
The Uses and Abuses of Science in Religious Environmentalism*

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Sideris's chapter is deeply thought provoking for all kinds of reasons, and for this response I will offer an analysis of Sideris's main arguments before coming to some overall conclusions about its significance for religious environmental ethics. For the central charge here is an intensely serious one: namely, that the framing of narratives insofar as they are commonly conceived in much religious environmentalism is actually *detrimental* to promoting environmental practices, thus undercutting the whole point of their activity as far as proponents are concerned.

The background to this chapter is a full-length work in which Sideris (2003) argues strongly in favor of religious environmentalism taking scientific results more seriously. Insofar as religious groups have tended to point the finger at practices associated with modern science, such as dualistic, mechanistic attitudes towards the natural world or even disenchantment with it, they are at risk of taking the next step and actually ignoring proper consideration of scientific endeavors, including evolutionary and ecological science. Now, inasmuch as religious groups are ignorant of Darwinian science or modern ecology, Sideris makes a convincing case for the need for much greater awareness of biological disciplines. After all, ignorance about the way the world works according to scientific analysis does not really help anyone to understand how to act, unless, of course, the assumption is made that all forms of

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evolutionary or ecological science are suspect. At the same time, lurking in the background for those who press the case against too strong a place for scientific reasoning is the suspicion of ethical naturalism or worse: the naturalistic fallacy that an 'ought' cannot simply be read as an 'is'. Even in this scenario, the perception that science reflects the way the world is and does not carry its own values comes under critical scrutiny. Sideris is, in this sense, philosophically a critical realist inasmuch as she holds to the view that there is something about the natural world that science can seek to uncover, even if it is always provisional, and in that sense her position is one of critical realism and not simply realism.

But this is how the other side of critical realism comes to bear on the present chapter. For if that realism is no longer critical, it slips away from the concrete experimental base and becomes mythological. And it is just that shift that Sideris now argues has infected religious environmentalism. So, what looks at first sight as a U-turn in her thinking—from an argument that there is *not enough* science woven into religious discussion about the environment to arguing *there is too much*—actually makes good sense. I also do not think she is suspicious of ethical naturalism in this context; rather, it is the framing of science in a way that extends beyond its claims as science into *scientism*.

There are a number of critical issues at stake here that need to be carefully analyzed. The first is this: Is her argument completely convincing? That is, how far do those who hold to the kind of position she criticizes actually adopt the particular form of grand narrative that is actually debilitating to environmental activism? That mythical grand narratives do exist in the literature is not really a matter of dispute. For example, Gaia can also be analyzed critically through a mythological lens (Deane-Drummond 1992). There are also ethical problems associated with grand narratives insofar as there is a tendency towards fatalistic or deterministic models of human activity that can certainly be detrimental for environmental ethics and take away from concern for local projects and activities (Deane-Drummond 2010). In this sense, Sideris is not quite as original as one might suppose from reading her chapter. At the same time, there are points worth considering in her argument, such as whether the narrative account can portray accurately what is actually happening across such a wide range of sciences. In fact, the unifying story seems intuitively so appealing that it is difficult for the non-specialist or even the specialist to notice what is taking place. Does it matter, in other words, that forms of cosmology in physics are combined with evolutionary biology, sociology, and cultural anthropology? I suggest that it does, and the reason is this: laws in the natural world, such as they exist, are very different in physics compared with evolutionary

biology. Even physicists are reluctant to use the language of 'law', but the basis for any law is more secure compared with evolutionary biology, that uses inductive methods. If different sciences are combined as if they were on a flat plane, however appealing that might seem, it creates the impression of a single, undivided scientific consensus, whereas in fact there are varieties of interpretations even within one field, let alone different disciplinary boundaries. It is not that multidisciplinary approaches are incorrect; rather, in their fusion the rich diversity is lost to the eye and becomes illusionary. Much the same could be said about the religious aspects also: when combined together they seem to unite but at a cost of recognizing the diversity embedded across and within religious differences. Sideris's belief that the grand narrative accounts end up ironically being anthropocentric insofar as they seem to be more fundamentally concerned about the human person than anything else also needs to be taken seriously. In other words, what is really driving these accounts?

However, there is a difference between her position and my own and it is this: Sideris suggests that grand narratives of the type used in the New Genesis¹ are seamless with the more obviously religiously resonant accounts proposed by Thomas Berry. But even the category of the New Genesis is itself a gross oversimplification of the diversity of views within the range of stories included under this umbrella. I will use the term New Genesis not as a way of agreeing with her synthesis of such views but as a way of showing up how she is making her case given this presupposition, which, as I have suggested, needs to be recognized as having considerable flaws. In addition and surprisingly perhaps, another broadly similar grand narrative account of the origin and current ecology of the earth—James Lovelock's *Gaia* (1979), which equally provokes a sense of wonder mixed with scientific narrative—is not even mentioned. She also suggests that the New Genesis is a grand narrative of epic proportions akin to Richard Dawkins's fiercely atheistic account of the way the world is, leading decidedly to a *God Delusion*.² Though of course

1. This term, a generic one that Sideris proposes, covers grand narratives such as the Epic of Evolution, The Universe Story, Big History, The New Story, or The Great Story.

2. Sideris cites Dawkins's *Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998) and *The Magic of Reality* (2011) rather than his *The God Delusion* (2006), and I am using the title of this book to illustrate the irony of the point she is making. But the central message in each of these books is similar: namely, an attack on religious belief as being irrational and scientific analysis as disclosing the true nature of reality, from which all reasonable human wonder should spring.

for Sideris, Dawkins is just as deluded as the rest, because all such accounts are turning science into a sacred myth.³

While deeply provocative, there are a number of difficulties in making all aspects of this argument stick. The first is that Sideris distinguishes between innocent and troubling forms of science, though she does not use these terms. Innocent science, such as that issuing from Charles Darwin as well as the more recent research in ecology, seems something she is prepared to accept. However, evolutionary science as a whole has a tendency towards grand narratives that also provoke wonder, as well as the latest variants embedded in the diversity she names the New Genesis. Sideris does not seem to acknowledge adequately this historical legacy of myth making in science and therefore problematizes the newer variants of science as if this is a paradigm shift. But Mary Midgley years before had written about the implicit dangers of mythological forms of evolutionary science appearing in scientism (Midgley 1992, 2002, 2011), even though, ironically perhaps, she seems to adopt Gaia as being the best available option (Midgley 2001). Hence, it might take a more exaggerated form in the New Genesis and Dawkins's New Atheism, but it has always been there.⁴ In addition, Sideris seems to see the geologically based construct of the Anthropocene as being in the scientifically innocent category, but the mythology here is, it seems to me, just as strong, and if anything far more insidious since it appears to be neutral (Deane-Drummond 2015) in a way that is less obvious compared with the stronger and somewhat crass claims of New Atheism.

The second difficulty is the pairing that Sideris makes between the New Genesis accounts and more radical evolutionary biologists, including Dawkins, and over 20 years of scholarship from sociobiologist E.O. Wilson, ranging from his approach to human nature (1978) and his attitude toward the humanities (1998). Her argument is that what all three approaches have in common is too fundamental an attachment to science. But in considering this thesis it is necessary to ask how it is that

3. Sideris recognizes that myths are powerful motivating forces often used in different religious traditions. It is the way that the science is portrayed as a myth without recognizing its mythological status that is more problematic.

4. Michael Hanby (2013) goes even further than Midgley in his denial of any distinction between science and scientism, arguing that science is always irreducibly metaphysical and always includes a theological element such that any claim for neutrality is undeniably false. My own view is that Hanby replaces one type of hegemony—positivistic science—with another—God—and in that respect misconstrues the problem. However, insofar as he seeks to go back to the deepest roots of science, his philosophical argument is worth considering in the context of the case that Sideris tries to make.

so many religious environmental activists do actually find inspiration for their practical and locally based work in the New Genesis accounts, but are staunchly resistant to Dawkins and Wilson. Of course, the pairing of Wilson and Dawkins is also unfortunate in that Wilson has also attempted to be rather more conciliatory, as in his book *Creation* (2006) that Sideris does not even mention. Wilson was still insistent on retaining his scientific and atheistic views, but he at least attempted a conversation. There are from a theological point of view many blunders in this book, but at least he does try to understand the position of religious believers. Dawkins of course makes no such attempt and is positively hostile, while many of those who are religious in the New Genesis camp assume, perhaps naïvely, their position supports a form of evolutionary theism.

But I do suggest that it makes a big difference to the ethical outcomes if we take into account the religious attitudes and approaches of those who are adopting grand narratives. The New Genesis advocates are not, therefore, *inevitably* fatalistic or necessarily adherents of ethical naturalism because if they are Christians, they are also capable of listening to another strand in their shared history: namely, the particular and dramatic entry into the world of a first-century Jew, Jesus Christ. On the other hand, those adopting the form of extreme scientific reductionism advocated by Dawkins are exploring the micro levels of existence, the gene, but turning it into a Grand Myth. Evolutionary scientists in contemporary scientific discourse are much more inclined to move away from Dawkins's thesis as being far too limiting with respect to the actual science of evolution. Hence, it is not that such scientists necessarily open up to the possibility of the transcendent—though some, such as Ursula Goodenough (2000), are prepared to do that—but that evolutionary theory tied to genetics does not reflect accurately enough the four dimensions of evolution through genetics, epigenetics, behavior and symbol making (Jablonka and Lamb 2005). The Selfish Gene Myth, inasmuch as it seems to captivate its audience by being rooted in a particular scientific theory, is broken from *within* the field without necessarily needing humanities scholars to point out the obvious. The extent to which evolutionary biologists will be sensitive to the need for environmental advocacy will be influenced by broader cultural factors in addition to their scientific views of the world. Thus, there is the capacity for containment of such myths so that they do not replace or subvert the sacred religious view that is so worrisome for Sideris. I concede that the danger is there of both a naïve adoption of a combined science by religious advocates and of a naïve forcing of science in which it becomes an implicit sacred myth, but neither is inevitable.

Finally, how might we really find out what is actually the case in making claims about the New Genesis and its impact on environmental activism? Perhaps only by turning to the tools of anthropological and social sciences that offer an analysis of cultural attitudes in individuals and societies, and how far and to what extent their action reflects their particular beliefs. In this sense I am arguing for *more* science rather than less in the analysis of the way science creates its own sacred myths and encourages those who are religious to join the Story. But Sideris also misses any nuanced awareness of the theological issues at stake here. For just as there is a blurring of scientific variation in order to create a single story, so theological diversity is left up to individuals to work out for themselves. In other words, the specifics of different religious traditions and traditions within traditions are toned down in the interests of a unifying account. But Sideris has committed the same error as those she accuses: namely, of paying insufficient attention to diversity.

In spite of these criticisms, scholars should appreciate what Sideris has set out to do: challenge what some accounts of religious environmentalism have taken for granted, thus provoking further and deeper analysis.

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