Supernatural Explanations Are Bad for Religion

A lightly edited transcript of an impromptu talk by Mark F. Sharlow

The main source of conflict between science and religion is the fact that religion assumes there are supernatural causes for some events. Not all forms of religion do this (the more philosophical and sophisticated forms do not), but most ordinary forms of religion do it. Science, on the other hand, insists on natural explanations. When science finds a natural explanation for a phenomenon (like the creation of living species or of the Earth), this causes problems for religion.

Most, perhaps even all, of the conflict between religion and science stems from religion’s tendency to use supernatural explanations. If religion did not do this, then religion would not contradict any of the explanations that science gives for natural phenomena (physical or mental). What big conflicts would be left? Even if there were a few other grounds for conflict, the main cause of disagreement would be removed. Probably no serious conflict would remain at all.

It would be easy for religious believers to make this happen! Just give up the belief that supernatural causes, instead of natural causes, give rise to natural events and objects.

You don’t have to stop believing in God. You don’t even have to stop believing that God created things. You just have to stop believing that God creates things INSTEAD OF natural causes creating them.
Here’s what I mean by that.

Take the biggest example of supernatural causation: the belief that a supernatural God is the creator of natural things (like species, or like the whole universe). Believers often assume that the cause of these items is God, INSTEAD of natural causes. However, there is another option: believers could assume God is the cause, but in a way that DOES NOT RULE OUT natural causes.

Here are several possible ways to make this step:

1. Assume that the natural causes are parts of God. (In this way, natural objects have their source in God, even if God isn’t literally a supernatural creator.) There are at least two possible versions of this assumption:

   (a) Assume that the natural universe is part of God. (This belief is called “panentheism.” The philosopher Charles Hartshorne is one notable advocate of this idea.)

   (b) Assume that the physical universe is one aspect of God. (This idea was advocated by the philosopher Spinoza.)

2. Assume that all events have natural causes, but that God nevertheless plays some role in causing natural events. Again, there are several possibilities:

   (a) Assume that God is what makes causation possible – that when event X causes event Y, God is somehow involved in this relationship of causation. (This would mean that God has a role in the causation of all things, even if the causative events themselves are purely natural.)

   (b) Assume that God is somehow present in the events that bring natural objects into being.
(For example, God could be what philosophers call an “abstract entity” – an item that can have instances or examples – and the causes of natural objects could be instances of God. Or perhaps God is present in the causes in some other way.)

(c) Assume that God is at one with, or identical in some way to, the processes that bring natural objects into being. (This oneness couldn’t be complete sameness, which philosophers call “numerical” identity. It would have to be what philosophers call “loose” identity or “partial” identity.) In this way, God could be regarded as the cause of things, even if all things in nature have natural causes.

3. Assume that God is the cause of the things in nature, but that God is not an “efficient” cause. In other words, God is not what we usually call a cause – something that forces an event to happen. Instead, God is the cause in a broader sense, perhaps something like the “final causation” discussed in classical philosophy. (The philosopher Howison adopted this alternative.)

If religions adopted any one of these ideas, they could avoid any really serious conflicts with the scientific view of the universe. For monotheistic religions, the universe still would have its source in God. Polytheistic religions might be able to adapt these alternatives to their own concept of divinity, with any given god, or the totality of gods, taking the place of the single God.

Given that there are so many ways of reconciling God’s existence with science, one might want to ask why the religions don’t adopt these ways. What’s the problem, anyhow? Why don’t the religions just adopt one of these logical concepts of divine creation, and have done with it? Why don’t they just admit that religion, like science, must update its ideas in the light of new discoveries?
If the religions would just update their concept of divine creation, and break free from the simplistic, potter-makes-pot kind of causation, then the main source of conflict between science and religion would vanish. Believers could believe in God, and even in God as creator, without once violating the scientific idea that natural events have natural causes.

Religion would not lose anything by making this change. After all, the religious doctrine that God creates things is not a detailed, precise theory. It is a very general, vague idea that doesn’t touch on the exact details of how God creates things. It can fit in with more than one concept of creation. If believers shifted their usual mental picture of creation to avoid supernatural causation of a simplistic kind, nothing would be lost – and much would be gained.

Believers, get busy!

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