4 Theological Issues: Evolution[1]

Discuss: What are your initial thoughts about evolution and faith? Are they compatible? Why or why not?

What is a Christian to do with the theory of evolution?

Theory of Evolution: *This is a scientific model that claims that the mechanisms of evolution, operating over a long period of time explain common ancestry and the patterns of change which occur over time. (More below)*

Some people today would argue that evolution is ***just*** a scientific theory along the same lines as theories about the weather. Others, however, argue the opposite - that the theory of evolution has huge theological ramifications, for if it is true, it changes how we see God, humanity, creation, faith, and salvation!

The thinking usually goes something like this:

- *If evolution is true, then Christianity must be false*
- *Because evolution is true, then Christianity must be false*
- *Because Christianity is true, then evolution must be false*

What do we mean by "Evolution"?

Three Basic Principles to Evolution:

1. **Variation** - when living things reproduce, there is variation to what is reproduced.

2. **Selection** - some of these variations, or differences in your children, for example will be helpful, some will be not so helpful. This gives some an advantage over generations.

3. **Continuation** - when living things reproduce, there is continuity. Fitter species survive. There is variation, but not too much.

1. Microevolution

What is Microevolution? This points to small changes will take place in species caused by the mechanisms of evolution laid out above. Over decades or centuries, these changes add up allowing species to adapt to a changing environment and *sometimes* even splitting and forming into two or more species.

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[1] This lecture is drawn from many sources, but primarily three: John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2007), 98-138; and Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-64. Deborah & Loren Haarsma, *Origins* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2011), ch. 8.

- *Random Mutation*: this refers to a way that the genetic makeup of an animal or a plant can change. Most mutations are apparently neutral, some are beneficial and some are harmful. An example of this is found in the evolution of drug-resistant antibiotics.

- Remember - when we use the word “random”, this means that is “unpredictable”.

- Not a theory of “progress” necessarily - changes can be reversed if conditions change

2. Pattern of Change over Time

This is the view that the fossil record suggests that species undergo change over long periods of time, even billions of years. The fossil record shows that modern species look somewhat like the species you come across in the recent past, but less like the ones you find in the distant past. Over time, some species go extinct, and some survive, and some new species show up on the scene.

3. Common Ancestry

This argues that all living and extinct creatures are linked together in a “family tree” moving from the simple to the complex. Modern species (including human beings) are descended from earlier species, and all living things have a common ancestor..

4. Theory of Evolution

This refers to a scientific model that claims that the mechanisms of evolution (microevolution and macroevolution) are at work over long periods of time, and this theory best explains both our common ancestry and the patterns of change over time.

5. Macroevolution

By **Macroevolution**, we mean a *large-scale innovation* and the coming into existence of new organs, structures and qualitatively new genetic material.

- Macroevolution marks a move towards increased complexity.
    a. Includes the evolution of multi-cellular organisms from single-celled organisms
    b. Macroevolution is arrived at *by extrapolating the changes which occur through microevolution*

6. Evolutionism

This is a philosophy and ideology which, among other things, holds to the conclusions which proponents of the theory of evolution come to regarding God and faith. Evolutionism asserts that there is no Creator who cares for the world, humans arose through natural processes without guidance or input from God, there is no higher purpose to life, there is no absolute morality. All life exists due to blind, random chance.

"No intervening spirit watches lovingly over the affairs of nature....No vital forces propel evolutionary change. And whatever we think of God, his existence is not manifest in the products of nature."

Stephen Jay Gould

"Chance alone is at the source of every innovation, of all creation in the biosphere. Pure chance, absolutely free but blind, is at the very root of the stupendous edifice of evolution.... [These biological discoveries] make it impossible to accept any system...that assumes a master plan of creation." Jacques Monod

What Evolution is and is not

- Natural selection is not creative
- Natural Selection is made from *already existing things*
- Natural Selection has no innovative capacity

"Natural selection, by its very nature, does not create novelty." John Lennox

Where Christians Agree and Disagree about Evolution[2]

Most Christians land in one of three main positions:

1. Young-earth Creationism

a. Accept microevolution
b. Say that the earth is young
c. Reject that the fossil record shows a pattern of change over time, but rather, they are a result of a catastrophic event - namely, the world-wide flood described in Genesis.
d. Reject common ancestry - humanity begins with Adam and Eve.
e. Reject the theory of evolution - in particular, macroevolution.
f. Reject evolutionism

2. Progressive Creationism

a. Accept microevolution
b. Say that the earth is old
c. Accept that the fossil record shows a pattern of change over time
d. Are split on the question of common ancestry
e. Reject the theory of evolution as a complete model for biological history, saying that while some evolution did happen, God must have miraculously guided or intervened at various points
f. Reject evolutionism

3. Theistic evolution (Evolutionary Creationism)

a. Accept microevolution
b. Say that the earth is old
c. Accept that the fossil record shows a pattern of change over time

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[2] Cited from Deborah B. Haarsma & Loren D. Haarsma, *Origins: Christian Perspectives on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2011), 187-188.

d. Accept common ancestry
e. Accept the theory of evolution as a scientific model
f. Reject evolutionism

Concerns that Christians have about Evolution:

1. Evolution seems to directly contradict Scripture

2. Evolution seems to indirectly contradict Scripture

Evolution raises huge questions which, taken to their logical conclusion, seem to be at odds with Christian orthodoxy.

3. Evolution seems to undermine the possibilities of Miracles

4. How does the Imago Dei work with the idea of common ancestry?

5. Doesn't Evolution inevitably leads to a bleak and atheistic worldview that undermines Christianity and erodes morality and human dignity?

Discussion: Looking at these different pictures of "evolution" and these concerns. Where do you land on this? If someone asked you if you believed in evolution, how would you answer this question? What questions are raised in all this?

Lingering Questions with microevolution and macroevolution

1. Where are the boundaries between microevolution and macroevolution?

2. Can evolution explain not only the variation in say, finch beak lengths and superbugs but also account for the very *existence* of finches and bacteria in the first place? If so, how? And how does this relate to the Biblical understanding of Creation?

3. Can Microevolution or Macroevolution explain the origins of life?

"There is no theoretical reason that would permit us to expect that evolutionary lines would increase in complexity with time; there is also no empirical evidence that this happens." John Maynard Smith & E. Szathmary (both Darwinists)

5. What about Genetic Mutation?

"The vast majority of mutations observed in the laboratory have deleterious effects." Lennox (God's Undertaker, 107)

If the mutations were random, the chances that 5 non-deleterious mutations [that is, mutations that bring benefits] could occur is 1 in 10 to the power of 15 (million billion).

And yet Daniel Dennett writes that Darwin's Dangerous Idea is that *"every feature of the world can be the product of a blind, unforesightful, nonteleological, ultimately mechanical process of differential reproduction."*

But, basically his argument (along with Richard Dawkins') is tantamount to saying that blind, unguided natural selection *is not astronomically improbable*. Therefore, the argument looks like this:

P is not astronomically improbable

Therefore

P

6. The Process of Macroevolution is unobservable

"Well, as common sense would suggest, the Darwinian theory is correct in the small, but not in the large. Rabbits come from other slightly different rabbits, not from either [primeval] soup or potatoes. Where they come from in the first place is a problem yet to be solved, like much else of a cosmic scale."

Sir Fred Hoyle, Astrophysicist and mathematician

7. What about the fossil records?

There seems to be a noticeable absence of the transitional forms in the fossil record.

"The extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record persists as the trade secret of palaeontology." Stephen Jay Gould

What does the fossil record show?

1. **Stasis**.

2. **Sudden Appearance**.

8. What about Common Ancestry?

Connected with the overall theory of Darwinian evolution is the *common ancestry thesis*, that is, we all have one common family tree. It is the theory that life originated at only one place on earth, and that all subsequent life is related by descent to those original living creatures. This thesis essentially argues that we are all cousins of each other.

Zoologist Mark Ridley makes an important point when he writes, *"The simple fact that species can be classified hierarchically into genera, families, and so on, is not an argument for evolution.*

It is possible to classify any set of objects into a hierarchy, whether their variation is evolutionary or not."

9. What about the Origin of Life?

In 1952, Stanley Miller conducted a famous experiment and passed electrical charges through a chemical mixture simulating what was thought to be the atmosphere of the early earth. In the end, this experiment produced all but one of the 20 amino acids necessary for life.

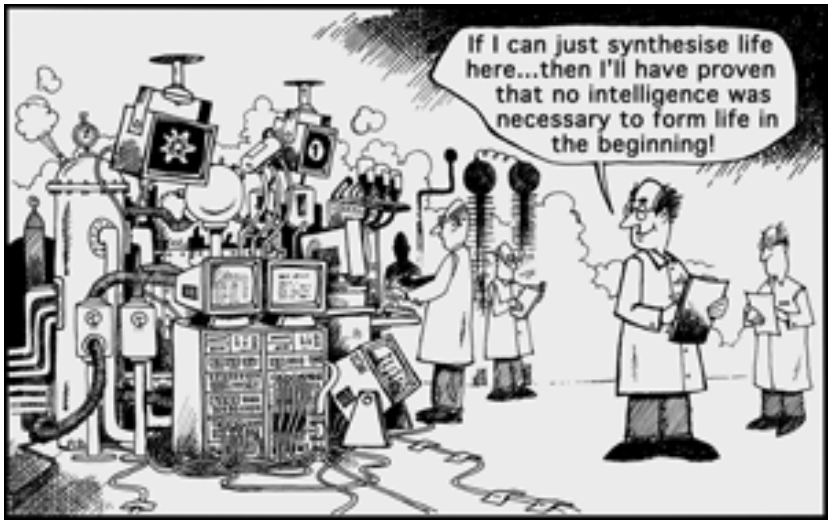
"Classical science, with its preferences for reduction to a few controlling factors of causality, was triumphantly successful for relatively simple systems like planetary motion and the periodic table of the elements. But irreducibly complex systems – that is, most of the interesting phenomena of biology, human society and history – cannot be so explained. We need new philosophies and models, and these must come from a union of the humanities and the sciences as traditionally defined."

Stephen Jay Gould

Problems have emerged though:

- Consensus on how earth's atmosphere was composed has changed. Now, it seems that the atmosphere of the early earth would have been hostile to the formation of amino acids

- The formation of protein from amino acids is an extremely complex process. *"Making a protein simply by injecting energy is rather like exploding a stick of dynamite under a pile of bricks and expecting it to form a house. You may liberate enough energy to raise the bricks, but without coupling the energy to the bricks in a controlled and ordered way, there is little hope of producing anything other than a chaotic mess."* Paul Davies



- Blind chance will not do the job of organizing the building blocks of life in a way that produces life

Are some systems *Irreducibly Complex*? To be irreducibly complex means *"a single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning."* Michael Behe (Darwin's Black Box, 39)

Michael Behe argues that complex structures and phenomena could not have come to be through a Darwinian gradual step-by-step evolutionary process. **How** did complex structures come to be?

10. What about Genetics?

"Any adequate explanation for the existence of the DNA-coded database and for the prodigious information storage and processing capabilities of the living cell must involve a source of information that transcends the basic physical and chemical materials out of which the cell is constructed." John Lennox (*Seven Days that Divide the World,* 174)

"A chimp may share 98% of its DNA with ourselves but it is not 98% human: it is not human at all – it is a chimp. And does the fact that we have genes in common with a mouse or a banana, say anything about human nature? Some claim that genes will tell us what we really are. The idea is absurd." Steve Jones, geneticist

"Having seen how DNA shores and manipulates tremendous amounts of information…and uses this information to control life, we are left with one big question: what created DNA…was it perhaps the power, thinking and will of a supreme being that created this self-replicating basis of all life?" Amir Aczel, mathematician

The Bible, Theistic Evolution and the Question of Origins

For Theistic Evolutionists, God gave the universe certain laws and these laws themselves are sufficient to explain all that we see and experience today.

Theistic Evolution argues:

1. God causes the universe to come into being
2. God sets the laws of physics and the fine-tuned initial conditions
3. God sustains the universe in being
4. The universe develops and life subsequently emerges without any more special discrete supernatural input from God, until God creates human beings
5. At a particular moment, God specially conferred his image on a hominid that had already emerged from the gradual evolutionary process.[3]

And yet…

Why shouldn't God make several intentional creative acts in history of the universe (eg – origin of life, humans) that are distinctive and that differ from what normally happens in a universe governed by natural laws?

So then, what reason is there to say that God must not be involved in other points of creation? If we can agree with three major *singularities* – creation, incarnation, and resurrection, why should we object to there being a few other *singularities* especially if there is both scientific and biblical evidence for them? Does "creation" solely imply that God causes the universe to exist and sustains it by introducing laws? It certainly would include this, but why should our understanding of the term "creation" preclude sequences of specific creative acts from God?

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[3] John Lennox, *Seven Days that Divide the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2011), 163.

Or let's go even further. ***Could it be that God is actively intervening as well as actively sustaining His creation?***

Where does this leave us?

In essentials, unity.
In non-essentials, diversity.
In all things, charity

The alternatives in how we approach our faith can be seen in these two ways:

1. **Set the Boundaries**:
    - What are the boundaries to our faith?
    - Who's in and who's out?

2. **Reach for the Core**:
    - What are the key truths at the core of our faith?

It takes God a long time to get us to stop thinking that unless everyone sees things exactly as we do, they must be wrong. That is never God's view. There is only one true liberty -- the liberty of Jesus at work in our conscience enabling us to do what is right. Don't get impatient with others. Remember how God dealt with you -- with patience and with gentleness. But never water down the truth of God. Let it have its way and never apologize for it. Jesus said, "Go . . . and make disciples . . ." (Matthew 28:19), not, "Make converts to your own thoughts and opinions."
- Oswald Chambers

"I don't think that there's any conflict at all between science today and the scriptures. I think that we have misinterpreted the Scriptures many times and we've tried to make the Scriptures say things they weren't meant to say, I think that we have made a mistake by thinking the Bible is a scientific book. The Bible is not a book of science. The Bible is a book of Redemption, and of course I accept the Creation story. I believe that God did create the universe. I believe that God created man, and whether it came by an evolutionary process and at a certain point He took this person or being and made him a living soul or not, does not change the fact that God did create man. … whichever way God did it makes no difference as to what man is and man's relationship to God."
Billy Graham: Personal Thoughts of a Public Man, 1997. p. 72-74

Rather than being afraid of evolution, I would suggest that it is better to teach about a range of Christian positions on evolution, encouraging Christians to weigh the evidence and make choices. All truth is God's truth. If evidence points to some forms of evolutionary process, then we do not need to be afraid.

That said, we must also not be naive in thinking that evolution is inert and exists as unbiased science.

Next Week: Adam and Eve