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## **“Natural Selection” of Ideas. How Arguments in the Debate on the Origin of Life and the Universe Are Framed**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to present how the participants in a debate between a representative of new atheism (and evolutionism) and a representative of Christianity frame their arguments by the metaphor of struggle for survival. In order to do so a debate *Has Science Buried God?* has been analysed. It is shown that arguments are thought to compete for the status of “the truth” in the eyes of the general public, in a way that “better” ones push out “worse” ones, especially with a view to how scientific discoveries make explanations considered valid in the past no longer valid.

*Keywords:* cognitive pragmatics, frames, (im)politeness.

### **1. Introduction**

When European Space Agency’s Rosetta landed its Philae probe on a comet on 12th November 2014, Jean-Jacques Dordain, ESA’s Director General, said: “With Rosetta we are opening a door to the origin of planet Earth and fostering a better understanding of our future” (European Space Agency 2014). The Internet was quick to share his enthusiasm, with images of the landing posted by the users of social media, and, inevitably, the creation of memes. One such meme, published by a domain entitled Godless Utopia, featured a picture of a comet flying over a silhouette of the Earth, with a caption that said “Ancient man believed comets were God riding across the sky. Modern man rides comets. We don’t need myths to explain them anymore.” The sentiments expressed in these two statements seem to perfectly summarise the contemporary debate on the origin of the universe, and the existence of God.

The aim of this paper is to show that the metaphor of struggle/competition frames the way arguments are raised and organised in a debate between Richard Dawkins and John Lennox, entitled

*Has Science Buried God?* It appears that the frame of natural selection has also permeated thinking about ideas and arguments. In the case of the atheist/religious debate, it seems that, at least for the atheists, “God” as an explanation of the universe was a valid one where and when the science was lacking. Now that better (“fitter”) explanations are available (e.g. evolution as the explanation for the multitude of life forms on Earth), the “God explanation” has become superfluous. There is a point to such logic – scientific explanation of the world is more fitting the scientific-oriented minds of contemporary Westerners (for the possibility of a less binary perspective see e.g. Nisbett 2003). Within the frame of struggle and the survival of the fittest, ideas/arguments/explanations are also expected to undergo evolution, and be subject to natural selection. This can be seen, for example, in how the proposal of what is seen as a better(-fitted) explanation for the existence of the universe is expected to cause the worse(-fitted) explanation to become obsolete. So the argument not just between evolutionists and creationists, but rather between atheists and the religious, often revolves around whether science provides a good enough explanation to make the idea of God obsolete.

This paper is divided into a number of subsections; first, related work and methodology are recounted, then the analysis is reported on, this is followed by the discussion of the results and suggestions for further research.

## 2. Methodology

Debate is a highly structured discourse type. There are two participants, a moderator who asks questions and an audience. Each participant gets a chance to answer the question, and usually certain amount of time is allocated for the rebuttal of the opponent’s arguments. In order to provide a more detailed description, features of debate as an activity type (Levinson 1979) are presented with reference to Thomas’ classification (Thomas 1995: 190–192).

In the debate in question, the goal of the participants, rather than to bring the opponent to one’s point of view, appears to be to present one’s views in front of an audience, to perhaps persuade the audience members, and above all to present one’s position as superior – more reasonable, more scientifically sound, and perhaps, as is argued in this paper, “fitter.” As to allowable contributions – impoliteness strategy *seek disagreement / avoid agreement* (Culpeper 1996: 357; Bousfield 2008: 108) is inherent to this discourse type. Other impoliteness strategies, however, such as *use taboo language, threaten/frighten* (Culpeper 1996: 358) appear to be disallowed. Gricean Maxims are adhered to, with the exception of strategic flouting of maxims of relevance and quantity (Grice 1975), when participants rather than admit they do not have a good counterargument, offer a good argument that is vaguely relevant to the issue at hand (for details see Górska & Drogosz forthcoming). As to Leech’s Politeness Principle, only the Agreement Maxim (Leech 1983: 32) appears to be flouted, again, a feature essential to the discourse type at hand. Finally, opponents in a debate routinely threaten each other’s face when they attack each other’s positions. Positive face is at risk when the opponent implies, or in some cases states, that the other’s position is unreasonable, and negative face is threatened metaphorically when the other’s freedom to believe what they like is challenged, and literally in the case of interruptions.

The key concept to the present analysis is the frame of struggle for survival. Within this frame, ideas compete with each other for preservation, within the evolutionary struggle for survival, with the weakest ideas/arguments being forced out by stronger ones. This is evident in the way the participants

of the debate in question formulate their arguments. Frames become apparent in the use of “[f]rame-evoking words and phrases, frame-evoking references and allusions, register markers (especially with respect to lexical choice and syntax), discursive style, ... , and so on” (Morgan 1997: 276).

### 3. The analysis

The material analysed in the present paper is a debate between Richard Dawkins, a representative of evolutionism and atheism, and John Lennox, a philosopher of science and a Christian. There is a moderator and an audience present. The debate took place and was recorded in Oxford Museum of Natural History, and is available online (Fixed Point Foundation 2009). This debate is atypical among this type of debates in that the opponents are both scientists, and in that they both denounce creationism (for an overview and history of the evolutionist/creationist debate see Barczewska 2017: 12–33). The analysis has been carried out on audio-video recording of the debate as well as the transcript. Where necessary, extralinguistic information has been taken into account. The main arguments presented by the debaters have been identified and analysed. In the following sections four such examples are presented and discussed in detail. These examples are taken from a fragment that starts 9 minutes into the debate and spans over 11 minutes. Such a choice of the sample to present in this paper has been made for the sake of space – the arguments are often lengthy and require context, so for the clarity of presentation, four arguments revolving around the same topic and following one another almost immediately have been chosen. They are two argument-counterargument pairs. Also, for the sake of clarity, the extralinguistic information in the examples quoted has been limited to a minimum (*e.g.* a dot in brackets indicates a pause shorter than a second, a number in brackets indicates the number of seconds in a pause, an underlined section has been pronounced emphatically).

#### 3.1. Argument 1: “Illusion of design”

The question at hand at this point in the debate is whether the universe is designed or not. Lennox claims that the complexity of the universe points to the existence of a creator – if the universe is “rationally intelligible,” there must be “a mind behind it” (this is a quote from John Lennox elsewhere in the debate). Dawkins counters with the argument that the universe may seem designed without it being designed – as, in his opinion – was the case with the origin and development of the natural world.

##### Example 1

Lennox: [...] now how do you account for the rational intelligibility of the universe.

Dawkins: Well John, you said that I believe that the universe is a freak accident which is the opposite of what you believe uh... for many years, for many centuries indeed it seemed perfectly obvious that it couldn't possibly be a freak accident because you really had to look at living creatures the sort of magnificent diversity we see this in this- in this museum and **everything looks designed** so it was clearly preposterous to suggest that it was due to any kind of freak accident hhh **Darwin came along and showed that it's not actually a freak accident but nor is it designed**. There's- There's a third way, which in the case of biology is evolution by natural selection, which produces a close imitation of something that is designed. it's not designed. we know that now. we understand how it happened, erm, but it looks very designed (.) Now the cosmos hasn't yet had its Darwin we don't yet know, how the laws of physics came into existence, how

the physical constants came into existence, and so we can still say is it a freak accident or was it designed. **The analogy with biology might discourage us from being too confident that it's designed because we had our fingers burned before** the nineteenth century with the thing that- that biology which looks so much more obviously designed than we- we got our fingers burned there. now in the case of the cosmos, freak accident or design the point that I've made over and over again is that **even if we don't understand how it came about (2.0) it's not helpful, to postulate a creator**. Because a creator is the very kind of thing that needs an explanation. [HSBG: 9:00–10:59]

The actual expressions used by Dawkins to make this argument have been printed in bold in Example 1 above. Here they are quoted for clarity:

- “everything looks designed”;
- “Darwin came along and showed that it's not actually a freak accident but nor is it designed”;
- “The analogy with biology might discourage us from being too confident that it's designed because we had our fingers burned before”;
- “even if we don't understand how it came about it's not helpful, to postulate a creator.”

So the argument is constructed as follows: design had been a valid explanation before Darwin, Darwin has shown that the design was just an illusion, therefore, where we seem to see design, we should suspect just an illusion of design, creator is no longer a valid explanation. As has been stated before, often in the debates rather than make their response relevant in terms of content, debaters choose to counter with an argument that is strong, but only loosely relevant to the argument it is supposed to counter. This is true in the case of Example 2 in the next section.

### 3.2. Counterargument 1: “Not a freak accident”

In Example 2 Lennox points to the “phenomenal precision” with which the laws of physics operate, and circles back to his argument that this precision points to the existence of a creator – “a mind behind it.”

Example 2

Lennox: [...], and you said somewhere that it's terribly terribly tempting to believe that that has been design but that Darwin has shown us that's this design is an illusion, but I've been very interested in the kind of thing that Simon Conway Morris has been saying recently that if you take the evolutionary pathways, they're navigating through an informational hyperspace with **phenomenal precision** and therefore there is the impression of design at that level, i mean **if this mechanism that you talk about which doesn't apply for the origin of life at all** but let's leave that aside **if it is so phenomenally clever then it itself is giving evidence that there's a mind behind it**.

Dawkins: (.) **The whole point of Darwinian natural selection is that it works without design, without foresight without guidance** [HSBG 14:47–16:02]

In Example 2 Lennox actually makes two points that are designed to weaken Dawkins' argument – to point to the fact the latter's argument is not actually “stronger”:

1. The cosmos is too precise to be an accident, therefore, “freak accident” is not a valid explanation of its existence.
2. The mechanisms discussed by Darwin do not account for the origin of life.

So, we can see two levels of argumentation – one that refers to the content of what has been said by the opponent, and second, a meta-argument, referring to whether the opponent’s argument was valid at all. So the opponent’s point is not stronger, because it on the one hand does not provide an explanation for the issue at hand (the origin of life), nor does it disprove the possibility of the existence of a creator. This is met with a rejection and a rephrasing of the previously made point on the part of Dawkins (the underlined phrases were pronounced with emphasis).

### 3.3. Argument 2: “Why bother?”

In this argument–counterargument pair the discussion revolves around whether the process of natural selection is guided or not. The first line in Example 3 is the last sentence of Dawkins’ turn the beginning of which was the last line of Example 2 – after developing his argument and supporting it with examples and references to other scholars, he repeats his main point – natural selection is not guided. When Lennox seems to be impervious to his argumentation, Dawkins lets out an exasperated “no!” followed by: “why bother when you have a perfectly good explanation that doesn’t involve guidance.”

Example 3

Dawkins: [...] It’s not it’s not caused, it’s not guided, there’s no need it to be guided, but the whole point is that it works without guidance

Lennox: but it could be guided, or do you completely shut that out

Dawkins: no! I mean why bother when you have a perfectly good explanation that doesn’t involve guidance [HSBG 17:00–17:28]

The “why bother” argument works only within a frame where ideas/explanations compete for “life” in our minds, thus when we have a “perfectly good explanation” we simply ignore any other possible explanations, because they have lost the competition for our attention. It is worth noting that once again, Dawkins returns to a previously stated argument about the redundancy of a creator to the explanation of the origins of life and the universe.

### 3.4. Counterargument 2: “God and science are not opposing explanations”

Finally, in the last example, the main weight of argumentation has been shifted, but only very slightly. Now the question is whether an agent is necessary for the explanation of the issues at hand. Lennox makes a point about science accounting for the laws of nature at the level of the process or the mechanism, while God exists at the level of agent. Thus, they are not in opposition with each other, as they exist on different plains of thinking. This argument is wholeheartedly and completely rejected by Dawkins.

Example 4

Lennox: No. And this is a very important point because i **detect in many of your writings that you oppose God vs. science as explanations.** When Newton discovered the law of gravity he didn’t say marvellous, now I can know how it works i don’t need God. .hh God is an explicator at the level of an agent not a mechanism, so that we can study mechanisms and biology, the more suffix- suss- sophisticated they are the more that might well point towards an agent. **You don’t argue away the existence of an agent by showing that there is a mechanism. And I don’t quite understand how you manage to get if i understand you right God and science as alternative explanations**

Dawkins: Well **I think you do get rid of- of an agent if the agent is superfluous to the explanation.** That when- when you're erm studying something that's happening there may well be an agent and it may be if you're watching er a car driving along and avoiding obstacles and turning left and turning right you say there is an agent controlling that car and certainly there is, there is a driver. But if- if you don't need an agent, to explain what's going on, and we don't in the case of biology we don't in the case of gravity. Of course I accept that Newton was a theist, he lived in the seventeenth century and everybody was, but erm **you don't need an agent and agent is a superfluous explanation it's a gratuitous grafting on of something that you don't need** [HSBG 18:57–20:26]

For the sake of clarity, the elements of the argument made by Lennox are as follows:

- “I detect in many of your writings that you oppose God vs. science as explanations”;
- “You don’t argue away the existence of an agent by showing that there is a mechanism”;
- “And I don’t quite understand how you manage to get, if I understand you right, God and science as alternative explanations.”

Thus, the thrust of the argument is that scientific explanations of known phenomena do not get rid of or disprove the possibility of the existence of God. This shift in focus, however, does not challenge the “struggle for survival” frame – the argument is not that both explanations are equally valid, but rather, that while science explains certain phenomena at the level of mechanism, God provides an explanation at the level of the agent. Still, such a shift is completely rejected by Dawkins, who simply rephrases his arguments about an agent being superfluous to the explanation of the origin of life and the universe.

#### 4. Discussion

Debates such as the one under analysis are instances of highly structured conflictive discourse. Previous research suggests that they are framed by the metaphor of war, where the attack is realised by means of *challenge* impoliteness strategy (Bousfield 2008) and the defence by means of the strategy *deflect* (Górska & Drogozsz forthcoming). This productivity of *challenge* as an impoliteness strategy and the surprising proclivity of the participants to deflect brings to the fore the following question: what is it that is being challenged? A challenge, by definition, requires an impoliteness trigger (Jay 1992), however, Górska and Drogozsz (forthcoming) have found that the majority of challenges in the debates in question occur without a trigger. This in turn would suggest that it is the mere standpoint of the opponent that the debaters find offensive. It would appear that the most fundamental conflict between evolutionists and creationists lies in the resistance of the former to apply the evolution frame to the explanations. Alternatively, both sides of the conflict follow the scheme of “the less fitted explanation should be done away with,” only disagreeing as to what that better fitted explanation is. This is apparent in how arguments in many such debates are reducible to whether it is or is not possible to explain the world without reference to God.

In the arguments found in the sample, some of which have been presented in section 3, it has been apparent that the struggle metaphor highlights the antagonistic view of life on the one hand, and is never challenged in the debates on the other. The battle seems to be for “whose explanation is the fittest,” and the frame of “natural selection” underlies the debates – the scientific explanation is expected to “force out” the “God explanation.”

## 5. Future work

Certainly more research needs to be done to see the degree to which the struggle for survival frame permeates our thinking within the origin of life and the universe debate. The debate discussed in this paper is specific in that two scientists rather than a scientist and a theologian are involved. The hypothesis put forward in this paper would certainly benefit from testing against other participants in other debates. The general public also seems to be involved in the debate – in the form of comments below videos documenting the debates, but also blogs and memes commenting on current issues connected to the ongoing conflict between believers and non-believers. The material is abundant, the only restriction is time.

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