

# The Creation versus Evolution Debate

Andrew Perry

THERE HAS BEEN AN EXPLOSION of 'Bible-science' literature in the last twenty years. This has been partly driven by the revolution in molecular biology, which has given rise to a renewed advocacy of the concept of design<sup>1</sup> in the form of 'intelligent design' (ID). It has also been driven by a cluster of thinkers arguing for atheism (the 'new atheists'), which has in turn engendered a response from Christian apologists.

The Internet is also a factor. There are now many websites devoted to bible-science issues, with many forums discussing what is true and false in this area. A search on Google will quickly reveal that there are 'old-earth creationists', 'young-earth creationists' and 'theistic evolutionists' putting forward various and conflicting harmonisations of the Bible and science. Such harmonisation ranges from rejection of the detail of Genesis at one end of a continuum, through various reinterpretations in the middle of the spectrum of views, to a literal acceptance of Genesis at the other end of the scale.

If theistic evolution and young-earth creationism are polar opposites, old-earth creationism sits in the middle between these two extremes. Putting science to one side, Biblically we assume that old-earth creationism is the correct exegesis of Genesis 1.<sup>2</sup> Bringing science back to the table, obviously an old earth is an established fact.

Opinion polls show that many religious people do not believe in evolution, despite it being the secular orthodoxy and taught in an unquestioning way in schools. It seems that when ordinary people look at the wonders of nature, and then hear the religious teaching that God is the Creator of all that they see, they naturally see an agreement or 'concordance', and so they believe as a matter of faith that God exists and is a Creator. There seems to be a spiritual connection here which science has not been able to break down. People are incredulous<sup>3</sup> that evolution can explain the full diversity and complexity of life at all levels.

It is this spiritual dimension and this religious experience that underpins the intellectual attempts to harmonise religion with science. Each side is at a disadvantage: resorting to the unseen (God) as an explanation is a very difficult strategy to beat for scientists—it is easier to be dismissive, arrogant and even aggressive in response. On the other hand, not having ready-made empirical evidence to hand, and experimental observation to conduct, disassociates religion from everyday scientific endeavour. It would seem then that there is nothing in common for them to 'get on' together.

## Evolutionary philosophy

Most people (including me) gave up the study of the sciences when they left school. Consequently, the ongoing debate between creation and evolution is generally put to one side as a 'black box'. Obviously, scientific material on this issue is beyond a non-scientist, but scientists have endeavoured to explain the theory of evolution in a popular way.<sup>4</sup> The theory of evolution is scientific and secular orthodoxy. A review of the library shelves in a university shows the extent of the orthodoxy; it is worldwide, massive in size, integral to research funding, and immovable.

Lined up against atheist and agnostic evolutionists there are a variety of opponents, including young-earth creationists, old-earth creationists, intelligent-design theorists, some philosophers of science, and theistic evolutionists. Obviously, this last type of opponent is the friendliest to a non-believing evolutionist since he or she wants only to add God to the theory of evolution. As for this range of opponents, what is new today is the philosophical appraisal of the ideas of creation, evolution and intelligent design. The philosopher of science, Michael Ruse, observes that in the last twenty years "philosophy has come to the fore" and is at "the front of the dispute" between creationists and evolutionists.<sup>5</sup>

What is the problem? Why is there a debate? Can there be agreement? The problem is simple: 'creation' as a concept doesn't look like the concept of 'evolution'. Atheistic and agnostic evolutionists don't feature God or divine action in their work; evolution theory doesn't feature miraculous, creative acts of God. So, if you believe in the Biblical account of creation, you have the problem of what to do with evolution.

But if this is the problem, the solution doesn't appear to be a simple marriage between the Bible and science—what is known as 'theistic evolution'. This is the idea that God works *only* through the evolutionary processes (see the Wikipedia entry). This makes no sense of Genesis. Theistic evolutionists have in the past interpreted Genesis non-literally (perhaps metaphorically or allegorically; again, see Wikipedia), but the narrative looks literal—it is the language of appearance.

More recently,<sup>6</sup> theistic evolutionists have argued that Genesis is the literal language *of its day*—a kind of ancient cosmology, not to be related to science in any way. The problem here is that Genesis is not a very good fit with such cosmologies (noted by Biblical scholars down the years), and it rather makes the details of the account irrelevant for

the believer today. Christians instinctively feel that theistic evolutionists who take this route are rejecting Genesis and they do not see how one can do this when Adam and Eve are central to Christian teaching.

### **Intelligent design**

The slogan 'intelligent design' came to prominence in the 1990s starting with the work of P. E. Johnson and his book *Darwin on Trial*.<sup>7</sup> This was built upon by the biochemist Michael Behe in his book *Darwin's Black Box* in 1996.<sup>8</sup> Several likeminded scholars got together and decided to promote the idea of intelligent design and, hence, critics refer to an 'intelligent-design movement'. A research institute, the Discovery Institute, was set up in the USA and two philosophers of science joined the cause—W. A. Dembski and S. C. Meyer.<sup>9</sup> The movement gained notice, and apologists for evolution responded with criticism—scientists such as K. R. Miller, in *Finding Darwin's God*,<sup>10</sup> F. J. Ayala and J. A. Coyne. Other philosophers, not particularly identified with the movement, have added critical observations about aspects of neo-Darwinism, such as A. Plantinga, J. Fodor and T. Nagel.<sup>11</sup> In turn, philosophers supportive of evolution have written defences, such as M. Ruse and R. T. Pennock.<sup>12</sup>

The intelligent-design movement seeks to disconnect the metaphysical naturalism of the evolutionists from the day-to-day practices of science. If intelligent design is to be admitted to the range of scientific hypotheses, this disconnection is essential. Advocates of ID also disassociate themselves from religious creationism. They are not in the business of defending the Bible. They are merely arguing that we can make an inference from complexity in nature to an intelligent cause.

Philosophically, the intelligent design argument can be made into the traditional 'design argument for the existence of God'. It is well known that complex coded information and complex functional systems are the result of intelligent agency, including those produced by scientists in biology laboratories. It is reasonable therefore to infer an intelligent cause (God) for at least some specified complexity in nature. Regardless of this use of the intelligent design argument, however, ID theorists see the increasing complexity of nature in biological understanding as the driver for a move away from naturalism to intelligent causation in biological explanation—and this is the significant claim—not any argument for God's existence.

### **Balance, judgment and knowledge**

The creation-*versus*-evolution debate is not an 'in-house' dispute. Christians may argue amongst themselves about doctrine; they may engage in dialogue with those of other faiths; but the problem with the creation/evolution issue is the lack of common ground. A Christian may debate with atheists the existence of God, but here the common ground is philosophy. On the other hand scientists are attempting to describe natural processes but without reference to God; explanations are sought and developed in wholly naturalistic terms. Their work does not supply common ground for debate. They may disagree amongst themselves on what is true, what is false, or the best hypothesis, but this is not the kind of disagreement that a creationist has with science.

Equally, Christians, when they think of God as a Creator, as responsible for all things, are not doing science. With Bible interpretation, they are doing history and theology. Their vocabulary is different from that of science. Nevertheless, there is a genuine point of difference with the concept of creation. The Biblical account does not appear to be reducible to 'the story of evolution' with God simply added in the background as the agent. Rather, the account details acts of speech that bring about created order and various kinds of plant and animal life including human beings; this is called 'special' or 'miraculous' creation.

The Scriptural idea of God as a Creator working through his angels (that is, the fact of divine agency) affects what scientists may claim to know. Science textbooks do not present naturalistic evolution as 'possibly true' but as a fact. But the *fact* of divine agency is opposed to the philosophy of naturalism that informs the theory of evolution. For example, a scientist works with the 'fact' of spontaneous change, but a religious apologist will offer the idea of a change 'initiated' by God as an explanation for what has happened. This is an unwelcome adjustment to the rules of the game for a scientist.

### **Conclusion**

*What we can claim to know* is at the heart of the conflict between creationists and evolutionists. There is a philosophical layer embedded in popular evolution writing and the conflict with religion lies in this layer. This is the philosophy of naturalism. Once this is rejected on philosophical grounds, the theory of evolution cannot exclude either special creation or divine agency. Consequently, a fairly literal view of Genesis can be defended. The conflict with religious thinking is philosophical when evolutionists make their view exclusively true—when they exclude special creation, reject Genesis, or deny divine agency at work in various ways throughout the known history of the universe.

What we need to do is expand our horizon as to how God has been involved with His creation since the birth of the universe. We have to learn how to distinguish when features are best attributed to slow natural processes of

change and when they are best attributed to direct involvement of God. Genesis is a fairly literal account of recent creative work which we should take as exemplary for God's creative work throughout known history.

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<sup>1</sup> By 'design' we refer to the arrangement of parts in a whole; by 'intelligent design' we refer to the thinking behind such an arrangement.

<sup>2</sup> This is argued exegetically in A. Perry, *Old Earth Creationism* (Sunderland: Willow Publications, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of 'credulity' in relation to science, see K. Stone, *Evidence in Science* (Bristol: John Wright & Sons, 1966), ch. 1.

<sup>4</sup> F. J. Ayala, *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* (Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, 2007); J. A. Coyne, *Why Evolution is True* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> M. Ruse, "Methodological Naturalism under Attack" in *Intelligent Design Creationism and its Critics* (ed. R. T. Pennock; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 363-385, 363.

<sup>6</sup> The most prominent example is that of the BioLogos Foundation which is prominent on the web.

<sup>7</sup> P. E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (3rd edition; Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2010); the original edition was published in 1991.

<sup>8</sup> M. J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (10th anniversary edition; New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> For a history of the movement see A. Menuge, "Who's Afraid of ID? A Survey of the Intelligence Design Movement" in *Debating Design* (eds. W. A. Dembski and M. Ruse; paperback edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 32-51.

<sup>10</sup> K. R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007); the original edition was published in 1999.

<sup>11</sup> J. A. Fodor & M. Piattelli-Palmarini, *What Darwin Got Wrong* (London: Profile Books, 2010); A. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); T. Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). These authors are all professors of philosophy with international reputations.

<sup>12</sup> W. A. Dembski and M. Ruse, eds., *Debating Design: From Darwin to DNA* (Paperback Edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). R. T. Pennock, ed., *Intelligent Design Creationism and its Critics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). Ruse is a professor of philosophy at Florida State University. Pennock is a professor of science, technology studies and philosophy at Michigan State University.