

## **Dodgson Chose the Safe Way**

So many of us who, when were children, read Lewis Carroll's work and then either passed the book on to younger siblings, cousins, or the children of friends, without realising that its main import, the meaning within a meaning which it contains, was there to be interpreted by older and more experienced minds than ours. Some may feel that it was totally unnecessary for the author to hide this vital message within the pages of a children's book; but they did not grow up in the Victorian age when, in order to obtain a place in the realm of academia it was obligatory, not merely to be a Christian, but to be an ordained priest in the Church of England, as Charles Dodgson necessarily was. Now we live in times when people are free to express their own views on such matters without – or almost without – fear. Charles Dodgson lived from 1832 to 1898, 66 years, and at a time which supported the poor only by the workhouse, so he could not afford to jeopardise his livelihood by rash acts. He was reasonably safe in expressing himself in the way he chose.

Dodgson would have been expected to give a sermon in the university chapel once a year and this must have nearly choked him. Perhaps, he was saved this exquisite torture by reason of his stammer – not out of kindness by his college Dean, but in order to spare the dons the agony of sitting through the inevitable display of mangled speech.

The Victorian era was time of great repression. Its demands on all the nation's citizens: to comply with the constrictions of what was virtually a theocracy, were overwhelming. People *said* that they believed, for their own protection, and they also attended church.\* Women and children were second-class subjects and those in authority habitually passed judgement on others, though often indulging their own venal desires in secret. One can still see the occasional hangover of this disgraceful state-of-affairs today.

Voltaire, in 1762, said: 'Whatever you do, stamp out superstition, and love those who love you.'

\*Although, apparently, Charles Darwin escorted his family to the Church door and then went home. {Ed.}

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## **SCIENCE, HUMANITIES, RELIGION: HOW MANY CONFLICTS?**

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The topic of this paper is the conflicts, or the potential conflicts, between three areas of human thought: science, the humanities and religion. "Science" refers to the natural sciences: physics, chemistry, biology and so on. We can include at least some types of psychology. Then we have the humanities: subjects like history, literary criticism and philosophy. Then we have religion.

### **The Natural Sciences and Religion**

We are all well aware of the conflict between science and religion. Some people think science shows that God does not exist. Others think that there is no

outright conflict, but that the sciences have left God with nothing useful to do. Although the conflict is familiar, it is by no means finished. There will always be new generations who need to debate the issues afresh and every time science claims to have made God redundant, religious believers claim to find something that remains unexplained.

### **The Humanities and Religion**

Turning to the humanities and religion, my focus will be mainly on history, rather than on the other humanities. Here we have a conflict that has received much less attention than the conflict between science and religion. It is not a conflict between the practice of the humanities and religion. Instead, it is a conflict between religious and non-religious ways of taking their results. It arises out of the fact that there is a very important question for us: a question on the lines of, "What is human life all about?". How we use history to help us answer that question depends on our attitude to religion.

The question must be made more precise. I propose identifying two specific questions within it. First, "What is there that motivates us?", and second, "What is there that makes us joyful?".

These two questions are not straightforwardly narrower versions of the original question. That is important. The question "What is human life all about?" is not directly a request for factual information. It is an expression of some form of angst. But the angst can be assuaged by the provision of factual information, so long as it is taken in the right way. The two smaller questions do have factual answers. We can talk about what in fact motivates us, and what in fact makes us joyful. But that does not in itself do the job. In order to assuage the angst, we have to take the information in the right way. This is where the religious and the non-religious approaches come apart. They require us to take the things that may motivate us and give us joy in different ways.

### **Historical Accounts**

The issue is that of how historical accounts can motivate us. It is not the content of historical accounts. A religious belief, and specifically a desire to see God's purpose at work, can influence how one writes history, but it does not have to do so. The religious historian has the option of writing exactly the same narrative as the atheist historian, and then taking it to be a sign of God's purpose. This is possible, regardless of the content of the narrative, because the concept of God's purpose is pretty flexible, and the specific purposes can easily be pretty opaque to human beings. That flexibility and potential opacity allow purpose to be attributed in the context of pretty well any narrative of any stretch of history.

A claim that history reveals God's purpose is a factual claim. But it is closely related to a claim about value. We get to the claim about value by adding the premise that we should live in accordance with God's purpose. That premise is something that most people who believe in a religion that has a personal God will accept. Put it together with the factual claim that history reveals God's purpose, and we can reach the claim about value. It is the claim that history helps us to see how we should live. History is not likely to be our only guide. But to the extent that it is a guide, it is a guide via this route. Furthermore, when history becomes a guide to how we should live, that makes it an inspiration. It may not make our hearts beat faster, but it still inspires us to do things, simply because a recommendation from God, even an indirect one that is hidden in a pattern of

history, is one that the religious person will automatically be inclined to follow. And if a religious person views the course of history as a sign of God's purpose, that can also be a source of joy. He or she can see that little by little, God is reclaiming the world from the evil done by those human beings who have misused their free will.

A non-religious historian, on the other hand, cannot sensibly see any ultimate purpose. He or she must also acknowledge that a great many historical events have turned out very badly indeed for humanity. But the fact that there is no ultimate purpose to be found liberates us to focus on the inspiring episodes. We must not pick and choose when writing history. But we can pick and choose in the search for inspiration, so long as we are not foolish enough to conclude that humanity is better than it actually is. We can concentrate on the great scientific discoveries, on the great artistic achievements, and on the political structures that we have created to allow personal freedom alongside civil peace. Thus we can, very easily, find motivation and joy.

The religious historian who sees God's purpose does not really have that freedom to pick and choose, at least not in any honest way. If he or she would thank God for bringing down tyrants, he or she must also overlook the tyrants' original ascent to power. God must be assigned the credits, but not the debits, even though the historian has no ground whatever, in the picture of history as disclosing God's purpose, for doing so. Alternatively, the religious historian must claim that what looked bad, was in fact an essential element in some larger good that we are unable to see. When it comes to monstrous figures like Stalin, {Or especially, Hitler. Ed.} that gets a little difficult.

### **Things of Beauty**

Things of beauty can both motivate us and give us joy. Flowers and sunrises are most likely simply to give us joy. Fine music, or art, or mathematics, can both give us joy and motivate us. The motivation comes from the recognition that members of our own species can do these wonderful things. We may not aspire to the same heights, but we may well feel the urge to do what we can in the same general direction. We are not here concerned with the direct impact of things of beauty, the impact that prompts an inarticulate response, but with what happens when we reflect on the beautiful things. Why do we derive motivation, and hang on to our joy, when we reflect on things of beauty?

The proper religious answer is that things of beauty are minor miracles. We live in a world that is suffused by the divine, so of course we feel joy. It is also natural to feel motivated. The message of things of beauty is that we live in God's world.

Atheists are easily accused of missing all that. A flower is just a natural organism. A symphony is just an arbitrary product of synaptic activity. Above all, our reactions to such things are not validated by the presence of God's magic touch in those things. Instead, our reactions are simply the workings of our brains, workings that could have been very different. How can we derive motivation from neurological facts? And how can joy survive a reduction of experiences to the mechanics of the brain?

This gloomy conclusion misrepresents the facts. We can marvel at the world, even while knowing that our reaction is determined by facts about our

own brains. Aesthetic discourse is rich and complex, without any reference to God. Indeed, the introduction of God and his minor miracles rather puts a block on aesthetic discourse. It gives us reason to stop seeking the power of things of beauty in their relations to their artistic context and to our way of life. Atheists, by contrast, can go on exploring, never expecting to find conclusions to their aesthetic discussions, but feeling enormously enriched by them. In that dense network of connections, we can find ample joy. We can also find motivation, because we do not just recognize that people of our own species can do these things. We can recognize that they do not do these things by magic. They do them because they are, just like us, embedded in traditions and societies, but still individuals. Their brains just work a bit better than those of most people.

So there is the conflict. We take reflective joy in things of beauty, and are motivated by them, either because we see the hand of God at work in them, or because we see the unaided hands of nature and of humanity. The latter approach is the richer one.

### **The Natural Sciences and the Humanities**

Is there a conflict between the natural sciences and the humanities? Specifically, do the natural sciences threaten to make the humanities redundant?

They do not. There is obviously no practical prospect of replacing talk of historical figures and events with talk of neurons, and that is not just a matter of the overwhelming complexity of any neuron-based account. We can see that it is not just a matter of complexity by being more realistic in our reductive ambitions, and thinking about replacing the humanities with the social sciences. The social sciences might regard themselves as fairly directly related to the natural sciences, both via psychology and via their use of statistical methods.

In order to produce a worthwhile history, we have to go way beyond what either the natural sciences or the social sciences would regard as justified. We have to tell a good story. The skill, of course, is to tell a good story that is true to the evidence. A historian who ignores inconvenient facts, or who downplays something that was manifestly important at the time, is a bad historian. But one who merely recites the evidence and those inferences that would be warranted by the canons of the natural or the social sciences, writes something dull that does not speak to us.

There is the problem. History must be made to speak to us. It must be adapted to the psyches of the readers. That requires going beyond the scientifically legitimate inferences. Contrast, at the other extreme, physics. The equations are what they are. No concessions are, or should be, made to our psyches. If we cannot grasp what the equations say, that is our problem.

Going beyond scientifically legitimate inferences does not, however, place us at odds with science, provided that we recognize what we are doing, and do not over-state the validity of our conclusions. We should not deny ourselves our intellectual adventures in history. At the same time, we must always look critically at the historical evidence we have, and we must stand back from our conclusions and ask whether they really make sense. Not being limited to what the natural or social sciences would endorse, does not mean allowing ourselves a free-for-all.