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A Setback to the Dialogue: Response to Huston Smith

Ursula Goodenough

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ABSTRACT

Huston Smith's book, *Why Religion Matters*, offers an eloquent evocation of mystical sensibility. Unfortunately, along the way, he offers a strongly negative and often inaccurate account of the scientific worldview, the claim being that the science is laying siege to the spiritual.

In *Why Religion Matters*, Huston Smith uses three-fourths of his book to tell us why the modern alternative to religion – which he calls scientism – is the root cause of our current human discontent, and then moves in the final pages to give us an evocation of the religious life, with particular eloquence for the worldview of the mystic. Since I am a scientist, and since Smith is familiar with some of my positions on these matters, and since he invited me to be on this panel, I assume that he is interested in having a good exchange on his views, and so I offer a response that I hope will elicit dialogue not only among us up here but also with those in the audience.

Let me begin, since this is my field, with a response to Smith's understanding of the status of neo-Darwinism in the scientific worldview. Smith correctly quotes from books that claim that Darwinian theory is in disarray, that "the evidence for evolution is extraordinarily thin." The problem is that the books from which he quotes are themselves polemical works that were written to make this very point and have therefore biased the argument to the point of distortion. What is extraordinarily thin is the evidence introduced in these books for the lacunae in evolutionary theory. In fact, the neo-Darwinian paradigm has never been more robustly supported. It is documented by overwhelming empirical evidence, with perhaps the best fossil and DNA-based data of all being that which documents human evolution from simian ancestors. This is not to rule out theistic influence over the evolutionary process – one is free to hold the belief that key mutations were guided and not random – but to argue that things happened some other way is no longer a coherent option, and by doing so Smith has regrettably introduced incoherence into his argument.

While not incoherent, I find Smith's perspectives on scientism to be distorted as well. He has amassed pages of quotes from various writers, some but not all scientists and many, such as Freud and Nietzsche, writing for other times, who suggest that the scientific worldview renders the humanities and

religion obsolete. He then uses these perspectives to argue that the angst of our times can be laid at the doormat of scientific idolatry, offering us such invective as “science swallows the world,” “science has shown itself unable to coexist with anything,” and “the sunset for the empire of science has arrived.” In fact, one could assemble an equal volume of quotes from equally prominent persons stating that our scientific understandings do not answer, indeed do not address, many of the questions that humans ask about themselves and their lives. Smith does quote one such passage, from science writer Timothy Ferris, who defines scientism as “the belief that science provides not a path to the truth, but the *only* path” and then writes “we ought to muster the sophistication to recognize such claims as hyperbolic. Scientism today is advocated by only a tiny minority of scientists.” Smith responds by being “astonished at how blind those inside the scientific worldview are to the scientism that others find riddling modernism throughout.”

If we go beyond all this name-calling – and it goes without saying that Dawkins, Gould, Sagan, and Wilson all get their due – to the real matter at hand, then what I hear Smith to be saying is that he finds the scientific cosmology to be unappealing. He starts out, on page 7, with an eloquent paragraph on its key features, and there are passing nods elsewhere, but one feels one is hearing his real take on the scientific worldview in passages such as these:

- In restricting consciousness (which is as close to spirit as science gets) to attributes of conscious organisms, it turns spirit into tiny rivulets on a single planet in a desert approximately fifteen billion light-years across.”
- “Organisms [are] that razor-thin veneer on the world of dead matter.”
- “Apart from organic life, purposelessness reigns.”
- “The scientific worldview is ‘out of the running’ as a human home, and what disqualifies it for that role is the way it strips the objective world of its qualities.”
- “As for the scientific worldview, there is no way that a happy ending can be worked into it. Death is the grim reaper of individual lives, and whether things as a whole will end in a freeze or a fry, with a bang or a whimper (or keep on cranking out more insentient matter in an expanding universe) is anybody’s guess.”
- True or not, the traditional (religious) worldview is transparently intelligible. The scientific worldview is not. Final causes being categorically excluded from it, it necessarily deadends in questions that have no answers.
- The language of science is not a natural language...It is an artificial language that cannot accommodate the human spirit.

I have recently written a book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, in which I lift up the intelligibility of the scientific worldview and celebrate its resources and potential for religious reflection and orientation. Smith categorizes my work as being in the lineage of efforts to “sweeten the sour apple.” To his mind, the awe and reverence that I describe in reflecting on Nature is “no more than a post-it, so to speak, affixed to a nature of that is unaware of being so bedecked....What is in the depths of nature – its deep structure on which human sentience bobs like a rose petal on the sea – is insentient, quantifiable matter.”

This is a very unusual reading of my book, since 11 of its 12 chapters focus not on insentient quantifiable matter but on the organisms that have emerged from this matter via biological evolution. But the problem runs deeper, since he later dismisses emergence as an explanatory tool. “Darwinists,” he writes, “consider it a proven fact that novel qualities – life, sentience, and self-consciousness – can derive from the rearrangement of elements that themselves lack those qualities. The explanation that is offered for how these rabbits appear out of hats is to say that they emerge. What that explanation overlooks is that ‘emergence’ is a descriptive, not an explanatory concept. It explains nothing.”

This claim is in fact not correct, as I will be happy to elaborate during our discussion period if there is interest. But let me close by considering what Smith regards as explanatory concepts.

Smith offers his explanations – The Big Picture -- in the closing pages of his book, and for the most part they entail traditional hierarchical concepts: an omniscient personal God, a this-world/other-world duality, and topdown causation. To buttress this perspective he quotes Ken Wilber’s comment that the hierarchical worldview is “so overwhelmingly widespread that it is either the single greatest intellectual error ever to appear in human history – an error so colossally widespread as to literally stagger the mind – or it is the most accurate reflection of reality to have appeared.” I would certainly agree that it is the most accurate reflection of human religious aspirations to have appeared, but consensus does not generate reality.

As if cognizant of this problem, Smith ends his book with an effort to integrate his worldview with the scientific view of reality.

“I turn now to indicate how things might look when Spirit [his synonym for God] is taken to be fundamental to the world. (Is there any *reason* for thinking that consciousness, or sentience, or awareness...is less fundamental than matter?)...I begin with what Plato would call a likely tale. What if, in the Big Bang, it was Infinite Omniscience that exploded....Chronologically, the sequence begins with the meagerest

possible existences that become increasingly complex as time proceeds. But note that in this scenario intelligence is present in those microscopic entities at the very start – there is a Buddha in every grain of sand...Sentience is everywhere.

And though in the smallest things God's omnipresent omniscience is veiled under the thickest conceivable veil, the tiniest bit of sentience that surfaces in those things is *of a kind* with omniscience and is backed by it. Why do not particles content themselves with being just what they are – particles? Whence comes this drive towards complexity which leads (on this planet we know firsthand) to plants, animals, and rationality? Because intelligence is actively working to free itself from its stifling veils and give itself more elbow room for movement in the finite world. *That is why tacit knowledge comes together and serves us so well. Its components (under the final direction of the omniscience that orchestrates everything) are up to something, that "something" being their working for the greater largess just mentioned.*

So, the sour apple is sweetened, not by regarding matter and its biological emergence with reverence and awe, but by endowing matter itself with sentience, intelligence, and purpose, properties that are initially thickly veiled but somehow become less so as they work for the greater largess. And here we come full circle. Smith decries the scientific worldview because "it necessarily dead-ends in questions that have no answers." Smith solves the problem by providing answers to these questions. But why are his answers, his likely tale, preferable to unanswered questions? Why is it more helpful to believe that Infinite Omniscience exploded in the Big Bang and that subatomic particles are therefore sentient than to believe that matter flared forth from the Big Bang and then associated to form atoms, and then molecules, and then life, and then sentience? Why is the veil more explanatory than emergence?

I am troubled by the publication of this book. Smith is an eminent and revered scholar who has made seminal contributions to our understanding of the world's religions. He is also a very kind, charismatic person with a deeply held faith that I greatly admire. Had he elected to write a book offering his Infinite-Omniscience explosion as a contribution to theology, with his body-shedding eternal sentience as the happy ending, it would be read with interest as a capstone sequel to his previous volumes of religious thought. But that is not going to be the trajectory of this book. It is going to be greeted as "Famous Scholar Derides Scientism and Darwinism!" Scientists who review it and challenge its premises and sources will be dismissed as "circling their wagons to defend their priesthood." We will not move forward in the science and religion dialogue.