How Special Are We? The Perspectives of Traditional and Naturalistic Theism

Abstract

The paper compares statements made within classical (traditional) and naturalistic theism relating to the special character of human beings. The aim is to establish the degree to which the views represented in the traditional Christian theism were modified in that respect by a version of scientifically-informed theism.

Naturalistic theism attempts to reconcile Christian theism with the scientific view of the world. Among the proponents of this approach one finds scientists-theologians, professional theologians and philosophers who aim at harmoniously combining religious and scientific views by reformulating the traditional Christian doctrine in many respects. The ontological and epistemological differences between the classical Christian theism (characterised by supernaturalism and interventionism) and the basic assumptions of science (i.e. methodological and ontological naturalism) result in important differences with regard to the ideas on the origin and nature of human species between the classical and naturalistic theisms.

According to the traditional view, the special character of humans was expressed in the following concepts: 1) the creation of humans by distinct act of God that differentiate His creation of our species from the creation of other species; 2) a dualistic vision of humans as consisting of material body and immaterial soul making humans rational and free agents and distinguishing them from other creatures; 3) the view that humans, unlike other species, are created in the image of God; 4) special dignity of humans not present in other species; 5) domination of humans over other creatures as intended by God.

From the naturalistic point of view, which is now accepted in science, there are no supernatural factors (for example God, angels, daemons or immaterial souls) acting in nature. Moreover, all aspects of human behavior can be fully explained in socio-biological-psychological terms. According to Neo-Darwinism, our species is an effect of non-teleological natural process of evolution. One consequence of this approach is that the boundaries between species seem to be blurred. In order to harmoniously combine science and religion, naturalistic theists adapt the following concepts: 1) creation of humans by general non-interventionist action of God that does not differentiate His creation of our species from the creation of other species; 2) a monistic vision of human beings (usually in the form of dual-aspect monism); 3) the view that all species as created in the image of God; 4) an inherent dignity characterizing also other species; 5) domination of humans over other creatures as illegitimate and even threatening the life on Earth. In this way, naturalistic theism revises the anthropocentric and supernatural elements of the traditional Christian theism and endorses ecological and anti-anthropocentric currents in contemporary philosophy and theology.