

On the Absurdity of Theistic Evolution

Ever since the inception of the most convincing theory of evolution by famous naturalist Charles Darwin in his revolutionary book *On the Origin of Species*, there has been much debate over how theism could potentially come into play in regard to its influence (or lack thereof) on evolution and the process of natural selection. This seems to be the result of the theory of evolution seemingly disproving creationism and rendering it illogical, given the vast amount of empirical evidence accumulated over more than one hundred and fifty years of intensive research. This contemplation arisen from the introduction of the theory of evolution and process of natural selection was a view on the compatibility of religious teachings about God and contemporary scientific understanding about biological evolution that has come to be called theistic evolution. In this paper, I will attempt to show how theistic evolution is a logically absurd theory in that it is preposterous to believe that theism is necessary in explaining evolution and natural selection. I will primarily be using David N. Stamos's book *Evolution and the Big Questions: Sex, Race, Religion, and Other Matters*, along with secondary support from various sources, in defending the absurdity of theistic evolution. I should start off by defining the view of theistic evolution before I commence with showing its illegitimacy.

Theistic evolution, first and foremost, is a system of views involving the compatibility of religion and evolution. In its simplest form, these views follow the ubiquitous claim that evolution occurs, yet it was set forth into motion by God. With this claim, proponents of theistic evolution can agree that evolution manifests in manners described by evolutionary biologists, but

the processes are simply guided by God. Considering there are a wide range of beliefs concerning God's magnitude of intervention, proponents of theistic evolution have views varying from complete and continued intervention, to a more deistic approach in rejecting the concept of continued intervention while continuing to maintain that God sparked the processes of evolution and natural selection, to a more evolutionary creationist view that God, as Creator of the universe, uses evolution to bring about his plan.

With the above definition of theistic evolution, it is quite unvarnished to see that there is at least one problem with this view of evolution. Given the broadness of the definition of theistic evolution, it is simply impossible to reason all probable suggestions concerning evolution and God's supposed intervention. So, for the sake of this paper, I will now be using theistic evolution to refer to a more general view called theistic evolution proper, which is the mere assertion that God is in some way involved with evolution. According to Stamos, there are two main approaches in showing how theism is compatible with evolution: "One is to suppose that God set up the conditions for evolution but once evolution started he did not play a guiding role. The other is to suppose that God continued and is still continuing to play a guiding role."<sup>1</sup> These two approaches are simply derived from the most prominent beliefs of proponents of theistic evolution; that God sparked evolution and lets it continue to run its course uninterrupted, or God is continuously guiding the processes of evolution and natural selection after setting it into place. In support for the first supposition is Kenneth Miller, in his book *Finding Darwin's God*, who argues that God chose to create by setting up a system of evolution by chance variation and natural selection so as ultimately to equip beings with genuine free will. Ergo, in Miller's view,

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<sup>1</sup> David N. Stamos, *Evolution and the Big Questions: Sex, Race, Religion, and Other Matters* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 202.

the evolutionary system of nature, with all the pain, suffering, and killing that is built into it, is the only way that God could get the happy accidents he wanted, namely, creatures like us with genuine free will.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, Miller advocates for a more “problem of evil” driven interpretation of theistic evolution in the sense that for God, whose supposed intention was to manifest sophisticated and intellectual beings such as us with legitimate free will, it was necessary to have generated evolution in such a way that by chance variation and natural selection in producing more and more mutations, the evolutionary system of nature would result as is. In sharp contrast to this proposition (while maintaining the same evolutionary creationistic view), Paul Davies, in his book *God and the New Physics*, claims that God’s original and continuously indefinite influence on the evolutionary process is all part of his plan to eventually arrive to the presentation of our existence and thus inevitably advanced consciousness. To put it in his terms, there exists “the clear implication that God has designed the universe so as to permit ... life and consciousness to emerge. It would mean that our own existence in the universe formed a central part of God’s plan.”<sup>3</sup> It is also important to note (concerning a central belief of a majority of advocates for theistic evolution, especially those who retain the idea that God guided the evolutionary process) that evolutionary creationists maintain that God’s guidance of evolution and natural selection is completely hidden from us, and as a consequence, evolution was created by God to look like a random and undirected process. As expected, with all of these propositions related to the defense of theistic evolution come resounding objections that in my opinion do a much better job of vindicating both non-theistic evolution and the view that a deity

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin’s God: A Scientist’s Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999): 279, 291.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992): 213.

is not necessary in the slightest in advancing the evolutionary process than evolutionary creationists do at substantiating theistic evolution.

There are many different ways in which one could denounce the views held by evolutionary creationists, but for the sake of this paper I will be sticking to objecting the precise points made previously. In regard to Miller's view, there are many issues that are worth mentioning. It would be too simple for me to mention the Argument from Evil in response to his "problem of evil" themed view, considering even that argument comes with its own negative implications (e.g., If God is not to blame for a crime committed by someone with a mental illness, then would that signify the perpetrator were to blame, even if he or she weren't acting willingly? If not, then who would be at fault for causing the mental illness in the first place?). However, what I will say is that what Miller does in arguing for theistic evolution from a "problem of evil" point of view is seemingly completely ignore the negative connotations that arise in advocating for a view involving an "all holy good" God allowing natural catastrophes and other assorted naturally evil events (including those caused by mankind), while simultaneously neglecting to realize that the very concept of free will comes with multiple logical difficulties, including the fact that quantum mechanics does not entail the existence of free will, considering quantum mechanics is indeterministic, in that the results of measurements are chosen at random from the slate of relevant possibilities. So, if quantum effects help to shape our conscious choices in randomly affecting the outcomes of our finite, potential decisions, they sever the interdependence between us and the initial conditions of the universe, leaving us with the mendacity of free will (i.e., even if we were given the power to choose our actions without any interference from a deity, quantum mechanics does not necessitate the existence of free will

since we are *limited* to a particular number of options when put into any certain situation with the consequences of each option depending on naturally indeterministic conditions). So, while defending theistic evolution from the point of view of the “problem of evil” is within itself problematic, the real issue lies in the belief that God allowing for randomness amongst natural selection would necessarily result in free will, which is clearly untrue.

In reference to Davies’s view, who claimed that there was a “clear implication” that God’s design of the universe permitted life and consciousness to emerge, this can be considered an incident of casual oversimplification, also known as “fallacy of the single cause,” in which it is assumed that there is one, simple cause of an outcome when in reality it may have been caused by a number of only jointly sufficient causes. There definitely may be reasons as to why mankind exists, but it does not require a deity. We can very well thank the sudden extinction of the dinosaurs for the emergence of mankind, and consequently, mankind’s intellect. According to Stephen Gould in his book *Wonderful Life*, dinosaurs absolutely had the potential to survive for a remaining 100 million years or more had they not gone extinct, but their brains and cognitive capacity had not been developing any more advanced at the time of their extinction. Because of this, “we must assume that [human-like] consciousness would not have evolved on our planet if a cosmic catastrophe had not claimed the dinosaurs as victims.”<sup>4</sup> Based on this information, the previously supposed “clear implication” that God had something to do with the emergence of life and consciousness has become rendered gratuitous in the sense that it is completely possible for there to have been combined causes of the emergence of life and consciousness consisting of a deity and the extinction of dinosaurs, or even the extinction of

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 318.

dinosaurs and the noninterference of God. Regardless, the fallacy lies in attempting to explain the cause of a phenomenon by giving a single explanation without recognizing additional, potential causes for said phenomenon (i.e., Life and consciousness occurred after God's intervention of evolution. Therefore, God's intervention of evolution caused life and consciousness, even though the extinction of the dinosaurs [may have] also caused life and consciousness, even in conjunction with God's intervention).

On the subject of the view that natural selection is a (seemingly) random process, there are reasons to believe that natural selection is in fact not random in any sense of the term. According to Elliott Sober in his essay "Paley's Watch and the Likelihood Principle," the process of natural selection consists of two components. First, "... variation must arise in the population; then, once that variation is in place, natural selection can go to work, modifying the frequencies of the variants present."<sup>5</sup> As is a common observation of natural selection, a variation (or perhaps, mutation) of a particular gene must arise within a certain population, and it is in that instance that natural selection can modify the incidence of that particular variation (or mutation). The variation produced has no regard to whether it is advantageous to the organism in question, making variations (or mutations) random; what is not random is the retention of the variations, or the ability for the particular variants to arise through selection. In Sober's words, "*Variation* is generated without regard to whether it 'matches the target'. But *retention* is another matter. Some variants have greater staying power than others."<sup>6</sup> To put it bluntly, variations in genes are what can be considered random; the process of natural selection (i.e., the previously discussed "retention" of said variations) is not at all random, since the length of retention

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<sup>5</sup> Elliott Sober. "Paley's Watch and the Likelihood Principle," *Philosophy of Biology* (2000): 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 38.

depends on how fit that particular variation is within a population in relation to its environment, which superficially are not considered random occurrences.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the previous three paragraphs, I was capable of showing some incriminating evidence to the belief system of theistic evolution. First, I disproved the belief that God allowing for randomness amongst natural selection would necessarily result in free will. Second, I showed how stating there is a “clear implication” that God’s design of the universe resulted in life and consciousness is a fallacy of the single cause and that God’s intervention is unnecessary for evolution and natural selection to have manifested intelligent beings, regardless of whether or not it was his “plan”. Last, I was able to explain how natural selection is not at all random, contrary to what a sizable number of evolutionary creationists believe. So, in essence, I showed that God’s intervention with evolution and natural selection would be unnecessary in that there are more plausible, scientifically shown causes of the emergence of life (specifically human life) and consciousness that do not depend on the existence of God or, if in fact he does exist, his intervention. I also showed how natural selection is not a random process, but even if God allowed for it to be subject to randomness, it would not necessarily result in free will, a common claim amongst evolutionary creationists. Therefore, as far as the relationship between theism and evolution goes, it is absurd to believe that theism is necessary in explaining the processes of evolution and natural selection.

Like any philosophical or scientific theory, there will always be those who object to your claims in an attempt to savor their own. A common response to my objection of Davies’s claim

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<sup>7</sup> I will not be mentioning any objections to this claim in the next section of this paper, due to there being widespread agreement amongst evolutionary biologists that natural selection is not at all random (considering this explanation by the Understanding Evolution project: [http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/misconceptions\\_faq.php#a2](http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/misconceptions_faq.php#a2)). Given this scientific consensus, there is no need for objections from philosophers or others alike.

would be made by theists who would rapidly respond that they have long claimed that God alone is necessary and that anything and everything else is contingent (occurring or existing if and only if certain other circumstances are the case), including mankind. In response to this reply, concluding that God has influenced the sequence of events in our favor by setting the initial conditions and laws of nature or (more directly) by influencing mutations and meteors (in reference to the extinction of the dinosaurs previously discussed in this paper) is absurd in the sense that there is a more scientific (and in effect, empirical) explanation for the nature of contingency found in modern evolutionary theory that can lead us to conclude that, even if God just so happens to exist, any sort of divine intervention is not at all necessary. In essence, deducing non-theistic theories regarding evolution and natural selection is more logical of a task than deducing purely abstract, evolutionary creationistic propositions.

A possible response to my objection of Miller's claim could be a retort apropos of skeptical theism, which conjoins the claim that theism is true and the claim that because of human cognitive limitation, we could not possibly know why God, an infinitely intelligent and knowledgeable being, allows the evil that is present on the world. In my interpretation of Miller's words, the evolutionary system of nature, with all of its seemingly inevitable evil, is the sole manner in which God could get intellectual beings with legitimate free will. It seems like the skeptical theistic reply to my objection unknowingly employs its logic on itself; if we as humans could not possibly conceive exactly why God allows evil to exist, then how is it that we could know that him allowing for evil was the "sole way" he could bring forth intellectual beings? How could we possibly know that his intentions are good given that he is supposedly "holy good"? From what I can gather, it seems like God's infinite intelligence and



knowledgeability do not allow for our limited intelligence to understand his intentions, and God does not necessarily make his intentions obvious himself.

For what it is worth, theistic evolution is a system of beliefs followed by dogmatic institutions, such as the Catholic Church, and has been increasingly gaining prominence within the religious communities of the world, including those with a majority Christian population. If I were capable of showing anything throughout the course of this paper, it is that these views are purely dogmatic with little to no consideration for the vast amount of work of various scientific communities. Theistic evolution, in my own opinion, is the combination of a piety and the conclusion of empirically and scientifically obtained evidence, which by definition are contradictory. However, with no regard to superficials, it can be seen that theism is unnecessary in explaining the processes of evolution and natural selection, and attempting to combine them and passing it off as truth based off of dogmatism is an absurdity.