

A Rough Guide to Creation & Evolution

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Whether or not there is an objective purpose to life obviously depends upon whether or not life was created for a purpose. You can't get purpose without a purposer. It's impossible to entertain the question of whether life might be created for a purpose without raising the question of how a belief in creation relates to scientific attempts to understand origins - and especially how a belief in creation relates to the theory of evolution. A wise man once said that "the best way to approach a problem of any kind is usually not to talk or even think very much about the ultimate answer until I have made sure that I am asking all the right questions in the right order." 1 So I'm not offering a definitive *answer* to the question of Creation and Evolution. Instead, I'm going to provide a "rough guide" to the subject, some advice about mistakes to avoid, and some suggestions about asking the right *questions* in the right order.

My first piece of advice is to start at the very beginning, with just the first five words of *Genesis*: "In the beginning, God created..." If you need more words to get your teeth into, go to John 1:1-3: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." "Word" is a translation of the Greek term *Logos*, from which we get the word logic. *Logos* is equivalent to what scientists like Stephen Hawking mean when they talk about "knowing the Mind of God". The belief that *Logos* came first, that Mind created Matter, is *the* fundamental theistic claim about creation, and *this* is the place to start when considering the relationship between Creation and Evolution.

It's important to keep in mind the distinction between the *doctrine* of Creation, which is something all Christians hold in common, and different *pictures* of creation that Christians hold because they have different interpretations of Genesis. As Phillip Johnson reminds us: "The essential point of creation has nothing to do with the timing or the mechanism the Creator chose to employ, but with the element of design or purpose. In the broadest sense, a "creationist" is simply a person who believes that the world (and especially mankind) was *designed*, and exists for a *purpose*." 2 The place to start thinking about Creation and evolution is with the *doctrine* of Creation, because once you've worked that out, you are in a better position to evaluate different Christian *pictures* of Creation. In other words, your first question should be:

Question One: "Is the doctrine of Creation true?"

Plato noted that "all things do become, have become and will become, some by nature, some by art, and some by chance" (*The Laws*, book X), and he argued that either Mind comes before matter (and the world is basically a work of art), or matter comes before mind (and the world is purely the result of chance and natural regularities). The doctrine of Creation says that Mind came before matter - the cosmos is a creation, a work of art. To be an atheist, on the other hand, means being committed to a "matter first" view of things - the cosmos is not a work of art, and everything *must*, therefore, be the result of nothing but natural regularities and chance. Darwin's theory of evolution is an explanation of biological reality in terms of a finely balanced combination of natural regularities and chance working over long periods of time. You can see that for atheism, evolution is not so much the result of an objective assessment of the evidence as it is a necessary assumption brought to its interpretation. Geneticist Richard

Lewontin has let this cat out of the bag:

We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs... in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods. . . of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the. . . world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our... adherence to material causes to create . . . a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying... 3

"Moreover", says Lewontin, "that materialism is absolute, *for we cannot allow a Divine foot in the door...*" 4 Lewontin's rejection of the doctrine of Creation has nothing to do with science and everything to do with his faith in materialism.

Richard Dawkins, Oxford University's professor of the public understanding of science, is quick to dismiss religious belief. He calls anyone advocating a creator God 'scientifically illiterate'. 5 Dawkins' most famous book is *The Blind Watchmaker*, the title of which comes from William Paley's design argument from the similarities between the complex workings of a watch, which we know has a designer, and the complex workings of nature, which by analogy probably have a designer too. Dawkins admits that living things are analogous to watches, and that they appear to be designed. He even defines biology as "the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose." 6 Why is Dawkins so confident that design in living things is only apparent? Because, although the subtitle of *The Blind Watchmaker* is "Why the evidence of evolution reveals a world without design", Dawkins "excludes design on philosophical grounds." 7 "The kind of explanation we come up with", says Dawkins, "must not contradict the laws of physics. Indeed *it*

will make use of the laws of physics, and nothing more than the laws of physics." 8 Here, as philosopher William Dembski notes: "we are dealing with a naturalistic metaphysic that shapes and controls what theories of biological origins are permitted on the playing field *in advance of any discussion or weighing of evidence.*" 9 To approach biology without Dawkins' atheistic assumption doesn't mean ruling out evolution as an adequate, or even the best available, scientific account of biology; but it does mean letting the evidence speak for itself.

Dawkins fudges the issue here. According to him, Paley was right about the complexity of nature, but wrong about its explanation: "The only thing he got wrong - admittedly quite a big thing - was the explanation itself. He gave the traditional religious answer. . . The true explanation is utterly different, and it had to wait for one of the most revolutionary thinkers of all time, Charles Darwin." 10 It's crucial to realize that Dawkins has just "pulled a fast one". He has just implied that *either* Paley was right to argue that nature is a work of art, *or* Darwin was right to argue that biological organisms are the result of nature and chance. But of course, this is a false dilemma. It's possible that Paley and Darwin are both right. The theist, no less than the atheist, can acknowledge the existence of a "blind watchmaker", simply by attributing that "blind watchmaker" itself to God's design!

Dawkins thinks that "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist." 11 Before Darwin was that there was no naturalistic candidate for an explanation to fill in the blank labelled "*blind* watchmaker". Evolution fills that blank. However, Dawkins is wrong to think that evolution undermines Paley's watchmaker argument, contradicts belief in the doctrine of Creation, or supports atheism. Darwin's theory may fill in a blank created by the assumption of atheism, but that doesn't prove atheism (or evolution). Father Christmas may fill

in a blank left by the assumption that "parents don't deliver Christmas presents", but that hardly proves the existence of Father Christmas!

The theory of evolution does *not* "reveal a world without design" as Dawkins claims, because science is incapable of doing any such thing. Why is the coffee getting hot? Scientific answer: because the flow of electrons through the element in the kettle is causing the water molecules to vibrate. But *why* is this happening? Because I want my coffee hot! This is an explanation in terms of design and purpose, and it doesn't conflict with the scientific explanation. You don't have to choose one explanation over the other.

Moreover, the fact that we can give a scientific description of the physical mechanism of a kettle doesn't disprove the existence of a kettle designer! Similarly, a scientific description of a physical mechanism that results in living organisms would not disprove the existence of a designer of that system. Science doesn't "reveal" a world without design, atheism *demand*s a world without design. The theory of evolution is irrelevant to the doctrine of Creation. As philosopher Keith Ward says: "The argument that the evolutionary process is incompatible with design misses the mark completely." ¹² I suggest that the next question on your agenda therefore ought to be:

Question Two: "If we don't assume that matter came before mind, is evolution an adequate explanation given all the available scientific evidence, or is there a better explanation?"

Someone who believes in Creation can afford to be much more open-minded about evolution than the atheist can be. As philosopher Alvin Plantinga writes:

a Christian (naturally) believes that there is such a person as God, and believes that God has created and sustains the world. Starting from this position... we recognize that there are many ways in which God could have created the living things he has in fact created: how, in fact, did he do it? ...Did it all happen just by way of the working of the laws of physics, or was there further divine activity..? That's the question... Starting from the belief in God, we must look at the evidence and consider the probabilities as best we can. 13

Question two is an interesting and important question - but it isn't a crucial question for everyone to answer. You could quite happily be a Christian, or become a Christian, without having an answer to this question.

Evolution may be a wholly adequate theory, a partially adequate theory, or an inadequate theory, but the right way to find out - whether you believe in the doctrine of creation or not - is to let the evidence speak for itself without support from the assumption that the natural world *must* be able to account for itself.

If you have decided your answers to our first two questions, you are now in a good position to ask a third question:

Question Three: "*Which picture of Creation is the most plausible one?*"

This is an interesting and important question - but it isn't a crucial question for everyone to answer. You could quite happily be a Christian, or become a Christian, without having an answer to this question. Christians certainly shouldn't elevate belief in any particular picture of Creation into anything more than the peripheral issue that it is.

If you *do* pursue this question, there is no shortage of interpretations you could adopt. In-between the extremes of a

completely literal "young-earth" creationism and an *essentially non-literal* creationism (often associated with "theistic evolution", but compatible with other theories), you might adopt an *essentially literal* "old-earth" or "progressive" creationist interpretation. But as Professor J.P. Moreland warns: "there are sufficient problems in interpreting Genesis 1 and 2 to warrant caution in dogmatically holding that only one understanding is allowable by the text." 14

Giving a responsible (but non-dogmatic) answer to our third question involves asking a whole bunch of subsidiary questions. As theologian David Winter explains: "The phrase 'The Bible says . . . ' begs a lot of questions . . . What *does* the Bible say? To whom is it saying it? What is the context, background and literary form of the passage in question? Is it to be taken literally, or figuratively, or allegorically?" 15 With Alvin Plantinga I will merely say: "the proper understanding of the early chapters of *Genesis*... is a difficult area, an area where I am not sure where the truth lies." 16 What I *am* sure of is that there can't be any conflict between God's Word and God's World, although there can be conflicts between incorrect human understandings of God's Word and God's World. As Charles Hodge warned: "Theologians are not infallible in the interpretation of Scripture." 17 Nor are scientists infallible when they think about nature.

For anyone who believes in the doctrine of Creation, the fundamental question is not "what is the best *scientific* account of reality" (let alone "what is the best *naturalistic* account of reality") but "what is *the best* account of reality given everything we know?" This only seems odd on the assumption that, as Richard Lewontin asserts, 'science is the only begetter of truth.' But of course, the claim that 'science is the only begetter of truth' *isn't something that science can establish as being true!* It's a philosophical claim, and a self-contradictory

one at that; in which case, there must be more truth than can be known through science, and Christians are right to seek to understand reality by employing what we think we know from thinking about God's Word as well as what we think we know from thinking about God's World. Our *picture* of creation (as distinct from the *doctrine* of creation) is not the best place to start this project of integration, but it shouldn't be *excluded* from the process. To do so would be like a jury deciding a murder case purely on the basis of the forensic evidence, without taking into account the testimony of witnesses: "we cannot... pursue theology without bringing to that study all that we know about the world, nor can we... pursue science without bringing to that study all that we know about God" 18

Conclusion

Let's go back to the beginning: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." (John 1:1-3) This is the Christian doctrine of Creation: we *are* here for a reason, life *does* have an objective purpose because - through whatever means - God created us for a reason. But John goes on to tell us that: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) Whatever you make of the scientific merits of the theory of evolution, and whatever you make of the relative merits of different *pictures* of Creation, so long as the *doctrine* of Creation is true, then John 1:14 might be true as well. "Is it true that "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us... full of grace and truth"?" is a question that trumps all the other questions we've asked, because if it is true, it's a truth that dwarfs every other truth and which can change your life forever. Why? Because it would mean that our purposer has personally come to us to tell us exactly *what* the meaning and purpose of life is and to help us embrace it: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

References

- [1] Phillip E. Johnson, *The Right Questions*, (IVP, 2002), introduction.
- [2] Johnson, *Darwin on Trial*, (IVP, 1993), p. 115.
- [3] Richard Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons", *New York Review of Books*, January 9, 1997.
- [4] Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons", my italics.
- [5] Julia Hinde, "Does God Exist?", Harriet Swain (ed.), *Big Questions in Science*, (London, Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 2.
- [6] Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, Preface, p. x.
- [7] Jonathan Wells, *Icons of Evolution*, (Washington DC: Regency Publishing, 2000), p. 204.
- [8] Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 151, my emphasis.
- [9] William A. Dembski, "What Every Theologian Should Know about Creation, Evolution and Design", p. 6, my italics.
- [10] Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 41.
- [11] *ibid*, p. 6.
- [12] Keith Ward, *God, Faith & The New Millennium*, (OneWorld), p. 119.
- [13] Alvin Plantinga, "Evolution, Neutrality, and Antecedent Probability: a reply to Van Till and McMullen", p. 5-6.
- [14] J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, (Baker, 1987), p. 214.
- [15] David Winter, *But This I Can Believe* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980), p. 112.
- [16] Plantinga, "Evolution, Neutrality, and Antecedent Probability: a reply to Van Till and McMullen", p. 2.

📖 [17] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1992), 1:59.

📖 [18] John Stek, quoted by Plantinga, "Methodological Naturalism? Part 2", *Origins & Design*, 18:2.