

"The Talk"

Recently, prominent atheist professor David Barash proudly shared the first lecture ("The Talk") he has with his incoming biology students in the New York Times Opinion section. We've asked Professor Mary Poplin, author of *Is Reality Secular?* to give her analysis of Barash's bold assertions regarding the incompatibility of science and faith.

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by Mary Poplin

David Barash and the NY Times has done a great service to theists and atheists by sharing the lecture notes for his first class - "The Talk" on September 27, 2014. For those trained by secularism (and that includes most of us) it seems a thoroughly reasonable lecture. However, as someone who supports the epistemological return to the truly "free open marketplace of ideas", I'm a bit skeptical.

Professor Barash informs his students from the outset that evolution is not "merely a theory but a fact". If by that he means the change in genetic material *within* a species to make it more adaptable, such as the famous Galapagos finches whose beaks harden during droughts in order to break the also hardened seed casings and reverse at drought's end, all is good; it is a fact we can see. Nevertheless, these are still essentially the same finches. On the other hand, if Barash means evolution *across* species, generating entirely new species is a fact - fish into birds or apes into humans - that is another thing. Unfortunately for Professor Barash, there is increasing doubt about macroevolution, including pushbacks from well-respected scientists and philosophers of science who share his atheism, such as Thomas Nagel.

Nevertheless, Barash is right, evolution (micro and macro) is critical content for science students to learn because microevolution is a fact and macroevolution has a good number of advocates, Barash, as well as the Catholic Church and other prominent scientists who are religious, Francis Collins being the foremost apologist. However, it would be intellectually more honest if Professor Barash at least shared the other theories, even if he stated his disagreement. These are all metaphysical beliefs (faiths) about origins inductively derived from the data we currently have available.

Professor Barash spends some time jousting with his deceased debate partner, Stephen Jay Gould who proposed that science and religion are compatible because they occupy non-overlapping magisterial (NOMA) - one addresses facts and the other values. He opposes it because it misrepresents science and religion; I oppose it because Judeo-Christian thought contains both knowledge (facts) and values.

Predictably, Professor Barash uses his power to intimidate any student who believes God made the earth in six 24-hour days. There are four major origins theories in Christendom, one believes in the literal six-day theory "the young earth creationists. The other three (theistic evolution, intelligent design, old earth creation) use the traditional dating. So, what is the purpose of sharing the six-day story and leaving out the other theories held by scientists who believe in God? After all, even atheists and agnostics are joining the advocates of intelligent design, who as William Dembski

points out propose that the prima causa of the universe is information communicated by its intelligent source and not the resultant material. The truth is you could have a team of five scientists working on the same project, each of which believed a different origins theory, and they would all use the same scientific method and each be equally able to contribute to answering the research question.

Professor Barash moves next into familiar wishful-thinking space when he states emphatically that the more we know, the less space there is for God (God of the gaps argument). Oxford mathematician and historian of science, John Lennox likens this to saying because we understand the internal combustion engine, Henry Ford never existed. Barash goes on to dispute the "argument from complexity," which goes something like this "no one has ever seen anything so complex and finely-tuned that has not emerged from an intentional intelligent source. But Barash claims all this complexity emerges from "an entirely natural and undirected process, namely random variation plus natural selection," which generates "all that is needed" for "extraordinary levels of non-randomness." So out of randomness, we apparently get fantastic "non-random" complex workable design. Barash proudly boasts that at this moment in the lecture, some of his students shift uneasily in their seats. It may just be that the students are now a bit embarrassed seeing as their professor has just made no small number of leaps of logic. Even famous atheist astronomer, Fred Hoyle, noted that nowhere do we see complex orderly design emerging from randomness. He wrote that it was "better to suppose that the origins of life was a deliberate intellectual act. By 'better' I mean less likely to be wrong."

Now had any of my colleagues in the sciences who are Christians brought in as much theology into their science lecture they would have been excoriated by the university and their colleagues; many have suffered much worse consequences for much less theology. However, the atheist, Professor Barash wins a spot in the Sunday Times. Here it is seen as not only perfectly reasonable but necessary.

Now, at last the lecture comes to apes and man. Barash tells his students that once, before Darwin (who by now might be turning over in his grave since he offered standards by which we might judge his theory) we could believe that humans "were distinct from other life forms, chips off the old divine block" but "no more". Here, he makes the shocking observation, for a scientist, that "no literally supernatural trait has ever been found in Homo sapiens; we are perfectly good animals." I was under the impression that the rigorous scientists use only methods that work brilliantly but strictly in the material world and that scientists leave the supernatural to other disciplines.

Furthermore, he tells his students that the linkages among life forms compel us to believe, that species share common descent. He fails to mention that common design is an equally plausible argument "similar material is used to create very dissimilar things, a bit like human beings do who use metal to build toy trains and/or casings for weapons.

At last, Professor Barash leaves his field altogether and adds the most irresistible critique of God "the presence of evil, whereupon he observes that "the more we know of evolution" the more we have to admit that "human beings are produced by a natural, totally amoral process, with no indication of a benevolent, controlling creator".

Now at this moment I am thinking, not about defending God, but that it is Professor Barash who needs to answer the question of evil. How does evil emerge in a world of material acting only predictably "the strong overcome the weak" and that's the end of the story it seems. Christians have a pretty consistent story about human evil that concludes that we all know better, that we have available free will and grace to make

better choices, and when we fail we still have the possibility of being forgiven and changed from the inside out (if we so choose). However, I recognize that neuroscientists increasingly support the materialist theory "my genes made me do it," leading to the psychological theory "I have no control over this," leading to the legal theory "therefore, I'm not responsible". At this point in the lecture my hand surely would have shot up, "Professor Barash, then what went so terribly wrong with this fantastic random process of evolution when, instead of humans beings evolving better able to thrive and survive, we evolved as a danger to our selves and our own species?"

Mary Poplin is a professor at Claremont Graduate University and is the author of *Is Reality Secular?* IVP, 2014.

Excerpt from Professor David Barash's lecture: "The Talk"

"As evolutionary science has progressed, the available space for religious faith has narrowed: It has demolished two previously potent pillars of religious faith and undermined belief in an omnipotent and omni-benevolent God.

The twofold demolition begins by defeating what modern creationists call the argument from complexity. This once seemed persuasive, best known from William Paley's 19th-century claim that, just as the existence of a complex structure like a watch demands the existence of a watchmaker, the existence of complex organisms requires a supernatural creator. Since Darwin, however, we have come to understand that an entirely natural and undirected process, namely random variation plus natural selection, contains all that is needed to generate extraordinary levels of non-randomness. Living things are indeed wonderfully complex, but altogether within the range of a statistically powerful, entirely mechanical phenomenon.

A few of my students shift uncomfortably in their seats. I go on. Next to go is the illusion of centrality. Before Darwin, one could believe that human beings were distinct from other life-forms, chips off the old divine block. No more. The most potent take-home message of evolution is the not-so-simple fact that, even though species are identifiable (just as individuals generally are), there is an underlying linkage among them — literally and phylogenetically, via traceable historical connectedness.

Moreover, no literally supernatural trait has ever been found in *Homo sapiens*; we are perfectly good animals, natural as can be and indistinguishable from the rest of the living world at the level of structure as well as physiological mechanism.

Adding to religion's current intellectual instability is a third consequence of evolutionary insights: a powerful critique of theodicy, the scholarly effort to reconcile belief in an omnipresent, omni-benevolent God with the fact of unmerited suffering.

Theological answers range from claiming that suffering provides the option of free will to announcing (as in the Book of Job) that God is so great and we so insignificant that we have no right to ask. But just a smidgen of biological insight makes it clear that, although the natural world can be marvelous, it is also filled with ethical horrors: predation, parasitism, fratricide, infanticide, disease, pain, old age and death — and that suffering (like joy) is built into the nature of things. The more we know of evolution, the more unavoidable is the conclusion that living things, including human beings, are produced by a natural, totally amoral process, with no indication of a benevolent, controlling creator."

David Barash

New York Times
Sunday Review/Opinion Section

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/28/opinion/sunday/god-darwin-and-my-college-biology-class.html?_r=0

Jerry A. Coyne, Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Chicago, criticizes Professor Barash on his blog for discussing his view of the relationship between science and religion in a science class

While I think Barash is 100% right, and that religion and science are indeed incompatible in critical ways...I think he needs to knock off giving The Talk. It is not science, but a form of theology or philosophy. By all means let him trumpet his views in The New York Times, as he did so well, or any other similar venue...But I'm not so sure that this stuff belongs in a science class."

Jerry A. Coyne

<http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2014/09/28/david-barash-on-the-incompatibility-of-science-and-faith/>

Mary Poplin's recently released book examines four major worldviews—naturalism, humanism, pantheism, and Judeo-Christian theism—and explores their implications for human behavior and the evidence for their truth.

What is the nature of reality? At the root of our society's deepest political and cultural divisions are the conflicting principles of four global worldviews.

While each of us holds to some version of one of these worldviews, we are often unconscious of their differences as well as their underlying assumptions.

Mary Poplin argues that the ultimate test of a worldview, philosophy or ideology is whether it corresponds with reality.

Since different perspectives conflict with each other, how do we make sense of the differences?

And if a worldview system accurately reflects reality, what implications does that have for our thinking and living?

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Mary Poplin

Mary Poplin is professor at Claremont Graduate University and the author of a new book published by InterVarsity Press - *Is Reality Secular? Testing the Assumptions of Four Global Worldviews* (interVarsity Press). Professor Poplin earned her PhD from the University of Texas and is a professor in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. Her work spans K-12 to higher education. Professor Poplin, who began her career as a public school teacher,



conducts research largely on the inside of schools and classrooms, and more recently on highly effective teachers in urban poor schools. Her work in higher education has included administration; at various times, she served as dean and as director of teacher education. Academically, she explores the contemporary intellectual trends dominant in the various academic disciplines—the sciences, humanities, and social sciences. She is a frequent speaker in Veritas Forums throughout the country.

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