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Disciplinary Brief

LOVE AND NATURAL SCIENCE: CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

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Relating Love to Natural Science

At first sight “love” and “natural science” seem an incongruous pairing. Love is an aspect of human experience, in particular of personal relationship with another person or thing. The word love is then applied to a wide variety of entities, including inanimate things such as landscapes, sunsets, paintings and works of art etc. when what is actually being referred to is a human response to these things that might be better described as “taking delight in” the object of affection. The risk then is that the value of the word becomes diluted and potentially emptied of much of its significance. As Ian Hutchinson [LINK] points out, natural science is “inherently impersonal” and so the relationship between love and natural science is inherently tangential. The refinement of the definition suggested by O'Donovan [LINK] and endorsed, to some extent by Hutchinson, that love is “affective and directive attention to the good of persons” does, at least, begin to distinguish between kinds of love. This also encourages us to focus on the personal aspect of love enshrined in the two commandments to love God and our neighbour. Here Hutchison is right to emphasise, as Jesus did, love of persons.

Points of Contact between Love and Natural Science

Having made the distinction between love directed between persons and the taking delight in other things, it is, nonetheless, illuminating to look carefully at the tangential points of contact between love and natural science. Lorna Smith points to the exquisite chemistry of the haemoglobin molecule as something in which to take delight. It also illustrates the attention to detail paid by the Creator in fine-tuning the laws of electromagnetism and quantum mechanics to create this marvel. This may point, for those willing to look, to the love of the Creator for his creatures.

Personal Love in the Practice of Science

The more personal aspect of love, however, is rightly emphasised in Lorna Smith's reflection [LINK] on how

love for persons is to be worked out practically by relating to colleagues with humility and grace, putting aside personal ambition in our scientific work for the good of others. In the competitive world of academic research, we are given opportunities for witness by service oriented to the good of others, where we lay not up for ourselves treasures of fame or fortune on earth, but rather seek Christ's approving greeting, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” [1]

Turning to the issue of how to relate the command to love God and our neighbour to the academic life, O'Donovan highlights three areas; vocation, order and education. The practice of educating is picked up by Bruno Cavalar [LINK] as a way of practising love as it is directed to the good of another person. That benefit, bestowed by education, is not simply the transmission of knowledge, but the training in critical thinking. This, surely, is the helpful skill that enables everyone to discern truth - that essential characteristic of true love.

The Role of Love in Revisionist Evolutionary Theory

As science strives for the best and truest understanding of how Nature works, Andy Gosler [LINK] points us first to the often-overlooked fact that Jesus misquotes the Deuteronomic commandment to love God with all our might, by replacing “might” with “mind”! (*Deuteronomy 6:5*, *Matthew 22:37*) It is therefore, in obedience to Christ, our duty to strive for a deeper and fuller understanding of the evolution of life forms. Where the Darwinian paradigm gave pre-eminence to competition, with the disquieting features of predation and suffering, modern research has developed a counter-narrative that emphasises cooperation, and that “mutual dependency is a fair description of love”. So, even in the most unlikely situations, we may see love in action in the natural world.

It may be argued, however, that “mutual dependency” is simply another successful survival strategy in the neo-Darwinian version of evolution, and that “love” is an anthropocentric descriptor of a purely natural process. This issue illustrates the difficulty with which we started, of relating love to natural science. Science seeks causal links to explain how the world works - methodological naturalism, and its methods explicitly exclude the personal. The theistic perspective challenges the claim that this approach justifies ontological naturalism - that the explanation in terms of natural process is all that can be said and that personal dimensions, such as meaning and purpose, are not real but by-products of evolved brain functions.

The thorough-going naturalist will claim that love is simply another epiphenomenon of naturalistic or materialistic processes. Love, in this view, can be reduced to nothing more than physico-chemical processes in the brain. The Christian theist, however, will argue, in a tradition that goes all the way back to Aristotle, that materialism is self-defeating. For if all brain activity and rational thoughts are “nothing more” than interactions between molecules, we have no reason to suppose our thoughts are true and no argument, including ontological naturalism, can be considered true. [2] The materialist undermines the validity of reason and once reason is in doubt, one cannot use reason to validate it. In this context, C.S.

Lewis famously quoted a saying attributed to, or quoted by, Aristotle, “If a man chokes on water, with what will he wash it down!” [3]

Finding Wisdom and Meaning in Love

Andrew Gosler [LINK] helpfully points us to the book of Job if we would seek wisdom and that in looking at the animals, birds and plants we will see pointers to the Creator God. I would offer a further insight that the book of Job provides; the lesson that Job learns as he sought to understand his suffering was that some things are beyond our complete understanding. He learns the lesson of humility in the light of the power and wisdom of God. Job sought a reason and God gave him a relationship. It is in that relationship of faith and trust that we experience the love of God. In looking at the natural world, Job realised his limitations.

In thinking of the tangent points where love and natural science touch we may gain valuable insights into the nature of both. For example, natural science strives for certainty and proof by testing and experiment. Love, however, cannot be proved. A relationship that is constantly being tested cannot develop into love without faith and trust. Furthermore, love makes us vulnerable - vulnerable to the pain of loss, but faith in the love of God reassures us that “All shall be well, … and all manner of things shall be well.” [4] Natural science can give us explanations in terms of mechanisms, it cannot tell us about meaning. We can rejoice, however, by following the advice we find in Job, to see God's hand in Nature, revealed more and more by our science, to see the meaning and purpose of our lives in the love of God.

Endnotes

[1] Matthew 25: 21, 23

[2] J.B.S. Haldane, *Possible Worlds and Other Essays*. Evergreen Books ISBN 10: 1773237578 / ISBN 13: 9781773237572

[3] C.S. Lewis *Miracles*. London & Glasgow: Collins/Fontana, 1947. Revised 1960. (Current edition: Fount, 2002. ISBN 0-00-628094-3) See also Reppert, Victor. *C.S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003. ISBN 0-8308-2732-3

[4] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*.

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