

Distinguishing science and metaphysics in evolution and religion

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Even though the 'silent majority' of evolutionary biologists and mainstream religious denominations agree that religious belief and the theory of evolution can be harmoniously combined as different aspects of a single world view, this opinion is not shared by all. Furthermore, even if one accepts the distinction between evidence-based claims and metaphysics, there are often 'boundary disputes', e.g. when it comes to evolutionary biology. Though such disputes can be very useful, we believe that the current polarized view on the interrelationship between science and religion is not only harmful for science (part of society does not recognize the value of evidence-based claims) but also for religion (part of society considers a religious worldview incompatible with science).

The overall aim of the workshop was to establish the case for distinguishing evidence-based claims and metaphysics in evolution and religion. By emphasizing this distinction, and analyzing case studies where the distinction is problematic, we hoped to clarify 'boundary disputes' between science and religion and to identify the real issue(s) in the dispute. A secondary aim was to provide some guidelines for biology teachers to teach evolution to religious students without (necessarily) compromising the religious beliefs of these students. The first step towards this goal was to start a dialogue between theologians, evolutionary biologists, religious scientists from various religions and philosophies of life (including atheism) and philosophers of science in an attempt to take away some common misunderstandings and caricatures that exist back and forth in the various groups. Second, by unravelling the history of the position of evolutionary biology in different religions, we aimed to achieve a common understanding of the interrelationship between religion and science and of the legitimacy of both. Third, we discussed case studies on 'boundary disputes', either when science may claim too much (as in the philosophy of 'scientism') or when religion encroaches on science (as in so-called intelligent design, or creationism). Related to this, we discussed the ways in which evolutionary biology is being taught and or should be taught at secondary schools, including religious ones.

The workshop has resulted in 'The Leiden Declaration on Evolution and Religion', which was signed by no less than 51 of the participants. This declaration has been officially presented at the National Religion Debate in Amsterdam on October 30 (<https://www.gelooftenwetenschap.nl/index.php/opinie/item/939-de-mythe-ten-grave-dragen>). We are now in the process of giving more publicity to this declaration, since it is very rare for a group of this caliber and this range of perspectives (science and humanities, atheists plus leaders from several major religions) to agree on such points.

Leiden Declaration on Evolution and Religion

We, religious and secular biologists, philosophers, historians of science, teachers and theologians, participants of the Lorentz workshop 'Distinguishing Science and Metaphysics in Evolution and Religion' 2018 in Leiden, Netherlands, declare that:

1. The scientific theory of evolution, as it has been developed over more than one and a half centuries, currently provides the best explanation for the diversity, distribution, history and ongoing change of life on earth;
2. This theory provides a unifying framework in biology, essential to understand living organisms, with applications in medicine, computer science, ecology, agriculture et cetera;
3. This theory should be taught at both public and religious secondary schools, in a way that distinguishes it from atheistic or religious interpretations;
4. Scientists, philosophers and religious believers have disagreed on the topic of evolution in the past and still sometimes do today, but these disagreements are not intrinsic to either evolutionary theory or religion per se;
5. We should respect the distinct roles of science and of metaphysics (including religious and secular worldviews): metaphysical claims should not overrule established scientific conclusions; likewise the natural sciences should not be misused to make metaphysical claims;
6. Where friction or disputes occur, attempts to engage in respectful dialogue seem the best way forward;
7. We will seek to address unwarranted claims made in our own discipline about other disciplines and commit ourselves to further respectful exchange.

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