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Evolutionary Theory And Continuous Creation

by Keith B. Miller

Introduction

Simply stated, my position is that there is no inherent conflict between evolutionary theory and a Christian faith with a high view of scripture. By evolution, I mean the theory that all living things on Earth are descended from a common ancestor through a continuity of cause-and-effect processes. I believe that there are no necessary breaks or gaps in causal explanations. That is, all transitions in the history of life are potentially explicable in terms of "natural" cause-and-effect processes. This theory is no mere guess or hunch, but an extremely well-supported explanation of the observed record of organic change. It has great explanatory power in drawing together an incredibly wide range of data from many disciplines in an explanatory framework. It has been very effective in generating fruitful and testable hypotheses that have driven new discoveries and advanced our scientific understanding of the universe.

I accept the Bible as authoritative and true in what God intends it to communicate. However, simply accepting the truth of the Biblical writings does not indicate the meaning of those writings. Just as our observations of the natural world must be interpreted within some explanatory framework, scripture also must be interpreted. There is no such thing as an objective reading of scripture. The question for the Christian is then - What is the best interpretive framework for any given passage of scripture? I am convinced that the best interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis is a literary one in which neither time nor chronology are part of the intended message.

Finally, I fully and unhesitatingly accept the doctrine of creation. God is the Creator of all things and nothing would exist without God's continually willing it to be. Creation was not merely a past accomplished act, but rather is a present and continuing reality. The best term for this view of God's creative activity is "continuous creation." I also believe that God's existence can be known in the creation through faith. However, scientific observation provides no

proof of the existence of a creator God, indeed it cannot. Neither does scientific description, however complete, provide any argument against a creator. Since God acts through process, evolution and the theology of creation are perfectly compatible. In fact, I see them as positively reinforcing. An evolutionary understanding of creation illuminates our theological understanding, and theology places our scientific discoveries in a more comprehensive context and provides necessary moral guidance in the scientific endeavor.

Discussion

Much of the controversy over evolution and creation seems to rest firmly on the widely held view that evolution and Christianity are in irreconcilable conflict. However, this conflict view has been thoroughly discredited by both theological and historical scholarship. Christian theologians (including evangelicals) have long recognized that a faithful reading of Scripture does not demand a young Earth nor does it prohibit God's use of evolutionary mechanisms to accomplish His creative will. Many evangelical Christians at the time of Darwin found no inherent conflict between evolutionary theory and scripture. In fact, several of the authors of the "Fundamentals" (the set of volumes that gave us the term "fundamentalist") accepted some form of evolutionary theory. One of these was B.B. Warfield, a theologian who argued forcefully for Biblical inerrancy, and who accepted the validity of evolution as a scientific description of origins. Probably the most prominent advocate of evolutionary theory in America in Darwin's time was Asa Gray, a committed evangelical Christian.

Evolution has been viewed by many theologically orthodox Christians, since the publication of *The Origin of Species*, as a positive contribution to understanding God's creative and redemptive work. For many, important theological truths concerning the nature of humanity, the goodness of creation, God's providence, and the meaning of the Cross and suffering find renewed significance and amplification when applied to an evolutionary view of God's creative work. The integration of an evolutionary understanding of Earth and life history with theological understandings of God's

creative and redemptive activity has yielded important insights. The fruits of these efforts need to be more widely known and discussed. There is a desperate need to diffuse the heated conflict which has grown up around the issue of evolution. The evolution/creation "warfare" view has effectively inhibited productive popular dialogue on important theological and scientific issues.

Despite the long theological dialogue with evolutionary theory, many people continue to view evolution as inherently anti-theistic and inseparably wedded to a worldview that denies God and objective morality. Although this understanding of the meaning of evolutionary theory is strongly promoted by some, its conflation of metaphysical naturalism with evolution is widely rejected as philosophically, theologically, and historically false. Science is a methodology, a limited way of knowing about the natural world. Scientific research proceeds by the search for chains of cause-and-effect, and confines itself to the investigation of "natural" entities and forces. This self-limitation is sometimes referred to as methodological naturalism. Science restricts itself to proximate causes, and the confirmation or denial of ultimate causes is beyond its capacity. Science does not deny the existence of a Creator-- it is simply silent on the existence or action of God. Methodological naturalism simply describes what empirical inquiry is. It is certainly not a statement of the nature of cosmic reality. Science pursues truth within very narrow limits. Our most profound questions about the nature of reality (questions of meaning and purpose and morality), while they may arise from within science, are theological or philosophical in nature and their answers lie beyond the reach of science.

Theology, like science, must take account of the evidence at hand. While distinct, our scientific and theological understandings must inform each other if we are to be intellectually whole persons. Theology and science, while addressing different realities and different questions, are not hermetically sealed ways of knowing. Maintaining clear definitions of different types of knowledge actually aids in their integration. The confusion of metaphysical naturalism with evolutionary theory inhibits the productive interaction between the sciences and Christian theology. It does so by injecting into a

scientific theory a metaphysical worldview which is simply not part of the theory.

One commonly held perspective that tends to reinforce a conflict view of science and faith is that God's action or involvement is confined to those events which lack a scientific explanation. Meaningful divine action is equated with breaks in chains of cause-and-effect processes. This view has been called a "God-of-the-gaps" theology. God's creative action is seen only, or primarily, in the gaps of human knowledge where scientific description fails. With this perspective, each advance of scientific description results in a corresponding reduction in the realm of divine action. Conflict between science and faith is thus assured. However, this is a totally unnecessary state of affairs. God's creative activity is clearly identified in the Bible as including natural processes, including what we call chance or random events. According to scripture, God is providentially active in all natural processes, and all of creation declares the glory of God. The evidence for God's presence in creation, for the existence of a creator God, is declared to be precisely those everyday "natural events" experienced by us all. Thus Christians should not fear causal explanations. Complete scientific descriptions of events or processes should pose no threat to Christian theism. Rather, each new advance in our scientific understanding can be met with excitement and praise at the revelation of God's creative hand.

Responses To Specific Issues

Chance

There is much confusion over the meaning of the terms "chance" and "randomness." These are often seen as antithetical to God's action. Many people understand the word "chance" as implying a purposeless, meaningless, and accidental event. Scientifically, chance events are simply those events whose occurrence cannot be predicted based on initial conditions and known natural laws. Such events are, however, describable by probabilistic equations. This understanding of chance is not in any way in conflict with God's creative action. The

Bible, in fact, describes a God who is sovereign over all natural events, even those we attribute to chance such as the casting of lots or tomorrow's weather. This perspective has been placed into a modern scientific context by some modern theologians who see God's action exercised through determining the indeterminacies of natural processes. God is thus seen as affecting events at both the quantum level and at the level of large chaotic systems. Regardless of how one understands the manner in which God exercises sovereignty over natural process, chance events certainly pose no theological barrier to God's action in and through the evolutionary process.

Design And Gaps

Seeking scientific evidence for divine action in the failure of present scientific description actually has the effect of diminishing the perception of God's action in the physical universe. The very designation of only certain events or structures as "intelligently caused" relegates all others to the status of "unguided natural processes." The argument from design should not be reduced to searches for gaps in scientific description. God is personally active in all natural processes, and all of creation is purposefully designed by God. All creation declares the glory of God. The evidence for God's presence in creation, for the existence of a creator God, is precisely those everyday "natural events" experienced by us all. To reduce it to gaps in our scientific explanation does, I believe, great disservice to the witness of God in creation. As I have said elsewhere, "If a person cannot see God in a sunset or a thunderstorm, he or she will not see Him in a strand of DNA or a mitotic spindle." The argument from design is that God is praised and revealed through all that He has made. My objection to the arguments of "Intelligent Design" proponents is not that they posit design, but that they restrict its meaning to only certain structures or processes and make it subject to scientific verification.

Design Vs. Creation

Design is often discussed as though God's action is analogous to the work of an engineer or artisan. Such human action involves the

imposing of form on preexisting materials. What the engineer or artisan can do is limited by the nature of those materials. By contrast, a divine creator brings into existence the very materials themselves. God creates the substance as well as the form. If God was indeed completely free in creating, then the properties of matter would correspond perfectly to God's creative plan. We would thus expect nature to have the inherent capabilities to bring forth what God desires. This has been termed the "functional integrity of creation" by Howard Van Till. Such a perspective is much more consistent with the continuity of processes in the physical universe than an engineering view of God's action. It makes the discovery of each new natural capability, or each new link in the history of creation, an opportunity for the praise of God rather than another obstacle to faith or challenge to the doctrine of creation.

Design Vs. Mechanism

Intelligent design really says nothing about "How" God creates. It does not propose a theory for the mechanism of change. If it does not address this issue, then it does not contribute anything to the scientific description of the history of life. I believe that all of creation is designed by God and has its being in God, but that does not give me any insights into the processes by which God brought that creation into existence. Questions of ultimate origins are important, but they are philosophical and theological questions, not scientific ones. Science does not and can not deal with ultimate questions of meaning or purpose.

Design is a concept used in science, but not in the same way in which intelligent design advocates use it. The origin and evolution of anatomical features are discussed in terms of adaptation to environmental stresses and opportunities. Biological structures and systems have particular functions and purposes for which they were selected. Science routinely deals with design and purpose in this context.

Deism

It is often argued that if God does not intervene in creation by breaking the continuity of natural process, then God is not acting in a way that really matters. Those Christians who accept a gapless evolutionary description of the history of life are often labeled as deists. However, such a characterization could not be farther from my view, in which all natural processes are the personal, purposeful act of a creator God. God is both transcendent over creation, and immanent in creation. God's creative power is continually at work, even now. I believe that the biblical view is that God upholds all physical reality moment to moment. God is intimately and actively involved in what we perceive as "natural" or "law-governed" processes. I thus see no distinction between God's activity in "natural" and "miraculous" events. If one accepts this theological view, which I believe is thoroughly orthodox, then a completely seamless evolutionary history of life would be entirely acceptable theologically. In other words, such a scientific description would not violate one's understanding of the nature and character of God.

I would argue that an interventionist view of God is much closer to deism than my view. It implies that God is somehow withdrawn, or at least uninvolved in creation, except during special exceptional events. As others have noted, a doctrine of God's occasional intervention is really a doctrine of God's usual absence.

Methodological Naturalism (MN)

Some Intelligent Design (ID) advocates argue that MN arbitrarily and unjustifiably excludes supernatural agency from scientific explanation. This exclusion of God from scientific description is believed to unnecessarily restrict the search for truth. It does nothing of the sort. If God acted in creation to bring about a particular structure in a way that broke causal chains, then science would simply conclude that -- "There is presently no known series of cause-and-effect processes that can adequately account for this structure, and research will continue to search for such processes." Any statement beyond that requires the application of a particular religious worldview. Science cannot conclude "God did it." However, if God acted through a seamless series of cause-and-effect processes

to bring about that structure, then the continuing search for such processes stimulated by the tentativeness and methodological naturalism of science may uncover those processes. Using an ID approach, the inference to "intelligent design" would be made, and any motivation for further research would end. Thus, ID runs the risk of making false conclusions, and prematurely terminating the search for cause-and-effect descriptions when none are yet known. Furthermore, how would a gap in the causal chain be discovered unless continuing effort was expended in searching for possible "natural" causes? Thus even the verification of gaps requires research conducted using MN assumptions.

Some nontheists see God as an unnecessary addition to a scientific description of the universe. In fact, God is unnecessary, or rather irrelevant, for a scientific description, but a scientific description is not a complete description of reality. Scientific methodology excludes appeals to supernatural agents by definition. To then use this methodological exclusion to support a philosophical/religious exclusion is completely fallacious. That science does not make reference to God says nothing about whether or not God is actively involved in the physical universe or in people's lives.

Problem Of Pain

A very common argument against the existence of a creator God is the presence of pain and suffering in nature. The apparent conflict between God's goodness and the presence of pain and suffering is made especially acute when we consider the non-human creation. How can we accommodate the death and suffering of animals within a theology that declares both God's omnipotence and goodness? C.S. Lewis forcefully puts the issue before us in his book *The Problem of Pain*. "The problem of animal suffering is appalling; not because the animals are so numerous ... but because the Christian explanation of human pain cannot be extended to animal pain. So far as we know beasts are incapable either of sin or virtue: therefore they can neither deserve pain nor be improved by it."

This is hardly a new issue. The problem of death, pain and suffering

in the natural world, what has been referred to as "natural evil," has been the focus of much theological and philosophical debate within the Christian church since the first century. The historical struggle over this question (referred to as theodicy) has led to some very illuminating insights. It bears on issues of the nature of God's immanence in creation as well as transcendence. The reconciliation of pain and suffering with divine goodness brings new understanding to the doctrines of incarnation and redemption. It provides ways of understanding both human and creaturely free will. And it gives added insight into God's purposes as revealed in scripture.

Death and pain are integral to the functioning of all ecological systems and animal lifestyles. Defense, protection, camouflage, pursuit of prey, etc. are major forces in shaping both animal biology and behavior. The drive to reproduce is one of the most fundamental features of life, yet would not be possible in the absence of death. Without the continued loss of individuals to disease, predation, or injury the carrying capacity of the environment would be quickly reached and continued reproduction would become impossible. Consider how much of an animal's life is devoted to reproductive activities such as attracting mates, defending territory, preparing nests, caring for young, etc. What would remain of an animal's life without the search for food, pursuit of prey, need for defense, or the drive to reproduce? In short, essentially all meaningful animal activity and interaction would be rendered meaningless or impossible if death were not a universal certainty.

A similar argument put forward against theism is that the inefficiencies and imperfections in nature argue against a good or wise or perfect creator. Such arguments are loaded with presuppositions about the character of God and cultural understandings of abstract ideals such as perfection. The God described in the Bible certainly does not conform to any ideals of human efficiency or perfection.

As Christians, our understanding of God's character must begin in the person of Jesus Christ to whom the scriptures witness. Jesus is the revealed image of God – and this Jesus suffered and died on a cross.

The Creator is the crucified and this should inform our understanding of Creation.

Note: The ideas given above are presented in much more detail and through other voices in Mr. Miller's book *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation* (2003, Eerdmans Publishers). Also, the scientific basis for an evolutionary understanding of the cosmos, Earth and life is summarized in the book.

About The Author

Keith B. Miller is a Research Assistant Professor for the Geology Department at Kansas State University.

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