

Does Science Make Faith Irrational?

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Will Provine

Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear — and these are basically Darwin's views. There are no gods, no purposes, and no goal-directed forces of any kind.

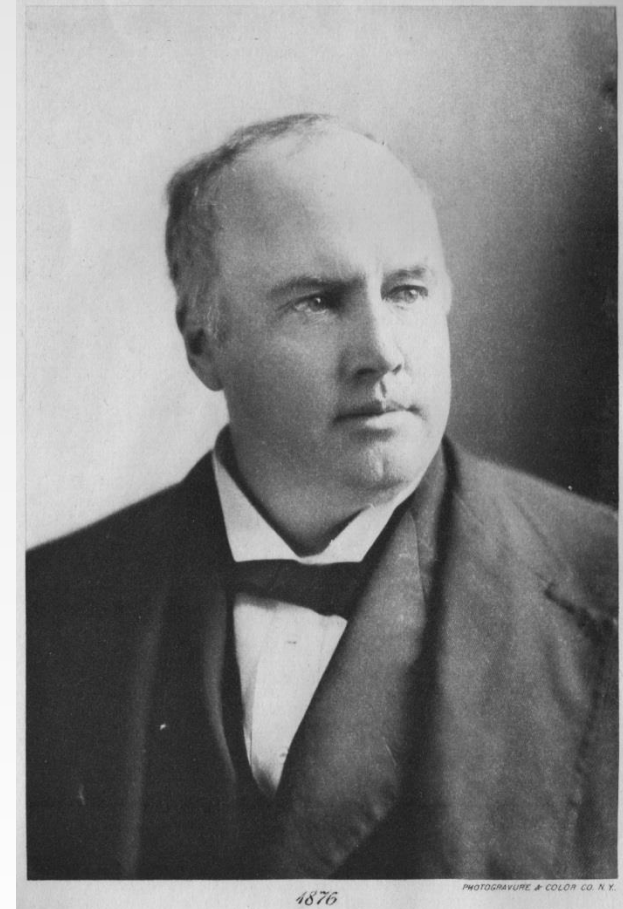
– Debate with Philip Johnson,
Stanford University, 1994



Robert Ingersoll

“There is no harmony between religion and science. When science was a child, religion sought to strangle it in the cradle.”

– 1885, in *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*,
vol. 8, p. 261



Some distinctions: Religion

- All religions are *not* the same
 - We will focus on Christianity
- Even sincere believers in the *same* religion often differ
- The question, to be meaningful, should be asked about the *essential beliefs* of a particular religion, not the non-essentials

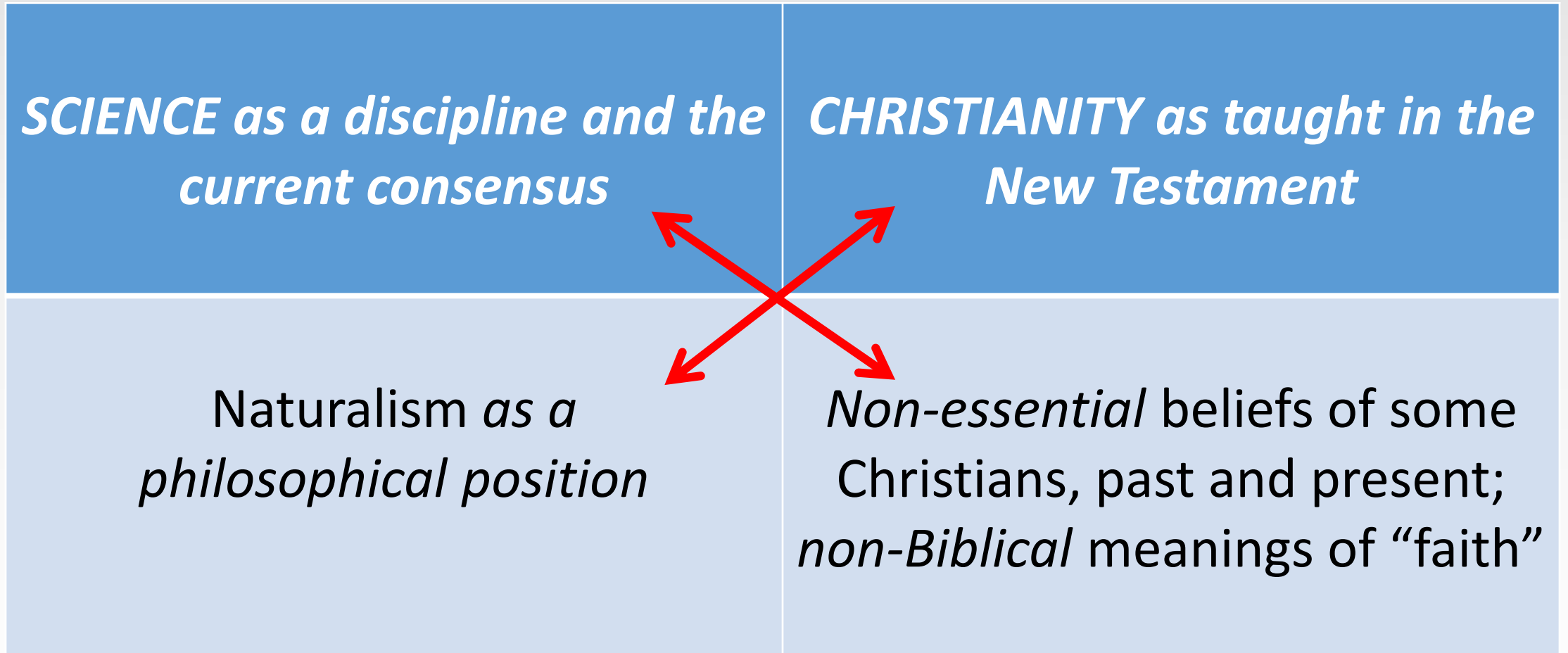
Some distinctions: Science

- An approach to investigating the physical world
- The most current set of beliefs about the physical world
- A philosophical position that limits what we can know or what can exist to the physical – “naturalism”

Some distinctions: Faith

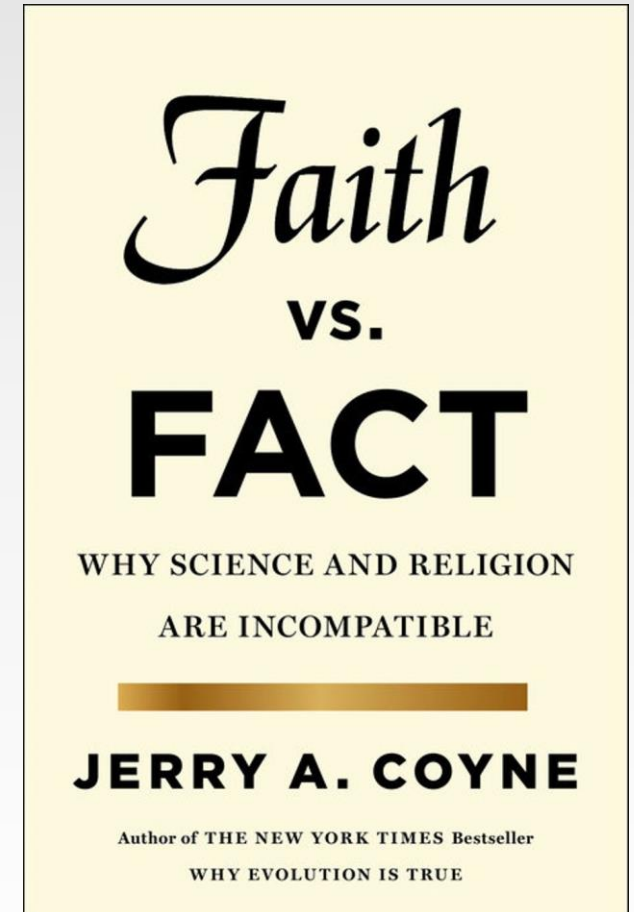
- Trust (*pistis*) – the basic meaning in the New Testament
- Blind insistence on believing without evidence
 - A meaning never found in the Bible
 - A meaning rarely intended by Christians
 - The default meaning of the word according to many atheists

Breaking down the question



Jerry Coyne's definition of "religion"

“Science and religion are incompatible, and you must choose between them.’ ... If you are trying to be consistent in how you get reliable knowledge about our universe, and if you already reject unevidenced claims like those of ESP and homeopathy, or claims of religions other than yours, then in the end you must choose – and choose science. That doesn’t mean that you must accept an unchanging set of scientific facts, but simply that you choose reason and evidence over superstition and wish-thinking.”



Response to Coyne: Faith founded on fact

“I seek no flighty converts from your ranks—no sudden passing over to our side from yours, of some hot, excitable partisan, who is incapable of thinking. I seek to lead you to accept what I believe to be Truth, by inducing you to practise the daily reflection, the steady conning over and over again of each item of the Christian Evidences, which effectually cured my doubts, and rendered me a settled and grateful believer. ...

Response to Coyne: Faith founded on fact

“I would not lift up my finger, or stir a straw, to make a sudden and spasmodic conversion of any one of you, which would leave you helpless in your new belief, and incapable of giving a reason of the hope within you. Such a convert would be a very useless one. I want to enlist real soldiers for my Master.”

— Thomas Cooper, *The Verity of Christ's Resurrection from the Dead* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1875), pp. 131-32

An honor roll of Christians in science

- Nicolas Copernicus – astronomy
- Johannes Kepler – astronomy and optics
- Galileo Galilei – astronomy, optics, mechanics
- Robert Boyle – physics, chemistry
- Isaac Newton – physics, calculus
- Gottfried Leibniz – physics, mathematics

An honor roll of Christians in science

- Leonhard Euler – physics, mathematics
- William Herschel – astronomy
- George John Romanes – evolutionary biology
- Gregor Mendel – genetics
- Georges Lemaitre – big bang cosmology
- Michael Faraday – electricity
- William Thompson (Lord Kelvin) – thermodynamics

An honor roll of Christians in science

- John Lennox – mathematics, physics
- Henry (“Fritz”) Schaefer – computational chemistry
- Alister McGrath – molecular biophysics
- Francis Collins – Human Genome Project
- James Tour – nanotechnology
- Andrew Pinsent – high-energy nuclear physics

A pointed question

- Were these scientists Christians because they just did not realize that faith and science are incompatible, as Jerry Coyne wants to claim?
- Or were they – and are they – Christians because they thought that Christianity is reasonable and explains the evidence better than the alternatives?

Richard Lewontin: Science as materialism

- “We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. ...

Richard Lewontin

“It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.”

— “Billions and Billions of Demons,” in *The New York Review of Books*, 9 January 1997, p. 31

TL;DR

- Religious faith would require us to believe that there is a God who could work miracles – and we *absolutely refuse* to believe that.

A critical question

If you are wrong, how will you find out?

Miracles and laws of nature: an objection

1. Miracles are, by definition, violations of the laws of nature
2. Science discovers the laws of nature.

Therefore,

3. To believe in miracles is to go against science.

An alternative definition

- The laws of nature tell us how the physical universe behaves *when it is left to itself*.
- They do not tell us *whether* it is always left to itself.