

# Can Science Explain Away God?

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David Glass

Christians in Science, Ireland

The Hub, Belfast

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# Introduction

- Based on work carried out on the project:  
'Explaining and Explaining Away'
- Carried out at Ulster University with Dr Mark McCartney
- Funded by the John Templeton Foundation

# Overview

- Science and God – a necessary conflict?
- Explaining Away and Ockham's Razor
- When does explaining away occur?
- Four ways to relate God and science
- Recent attempts to explain away God

# Science and God

– a necessary conflict?

Sam Harris, *‘Letter to a Christian Nation’*

“The truth, however, is that the conflict between religion and science is unavoidable. The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma; the maintenance of religious dogma always comes at the expense of science.”

# Science and God

– a necessary conflict?

Christian responses:

- No necessary conflict
- Science doesn't disprove God
- Science and God are compatible
- Founders of science believed in God
- History of science not one of ongoing conflict

But ...

Two beliefs can be compatible and yet still in competition with each other.

# Explaining Away

- Suppose your car won't start

Initial  
Hypothesis

Alternative  
Hypothesis



# Explaining Away and Ockham's Razor

- William of Ockham (c. 1287 – 1347)

“Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity”

“It is futile to do with more things that which can be done with fewer”

Explaining Away Version

There is no need for two explanations when one will do.



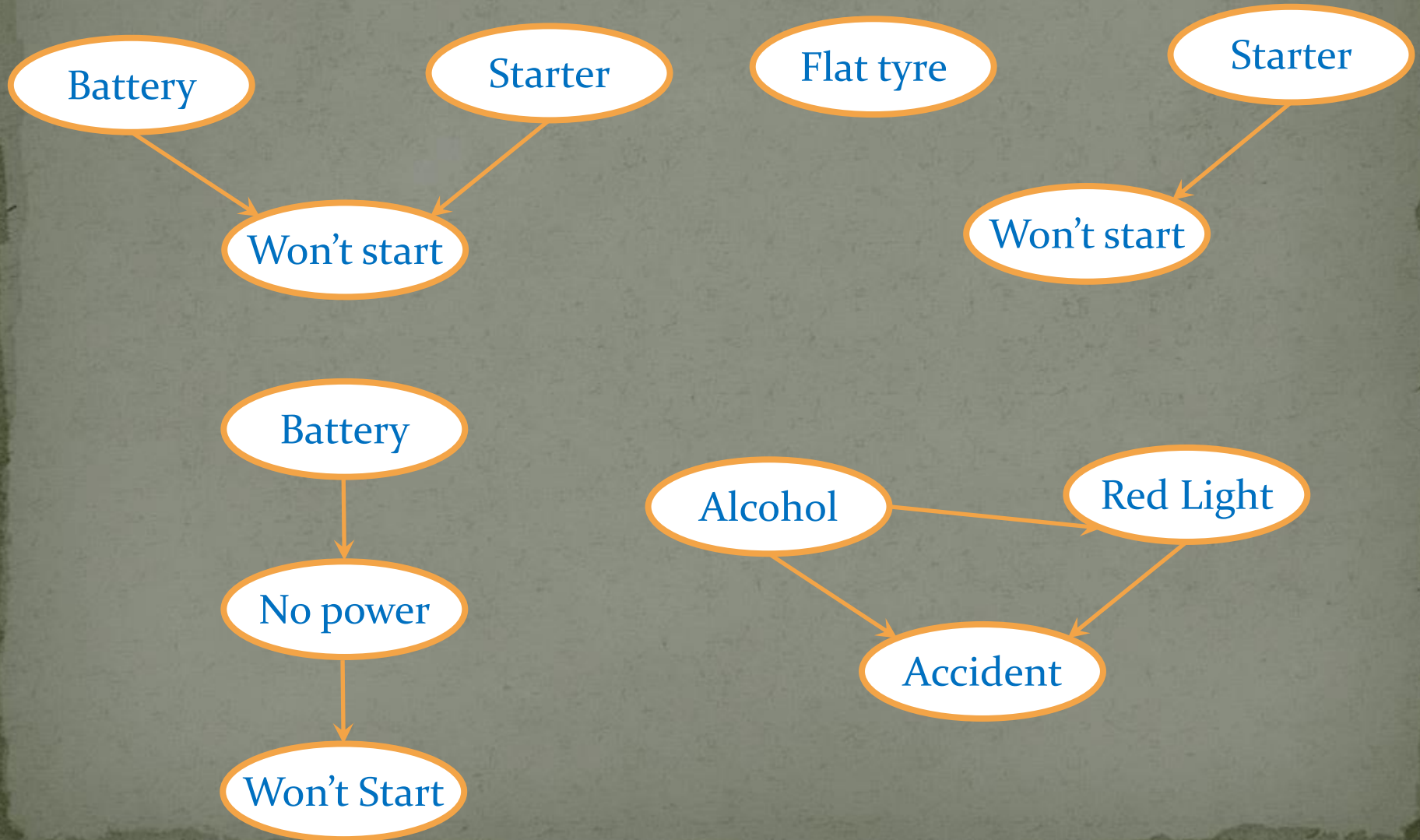
# Can Science Explain Away God?

“Over the past few hundred years, the progress of science has worked to strip away God's roles in the world. He isn't needed to keep things moving, or to develop the complexity of living creatures, or to account for the existence of the universe ... Two thousand years ago, it was perfectly reasonable to invoke God as an explanation for natural phenomena; now, we can do much better.”

Sean Carroll, ‘Does the Universe need God?’



# When Does Explaining Away Occur?



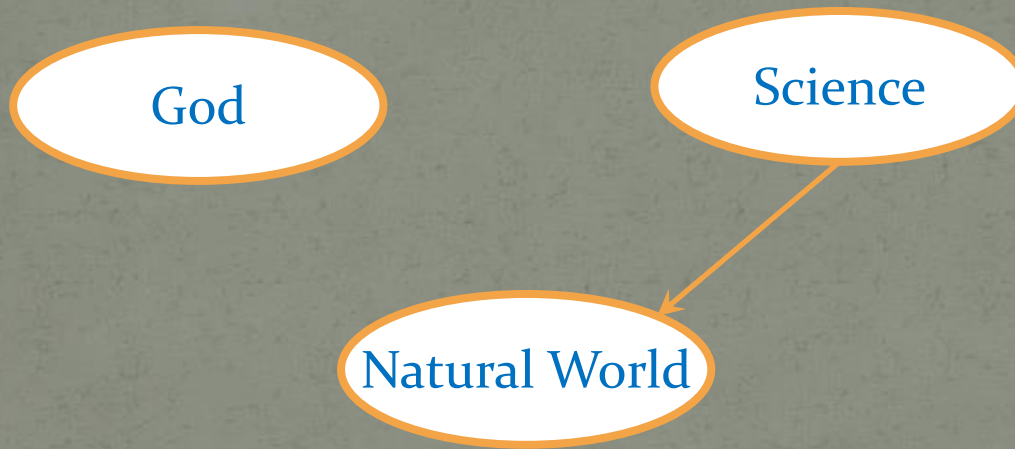
# When Does Explaining Away Occur?

Some questions to ask:

- Are they irrelevant to each other?
- Are they compatible?
- How well does the alternative explain the evidence?
- Is the alternative known to be true?
- Does the alternative depend on the initial hypothesis?

# Four Ways to Relate God and Science

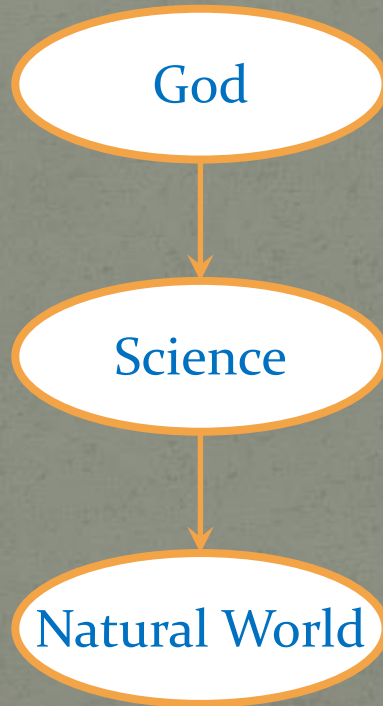
- Independent



No explaining away, but it comes at a high price for theist.

# Four Ways to Relate God and Science

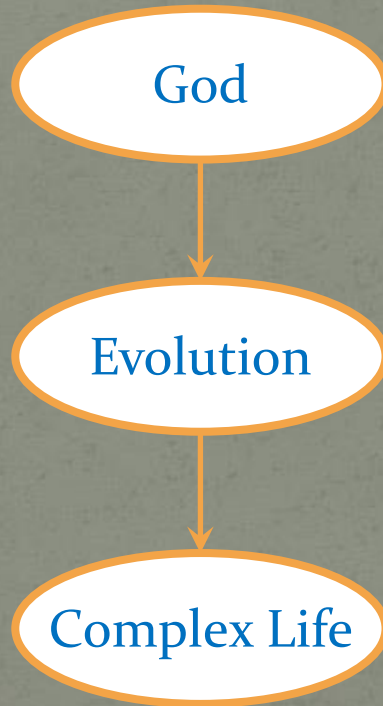
- God as Cause of Science



No explaining away, but what difference does God make?

# Four Ways to Relate God and Science

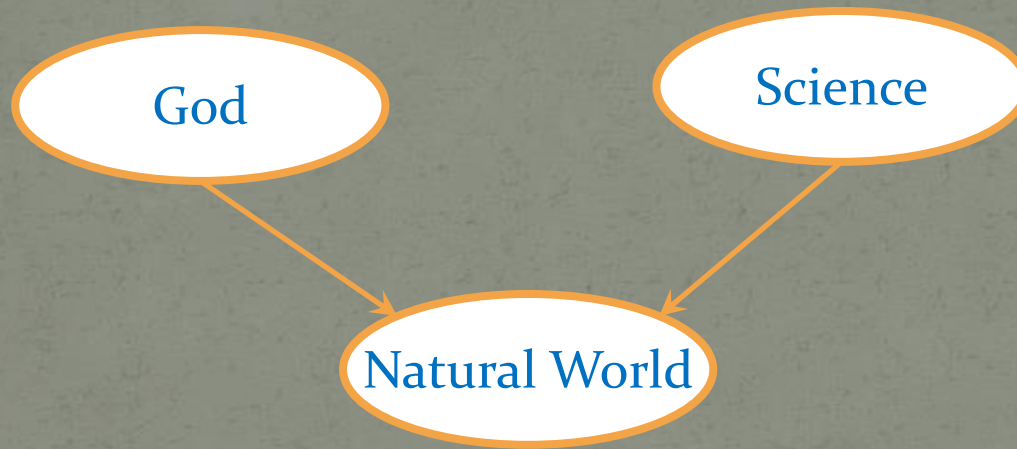
- God as Cause of Science



What difference does God make? Is complex life more likely if God exists?

# Four Ways to Relate God and Science

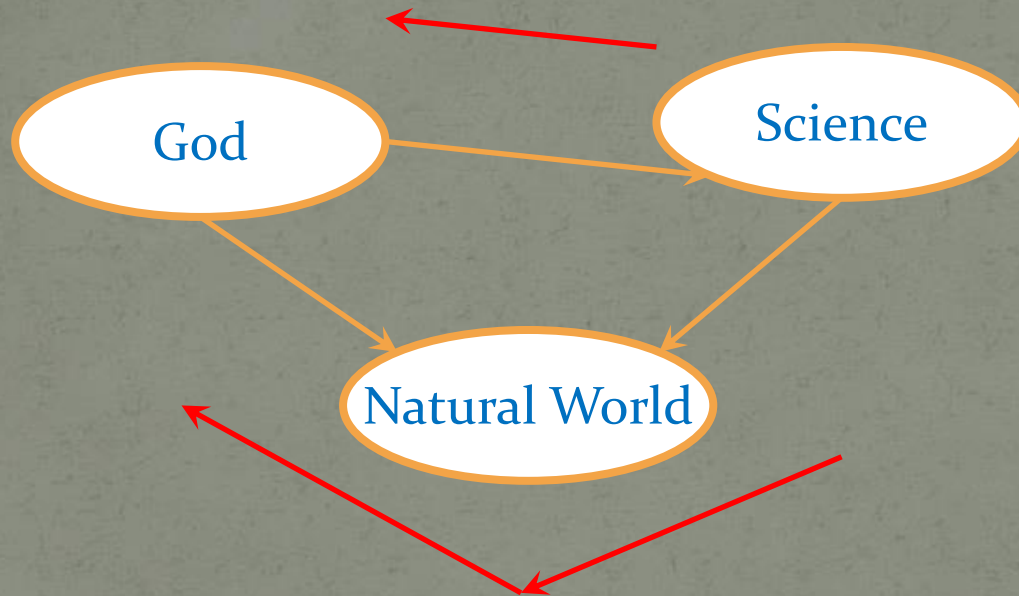
- Indirect Conflict



This model offers most scope for explaining away.

# Four Ways to Relate God and Science

- Integration



Can't rule out explaining away in principle, but plenty of scope for avoiding it.

# Four Ways to Relate God and Science

	Good Model ?	Avoids Explaining Away?
Independence	No	Definitely
God Causes Science	Limitations	Definitely
Indirect Conflict	No	Weak
Integration	Yes	Reasonable



# New Atheism and Explaining Away

Richard Dawkins, *'The God Delusion'*

“Historically, religion aspired to explain our own existence and the nature of the universe in which we find ourselves. In this role it is now completely superseded by science.”

1. Science explains
2. Ockham's razor
3. Therefore, science explains away God

Very weak – assumes indirect conflict model

Sean Carroll:

## Does the Universe need God?

In response to theistic appeals to the big bang and fine-tuning:

1. Theism is treated like a *rival scientific* theory.  
“God is essentially never invoked in scientific discussions.”  
“God is not described in equations”
2. Appeals to the *possibility* of a) cosmologies avoiding a beginning and b) a multiverse.

# From Science to Naturalism

Philosophers Paul Draper and Gregory Dawes

1. Theism doesn't guarantee that explanations will be natural.
2. Naturalism does guarantee they will be natural.
3. The success of natural explanations is more to be expected if naturalism is true than if theism is true.
4. Therefore, the success of natural explanations is evidence for naturalism.

# From Science to Naturalism

1. Theism doesn't guarantee that explanations will be natural.

Maybe, but it does give us good reason to expect natural explanations to be successful.

2. Naturalism does guarantee that explanations will be natural.

True, but

- a) Why expect the universe to be governed by laws?
- b) Why think that we would be able to discover them?

# From Science to Naturalism

Neither Draper nor Dawes rule out the possibility of theism.

But ... for theism to be successful there would have to be some feature of the natural world where science would break down.

Seems to assume something like the indirect conflict model.

# Conclusion

- Challenge for theists: mere compatibility is inadequate
- Challenge for atheists: need to grasp what is required to make explaining away arguments plausible
- Can't move from 'science explains' to 'science explains away'
- Appealing to *possible* scientific explanations – e.g. multiverses – isn't much help.

Project website: [scm.ulster.ac.uk/explainingaway/](http://scm.ulster.ac.uk/explainingaway/)

See also: [saintsandsceptics.org](http://saintsandsceptics.org)