Aporia Vol. 6, 1996

Continuing Plantinga's Critique of Naturalism: The Uncertainty of Reliable Probability Judgments

MATTHEW POWER

IN chapter 12 of *Warrant and Proper Function*, Alvin Plantinga argues against the possibility of metaphysical naturalism and the neo-Darwinian theory of biological evolution (hereafter denoted by N&E). First, he argues that the probability that the state of affairs N&E obtains is low. Second, he asserts that belief in N&E is irrational, even if N&E turns out to be true.[1] These two arguments are very significant philosophically, particularly in view of the claim made by many evolutionary scientists that "evolution is a proven fact." The aim of this essay will not be to recapitulate or evaluate Plantinga's arguments in any detailed way. Rather, I will focus on extending Plantinga's line of reasoning a step further. I will argue, primarily, that the defender of N&E is irrational not only in believing that N&E is true with certainty, but even in merely believing that N&E has a probability just high enough to make it plausible. In arguing this, I will show that the N&E defender is not even justified in making accurate probability judgments. Finally, from Plantinga's arguments and my extension of them, I will conclude that the only way to rationally believe N&E is to affirm theism, which then precludes N&E from consideration as a viable worldview.

Matthew is a senior majoring in philosophy and religion at the University of Iowa. He will begin graduate work in philosophy this fall also at the University of Iowa.

[1]It is important to note that Plantinga *does not* argue that the irrationality of believing N&E is entailed by the low probability of N&E. Rather, Plantinga claims that such a belief is irrational because it is self-defeating—belief in N&E ends up undercutting itself because if N&E is true, then the epistemological basis for believing it to be true is undermined.

Plantinga argues for the irrationality of believing N&E by unpacking the content of that conjunction and clarifying exactly what it entails. Although I have greatly simplified the argument, Plantinga's reasoning for the irrationality of believing N&E proceeds as follows. If N&E is the case, then the belief-forming mechanisms that human beings currently possess came to be as the result of an eons-long process of intellectually unguided, biological evolution that was driven by random genetic mutations and natural selection. Therefore, the particular belief-forming mechanisms that humans possess today must have given our ancestors survival value, since they lived in a physical environment whose general inhospitability made necessary characteristics conducive to survival. However, if our belief-forming mechanisms were generated by a process in which beliefs promoting the *survival* of living organisms were of paramount importance, then there is no particular reason to think that such mechanisms provide us with mostly *true* beliefs. Rather, any number of nonveridical sets of beliefs could have brought about the physical flourishing of the primates which would evolve eventually into human beings. In fact, certain sets of beliefs containing mostly false beliefs might be even better at promoting human survival and subsequent evolution than other sets of beliefs that are composed mostly of true beliefs. Therefore, a believer in N&E can have no undefeatable, rational grounds for belief in N&E, since in believing that N&E is true, one accepts that this very belief (that N&E is true) was formed as the result of a belief-forming mechanism which may or may not produce mostly true beliefs. Says Plantinga, "one who accepts N&E (and is apprised of the present argument) has a defeater for N&E, a defeater that cannot be defeated by an ultimately undefeated defeater. And isn't it irrational to accept a belief for which you know you have an ultimately undefeated defeater?" (235).

Despite Plantinga's argument, the N&E believer is unlikely to give up belief in N&E so easily. Rather, one might attempt to defend N&E against Plantinga's criticism by restating the N&E claim in a weaker fashion. For example, one could repudiate the strong claim that N&E is certain and replace it with the assertion that N&E merely is probable enough to be plausible. Or, one might argue that although the probability of N&E is low, nonetheless, it is higher than the probability of Theism and Evolution (T&E) or Theism and Creationism (T&C). However,

neither of these strategies will succeed.[2] As I will argue, a Plantinga-style argument can be constructed to demonstrate that a retreat to such reduced claims will not help justify belief in N&E.

First of all, if naturalism and theism are the philosophically significant alternatives in metaphysics, then those two alternatives are both mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. Thus, if it can be shown that belief in one of them is irrational, then belief in the other alternative is rational by default. One way to discover if a belief is rational is to determine the probability of that belief. Yet ascertaining the probability of naturalism is extremely problematic, for the following reason. Since some form of evolutionary theory is entailed by naturalism,[3] then if naturalism is true, then the ability to calculate probabilities must have evolved. So, to claim that atheistic evolution is probable (even minimally probable), or even to claim that such an evolutionary theory can be assigned an accurate probability, is to claim implicitly that the canons of probability themselves resulted from evolutionary processes. And these processes, it must further be noted, acted primarily to effect the survival of various organisms and were not aimed at a state of affairs in which organisms could obtain verisimilitudinous beliefs. Therefore, if our ability to form probabilities as well as our beliefs about probabilities (which include beliefs about the probability of evolution itself) are the result of belief-forming mechanisms that are known to facilitate survival, but that may or may not produce beliefs that correspond to reality, then any epistemic posture is undermined which claims to know anything about the probability of N&E, whether high, low, or somewhere in between. In other words, just as we cannot expect the evolutionary mechanism to produce true beliefs (as Plantinga argues), neither can we expect it to produce the ability for reliable probability judgments, and hence probably true beliefs.

[2] T&E and T&C are mentioned because they are the only two alternative possibilities to N&E. N&C, of course, is an incoherent set.

[3] Naturalism per se does not entail evolution, since it is logically possible that a universe exists without any biological organisms in it. Given that human beings do exist, though, if God does not exist, then we must posit some theory of nontheistic evolution to account for our existence, since creation and evolution (broadly construed) are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive theories of human origins.

At this point, the defender of N&E may want to counter the above argument with any of several objections. First, one might object that the ability to make accurate probability judgments is invaluable to the survival of any biological organism that has evolved to the intellectual level where such judgments are possible. For example, suppose that Caveman Ugg (a quasi-humanoid sort of guy) sees not too far in front of him a saber-toothed tiger snarling at him. In a mostly unconscious and instinctive way, Ugg quickly "estimates" the probabilities of the success of various means of survival available to him in his current situation. He could hurl his spear at the tiger, climb the nearest tree, stand still, turn and run away, play dead, jump into a nearby lake, roll up in a ball, smile and say "Niiiice kitty!" (if his verbal skills are that advanced), and so forth. If Ugg takes the course of action that is most likely to secure his continued existence, then he will probably survive this little incident. On the other hand, if he does something really stupid, then most likely he will become the main course for a large, mean, sharp-clawed, hungry Stone-Age mammal. Therefore, says the N&E believer, it is false that having true beliefs about probabilities is not connected causally to survival.

This objection does have some bite. However, it is far from clear that being proficient at making the sort of lightning-speed probability judgments that are necessary for survival in dark, steamy, primeval jungles or barren, frozen, Neolithic wastelands entails being similarly proficient when dealing with highly complex probability calculations (such as those about evolution) in the posh, (mostly) nonthreatening environments of modern-day universities. Clearly, the circumstances in which probability judgments are made, as well as the specific types of probability judgments being made, change the relationship between the making of such judgments and the survival of the judgment maker. For example, the miscalculation of a probability judgment that a certain chemical element will decay within the next four months usually has little or no bearing upon anyone's physical survival. Therefore, humans could have evolved in such a way that their "gut-reaction" probability assessments are generally accurate, but that nonetheless, many of their higher-level probability calculations are often flawed in some significant way. The N&E defender might object to this suggestion by asserting that such flaws could be uncovered by engaging in careful scrutiny of the reasoning involved in making complex probability judgments. However, such an envisaged scenario presupposes again that our ability to engage in

reflexive analysis of our own patterns of thought is not hopelessly faulty because of some quirk in the evolutionary process.[4]

A second objection that might be advanced against my argument is the following. Suppose that the property of possessing belief-forming mechanisms that are aimed at truth[5] is a property that came to be manifested in certain organisms. And P(B) did not come about because it gave those organisms survival value directly. Rather, because P(B) is associated genetically with various other biological characteristics that do have survival value, this property just happened to be "along for the ride."

This objection has very little explanatory power. Granting that such may have been the case does not answer a fundamental question that the N&E defender needs to grapple with, namely, why does P(B) exist at all? The N&E defender already cannot maintain that P(B) itself facilitates the survival of organisms which are on the evolutionary path towards humanhood. Therefore, apart from an Intelligent Designer who created beings with the kinds of belief-forming mechanisms that hook up those beings to their environment in a veridical way, there is no particular reason to believe that P(B) would have evolved simply as a result of random genetic mutations and natural selection. Also, the objector needs to explain why P(B) would be associated with other genetic properties that promote survival in the first place. Did this association occur at random? If so, were the odds realistic that such an association might eventually occur? And if not, what nonchance mechanisms resulted in such an association? Answers to such questions need to be forthcoming if this objection is to have any force.

One might argue, as a third objection, that it simply seems strange that one is forced to conclude from the mere plausibility of N&E that one is unwarranted in making any sort of probability claim concerning atheistic evolution, even a claim of relatively low probability. (For, if my argument is sound, then an inescapable agnosticism is entailed regarding the probability of neo-Darwinian evolution.) But this objection simply amounts to a protestation of the oddity of a situation in which beings who evolved cannot demonstrate successfully the probability of their

[4]This assertion also fails to explain how the very intellectual capacity of self-reflexivity of thought could have emerged through an evolutionary process.

[5]Hereafter, this property will be referred to as P(B).

own evolution. Strange as such a state of affairs may be, if it is the case, then it just happens to be a weird sort of case.

The reason why attempts to make probability calculations about N&E are futile can be stated another way. Initially, our epistemological situation is one in which we do not know whether or not naturalism is true. At this point, any attempt to give probabilistic arguments that purport to make plausible the truth of naturalism can be circumvented easily by the wise Plantingian. One need not waste time countering such reasoning with traditional theistic or antinaturalistic arguments. Rather, the Plantingian can undercut any such argument in much the same way that he or she undercuts arguments for the high probability of N&E. Recall that if naturalism is true, then our belief-forming mechanisms (which include the ability to form valid logical arguments) are the result of an essentially random evolutionary process. Consequently, we cannot know (for the same reasons given earlier) whether such mechanisms produce true beliefs, or whether they might generate false beliefs that are better somehow at facilitating our survival. But this uncertainty entails that the reliability is highly suspect of any probabilistic reasoning process that leads to the belief that naturalism even is plausible. Thus, the mere belief that naturalism is plausible turns out to be self-referentially destructive—by its very nature, such a belief cannot possess any undefeatable, rational justification. Hence, the belief that naturalism has even a low probability is undermined in such a way as to make it irrational. Consequently, to concern oneself with the probability of the truth of naturalism would be like worrying about the probability that Santa will be able to fit down one's chimney, after one had concluded that no logically unproblematic basis exists for believing in such a jolly old gift-bearer.[6]

To summarize the above arguments, the N&E defender who argues even for a respectable probability for N&E is in a real bind because given its very content, belief in the plausibility of N&E undercuts

[6] Of course, the Santa scenario is not completely analogous to the situation that obtains with regard to neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory. In the former case, adults know that there is no good evidence that Santa Claus exists. In the latter case, there does exist some empirical evidence which can be plausibly interpreted as indicating that some sort of biological evolution has occurred.

any attempt to determine its own probability. This, then, reinforces Plantinga's argument that we cannot reliably accept the truth of N&E. And these arguments lead to a more startling conclusion. If still it is maintained that theism and naturalism are the only two serious contenders in metaphysics, then it turns out that only in the context of theism is it even possible to fulfill the necessary conditions for determining the probability of N&E. That is, paradoxically, only if theism is true do the epistemological conditions obtain which would allow one to calculate N&E's probability. And of course if theism is true, then N&E is false. So it turns out that the existence of God is a necessary condition for the epistemological state of affairs to obtain in which a person can justifiably determine the probability of an explanatory hypotheses describing how atheistic evolution occurred. Therefore, determining the likelihood of any evolutionary theory can be done with warrant only if *theistic* evolution is assumed—and if theistic evolution is true, then of course the probability of evolution having occurred is one, merely because God willed that evolution occur.[7]

In conclusion, it turns out that because of what is entailed by the very concept of N&E, one cannot justifiably assign N&E a respectable probability,[8] or any probability for that matter. This fact is just as serious a problem for the N&E defender as is Plantinga's conclusion that it is irrational to believe N&E. Also, the N&E defender faces the even more unwelcome conclusion of jettisoning the belief in naturalism (and replacing it with belief in theism) to be epistemically justified in engaging in *any* sort of probability assessment. So, based on the preceding argument, the only option that the N&E defender has is to give up the epistemic right to make probability judgments. Such a choice probably will be as unsavory for the N&E defender as giving up belief in N&E itself.

[7] The argument just summarized also rebuts the potential "reduced claim" mentioned earlier of the N&E defender—namely, that even if the probability of N&E is very low, still it is higher than the probability of T&E or T&C. Clearly, if T is a necessary condition for determining justifiably the probability of any proposition, then both T&E and T&C are more probable than N&E.

[8] Of course, it may still turn out to be the case that N&E is highly probable (if it is true, for example)—it's just that we have no legitimate way of establishing such a probability.

Works Cited

Plantinga, Alvin *Warrant and Proper Function* New York Oxford UP, 1993