

“Does Neuroscience Leave Room for God?”

My debate with Dr. PZ Myers at
University of Minnesota at Morris,
8pm-10:30pm, Saturday, April 19th, 2008

by
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1. Format of the debate. The debate was moderated as follows: each of us had a maximum of 40 minutes to present our case. Then there was a maximum of 30 minutes in which Dr. Myers and I could probe each other’s position with questions. Finally, we opened to the floor and members of the audience could ask questions of either speaker.

2. My presentation. I presented first and made three main points.

(1) First, I argued that materialism is presumed true before looking at the evidence. Richard Lewontin has admitted that he holds to materialism in science as an *a priori* assumption. My main points were that inflexible adherence to materialism could prevent us from finding the truth, and weakens the claim to have found the best explanation by eliminating competitors to materialism without considering them. But what about those who claim that materialism has such an amazing track record, we should have a presumption in its favor?

(2) My second main point was that materialism does **not** have such an impressive track record. I noted that Christian theology, not materialism, played a substantive role in the rise of modern science, by justifying belief in laws of nature and in minds reliable enough to discover them. I noted the “Argument from Reason” against Evolutionary Naturalism, which points out that Evolutionary Naturalism predicts minds equipped with useful gadgets, but not ones attuned to discovering truth, especially in theoretical matters having nothing to do with basic survival. By contrast, rational theism predicts that our minds are attuned to the laws of nature, since both reflect the same divine logos.

Moving closer to the central issue of the debate, I argued that there is considerable evidence against the materialist contention that the mind reduces to the brain. There is the “hard problem” of consciousness, that subjective awareness is not explained or predicted by impersonally described states of the brain. Then there is the evidence from neuroscientists such as Jeff Schwartz and Mario Beauregard that, in addition to the bottom-up influence of the brain on the mind, the mind has a top-down influence on the brain (cognitive therapies that exploit neuroplasticity) and on health (psychoneuroimmunology). I focused on how these approaches gave hope to patients by showing that their own conscious choices could play a role in their recovery and health. I also mentioned the remarkable studies of Near Death Experiences by Pim van Lommel. I held up and recommended Jeff Schwartz and Sharon Begley’s *The Mind and the Brain*, and Mario Beauregard and Denyse O’ Leary’s *The Spiritual Brain*, and said that if someone is a true skeptic, they should be skeptical of materialism as well as of non-materialistic claims.

(3) My third point was to critique the slew of contemporary materialist attempts to explain away religious belief and experience. I noted that a culture of 1-way skepticism encourages both a presumption that supernatural religions are false without investigating the evidence for their truth claims, and also credulous acceptance of unsubstantiated materialist speculations, such as the “God gene” and “God spot”

theories, all of which can be decisively refuted. I then investigate the claim that religion is a “virus of the mind,” and argue that the underlying theory of memes would either discredit everyone’s beliefs or, if it does not, require us to check out the actual evidence for or against them.

3. Dr. P Z Myers’ presentation.

Dr. Myers focused mainly on defining the terms “science” and “God.” He argued that science can only work with what is measurable, and that “God” cannot be defined in a way that is measurable, and so God/theology are irrelevant to science. He claimed that scientists must accept the rule methodological materialism, according to which scientists can believe in any religion they want, but, within science, must restrict themselves to considering only material causes. He likened the scientist to the plumber who must work at the level of what physically works. Indeed, Dr. Myers asserted that science is not about truth, but about what works, and that God is irrelevant to science because “God” is not a tractable concept.

Dr. Myers held up a large standard volume on neuroscience, and asserted that it was better than Schwartz’s and Beauregard’s books, apparently because it was bigger! He then showed some interesting slides detailing the standard “homunculus” model of the brain, mapping various sensations and bodily functions to parts of the brain. He acknowledged the reality of neuroplasticity, but claimed that this could all be understood in terms of chemical processes in the brain, without appeal to consciousness. Yet, interestingly, he admitted that no-one could explain consciousness. Dr. Myers also mentioned a recent scientific experiment showing that in advance of conscious awareness of decision, there is already a 60% probability of action. (He did not, however, claim that this showed there was no free will, and since the result was so recent and under-analyzed, I chose not to take the bait.)

The remainder of Myers’ presentation was focused on the case for the brain’s bottom-up influence on the brain, including the impact of neural deficits and degeneration through illness and age. At one point he made the quite absurd suggestion that some people seem to think that neurons have nothing to do with it! Since I had argued for neuroplasticity and psychoneuroimmunology, this was a bit hard to take. I suppose it was an exaggeration or a joke, designed to make dualists look silly. Dr. Myers’ presentation was frankly depressing, because it left the impression that we are passive products of physical causes, with no ability to take control of our health. Myers did try to claim that he could account for some of the studies I had mentioned, but in terms of one part of the brain taking charge of another. The talk included relatively few slides, some of them showing the plight of family members.

4. Our discussion/debate.

Myers was surprisingly passive in debate and did not really seem eager to spar. I got the sense that he had previously dismissed me as another creationist “ID-iot,” and that he was not really prepared for me to make a serious case. Here are some of the main points of our discussion.

(1) While I agreed with Myers about the evidence of bottom-up causation, I argued that this did not negate the evidence of top-down causation. To refute the idea that consciousness must simply be generated by the brain, I used the analogy of a telephone. If someone calls and we drop the phone and break it, we no longer hear the voice, but the voice is not generated by the phone: the phone transmits it.

Likewise the fact that certain thoughts are impossible with neural deficits does not show that the brain generates our thoughts or that our mind is simply a passive shadow of the brain.

(2) I noted that at the end of his review of *The God Delusion*, Michael Ruse had argued that if the likes of Richard Dawkins continue to claim that Darwinian evolution inevitably supports atheism, then teaching Darwinian evolution in schools would violate the first amendment. Was not the approach to science advocated by Myers likewise against the constitution? In response, Myers said that science only uses methodological materialism, so it does not technically exclude religion, saying that he knew scientists who were Christian who subscribed to Methodological Materialism. (What he did not address was the distinction between those theists who believe in the natural knowledge of God and those who do not. Methodological Materialism favors secular humanists and those theists unconcerned about the natural knowledge of God and discriminates against those who believe God worked detectably in nature by preventing them from exploring scientific evidence for their point of view.)

(3) Wishing to expose the way Methodological Materialism can be held indefinitely, no matter what the evidence, I challenged Myers to define what could convince him that materialism was false, pointing out that if all materialist explanations were working or very promising, I could be persuaded that theism was false. He dodged the question saying it was too hypothetical. I did not get the impression that he has seriously considered the question of what it would be like to learn materialism is false. How, then, can he claim that the materialism of science is purely methodological, which implies it could be dropped if it fails to work in some areas?

(4) I also argued that Myers' attempt to reduce science to the physically measurable was inadequate, because science postulates theoretical entities that may or may not turn out to be observable. Mendel postulated genes, and these were later shown to be observable. In physics, however, there are plenty of entities (particles, forces, strings etc.) that are at the least unobserved, and also measurement itself presupposes such abstractions as logic and numbers that are inherently unobservable. I agreed with Myers that science should try to get the tractable and observable if it can, but argued that science should not give up if the best evidence points away from the observable. In my view, Myers is maintaining a positivistic view of science which limits science to what is verifiable by observation, but this does not square with Quantum Physics for example, particularly as it recognizes the role of the conscious observer in influencing what is measured.

(5) I asked Myers why, if science was neutral, there were so few studies of the psychology and neurology of atheists and secular humanists, given all the attempts to explain away theistic belief and experience. He surprised me by noting that Schwartz and Beauregard are Christians, suggesting that only theists were interested in the question. This did not jive with all the studies by secularists of the psychology and neurology of atheists cited by Beauregard. I also noted the 3 million dollar European project, "Explaining Religion," cited in *The Economist*, March 19th, 2008 ("Where angels no longer fear to tread").

(6) I also asked why, if science was a free inquiry, Guillermo Gonzalez had been so shabbily treated at Iowa State University. Myers claimed that this was because he had not brought in enough grant money. I pointed out that Gonzalez had 68 peer reviewed science articles, was author of a Cambridge text on astronomy, and that the emails acquired through Iowa's open record laws showed that Gonzalez's tenure was denied because of his pro-design views.

(7) Myers and I sparred on the fine-tuning argument. He asserted that there was nothing surprising: we wouldn't be here if it hadn't happened. I mentioned John Leslie's analogy: suppose you are scheduled to be executed by 200 sharpshooters. It would not be a convincing explanation of them all missing, that unless they had, you wouldn't be here. We would want to know if there was an order from above, a conspiracy, a flaw in the manufacture of the guns, etc.

I had two very big surprises. First, Dr. Myers denied being a Darwinist, which produced the kind of stunned silence one would expect if the Pope announced his non-Catholicity. Myers' stated grounds were that Darwin has been dead for over a hundred years. I wished I had pointed out that I am on many issues a Platonist, even though Plato has been dead for 2400 years. Second, as I mentioned, Myers denied that science is really about truth. I had to wonder why it was so important for him to exclude design from science if all that matters is what works. After all, I had noted earlier on in my presentation that the Darwinist philosopher Michael Ruse agrees that methodological design does work in biology by helping scientists decode the machinery of life.

At the end, I made Myers the offer of trying to set up a special issue of a journal where he could bring in his "cronies" and I could bring in mine to discuss the issue. He found the idea amusing and, so far as I could tell, not without appeal. I do not know if this will happen, but I am going to look into it.