necessarily reasonable nor sensible – it’s flying teapots all over again.

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MadScientist  
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 1:24 pm | Permalink*

Dang, Myron already beat me to it.

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Achrachno  
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 1:45 pm | Permalink*

You get points for color and brevity. He for quickness and completeness. It’s good to have both.

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Tulse  
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 1:44 pm | Permalink*

Sober’s argument gets a lot of implicit mileage out of the term “God”, even though in structure it also applies to Ahura Mazda, and Azathoth, and quantum pixies, and thetans. I think the significance of his argument would be greatly
reduced for many people if they understood that it meant Quetzacoatl is logically consistent with evolution.

More generally, whenever someone makes an abstract argument about supernatural entities, I get very nervous when they label it unreflectively with the Christian term “God”, as it is an invitation to import a huge number of implicit assumptions when the argument made does not warrant them.

Achrachno
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 1:46 pm | Permalink*

You’d think a philosopher would notice that, eh?

Ant
*Posted May 14, 2012 at 1:47 pm | Permalink*

Insightful.

Roz
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 1:55 pm | Permalink*

As a devout Pastafarian, I do believe the hand of the FSM has been guiding evolution.

That is why men have noodley appendages; they were created in His image

Michael Fugate
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 2:34 pm | Permalink*

If one creates a god that has every superpower imaginable, then everything it does must be trivial. If I create a superhero who can see through walls, then it is trivial that she can see through walls – it is what one would expect. It is trivial that humans see in color and walk on two legs. Also if this god can do anything and everything, then one can always imagine compatibility with any scenario.

Larry Moran
*Posted May 14, 2012 at 8:53 am | Permalink*

Science, and evolution, are silent on the question of whether such a superhero exists as long as she’s very careful not to let anyone know she can see through walls.

I wonder if anyone will invite me to come to Chicago (all expenses paid) to give a talk on that subject? I’m sure it’s of deep significance to the philosophers there.

Peter Beattie
*Posted May 13, 2012 at 2:43 pm | Permalink*

Interestingly, what Sober says (that science cannot disprove some godly ideas about the world, and that this is per se of interest) appears to be totally ignorant of the insights of one of the greats of the philosophy of science, Karl Popper. In the words of Ian Jarvie:

Popper discovered that in purely logical or methodological terms the problem of demarcation was insoluble. (The Republic of Science, p. 13)

Which means that it is not possible, by purely logical means, to separate ideas that contribute to the growth of knowledge from those that don’t. And that is because it is always possible, in a move that Popper called a “conventionalist stratagem”, to evade a logical conclusion—by denying the premises, by introducing ad-hoc auxiliary hypotheses, by obtusion. The solution, then, cannot in any case be to try to make the logic watertight; logic cannot force me
to accept the truth of any proposition; at best, it can force me to make a choice between accepting a conclusion and rejecting a premise. The best we can do in the search for growing objective knowledge is to make a methodological decision:

What characterises science on this view is a social decision to allow the world to correct our ideas, and collateral decisions to eschew attempts to insulate those ideas from inconsistency and counter-example. (TRoS, p. 20)

This is kind of my specialty, so I am continually astonished when fellow philosophers seem not to be aware that these thoughts even exist.

Ant
Posted May 14, 2012 at 2:01 pm / Permalink

“This is kind of my specialty” – So, what are your credentials here, Peter?

Peter Beattie
Posted May 14, 2012 at 2:26 pm / Permalink

Oh, I didn’t mean to invoke any kind of authority by that, it was just to say that when you immerse yourself in a somewhat specialised topic, you take a lot more things for granted than are common currency even in your general field. And I am doing a PhD in the philosophy of science, with a special focus on Popperian thought.

Ant
Posted May 14, 2012 at 4:46 pm / Permalink

Oh, thanks; no criticism was intended!

Paul Gnuman
Posted May 13, 2012 at 2:54 pm / Permalink

Good one, Jason Rosenhouse.

The court room evidence analogy is apt.

I am willing to say, it is proved that God does not exist beyond any reasonable doubt. I would vote to convict Him of non-existence.

corio37
Posted May 13, 2012 at 3:34 pm / Permalink

Quite so. Rosenhouse’s comment:

“Evolution cannot prove that traditional religion is false” should be read with the stress on the first word. The fact is that the same mechanisms we use to prove legal cases and scientific claims can be applied to test the existence of God — and when we do, of course, we come up with a negative. If it’s reasonable to say, for instance, that we can prove smoking causes lung cancer, then it’s equally reasonable to say that we can prove the non-existence of God.

But if God can be proved not to exist, then he can’t be fiddling with DNA, and Sober’s argument collapses in a heap. Like any theist he has to resort to special pleading, where ‘proof’ somehow means something different when applied to supernatural beings than to natural ones.

Beau Quilter
Posted May 13, 2012 at 8:58 pm / Permalink

This is a little off topic, but I wanted to point out that you (Jerry Coyne) came up in a post discussion at James McGrath’s blog “Exploring our Matrix”. The post
Shuggy
Posted May 13, 2012 at 9:18 pm | Permalink

It’s hardly news that it’s not logically impossible for God to push mutations or quantum leaps. It’s not logically impossible for an omnipotent being (or at least one with undefined and undefinable Powers) to do anything it likes, like the greeting-card 1000-kg gorilla on his birthday (or any other day).

Kevin
Posted May 14, 2012 at 6:28 am | Permalink

Of course, it is logically impossible for an omnipotent being to exist. So there is that.

stevehayes13
Posted May 14, 2012 at 4:12 am | Permalink

Had to look up ‘weenie’ and even though I used an American dictionary, I cannot claim to understand your use of the term in this context; but it made me smile nonetheless.

Pam
Posted May 14, 2012 at 5:30 am | Permalink

If you read Denial: History Betrayed by Tony Taylor you’ll have a better insight into their thinking. Denial is, after all, nothing new.

Kevin
Posted May 14, 2012 at 6:27 am | Permalink

You forgot incompetent.

Only an incompetent boob would give humans a perfectly good system for manufacturing vitamin C and then bork the process at a critical juncture.

Claudiu Bandea
Posted May 14, 2012 at 7:00 am | Permalink

Elliott Sober’s argument for the logical possibility of ‘God-guided mutations’ has ignited a lot of ink and mental effort, both here and at other sites.

I wonder if ‘Environment-guided mutations’, a more down-to-Earth presumption, can get a fraction of that attention. As a primer, I’m posting here as very shot paper I published two decades ago:


Can organisms mutate adaptively in response to a selective agent? Four decades ago, Luria and Delbruck (1943) showed that in bacteria, and presumably in all organisms, mutations appear to be random. This notion is one of the basic principles of modern evolutionary theory.

Recently, Cairns, Overbaugh and Miller (1988) challenged this notion by suggesting that “cells may have mechanisms for choosing which mutations will occur.”

In this paper, I propose that transcription might be a mechanism by which organisms could discriminately increase the mutation rate of some of their
genes in response to changes in the environment. An increase in the mutation rate would generate the genetic diversity necessary for rapid adaptation and evolution.

Cells possess several repair mechanisms for reducing the mutation rate (3). A decrease in the repair efficiency would result in an increased rate of mutations. Transcription may interfere with the repair process by obstructing the activity of repair enzymes. Transcription interference has been reported in other cases (4, 5).

During transcription, the DNA template becomes locally single stranded which makes it more susceptible to attack by some mutagenic agents. This is another way in which transcription may increase the rate of mutation.

Therefore, the environment, by controlling the transcription rate of some genes, may influence their mutation rate and evolution.

References

Lynn Wilhelm

I have heard people (not scientists) claiming that organisms can do this. One used the White Sands lizards as an example (I think I got that place right–the lizards speciated into a lighter species which is better camouflaged).

Claudiu, what work have you done to test your hypothesis set forth in this paper? Has anyone else done work on this?

Lynn Wilhelm

sub

JF Fortier

Here is someone who tested the non-random mutations Claudiu is talking about

But don’t bother, he is not taken seriously.
But what he says fits with the idea that consciousness is uncreated…
The video is about an article he put in references but the
guy who speaks also did some experiments about non-
random mutations.
But that can’t be true.

Lynn Wilhelm
Posted May 14, 2012 at 9:41 pm | Permalink

I’d love to see some more recent sources for information
on this.

Cairns, Overbaugh & Miller say the following in their
discussion in that paper*:

We describe here a few experiments and
some circumstantial evidence suggesting
that bacteria can choose which mutations
they should produce. But we realize that
this is too important and issue to be settled
by three or four rather ambiguous
experiments.

Has any new work been done since these “rather
ambiguous experiments” and “circumstantial evidence”
from 1988?

Even if their hypothesis is correct it is really beside the
point made in Jerry’s post.

*I love my recent free time and my university library!

Claudiu Bandea
Posted May 15, 2012 at 9:50 am | Permalink

@ Lynn Wilhelm & JF Fortier

Thanks for comments and video. This was a
relatively hot topic in the 1990s (e.g. see papers by
Barry G. Hall), but there are some more recent
papers (e.g. John R. Roth). Unfortunately, I did not
keep up with the experimental work, though my
understanding is that the idea is still valid.

However, I think this subject is relevant to Jerry’s
discussion, because it might provide insights into
the ‘origin of non-random mutations,’ if they become
a certitude and subject of philosophical discussions.

The problem with the research on this phenomenon
was, and apparently still is, on trying to differentiate
between the effects of the ‘selective agent’ on the
‘process of generating the mutations’ versus that on
the ‘process of selecting the mutation,’ which
sometimes can be very subtle. Ultimately, though,
is all about the selection of mutations, but ‘directed
mutations’ could increase the repertoire of
mutations (i.e. genetic variation) upon which the
natural selection can act.

Another relevant point is to differentiate between the
mechanisms by which a selective agent, such as a
stress or a metabolite, would increase the mutation
rate of ‘all genes’ indiscriminately, by repressing for
example the production of DNA repair enzymes, or
would increase the mutation rate of ‘specific
gene(s),’ those that are associated with the
selective agent.

Lynn Wilhelm
Posted May 14, 2012 at 12:29 pm | Permalink

This rearguard action, consisting entirely of special pleading
and post facto rationalization (also called “making stuff up”), is known as Sophisticated Theology.

Claudiu Bandea
Posted May 15, 2012 at 9:58 am | Permalink

We can also see this from the perspective of ‘people trying to make a living’ by doing what they like (and sells) but not necessarily what they believe in.

Zytigon
Posted May 31, 2013 at 3:16 pm | Permalink

Maybe Paley’s Watch analogy is good for the case for evolution. If you saw a watch lying on the ground then you wouldn’t think that it had just jumped into final working form by magic – like how the Genesis creation myth imagines life began. Rather you would realize that the watch has been put together little bit by little bit, in a manufacturing process. Also that watches have evolved by trial and error from earlier designs. The ones which failed & the also ran are forgotten, only the selected designs keep getting manufactured.

Daniel Dennett says something like this in “Darwin’s dangerous design”. I wonder who else has? Dawkins talks about the issues in, “The Blind watchmaker”

So then evolution is a simpler account of our origins than instantaneous creation.

The Bible might have shown signs of supernatural inspiration if it had managed to explain the most puzzling transitions in evolution but it doesn’t even realize that life evolved by natural selection.

Genesis 1v26 or 2v7 could have said, “And then God took an ape and made the brain & skull bigger so that it could communicate with him & made it able to walk upright on two legs”

However it in fact looks like primitive guesses.

Zytigon
Posted June 1, 2013 at 7:32 am | Permalink

The way the Genesis account has been written is so far from reality that it is more of a hindrance than a help, even using the language available to it’s authors at that time.

Genesis could have been written like this following passage to appear brilliantly inspired:

Genesis 2v7 about breathing life into the dust of the ground should have been placed at

Genesis 1v10, And then god took mud of the sea bed and formed tiny plants and animals too small to see with the naked eye.

Genesis 1v10, then the tiny plants and animals in the sea grew into other kinds of plant and animals big enough to see, male and female

Genesis 1v11 then plants & animals began to live in the boggy ground by the sea and spread up to cover the land, the kinds gradually altering with changes in each new birth into other kinds of plants & animals

Genesis 1v20 then the fish of the sea started to travel across the bog to catch & eat the tiny animals

Genesis 1v24 then when the fish had developed legs and lungs they started to roam the land

Genesis 1v26 then after a number of days too many to think of, god tinkered with some apes so that they became able to walk on two legs and their skull & brain enlarged allowing it to communicate. So we humans came to be.

Parody on 2 kings 23v26. As to many other steps in the process, are they not recorded in the book of the annals of WEIT

There were countless other tiny steps between one kind of plant becoming another and one animal becoming another but it is beyond me to think of them, perhaps in the future people will work it out.

[ It would have been nearly supernatural or extra terrestrial if the Bible had even voiced the idea that there were living things too small to see ]
1. By Sophisticated theology | The Heretical Philosopher on May 13, 2012 at 11:26 am

[...] Coyne posted this at his site: The history of science and theology together shows that the former constantly nibbles [...] 

2. By God-guided events? - blueollie on May 13, 2012 at 12:07 pm

[...] recommend reading Jerry Coyne’s take here; here is his finish: Evolution, science, and mere observation tell us that the evidence is strongly [...]