

Science, Faith and the Debate on Origins

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Introduction

Contrary to popular culture, science and faith, when viewed properly, are not in conflict. Any alleged tension is borne out of an incorrect view of the extent to which science can point toward truth. Once the flaws of this view are recognized, the door opens to explanations of data that evolutionary scientists close off, and it becomes clear that the best explanation for the origin of life lies in the creative act of God, not blind evolutionary processes.

Are Science and Faith at Odds?

It is the job of the Christian apologist to “[a]lways be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”¹ Adequate preparation, though, includes an awareness of the cultural influences shaping people’s questions. One such influence is the intellectual allegiance to scientism, the view that scientific inquiry is the final arbiter on all matters of truth. According to Del Ratzsch, the “traditional conception of science” which was popular from the seventeenth through mid-twentieth centuries held that objectivity, empiricity and rationality could all be protected in scientific investigation.² However, the positivist movement took matters further and sought “to reduce all knowledge to scientific knowledge, all truths to empirical, scientific truths and all methods of knowing to empirical, scientific methods.”³ Specifically, positivists adopted the “verifiability criterion of meaning,”

¹ 1 Pet 3:15 (NIV).

² Del Ratzsch, *Science & Its Limits: The Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000),18.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

which stated that “no statement is even meaningful unless either it is in principle possible to empirically verify it (or at least to test it) or else it is ‘analytic.’”⁴

While positivism itself is self-defeating (the verifiability criterion of meaning fails to satisfy its own test), its rise contributed to the perception of a conflict between science and religion. Religious claims allegedly were not empirically verifiable and therefore not meaningful. Thus, if scientific conclusions conflicted with biblical revelation, the scientific consensus was to prevail.

Scripture, however, paints a very different picture, one in which rational inquiry is consistent, not in conflict with the Christian faith. Romans 1:20, for example, assumes that reason (and specifically observations about the world God has created) may be used to discover truths about Him.⁵ Brian K. Morley points out that Paul utilized reason to argue against a popular Stoic belief when he emphasized the reunification of the body and soul.⁶ Douglas Groothuis observes that Jesus Himself utilized *reductio ad absurdum* when He demonstrated the absurdity of the suggestion that Satan would fight against his own forces.⁷ Because God both created the universe and revealed Himself in Scripture, each are products of the same divine Being and therefore will (when properly understood) exist in harmony. Conflicts only arise

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” Rom 1:20 (NIV).

⁶ Brian K. Morley, *Mapping Apologetics: Comparing Contemporary Apologetic Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 34.

⁷ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 31-32; Mt 12:24-28; Lk 11:15-20.

between the truth of God’s infallible world and the fallible conclusions drawn by scientists.

Thus, often an early task of the apologist may be to help the nonbeliever see past the obstacle of scientism.

The Presuppositions and Limitations of Science

Science as a discipline cannot even justify its own presuppositions. Ratzsch points to several assumptions that must be taken by the naturalist as “brute facts,” including that nature is intelligible in the first place, that it is uniform (i.e., that what we observe on limited scales can be extrapolated to larger ones), and that we can draw reasonable conclusions about unobserved entities based upon those things we can observe.⁸ Vince Vitale adds that scientists must assume the universe will behave in the same way today that it has in the past, but even that assumption cannot be justified by scientific inquiry.

We just assume that when we wake up tomorrow the universe is going to carry on in the regular, stable way that it always has, without pausing to consider what an astonishing assumption that is. ... Why do we assume that the universe is going to continue to operate with regularity? We might respond, “Well, that’s how it’s always operated in the past.” But that’s not an answer; that’s precisely the question! *Why?* Why has it always done so, and why should we think it will continue to do so tomorrow?⁹

In addition to failing to justify its starting assumptions, Ratzsch points out that there are some questions science is fundamentally ill-equipped to answer, such as questions concerning matters of purpose or the ultimate explanation for the universe.¹⁰

⁸ Ratzsch, *Science & Its Limits*, 14-15.

⁹ Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale, *Jesus Among Secular Gods: The Countercultural Claims of Christ* (New York: Faith Words, 2017), 78.

¹⁰ Ratzsch, *Science & Its Limits*, 94-95.

For the theist these presuppositions can be grounded in the existence of a creative, intelligent agent. For instance, nature exhibits order. Elsewhere when we observe a high degree of order we rightfully conclude it was the work of an intelligent agent. Similarly, if the universe was created by a non-deceptive God, then the principle of uniformity may also be grounded. God would not deceive us by making our corner of the universe appear one way, but the rest of the universe operate in a completely different fashion. Finally, the limitations of science in the realms of purpose and origins are no obstacle for a theistic God capable of creating the universe and bringing meaning to our existence. Thus, understanding the necessary assumptions and limitations of science serves to further illustrate the relationship between science and faith and how faith in God can ground the entire scientific endeavor.

A Christian Perspective on Science

Far from limiting science, opening one's self up to a Christian theistic worldview removes arbitrary obstacles to the discovery of truth and can inspire scientific discovery. For example, unlike the theist, someone who starts from naturalistic presuppositions is limiting the available explanatory options before the inquiry even begins. There is nothing inherent in observational data *per se* that requires solely naturalistic explanations. That is an arbitrary limitation imposed upon science by naturalists. A Christian theist is perfectly willing to accept natural explanations, but he does not limit himself to them. If the most plausible interpretation of the data lies outside the natural realm, the theist will not *a priori* reject it.

Also, many scientists and natural philosophers throughout history have been motivated by their Christian faith to investigate God's creation. Nicolaus Copernicus was a 16th century Polish clergyman who argued that the sun was at the center of the universe, challenging the

prevailing Ptolemaic geocentric view.¹¹ According to James Hannam, Copernicus felt the Ptolemaic view was “too messy to have been designed by God.”¹² Thus, it was Copernicus’ faith in God which drove him to consider heliocentrism.

Johannes Kepler similarly believed in God as an orderly designer and his success in tracking the motion of the planets was borne out of his Christian faith. While his faith in an orderly God caused him to adhere to the axiom of uniform motion, he realized that the notion of circular planetary orbits popular amongst his contemporaries actually came from the Greeks. Thus, he could abandon it without denying God’s fingerprint in creation. His Christian worldview pointed him toward a more accurate interpretation and enabled him to find that the planets orbited in ellipses.¹³

Faith as motivation is one thing. However, even if it is a strong motivator, the question of whether faith is philosophically and intellectually compatible with science is a separate issue. Some, like the late Stephen Jay Gould, find no room for influence between them. Gould developed his concept of “the Principle of NOMA, or Non-Overlapping Magisteria,”¹⁴ which he explained as follows.

I do not see how science and religion could be unified, or even synthesized, under any common scheme of explanation or analysis; but I also do not understand why the two enterprises should experience any conflict. Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important,

¹¹ James Hannam, *The Genesis of Science: How the Christian Middle Ages Launched the Scientific Revolution* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2011), 273.

¹² *Ibid.*, 277.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 295-96.

¹⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 5.

but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings and values – subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve.¹⁵

Gould's attempt at separation has not, by and large, been accepted in scholarly circles for reasons explained by John Polkinghorne.

Not only is NOMA contrary to actual experience; its approach is rationally flawed. To maintain its asserted separation it needs to appeal to highly dubious dichotomies, such as the notion that science deals only with public facts and religion only with private opinions. Both halves of this statement are in error. There are no interesting scientific facts that are not already interpreted facts.¹⁶

If science and faith are not so neatly separated, the question arises of the proper Christian perspective on the relationship between the two. The answer is to afford God His proper place. According to Hannam, 11th century theologian St. Anselm of Canterbury held that “faith was prior to understanding.”¹⁷ In other words, because our reasoning abilities were given to us by God, it is appropriate to utilize them in order to better understand Him. However, in the hierarchy of faith and understanding, faith is primary, meaning that God's revelation in Scripture must be afforded precedence over the fallible conclusions of scientists. Even the current consensus view of the scientific community, if in clear conflict with what we have been told by the creator of the universe, cannot be accepted as authoritative. After all, there are plenty of instances throughout history in which the scientific consensus has later been proven wrong, and others in which an irrational devotion to naturalism is clearly and unduly influencing scholarly opinion. The debate over the origin of life is one such area.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶ John Polkinghorne, “The Continuing Interaction of Science and Religion,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 40, no. 1 (2005): 45.

¹⁷ Hannam, *The Genesis of Science*, 38.

The Significance of Evolution Versus Creation as a Theory of Origins

The insistence of evolutionary scientists on elevating their naturalistic presuppositions above God's revelation has led them to a radically different conception of origins. Whereas Scripture reveals all creation was the handiwork of God, naturalism *a priori* excludes any explanations based on supernatural intelligence. Thus, naturalists must come up with some other theory that fits their worldview. They have based their preferred answer on Charles Darwin's 1859 work, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.

Natural selection is a relatively straightforward concept and not inherently contrary to creationism. As Donald Batten explains, it is merely the notion that "[c]reatures with features (traits) suited to survival in a given environment tend to survive better than those that do not have those features."¹⁸ However, evolutionists then make an intellectual jump from the noncontroversial reality of natural selection to the sweeping General Theory of Evolution (GTE).

In contrast to GTE, the more conservative Special Theory of Evolution (STE) refers only to simple changes in occurring within a species. Natural selection is a reasonable explanation as to how many of these changes may occur, none of which challenge creationist thinking. GTE, however, leaps from the generally acknowledged reality of STE to a broad theory of one species transforming into another.¹⁹

¹⁸ Donald Batten, "Natural Selection," in *Evolution's Achilles Heel*, ed. Robert Carter (Powder Springs, GA: Creation Book Publishers, 2015), 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

This distinction is an important one for Christians. As Batten explains, in the first chapter of Genesis “[t]he formula, ‘according to their kinds’ or ‘after their kinds’ is used repeatedly (10 times) in reference to the creation of different types of living things.”²⁰ He goes on to argue that the Bible says God created general “kinds,” not all the various specific creatures walking the earth today. Thus, speciation (i.e., changes within a created kind) is entirely consistent with the biblical description. The “kinds” that were created by God contained all the needed genetic information to allow variation within that kind over time. GTE, however, claims one kind evolves into a completely different kind. In other words, all species allegedly find their origin in the same common ancestor. This contradicts God’s creation of separate kinds in favor of only one ancient life form from which all others emerged.

How Assumptions Influence Interpretation

As noted above, Romans 1:20 assumes that believers and non-believers alike are capable of seeing God in the world around them. Therefore, Christians do not need to reject out of hand scientific conclusions that come from non-Christian scholars. However, a person’s interpretation of the data from the natural world will inevitably be influenced by that individual’s worldview. A naturalist will look at the data and try to make it fit within a purely naturalistic framework whereas a theist will be open to interpretations that include both natural law and acts of God.

GTE is a prime example of this influence as can be seen in the way naturalists view genetics. DNA is more than merely an ordered sequence of nucleotides. The specific organization of these nucleotides conveys information. In other words, as Jonathan Sarvati

²⁰ Ibid., 28.

explains, it includes “a non-repeating, non-predictable arrangement of signals that can be read and understood by some pre-engineered system with a predetermined set of rules for storing, retrieving, and interpreting instructions.”²¹ In any other context, we would recognize the presence of such rich information as being indicative of an intelligent agent. However, because the evolutionist’s presuppositions do not permit them to consider intelligent agency, they must jump through intellectual hoops in an attempt to explain the generation of information via non-intelligent processes. They have attempted to cite gene mutations, but as Batten points out, the overwhelming majority of mutations are harmful to an organism. Even those that are beneficial result from something being broken at the molecular level, not the generation of something new.²² Evolutionists have also grasped at gene switches like that in stickleback fish and argued that these switches can generate new genetic information. But again, Batten observes that gene switches merely activate or deactivate genetic information that is already present in an organism. They do not create new information.²³

These failed naturalistic explanations illustrate a significant problem with the manner in which much of scientific inquiry is carried out today. Evolutionary scientists insist that all scientific investigation must be conducted by first assuming naturalism as an operating principle. However, history demonstrates that the exact opposite is true. Copernicus doubted Ptolemy’s geocentric model explicitly because he started from a theistic worldview. The same could be said of Kepler’s motivation for discovering the uniformity of the planets’ orbits around the sun.

²¹ Jonathan Sarvati, “The Origin of Life,” in *Evolution’s Achilles Heel*, ed. Robert Carter (Powder Springs, GA: Creation Book Publishers, 2015), 85.

²² Batten, “Natural Selection,” 35.

²³ *Ibid.*, 40-42

It is precisely because these men did not assume naturalism, but rather that the universe was a reflection of God, that they were able to make their contributions. Thus, when evolutionists insist on methodological naturalism, they are cutting themselves off from potential scientific discovery, not enhancing it.

The Origin of Species and Superiority of Creation

If practitioners of modern science refuse to adhere to their colleagues' naturalistic mandate, it should become clear that creation is a superior explanation for the origin of species and humanity. Examples of this superior explanatory power can be found (among other areas) in the biological realm of DNA, the origin of the first life, the fossil record and the geologic record.

As noted above, GTE requires the infusion of massive amounts of new genetic information before natural selection can favor one gene over another. Not only do evolutionists fail to arrive at an adequate explanation for the origin of such information, they also fail to appreciate the full extent of the problem, even on their proposed timetable. According to evolutionists, the earth is 4.54 billion years old. However, as Emil Silvestru points out, multicellular life did not allegedly arrive on the scene until approximately 1 billion years ago, meaning for the first 3.54 billion years, evolution only developed the most basic forms of multicellular life.²⁴ Then, a sudden explosion of information occurred. As Stephen C. Meyer details,

For over 3 billion years, the living world included little more than one-celled organisms such as bacteria and algae. Then, beginning in the late Ediacaran period (about 555-570 million years ago), the first complex multicellular organisms appeared in the rock strata ... This represented a large increase in complexity. ... Then 40 million years later, the Cambrian explosion occurred. Suddenly the oceans swarmed with animals such as trilobites and anomalocaridids

²⁴ Emil Silvestru, "The Fossil Record," in *Evolution's Achilles Heel*, ed. Robert Carter (Powder Springs, GA: Creation Book Publishers, 2015), 117.

that probably required fifty or more cell types – an even greater jump in complexity.²⁵

Even assuming the evolutionist could come up with some remotely plausible naturalistic means for the generation of new genetic information, the time permitted for such information to come into being, *even assuming the evolutionist's position of an old earth*, is unfathomably short.

In contrast, Grant R. Jeffrey has pointed out that “researchers studied the information patterns encoded in the DNA of ‘simple’ bacteria. To their surprise, the scientists discovered that similar complex mathematical information patterns exist in both human language as well as in DNA.”²⁶ In other words, an intelligent agent can generate the type of information seen in DNA even though evolutionary processes cannot.

Similarly, whereas the theist can point to God’s action as the explanation for the first life, evolutionists have no answer. In the 1920s, A.I. Oparin and J.B.S. Haldane proposed that the early Earth atmosphere consisted of methane, ammonia, water vapor and hydrogen gas.²⁷ Thus, in 1953 Stanley Urey conducted an experiment utilizing these elements in his simulated atmosphere and successfully created some amino acids. The lack of oxygen in the alleged atmosphere was essential for the chemical reactions necessary for the experiment’s success. However, the reality of the early earth was far different from a controlled experiment in a laboratory. With no oxygen there could have been no ozone layer, allowing ultraviolet radiation

²⁵ Stephen C. Meyer, *Darwin’s Doubt: The Explosive Origin of Animal Life and the Case for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 163.

²⁶ Grant R. Jeffrey, *Creation: Remarkable Evidence of God’s Design* (Colorado Springs: Waterbook Press, 2003), 155.

²⁷ Jonathan Wells, *Icons of Evolution: Science or Myth?* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2000), 9, 13.

to permeate the atmosphere. As Jonathan Wells observes, this creates a significant problem for evolutionists.

Atmospheric scientists know that ultraviolet rays from sunlight cause dissociation of water vapor in the upper atmosphere. This process, called “photodissociation,” splits water molecules into hydrogen and oxygen. The hydrogen escapes into space leaving the oxygen behind in the atmosphere.²⁸

With hydrogen escaping into space, it could not have remained behind in the earth’s atmosphere, so Urey’s experiment could not have been an accurate representation of the earliest conditions.

While amino acids are still an enormously long way off from creating actual life, Urey still failed to achieve even this small preliminary step in any meaningful way.

The evolutionist’s problems are deepened by various chicken and the egg scenarios. Chaperonins, for example, are proteins that help other proteins fold properly. However, as Sarvati explains chaperonins also must be folded correctly themselves, begging the question of how the very first chaperonins were folded when there were no other chaperonins around to assist them.²⁹

Complicating matters further, the evolutionist also has issues with the fossil record. Emil Silvestru lays out expectations for what should be seen in the fossil record if evolution were true versus if biblical creation were true. For example, if earth’s history was as suggested by evolutionists, then we should see transitional fossils between evolutionary stages, simpler life in older sedimentary layers with more complex life in later layers, and animals of like kind being buried together (i.e., land animals with other land animals and marine creatures with other marine creatures). In contrast, if biblical creationism accurately describes earth’s history,

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

²⁹ Sarvati, “The Origin of Life,” 85.

creatures should appear suddenly, transitional fossils should be lacking, the various “kinds” should be evident before the flood and increase in variation thereafter, and animals from different habitats may be buried together due to being washed away by flood waters.³⁰

As it turns out, the fossil record is resoundingly more consistent with the creationist account than that proposed by evolutionary theory. It does not show the slow, gradual development of species, but rather is marked by sudden developments and long periods of stasis.³¹ Numerous fossils are “offset,” meaning they are found in sedimentary layers where evolution would say they should not be, and land animals (such as Hadrosaurs, a Nodosaurus and an Ankylosaurus) have been found in marine sediment.³² None of this evidence fits with an evolutionary model, but it does match the biblical history of creation and the Noahdic flood.

Finally, the assumption of a 4.54 billion-year history of the earth, necessary before evolutionary theory can even get off the ground, has influenced geologists to suppose that the layers of sediment have gradually developed over time. However, Tasman Walker points to several features of the geologic record that simply do not make sense on such a model. The 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens caused 25 feet of layered sediment to appear in just one afternoon.³³ Polystrate tree trunk fossils have been discovered crossing over multiple strata.³⁴ Blankets of sediment demonstrating “rapid and energetic deposition” are found covering huge

³⁰ Silvestru, “The Fossil Record,” 115-16.

³¹ Ibid., 123-24, 138.

³² Ibid., 125.

³³ Tasman Walker, “The Geologic Record,” in *Evolution’s Achilles Heel*, ed. Robert Carter (Powder Springs, GA: Creation Book Publishers, 2015), 164.

³⁴ Ibid., 173.

areas of the continents.³⁵ “Flat gaps” are evident between sedimentary layers in which millions of years have allegedly elapsed, yet there is no evidence of any erosion occurring.³⁶ While inconsistent with evolution, all of these findings would be expected given a global flood.

The consistent pictures painted by DNA, the origin of the first life, the fossil record and the geologic record all point to the same biblical picture revealed by God thousands of years before these scientific discoveries were made. An unnecessary adherence to naturalism only leaves scientists scrounging for explanations that will never fit the evidence because they are contrary to manner in which God created the universe.

Conclusion

Science and faith do not need to be in conflict. Such perceived tension only arises when God is not given His proper place as sovereign creator. Once His transcendence and activity are acknowledged, the pictures painted by Scripture and the scientific data fall into harmony. Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of the origin of life. Evolutionary explanations need billions of years in order to even begin approaching plausibility. But the evidence for those billions of years is lacking and what evidence is available is more suggestive of God’s creation and the flood disaster. The most logical response to the data is to remove the arbitrary obstacle evolutionary scientists place in front of themselves. Allow God’s revelation back into our search for truth, letting Him illuminate our discovery, and a consistent picture emerges.

³⁵ Ibid., 174-75.

³⁶ Ibid., 176.

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