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Avery Dulles and the Recovery of Teleology

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10–13 minutes

Avery Cardinal Dulles was a lean man who wrote lean prose. That he was never prolix makes it all the more remarkable that he was so prolific. Of the millions of words he published in his long, productive career, perhaps the most quoted are the handful that make up a certain passage from *A Testimonial to Grace*, his autobiography. In articles about him during his lifetime and now in the obituaries that began to appear only hours after his death, we are always reading about that bleary February day when, as an undergraduate at Harvard, he took a walk along the Charles River. He noticed the early buds on a tree and had an epiphany. It led him from atheism to theism and, in short order, Catholicism.

That, typically, is the import of the story when it is set as a quote, a sort of verbal photograph, somewhere in the middle of one of those engrossing pieces about the scion of Washington aristocracy and how he ended up a prince of the Church of Rome. We understand immediately the spiritual context in which Dulles situated this anecdote from his youth, but there is also an intellectual context, which requires some explication. Dulles' own language at that point is, though spare enough, a bit lyrical, and the image (young man from storybook background embarks on coming-of-age adventure that holds great surprises) is romantic. It's hard to hear

the words beneath the music. In a lecture he delivered toward the end of his life, Dulles rephrased the idea in terms that, being less picturesque, actually do more justice to the idea as idea (as opposed to biographical datum):

The behavior of living organisms cannot be explained without taking into account their striving for life and growth. Plants, by reaching out for sunlight and nourishment, betray an intrinsic aspiration to live and grow. This internal finality makes them capable of success and failure in ways that stones and minerals are not. Because of the ontological gap that separates the living from the nonliving, the emergence of life cannot be accounted for on the basis of purely mechanical principles. In tune with this school of thought, the English mathematical physicist John Polkinghorne holds that Darwinism is incapable of explaining why multicellular plants and animals arise when single-cellular organisms seem to cope with the environment quite successfully. There must be in the universe a thrust toward higher and more-complex forms. . . . Materialistic Darwinism is incapable of explaining why the universe gives rise to subjectivity, feeling, and striving.

The emergence of life is unintelligible unless it is assumed to be deeply purpose driven. In characteristic fashion, Dulles presented this not as his own original thought but rather as the precis of one of three main Christian perspectives on evolution, although it is the perspective he said he himself inclined toward. From his autobiography we know that his appreciation for the fact of biological life, of *bios*, preceded (logically, anyway, if not necessarily chronologically) his appreciation for the fact of spiritual life, of which he found to flourish most truly in the environment that is the Catholic Church.

But to say all that in one sentence is to risk understanding him too quickly. First of all, let's stop and pause with him before the fact of mere

bios . Does its theological aspect begin to come into focus for you? If not, think again. Consider Israel. The literal meaning of *Israel* in Hebrew is usually translated as “a man who strives with God,” in accordance with the account in Genesis 32, although both etymology and the Bible story would support “a man who strives *after* God,” which speaks even more directly to the intuition that God is what life in its manifold expressions is hardwired to strive after, or toward. Or, following the cue that Dulles provides elsewhere in the lecture quoted above, read Bergson, Teilhard, and Polanyi, who look at biological reality from various angles and in unusual frequencies of light.

“God is love, as St. John wrote so succinctly and as Christians have never tired of reminding themselves and the world. But what about life? Is God also that? To answer this question we would have to define *God* and then *life* , and such a monumental task I will not presume to undertake here. For my present purpose it is enough to quote St. John quoting Jesus: “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

A friend, a liberal nun for whom the good news that God is love was the air she breathed and the water she drank, once told me she was shaken when another Visitation sister said to her in passing that the Christian promise has two pillars, not one, and that they are love, of course, and . . . life. Explaining to me that she recognized the truth of that statement once it had been formulated for her so starkly, she went on to marvel that it had taken her so long. She was in her fifties. Now she too had had an epiphany about the fact of mere life (and, it may be, of her own mortality—she died of cancer less than two years later).

In her case, the context for the epiphany, or at least for her telling me about it, was a cluster of conversations we had recently had about abortion. More callow than my age (early thirties) warranted, I was

troubled to find myself troubled by the thought of unborn children being killed. I was even, I thought, you know, against it. Immersed in the prejudices of the secular university I had been affiliated with so much of my adult life, I began to worry that I was losing my mental stability. What would my friends think? Abortion was not high on Sr. Mary's list of injustices that as a Christian she felt called to confront, but she listened to me sympathetically and encouraged me to follow through on my instinct to take up this cause that was impressing itself on my own conscience.

The rough truth emerging from our friendly little dialogue was that for liberal Christians the shibboleth is *love* and that for conservative Christians it's *life* — a matter not of clashing values but of different and complementary emphases. Avery Dulles' particular attraction to the life pillar of his Christian faith directed his mind along paths that, for the most part, believers who are anxious to avoid alignment with what they regard as the losing side in a culture war fear to follow. In agreement with the magisterium of the Catholic Church, Dulles had no quarrel with evolution per se. The problem, which he patiently expounded, is what you mean by it. Strictly interpreted, it does not entail materialism. Nor is it incompatible with the teleology that informs his view of the life sciences. Atheists who exploit, or are exploited by, the popular misunderstanding about God and evolution, that they are mutually exclusive propositions, report to us that they have chosen one side in the matter and that so have we if we believe in God, the difference being that they, as they believe, have chosen for truth and we for error.

It's a strong position that enables others to sound moderate when they argue instead that the two realms should coexist on either side of a scrupulously guarded iron curtain. But that's an arrangement that can't be sustained either, unless you consistently halt your train of thought as soon as you suspect it's on course to cross and crisscross the border

between MIT and the Angelicum. The beauty and symmetry found in nature do not by themselves transport us to faith, it is true. They only direct us to it, although out of stubbornness we might, like a dog, refuse to avert our gaze from the hand to what the hand is pointing to. On the other side of the border, argue, if you wish, that the varieties of religious experience are dispositive of nothing except the robust nature of human psychology. But you would have to be limited by a sadly stunted imagination not to take providence as you experience it in your personal life and notice in it that something that just begs to be given the chance to try out for the position of organizing principle of life in general, of life in its grand sweep and in its minute intricacy. Call it the biosphere, the web of life you have been observing all these years here on God's green earth.

Let's return to Cardinal Dulles' lecture on evolution. During the question-and-answer period afterward, a high-school science teacher stood up and asked His Eminence if he thought that, in the classroom, intelligent design and theories of evolution that had explicit theological content ought to be taught alongside Darwinism. Dulles' answer was, in a word, yes. He thought that the prevailing form of the science curriculum fails to maintain neutrality between theism and atheism. It subtly favors the latter, and to redress the imbalance a measure of theology needs to be integrated into discussions not only of biology but of all the natural sciences.

After a few more questions from the audience, the moderator intervened to make his concluding remarks and thank the cardinal. We stood and applauded. As the crowd began to file out of the auditorium, I asked the high-school teacher, who was sitting near me, what he thought of Dulles' response to his good question. His whole demeanor bristled with indignation as he said something about laboratories, experiments, the scientific method. I said something about the Big Bang. He shot back

that that was physics, not biology. I replied that it was cosmology, to be more precise, and that anyway my point was that perhaps his disagreement with the august theologian was not really about science but about the philosophy of science. His parting words were that if he did anything like what Dulles recommended he'd be fired in an instant. It was a non sequitur in terms of the logical argument we were proving so lame in attempting to play out there on Fordham's Rose Hill campus that rainy April evening a year and a half ago. In terms of the emotional argument that was playing us, however, the comment made some sense. You could hear in it the familiar voice of cognitive dissonance, of being caught, as if in a vise, between two conflicting demands—plainspoken reason on one side and, on the other, powerful social pressure to disavow it.

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