

Questioning Reductionism in the Sciences

The link below takes you to a brief essay on reductionist methods by Marcelo Gleiser, a physicist at Dartmouth and columnist at NPR's 13.7 page. The piece is titled "More is Different: Nature's Unruly Complexity."

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2013/07/03/198006003/more-is-different-nature-s-unruly-complexity>

Some instructional topics that the article might be used to consider include

1. The tension of the two kingdoms and discussing possible points of intersection.
2. God hidden and God revealed: where God simply does not disclose his activity, where his activity may be "masked," and whether and how we should speculate or perhaps sustain a disposition of reverence toward God's creative and providential work.
3. How Christians—Lutheran and other traditions--and non-Christians discuss and express the relationship between the material and the spiritual. In the Lutheran tradition (and others) this sometimes takes the form of incarnational theology and the word becoming flesh.

The new atheists (Harris, Dawkins, Stenger, et al, and no longer very new) are more and more marginalized now among working scientists, having overstated their views with their own brand of metaphysics. (Consider watching for disclaimers from researchers who intentionally distance themselves from such dogmatism.)

Taking the place may be a more cautious group of thinkers who acknowledge that science cannot establish absolutes, that science operates with its own set of axioms or articles of faith, and that reductionist materialism cannot account for some very important aspects of reality that informed folks of all persuasions recognize. Some of these writers are instead proposing a sort of religious atheism.

A current example is Thomas Nagel, the analytic philosopher famous for his essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" His recent book, *Mind and Cosmos: why the materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false*, has stirred quite a kerfuffle among the true believers in reductionism. He is getting a lot of attention from even more readers who find his articulation of something more than reductionism intriguing if not persuasive. Nagel is a well-established atheist who now proposes a natural teleology at work in reality, an appreciation of which, he suggests, might serve as an alternative to religion.

Another example is Ronald Dworkin, a well-known and respected legal scholar who died in February, 2013, and whose last book was published in August, 2013. He titled it *Religion Without God*. The first chapter was printed in full by The New York Review of Books in April, 2013.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/apr/04/religion-without-god/?pagination=false>

Dworkin's introductory theme seems to be that all or most people, theists or not, share a sense of the transcendent and that the dividing line between theism and atheism is not as pronounced as common discourse makes it out to be. (Sounds a bit like Eccl 3:11.) Dworkin, like Nagel, is an atheist but he, too, is unwilling to take the new atheists' part. As one feature of his opening chapter, he plainly acknowledges that atheism can claim no intellectual or rational high ground to theism: "It produces, at best, a standoff." His candor is refreshing. Those interested can read the book and the reviews it draws.

Meanwhile, Gleiser's essay (linked at the top of this page) may be of interest because he does a nice job of summarizing the problems with scientific reductionism in just a few hundred words. It is accessible for undergraduates

Of related note: A recent CTCR publication happens to deal with the natural knowledge of God. See "The Natural Knowledge of God In Confession & Christian Witness." (A Web search will produce the PDF download.) The first half covers Scripture, the Confessions, and themes in Lutheran theology. The second section tends to make a case for natural theology and apologetics and carves out a useful role for civil religion. It may be a useful resource in this discussion.