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Can Science Answer Life's Big Questions?

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170

John A. Bloom



Can Science Answer Life's Big Questions? The Error of Allowing Naturalism to Dictate our Origins Models.

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Abstract: The modern tensions between Christianity and science stem mainly from the philosophical assumption of methodological naturalism as a filter for proper “scientific” answers, even for answers to the Big Questions regarding our origins. The pressure to conform to this secular religious view and the way naturalism skews the interpretation of scientific data may unwittingly drive some Christians to propose and defend inconsistent biblical interpretations like theistic evolution.

Key Words: origin of life, human origins, theistic evolution, evolutionary creation, science, methodological naturalism, intelligent design, theology, physical resurrection

Introduction

As a scientist who is also a theologian, it is not unusual for someone who learns of my dual backgrounds and interests to give me a wry smile or inquisitive look and ask, “That’s odd... so how do you fit them together?”

If I have the liberty to give a long answer, I mention that I also have a background as a historian, and if you go back only a century or two, you find that almost everyone then thought that science and theology did fit together – and fit quite well, since they believed that God’s works and God’s word both had the same Author.¹ But perhaps most importantly, people back then did not expect science alone to answer life’s Big Questions, such as those concerning our origins and purpose. What makes any connections between Christianity and science seem “odd” today is that many people uncritically let science answer these Big Questions without seeing that methodological naturalism is a religious assumption in modern science which dictates the troublesome “scientific” answers for many Christians. As I continue my answer below, I will outline how this religious assumption in science developed, note science’s shortcomings in answering the Big Questions concerning the origin of life and of humans, and point out the failure of theistic evolution to recognize this religious problem within science and solve it.

1. Alister E. McGrath, *Science & Religion*, repr. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000), 139-42.

Myths about Science and Theology

“Science and Christianity have always been at war with each other.” “The Bible is totally irrelevant for understanding the physical world.” These modern myths about science and theology are urban legends which serve our secular culture well as propaganda, but which historians of science repeatedly have shown to have little basis in fact.² Unfortunately, these myths got started and then become popular because early science looked like a convenient tool to use for avoiding a cosmic authority figure as the answer to life’s Big Questions.³ For these early authority-avoiding advocates of science, eternal physical laws and mechanical processes became a convenient substitute for God, who had nothing to do in a world strictly governed by mathematics. Certainly the study of physical laws and mechanical processes have given us incredible knowledge, ranging from the sub-atomic to the universal; and with this knowledge, we have gained technologies which have revolutionized every dimension of our lives in health, food, energy, communication, transportation, and even entertainment. But for all of the ways which it improves our lives, science has a glaring weakness in that it ultimately cannot answer the Big Questions of life: Where did we come from? What is our purpose for being here? Where are we going?

Now anyone who watches NOVA specials or reads popular-level science magazines is well aware that science definitely claims to answer these Big Questions without mentioning God, and it is true that science offers some insight and new perspectives about them. However, the voice-over giving the “no God is necessary” answers is not science, but the philosophy which strait-jackets science today: naturalism. The myth that science and Christianity are in conflict is a disguise for the fact that the struggle is actually between Christianity and the competing religion of naturalism.⁴

Naturalism in Science

Naturalism is the position that the only things which exist are natural or physical. When the systematic study of nature is subject to this constraint, any explanation which is “scientific” must appeal only to natural or physical causes.⁵ If something non-physical acted in the world, it would be super-natural and outside the realm

2. John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Gary B. Ferngren, ed., *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

3. Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130-31.

4. See, for example, Michael Ruse’s recent *Darwinism as Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

5. Lui Lam, *Science Defined*, February 20, 2015, accessed April 15, 2017, <http://www.sjsu.edu/people/lui.lam/scimat/Science%20Defined-150220.pdf>.

of science. Often this approach in contemporary science is called “methodological naturalism” to distinguish itself from philosophical or atheistic naturalism, but the effects are the same. A “Divine Foot in the door” is not allowed,⁶ and thus science must give naturalistic answers no matter what the data show, not only to everyday mechanical questions, but even to the Big Questions. Consequently, according to “science” the universe either has always existed or somehow made itself; we are just lucky evolutionary accidents who somehow just happened to appear on a grain of sand on the shores of an infinite beach of galaxies; our thoughts are merely chemical reactions and thus we have no free will; and when we die, the lights simply go out.

However, these religious answers did not come from science, but from the philosophy which today holds it captive. Looking at the same scientific data, there are many scientists (like myself) who see ourselves in a God-created and wonderfully designed and fine-tuned universe, on a beautifully crafted planet we call our home, with an obvious purpose to glorify God by studying His handiwork, and with the expectation of enjoying life with Him forever.

But beyond giving naturalistic answers to the Big Questions, (methodological) naturalism subtly has strangled the spirit of science by supplying the answers to *all* of our questions: whatever was, is, or is to come, will ultimately be explained by mechanical, physical processes: for instance, the thoughts you are having now are merely chemical reactions inside your brain. And when a naturalistic answer like this one does not seem to fit the data or feel quite right, we are assured that our doubts are a superstitious hangover and that, given enough funding and time, a more convincing naturalistic explanation will be forthcoming. Like the boring Sunday School teacher whose questions always have “Jesus” as the answer, science under naturalism’s thumb is boring because it always offers the same answer: “Naturalism.”

Of course, I am not arguing that we should not *prefer* and even *expect* mechanical causes for physical events, but (methodological) naturalism is not saying that: it asserts that ALL causes are mechanical. It is absolutely out of bounds scientifically to consider anything else, no matter how weak any current mechanical explanation might be.⁷ For example, the strongest evidence for the existence of the multiverse being cited today is the fine-tuning of our own universe: it is too spooky to think that our own well-crafted universe could have happened only by chance, hence there must be countless other throws of the dice which happened out there somewhere and resulted in innumerable, chemically and structurally boring, lifeless universes.⁸

6. Richard C. Lewontin, “Billions and Billions of Demons,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 4, 1997, accessed January 30, 2000, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1997/01/09/billions-and-billions-of-demons/>

7. Cornelius G. Hunter, *Science’s Blind Spot: The Unseen Religion of Scientific Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007).

8. See Jeffrey A. Zweerink, *Who’s Afraid of the Multiverse?* (Glendora, CA: Reasons to Believe, 2008).

A Better Approach: Follow the Evidence

It is unfortunate that naturalism has become the defining feature of science today, because there are much better definitions and approaches for science. One of my favorites comes from the maverick theoretical physicist Richard Feynman, who quipped: “Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts.”⁹ For science to make progress you have to question textbook orthodoxy and to assume that your professors and “the consensus view” are wrong. I remember my thesis advisor remarking on more than one occasion that the greatest achievements in his long career were the times when he proved that the popular views on various issues in biophysics were dead wrong.

While Feynman did not apply his definition of science to philosophical concerns, I suggest that the experts’ assumption of naturalism as the exclusive scientific approach can and should be questioned. Galileo made progress in his day by challenging the reigning and stifling Aristotelian influence on science;¹⁰ I suggest that progress today can be made by allowing the philosophical spirit of science to be open to the spirit of God. As Feynman notes, a truly scientific spirit challenges consensus and the status quo. A look in the historical rear-view mirror shows that virtually all scientific progress occurred by questioning what was the then-current orthodoxy, one of which has been Aristotelian philosophy.

Christians can be vanguards in politely raising this philosophical issue in contemporary science. If we follow the evidence where it leads without presuming naturalistic answers, we might make fascinating discoveries: maybe the fine-tuning of the universe means that Someone wanted us to be here. Perhaps Someone programmed functions into non-protein-coding “junk DNA,” so we should not dismiss it as “genetic flotsam and jetsam” and claim it is strong evidence for macro-evolution.¹¹

But it is risky to be vanguards. It could cost you your career, as we see today with those who dare to question any aspect of anthropogenic climate change.¹² Science is a human endeavor, after all, and has all the problems of political correctness, group think, overbearing authority figures, and urban legends. For all of its textbook claims

9. Richard P. Feynman, “What is Science,” *The Physics Teacher* 7, no. 6 (September 1969): 313-320, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1119/1.2351388>.

10. See Charles E. Hummel, *The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts between Science and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986).

11. David Klinghoffer, “On Junk DNA Claim, Francis Collins Walks It Back, Admitting ‘Hubris,’” *Evolution News and Views*, July 19, 2016, accessed July 20, 2016, http://www.evolutionnews.org/2016/07/on_junk_dna_fra103008.html.

12. Roger Pielke Jr., “My Unhappy Life as a Climate Heretic,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 2, 2016, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/my-unhappy-life-as-a-climate-heretic-1480723518>. See also Judith Curry, “JC in transition,” *Climate Etc.*, January 3, 2017, accessed January 10, 2017, <https://judithcurry.com/2017/01/03/jc-in-transition/> and <http://www.uncommon-descent.com/intelligent-design/85127/>.

to love “open inquiry,” many scientists are extremely intolerant of dissent.¹³ This is why humility and the willingness to say, “You know, I could be wrong,” are such virtues. Nevertheless, as much as we are able, it is important to ask probing questions, since this might steer the ship a little in the right direction. For example, Michael Behe’s much maligned work on irreducible complexity in *Darwin’s Black Box*¹⁴ did lead one researcher to admit recently:

“Since the subject of cellular emergence of life is unusually complicated (we avoid the term ‘complex’ because of its association with ‘biocomplexity’ or ‘irreducible complexity’), it is unlikely that any overall theory of life’s nature, emergence, and evolution can be fully formulated, quantified, and experimentally investigated.”¹⁵

This brings us to one of the Big Questions where naturalism is falling on hard times: the origin of life. As the quotation above acknowledges, the explosion of scientific understanding in how life works reveals an “unusually complicated” biochemistry, filled with chicken-and-egg problems and such elegant fine-tuning that living cells make the rest of the universe seem trivial in comparison.¹⁶ Yet, even though we may never fully formulate, quantify and experimentally investigate life (all of the things which science is good at), we are still assured that life arose by some naturalistic process. It is striking how this religious voice still manages to speak despite the growing mountain of knowledge which shouts otherwise.

Does Theistic Evolution Work?

Since we are on the topic of biology, it is worth discussing this Big Question as well: How did we humans get here? And what about all the evidence for evolution? When beginning any discussion of evolution, it is important to distinguish between micro- (small changes) and macro- (large changes) evolution. As Michael Behe notes

13. This is a sociological fact about the scientific community and is typical of many groups. Thus sociology often explains “consensus science” instead of strong and clear scientific data. When citizens or non-specialists observe that the “consensus” in a discipline is being strictly enforced and used for political purposes, they need to be especially cautious about what that consensus asserts: it likely is not true. For example, the knee-jerk rejection of Intelligent Design and the wholesale acceptance of naturalistic evolution by most university scientists are driven by strong sociological factors, which in turn influences many Christian university scientists to accept theistic evolution. Note that Lewontin voices similar sociological concerns in “Billions,” op. cit..

14. Michael J. Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Free, 2006).

15. Jan Spitzer, “Emergence of Life on Earth: A Physicochemical Jigsaw Puzzle,” *Journal of Molecular Evolution* 84 no. 1 (January 2017): 1-7, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s00239-016-9775-3>.

16. Stephen C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2010); Fazale Rana, *The Cell’s Design: How Chemistry Reveals the Creator’s Artistry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008); Fazale Rana and Hugh Ross, *Origins of Life: Biblical and Evolutionary Models Face Off* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004).

in *The Edge of Evolution*, small changes can be easily documented and studied, but extrapolating this process to explain the origin of large changes is problematic because the required modifications are extensive and coordinated, something which the neo-Darwinian mechanism of random mutation seems incapable of doing.¹⁷

But there is a philosophical problem with macro-evolution too. Naturalism requires it to be a completely unguided process: it cannot look ahead, anticipate, or plan a path towards any goal. Macro-evolution says that somehow the static on my radio can turn into Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, without the need for Beethoven. While "natural selection" (environmental feedback) still appears in textbooks as the filter for turning genetic static into birds and people, evolutionary biologists now realize that most environmental influences are so weak and undirected that they do not go anywhere. Thus the "neutral theory of evolution" (non-adaptation-driven) is now the buzzword.¹⁸ In other words, since it has become clear that filtering static will not turn it into great music, today we are assured that *unfiltered* static will turn into Beethoven's Fifth, given enough time. If naturalism were not holding the spirit of science captive, would such a mechanism be seriously considered?

Given these problems with macro-evolution, why are many Christians in the biological sciences "theistic evolutionists"?¹⁹ Why do they see this undirected, unguided macro-evolution as the mechanism which God used to make us? Some scientists I have met became Christians later in life, and probably have not taken the time to think through the ways in which naturalism still deeply influences their scientific and theological views.²⁰ Others maintain a dissonance by saying that God somehow guides what happened through evolutionary processes in a way which science cannot see, perhaps not recognizing that Darwin's main goal in formulating his theory was to completely remove God from the process.²¹ Still others were raised

17. Michael J. Behe, *The Edge of Evolution: The Search for the Limits of Darwinism* (New York: Free, 2007).

18. Laurent Duret, "Neutral theory: The null hypothesis of molecular evolution." *Nature Education* 1 no. 1 (January 2008): 218, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/neutral-theory-the-null-hypothesis-of-molecular-839>.

19. The term "theistic evolution" or "evolutionary creation" is difficult to define, given the range of positions found among the spokespersons who use these terms. One of the best and most objective presentations of this and the full range of creation/evolution views is Gerald Rau, *Mapping the Origins Debate: Six Models for the Beginning of Everything* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012). For our purposes here, the common thread among theistic evolutionists is their belief that humans had non-human ancestors. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 275-79; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 504-7; Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 233-34, s.v. "Evolution, Theistic."

20. Unfortunately, I believe that Francis Collins, a great scientist, Christian, and author of *The Language of God* (New York: Free, 2007), falls in this category.

21. Historically, the American Botanist Asa Gray corresponded with Darwin over this point, and Darwin eventually rebuffed Gray for his theistic interpretation. See Janet Browne, "Asa Gray and Charles Darwin: Corresponding Naturalists," *Harvard Papers in Botany* 15 no. 2 (December 2010): 209-20, accessed June 7, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.3100/025.015.0204>.

as young-earth creationists, but totally converted over to the Darwinist side after they felt betrayed by the weaknesses of some young-earth arguments. Now, after seeing the popularity and elegance of Darwinist logic, they are unwilling to consider any creation-friendly positions.²²

Since we are human, it is possible to be blinded by clever arguments and not see their weaknesses, especially when they are the main stream, well-funded, and peer-supported “consensus view.” One example of such a brilliant but poor argument is macro-evolutionary theory’s assumption that physical and/or genetic similarity is an absolute proof of common descent. Of course, the kittens in a litter sleeping by a female cat are likely her descendants, but when we start making historical arguments about ancient animals based on fossil or genetic data where the supposed intermediates are unknown extrapolations, we need to pause and realize that now we are doing forensics, and we cannot have the same level of certainty as we have with the kittens. As a historian, I have found many cases where looks are deceiving, and the real situation was far more complex than the surviving artifacts imply.²³ But if one is locked into naturalism, then common descent is the only possible physical mechanism to explain similarity, and the many anomalies and exceptions to this are ignored or become “research problems” to discuss in upper level biology courses on convergent evolution,²⁴ after all of the students are converted to Darwinism in the freshman biology class. A broader worldview perspective is open to agent causation and would take the exceptions seriously.²⁵

Nowhere does the influence of naturalism in science get more personal than with the topic of human origins. By presuming naturalism when being “scientific,” it is a foregone conclusion that humans have common ancestry with other primates and evolved their modern abilities gradually over eons. No fossils or other data are required to affirm this position: the religion of naturalism dictates the correct answer to science. The story about an independently and specially created first human couple, having communion with God in an idyllic setting before they rebelled against Him, must then be a myth.

22. This position is well exemplified by Karl W. Giberson, *Saving Darwin: How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

23. One example is the existence of two cities called Jericho in New Testament times (relatively recent history), which explains how Jesus healed Bartimaeus when he was both leaving (Mark 10:46) and entering (Luke 18:35) “Jericho.” See *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1646.

24. See Tom Bethell, “The Conundrum of Convergence,” in *Darwin’s House of Cards* (Seattle, WA: Discovery Institute, 2017), 115-25.

25. Cornelius Hunter, “Sugar Gliders, Flying Squirrels, and How Evolutionists Explain Away Uncooperative Data,” *Evolution News and Views*, January 25, 2017, accessed January 25, 2017, http://www.evolutionnews.org/2017/01/sugar_gliders_fl03440.html.

Suggestive Contrary Evidence

Yet a little scratching around in the data regarding human origins offers some suggestive clues that we indeed did have a unique start compared to the animals. For one, humans do not have some families of viruses which are commonplace in primates, yet these viruses can infect us today if we happen to have close contact with primates. But if we are related to primates via common descent, it is strange that we did not carry these ancient viruses along with us as we evolved apart, like they did.²⁶ Also, genetic studies on mitochondria, which are passed along in the cytoplasm of a mother's egg to her children's cells, converge back to a single female "Mitochondrial Eve" about 150,000 years ago, much more recently than a standard common descent model would expect. Similarly, the male Y-chromosome, which fathers pass on only to their sons, shows a convergence back to a single male "Adam" at about this same time.²⁷ For the naturalist, these data pose research problems but do not lead anyone to question the core assumption of universal common descent; for those with a wider philosophical toolkit available, these data are suggestive of a unique origin for humans.

But what about all of the other evidence for human evolution – the hominid fossils, for example? Fossil data do not give us a historical lineage or prove ancestry: a philosophical assumption is what bridges together and links the fossils. It is possible that God specially created Adam 'from scratch' out of the dust of the ground, yet he looked similar to the other life forms which God created previously. God is not required to reinvent the wheel and to create new life which is totally distinct from what He created before, any more than we demand that every time an artist makes a new painting, it must be radically different from all of his previous work. Similarity alone does not prove descent. Personally, I keep being reminded of this every few weeks because a fellow who attends my very large church looks almost identical to me, yet we have no known "common ancestor" in our family histories. His friends and my friends easily mistake one of us for the other, but fortunately our wives can tell us apart!

A Biblical Problem for Theistic Evolution

Wanting to follow the naturalistic assumption approach in science and require mechanical explanations for everything, the theistic evolutionist goes with common descent and regards Genesis as figurative. However, I think there is a serious problem in adopting this naturalistic approach to the origin of Adam if we look more broadly

26. Ann Gauger, "A Puzzle about Human Uniqueness," *Biologic Institute*, April 21, 2012, accessed April 22, 2012, <http://www.biologicinstitute.org/post/21513285720/a-puzzle-about-human-uniqueness>.

27. Fazale Rana with Hugh Ross, *Who was Adam? A Creation Model Approach to the Origin of Humanity*, 2nd ed. (Covina, CA: RTB, 2015).

at Bible history. According to numerous Old and New Testament passages, human history will culminate with the physical resurrection of every person who has lived on earth, both the righteous and the unrighteous (Dan 12:2, Isa 26:19). The Great White Throne Judgment follows this resurrection (Rev 20:11-5). How is God physically going to re-create the billions of people who have lived on the earth, most of whose bodies have completely decayed away to dust (Gen 3:19)? Will God do this through some gradual evolutionary process, or suddenly? The answer is clear: we are told in 1 Corinthians 15:52 that God will raise the dead “in the blink of an eye.” Since these passages refer to people “sleeping in the dust of the earth,” it is reasonable to suppose that God will quickly re-create them from the dust of the earth.²⁸ Here is my point: If we believe that someday God will physically and suddenly – at the Last Trumpet – re-embody the spirits of billions of people on the Last Day, what is the problem with believing that God suddenly created the physical body of the First Man from the dust of the earth and ensouled him? If God has the power to resurrect billions, He does not need evolution to create Adam.

Of course, knowing exactly what happened in the distant past is extremely difficult. Ancient history suffers from a severe lack of data, and it certainly does not enjoy the convenience of repeatability which empowers good lab science. But a lack of data is too-easily bridged by philosophical assumptions, and the data which contradict a favored philosophical assumption are easy to overlook. As in forensics, where a lack of data is too-easily bridged by bias and a favored suspicion of guilt, I fear that the theistic evolutionist is “going with the flow” of naturalism instead of resisting the presumption that Adam had ancestors and thus keeping more biblical hypotheses about human origins on the table. Is it scientifically crazy to think that God made the first humans in a special and distinct way? Not if one takes data like viral isolation, Mitochondrial Eve and Y-chromosome Adam as more than research problems and recognizes that the assumption of common ancestry with other primates is just that: a naturalistic assumption predicated on the belief that God never acts in the physical world (if He exists at all).

Conclusion

In summary, the Big Questions of life remain firmly within the religious domain, and unfortunately science today is committed to providing answers consistent with its naturalistic religious presupposition. Once a Christian realizes this, it is very liberating to see that a disguised religious position is interpreting the data and driving the “scientific” conclusions, and that a fair-minded look at the data clearly point to a Creator as the best answer. Instead of caving in to an alternative religious position

28. The alternatives are that the resurrection is an *ex nihilo* creation rather than from pre-existing matter, which is not a problem for this argument, or that the resurrection is only a “spiritual” resurrection, which the church condemned centuries ago as the heresy of Gnosticism.

John A. Bloom: *Can Science Answer Life's Big Questions?*

in order to be called “scientists,” I suggest that Christians in the sciences work like Galileo to free the spirit of science from its enslavement to philosophies like naturalism or Aristotelianism and infuse it appropriately with the spirit of God. If God’s works are free to speak for themselves, they indeed will declare His glory.