

Conflict or Mutual Enrichment?

Reflections on the relationship of Science and Faith

Alister McGrath

My own story

Very aggressive atheist as a teenager

Science could answer everything!

No need for God – no room for God

Went up to Oxford in 1971 to study Chemistry

Major rethink!

A sense of wonder at nature . . .

Faith is just a fact of life

Faith is not irrational. It just goes beyond the limits of reason.

Terry Eagleton: “We hold many beliefs that have no unimpeachably rational justification, but are nonetheless reasonable to entertain.”

Julia Kristeva: “Whether I belong to a religion, whether I be agnostic or atheist, when I say ‘I believe’, I mean ‘I hold as true’.”

José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955)

Scientific truth is characterized by its precision and the certainty of its predictions. But science achieves these admirable qualities at the cost of remaining on the level of secondary concerns, leaving ultimate and decisive questions untouched.

José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955)

We are given no escape from ultimate questions. In one way or another they are in us, whether we like it or not. Scientific truth is exact, but it is incomplete.

John Donne

'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.

The Anatomy of the World

Sir Peter Medawar

“Only humans find their way by a light that illuminates more than the patch of ground they stand on”.

Peter B. Medawar and Jean Medawar. *The Life Science: Current Ideas of Biology*. London: Wildwood House, 1977, 171.

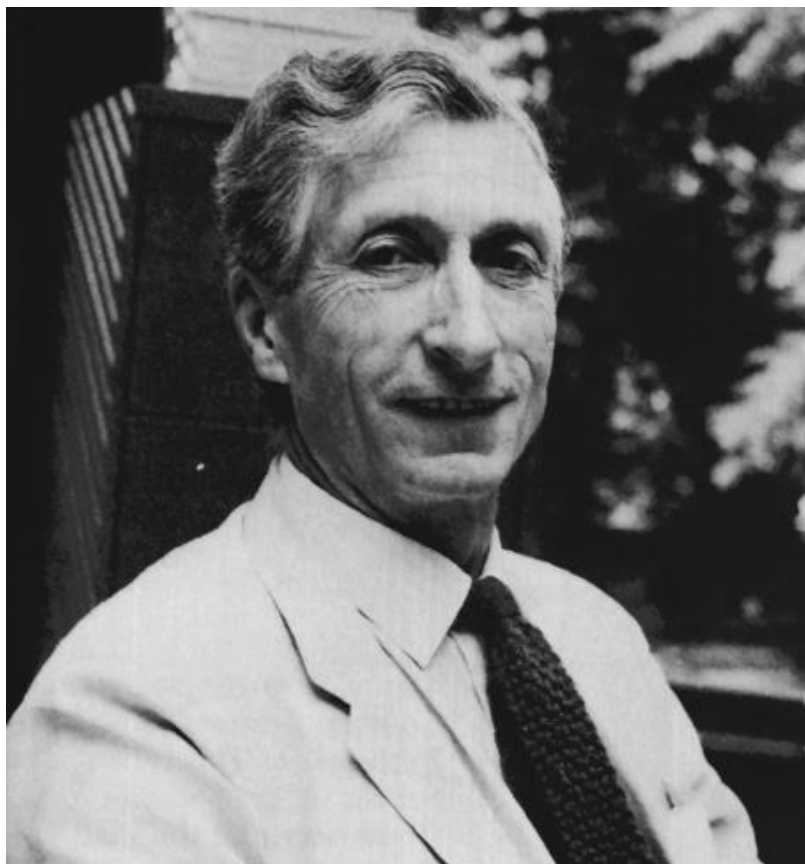
Mary Midgley



“For most important questions in human life, a number of different conceptual tool-boxes always have to be used together.”

Charles Coulson (1910-74)

Oxford's first Professor of Theoretical Chemistry



Charles Coulson (1910-74)

Best known for his *Science and Christian Belief* (1955) – still worth reading

Fundamental coherence of nature and faith

Rejection of idea of “God of the gaps”

Christianity provides an explanatory vision that explains the success of science

Need multiple perspectives

Coulson was a mountaineer in his spare time . . .

UNIVERSITY



OF DURHAM

RIDDELL MEMORIAL LECTURES

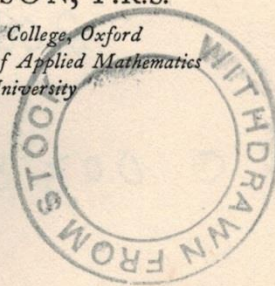
Twenty-fifth Series

CHRISTIANITY
IN AN AGE OF
SCIENCE

BY

C. A. COULSON, F.R.S.

*Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford
and Rouse Ball Professor of Applied Mathematics
in Oxford University*



GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

1953

Ben Nevis



Ben Nevis

Ben Nevis looks different when seen or approached from different directions

“A partial knowledge can be supplemented by sharing with others in the descriptions which they give us.”

“It is only the man who cannot, or will not, look at it from more than one viewpoint who claims an exclusive authority for his own position”.

Mary Midgley



Multiple maps of reality

None good enough on its own

Example: an aquarium

Mary Midgley

We cannot see it as a whole from above, so we peer in at it through a number of small windows ... We can eventually make quite a lot of sense of this habitat if we patiently put together the data from different angles. But if we insist that our own window is the only one worth looking through, we shall not get very far.

Another approach

Different levels of explanation

Reality is complex

Has many levels

Frank H. Rhodes on boiling a kettle

Frank H. T. Rhodes

Now these are different answers . . . But both are true, both are complementary and not competitive. One answer is appropriate within a particular frame of reference, the other within another frame of reference. There is a sense in which each is incomplete without the other.

Against reductionism!

Human beings have multiple levels of existence!
Each level helps us understand the complexity of human nature.

The physicist will tell us that we are made of atoms and molecules.

She's right. But she's *wrong* if she adds the ridiculous word "just".

Against reductionism!

The chemist will tell us about chemical reactions leading to food being converted to energy.

The physiologist will tell us about the functions of the various organs that make up the human body.

These are all true. Yet we transcend all of these levels of description (or perspectives)!

If humanity is defined by anything, it is not by what we find at the bottom of the ladder, but at the top.

Sir Peter Medawar

“questions that science cannot answer and that no conceivable advance of science would empower it to answer”.

Peter Medawar, *The Limits of Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 66.

William Ralph Inge

Rationalism tries to find a place for God in its picture of the world. But God . . . cannot be fitted into a diagram. He is rather the canvas on which the picture is painted, or the frame in which it is set.

William Ralph Inge, *Faith and Its Psychology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910, 197.

The Problem of Meaning

Let's look at a sentence from Albert Einstein's letter of condolence, written to the family of Michele Besso, a lifelong friend of Einstein who died in March 1955:

“Now he has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. For believing physicists like us know that the distinction between past, present and future has only the meaning of a persistent illusion.”

The Problem of Meaning

For most people the *subjective* distinction between past, present and future is real, and matters profoundly.

Physics says one thing, psychology something very different.

Yes, human life is incredibly brief when seen against the backdrop of cosmic time. But it's the only life we've got.

The Problem of Meaning

Einstein's analysis makes clear, all too often science treats us as objects rather than as subjects, so that its descriptions of our situation are not descriptions of what we actually feel.

That's why we need a greater narrative which can weave together fact and meaning. That's why we seek for a richer vision of reality, which engages both the cognitive and existential dimensions of life.

Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970)

Carnap got to know Einstein at Princeton, and they discussed “the Now”.

“The problem of “Now” worried Einstein seriously. He explained that the experience of the “Now” means something special for men, something different from the past and the future, but that this important difference does not and cannot occur within physics.”

Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970)

“Einstein thought that these scientific descriptions cannot possibly satisfy our human needs; that there is something essential about the “Now” which is just outside of the realm of science.”

Concluding

Science and faith can enrich each other

Both offer part of a bigger picture

C. S. Lewis:

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.”