

Feature Article: JAF2351

## THINKING CLEARLY ABOUT GOD AND EVOLUTION

by Jay W. Richards

This article first appeared in *Christian Research Journal*, volume 35, number 01 (2012). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

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*Christianity Today* recently had a cover story reporting on Christians who claim that human beings could not all have descended from a single human couple. That story was a symptom of a current trend: more and more Christians, even self-identified evangelicals, claim that Christians must make their peace with evolutionary theory. In recent years, scientists such as Francis Collins, Karl Giberson, Ken Miller, Darrell Falk, and others have written books defending *theistic evolution* or *evolutionary creationism*.

The historical reality of Adam and Eve is obviously central to historic Christianity; but it is just one of many issues that, as Christians, we must consider when exploring the broader debate over God and evolution. Unfortunately, the debate is often marred by confusion and ambiguity. Though we can't discuss every related issue here, let's see what we can do to think more clearly about the subject.

### CAN WE GET A DEFINITION?

I am often asked questions such as, "Can you believe in God and evolution?" and "Isn't evolution just God's way of creating?" I always respond: "That depends. What do you mean by 'God' and what do you mean by 'evolution'?" That might seem like a dodge, but everything hinges on the definitions.

Presumably, a theistic evolutionist claims that both theism *in some sense* and evolution *in some sense* are true, that both God and evolution somehow work together in explaining the world. But of course, all the real interest is hidden behind the phrase "in some sense." So we have to get more specific.

### "THEISM"

A theist believes that a transcendent God created the world and continues to conserve and interact in and with it. God can act directly in nature or indirectly through so-called secondary causes, such as physical laws or the actions of human beings. At all times, however, God oversees and providentially superintends His entire creation, even as He allows His creatures the freedom appropriate to their station. Nothing happens as the result of a *purposeless* process.

This is a minimal definition of theism. If someone believes a transcendent God created the world but denies that God can and does act within nature, then at best, he's a deist.

### "EVOLUTION"

It's a lot easier to define *theism* than to define *evolution*. It's been called the ultimate weasel word. In an illuminating article called "The Meanings of Evolution," Stephen Meyer and Michael Keas attempt to catch the weasel by distinguishing *six* different ways in which "evolution" is commonly used:

1. Change over time; history of nature; any sequence of events in nature.
2. Changes in the frequencies of alleles in the gene pool of a population.
3. Limited common descent: the idea that particular groups of organisms have descended from a common ancestor.

4. The mechanisms responsible for the change required to produce limited descent with modification, chiefly natural selection acting on random variations or mutations.
5. Universal common descent: the idea that all organisms have descended from a single common ancestor.
6. “Blind watchmaker” thesis: the idea that all organisms have descended from common ancestors solely through unguided, unintelligent, purposeless, material processes such as natural selection acting on random variations or mutations; that the mechanisms of natural selection, random variation and mutation, and perhaps other similarly naturalistic mechanisms, are completely sufficient to account for the appearance of design in living organisms.<sup>1</sup>

The first meaning is uncontroversial—even trivial. The most convinced young earth creationist agrees that things change over time—that the universe has a history.<sup>2</sup> Populations of animals wax and wane depending on changes in climate and the environment. At one time, certain flora and fauna prospered on the earth, but they later disappeared, leaving mere impressions in the rocks to mark their existence for future generations.

There’s also cosmic “evolution,” the idea that the early universe started in a hot, dense state, and over billions of years, cooled off and spread out, formed stars, galaxies, planets, and so forth. This includes the idea of cosmic nucleosynthesis, which describes the production of heavy elements (everything heavier than helium) in the universe through a process of star birth, growth, and death. These events involve change over time, but they refer to the history of the inanimate physical universe rather than the history of life. Parts of this picture of cosmic evolution contradict young earth creationism, but the generic idea that one form of matter gives rise, under the influence of various natural laws and processes, to other forms of matter, does not contradict *theism*. Surely God could directly guide such a process in innumerable ways, could set up a series of secondary natural processes that could do the job, or could do some combination of both.

In fact, to make a long story short, virtually no one denies the truth of “evolution” in senses 1, 2, or 3. And, pretty much everyone agrees that natural selection and mutations explain some things in biology (number 4).

What about the fifth sense of evolution, universal common ancestry? This is the claim that all organisms on earth are descended from a single common ancestor that lived sometime in the distant past. Note that this is not the same as the mechanism of change. Universal common ancestry is compatible with all sorts of different mechanisms or sources for change, though the most popular mechanism is the broadly Darwinian one.

It’s hard to square universal common descent with the biblical texts; nevertheless, it is *logically* compatible with theism. If God could turn dirt into a man, or a man’s rib into a woman, then presumably He could, if He so chose, turn a bacterium into a bonobo or a dinosaur into a deer. An unbroken evolutionary tree of life *guided and intended by God*, in which every organism descends from some original organism, sounds like a logical possibility.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the six senses mentioned by Meyer and Keas, there is also the metaphorical sense of evolution, in which Darwinian theory is used as a template to explain things other than nature, like the rise and fall of civilizations or sports careers.

Finally, there’s evolution in the sense of progress or growth. Natural evolution has often been understood in this way, so that cosmic history is interpreted as a purposeful movement toward greater perfection, complexity, mind, or spirit. A pre-Darwinian understanding of evolution was the idea of a slow unfolding of something that existed in nascent form from the beginning, like an acorn slowly becoming a great oak tree. If anything, this sense of evolution tends toward theism rather than away from it, since it suggests a purposive plan. That’s why Darwin didn’t even use the word in early editions of his *Origin of Species*. It’s also why many contemporary evolutionists (such as the late Stephen Jay Gould) go out of their way to deny that evolution is progressive, and argue instead that cosmic history is not going anywhere in particular.

It should now be clear that theism is compatible with many senses of evolution. In fact, for most of the senses of evolution we've considered, there's little hint of contradiction. Of course, this is a logical point. It doesn't tell us what *is* true—only what could be true.

### SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE

But there's one clear exception—the blind watchmaker thesis. Of all the senses of evolution, this one seems to fit with theism like oil with water. According to the blind watchmaker thesis, all the apparent design in life is just that—apparent. It's really the result of natural selection working on *random* genetic mutations. (Darwin proposed “variation.” Neo-Darwinism attributes new variations to genetic mutations.)

The word “random” in the blind watchmaker thesis carries a lot of metaphysical baggage. In Neo-Darwinian theory, random doesn't mean uncaused; it means that the changes aren't directed—they don't happen for any purpose. Moreover, they aren't predictable, like gravity, and don't occur for the benefit of individual organisms, species, or eco-systems, even if, under the guidance of natural selection, an occasional mutation might enhance a species' odds of survival.

The blind watchmaker thesis is more or less the same as Neo-Darwinism as its leading advocates understand it. It is usually wedded to some materialistic origin of life scenario, which isn't about biological evolution *per se*. This so-called chemical evolution is often combined with biological evolution as two parts of a single narrative.

Unfortunately, the blind watchmaker thesis isn't an eccentric definition of the word *evolution*. It's textbook orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Harvard paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson explained evolution by saying, “Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind.”<sup>5</sup> Darwin himself understood his theory this way: “There seems to be no more design,” he wrote, “in the variability of organic beings, and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the winds blow.”<sup>6</sup>

And here's how the late Darwinist Ernst Mayr put it: “The real core of Darwinism, however, is the theory of natural selection. This theory is so important for the Darwinian because it permits the explanation of adaptation, the ‘design’ of the natural theologian, by natural means, instead of by divine intervention.”<sup>7</sup>

Notice that Mayr says, “instead of.”

These are representative quotes from the literature. From the time of Darwin to the present, Darwinists have always contrasted their idea with the claim that biological forms are designed or created. That's the whole point of the theory.

Theists claim that the world, including the biological world, exists for a purpose; that it is, in some sense, designed. The blind watchmaker thesis denies this. So anyone wanting to reconcile strict Darwinian evolution with theism has a Grade A dilemma on his hands.

### RESOLVING THE DILEMMA, SORT OF

One way out is to redefine the theistic part. For instance, one could defend *deism*, with God getting things started at the beginning but not knowing or superintending nature after that. Dissolving a dilemma, however, is not the same as resolving it. If the adjective *theistic* in *theistic evolution* is not to be a misnomer, it should include a theistic view of God.

What about redefining it in the other direction? A theistic evolutionist could maintain that God sets up and guides nature so that it gives rise to everything from stars to starfish through a slowly developing process. Organisms perhaps share a common ancestor but reach their goal as intended by God. God works in nature, perhaps through cosmic initial conditions, physical laws, secondary processes, discrete acts, or some combination, to bring about His intended results, rather than creating everything from scratch. Whatever the details, on this view, the process of change and adaptation wouldn't be random or purposeless. It would implement a plan, and would reflect God's purposes. This would be a *teleological* version of evolution, and so would flatly reject the Darwinian blind watchmaker thesis.

This was the view of some early theistic evolutionists such as Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-discoverer of the concept of natural selection. Here the word *evolution* is being used in the pre-Darwinian,

even anti-Darwinian sense. History is the unfolding of a purposeful plan. This is a logically possible view; it is *not*, however, the view of many of today's theistic evolutionists, such as Francis Collins and Kenneth Miller. They seek to reconcile Christian theism with *Darwinian* evolution. They may affirm design in some broad sense at the cosmic level, but not in biology.

How should we respond? There's not much use in looking for evidence for this brand of theistic evolution, for the simple reason that it *can't* be true. It's not logically possible. It makes no sense to talk about a purposeful process that is nevertheless purposeless, or to talk about God directing an undirected process. To the degree that a view is Darwinian (as Darwinists understand it), it will not be theistic. And to the degree that it is theistic, it will not be Darwinian.

If you understand that basic point, you'll be much better equipped to navigate the current debate over theistic evolution.

**Jay W. Richards, Ph.D.**, is a Senior Fellow of Discovery Institute, editor of *God and Evolution* (Discovery Institute Press, 2010), and the author of *Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism Is the Solution and Not the Problem* (Harper One, 2009).

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## NOTES

- 1 In *Darwinism, Design, and Public Education*, ed. John Angus Campbell and Stephen C. Meyer (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2004).
- 2 See the explanation for the meaning of "evolution" from the BioLogos Foundation, which seeks to give a Christian defense of evolution. The explanation begins with "change over time," then goes on to fill out the definition with common descent and the Darwinian mechanism. But it quickly slips from defining the term to presenting the details as if they were uncontested facts. At: <http://biologos.org/questions/what-is-evolution/>.
- 3 I'm not saying this is true. I'm merely dealing with the logic of the ideas here. Since design is logically compatible with universal common descent, one could, strictly speaking, endorse both intelligent design and theistic evolution. Nevertheless, these days, ID and theistic evolution often describe people with different positions. See discussion of this point in the comments of Thomas Cudworth, "Olive Branch from Karl Giberson," *Uncommon Descent* (April 15, 2010), at: <http://www.uncommondescent.com/intelligent-design/olive-branch-from-karl-giberson/#more-13010>.
- 4 For discussion, see Casey Luskin, "Smelling Blood in the Water: Why Theistic Evolution Won't Appease the Atheists," in *God and Evolution*, ed. Jay W. Richards (Seattle: Discovery Institute, 2010).
- 5 G. G. Simpson, *The Meaning of Evolution: A Study of the History of Life and of Its Significance for Man*, rev. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 345.
- 6 Francis Darwin, *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton, 1887), 280, 283–84, 278–79.
- 7 Michael Ruse, *Darwinism Defended: A Guide to the Evolution Controversy*, with a foreword by Ernst Mayr (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982), xi–xii. Quoted in *ibid*.