

RESPONSE TO “MERE THEISTIC EVOLUTION”

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Introduction

One of the things I appreciate about Michael Murray and John Churchill’s paper is their candid embrace of the label, “theistic evolution,” for their view. This strikes me as much more accurate and straightforward a label than the euphemistic appellation, “evolutionary creationism,” recently adopted by some theistic evolutionists, which seems clearly an attempt to co-opt the label, “creationism,” in order to make their view more palatable to evangelical Christians.

It will be helpful at the outset to note the very limited scope of Murray and Churchill’s response to the volume, *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique (SPTC)*. They state that the volume as a whole conveys “the message that *for Christians with traditional doctrinal commitments, no version of theistic evolution that adheres largely to consensus views in biology will be a plausible option.*”¹ They maintain to the contrary that it is “incontrovertible” that there are versions of theistic evolution that are “immune to many of the key criticisms advanced” in the book.² More specifically, they argue that “there are versions of theistic evolution that are consistent with traditional doctrinal commitments” concerning divine providence, miracles, evidence for theism, and non-physical souls. It is evident, then, that their concern is with *doctrinal* criticisms of theistic evolution.³

Now immediately I felt myself rather left out of the conversation. For I am a Christian with traditional doctrinal commitments; but any reservations I have about the viability of theistic evolution have nothing to do with such doctrinal commitments. My reservations are not theological but scientific in nature. I think that a great many of the contributors to SPTC would lack what Murray and Churchill call “a confidence in the explanatory power of the evolutionary approaches employed in current biology.”⁴ Only at the end of their paper do Murray and Churchill address scientific objections to theistic evolution, however, and here they content themselves with pointing out a couple of alleged missteps by Paul A. Nelson and by Ann K. Gauger *et al.* They say very little to inspire confidence in the explanatory power of the evolutionary approaches employed in current biology.

So I find Murray and Churchill’s statement of the third plank of theistic evolution problematic due to its ambivalence. Initially, they state, “all versions of theistic evolution affirm that the complexity and diversity of life are best explained by appeal to evolutionary processes that have been operative over long periods of time, where the relevant processes include those that constitute what is often called ‘the modern evolutionary synthesis’.”⁵ Notice, the relevant explanatory processes include but are not limited to those of the modern synthesis. This is “mere” indeed! Even a Michael Behe, who thinks that the mechanisms of random mutation and natural selection explain very little of the origin of biological

¹ Page reference to Murray/Churchill article to be inserted by editors during typeset.

² Page reference to be inserted by editors during typeset.

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complexity, counts as a theistic evolutionist on this characterization, since he would agree that the mechanisms of the modern synthesis are included in the evolutionary processes. So would a classical progressive creationist like Bernard Ramm, who posits sequential miraculous intervention on God's part to drive evolutionary advance.

So Murray and Churchill's statement of the third plank of theistic evolution needs to be tightened up a bit if we are to exclude from its fold intelligent design theorists and progressive creationists. Something like their gloss "a confidence in the explanatory power of the evolutionary approaches employed in current biology" might do the trick.⁶ That would seem to preclude a Michael Behe's counting as a theistic evolutionist. But then, as I say, their paper does very little to defend theistic evolution so characterized against the scientific objections leveled against it in SPTC. Rather the burden of Murray and Churchill's paper is to defend theistic evolution against *theological* objections to the viewpoint. On this score I think that they do an admirable job. Consider each of the doctrinal commitments they mention.

Theological Acceptability of Theistic Evolution

1. Divine Providence

First, divine providence. Here they render the considerable service of correcting the misimpression often given by popularizers on both sides of the debate that when evolutionary biologists say that the mutations responsible for evolutionary change occur randomly, they mean by chance or purposelessly. If they did, then evolutionary theory would be enormously presumptuous, since science is just not in a position to say with any justification that there is no divinely intended direction or goal of the evolutionary process. How could a scientist know that God did not supernaturally intervene to cause the crucial mutations that led to important evolutionary transitions, for example, the reptile to bird transition?

This fact became clear to me in the course of my preparation for my debate with the eminent evolutionary biologist Francisco Ayala on the tenability of Intelligent Design in biology.⁷ According to Ayala, when evolutionary biologists say that the mutations that lead to evolutionary development are random, they do *not* mean "occurring by chance." Rather they mean "occurring irrespective of their usefulness to the organism." Now this is hugely significant! The scientist is not, despite the impression given by partisans on both sides of the divide, making the presumptuous philosophical claim that biological mutations occur by chance and, hence, that the evolutionary process is undirected or purposeless. Rather he means that mutations do not occur for the benefit of the host organism. If we take "random" to mean "irrespective of usefulness to the organism," then randomness is not incompatible with direction or purpose.

Alvin Plantinga has made this same point in his book, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*.⁸ Plantinga chastises scientists who have recklessly asserted that according to evolutionary biology the evolutionary process is undirected or purposeless. Such claims are not, he says, properly part of the biological theory itself but are a philosophical add-on, an extra scientific assertion. In support, Plantinga quotes the eminent evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr, who wrote: "When it is said that mutation or variation is random, the

⁶ Page reference to be inserted by editors during typeset.

⁷ The debate can be accessed at ReasonableFaith.org (<http://bit.ly/CraigAyala>).

⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

statement simply means that there is no correlation between the production of new genotypes and the adaptational needs of an organism in a given environment.”⁹ This is the same definition given by Ayala.

Such a definition of “random” is wholly compatible with God’s causing mutations to occur with a certain end in view. For example, suppose that God in His providence causes a mutation to occur in an organism, not for the benefit of the organism, but for some other reason (say, because it will produce easy prey for other organisms that He wants to flourish). In such a case, the mutation is both purposeful and random.

Indeed, I want to underline Murray and Churchill’s corrective by drawing attention to a theory of providence only later alluded to in their paper, namely, a Molinist account of providence based upon God’s middle knowledge. Given divine middle knowledge, supernatural interventions in the evolutionary processes are not necessary for divine direction of the evolutionary processes, for God could have known that were certain initial conditions in place, then, given the laws of nature, certain life forms would evolve through random mutation and natural selection, and so He put such laws and initial conditions in place. Obviously, science is in no position whatsoever to say justifiably that the evolutionary process was not under the providence of a God endowed with middle knowledge who determined to create biological complexity by such means. So if the evolutionary biologist were using the word “random” to mean “undesigned” or “purposeless,” evolutionary theory would be philosophy, not science.

But the evolutionary biologist is *not* using the word “random” in that sense.¹⁰ Properly understood, random mutations are entirely compatible with teleology and a robust doctrine of divine providence.

2. God’s Miraculous Activity

The second doctrinal commitment Murray and Churchill discuss is God’s miraculous activity in the world. Unfortunately, having ignored a Molinist account of providence in their first doctrinal section, they give an unnuanced characterization of miracles in the second section. For they characterize extraordinary providence, or miracles, as God’s “bringing about His desired outcome by (among other things) ensuring that a process within creation unfolds in a radically different way than is typical for processes of that kind.”¹¹ This characterization is ambiguous. God’s middle knowledge enables us to distinguish a kind of extraordinary providence that involves no divine intervention in the series of natural, secondary causes but which is discernable and distinguishable from God’s ordinary providence by its atypical and highly coincidental nature. Miracles, by contrast, involve God’s intervention in the series of secondary causes to bring about an event which is impossible for the natural causes operative at the time and place of the event to bring about.

⁹ Cited in Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Fortunately, as a scientifically informed philosopher, Steve Meyer makes this same point himself in SPTC. On the standard view, he explains, organisms “generate mutations randomly, that is without respect to their survival needs” (281). Unfortunately, elsewhere in the volume, after noting that “‘Random’ means ‘without respect to functional outcome,’” he adds, “entailing that there can be no inherent directionality or *telos* to mutational events” (112). This added gloss is a *non sequitur*.

¹¹ Citation to M&C inserted by editor at typeset.

The question, then, is the degree to which theistic evolution precludes postulating divine interventions in the evolutionary development of life. Murray and Churchill stipulate that any miracle claims must be “consistent with the affirmation that the complexity and diversity of life are best explained by appeal to evolutionary processes over long periods of time.”¹² Theistic evolution, they state, is not “consistent with any . . . position on which miraculous activity is deemed crucial to explaining much of the world’s biological complexity and diversity in light of alleged explanatory deficiencies in evolutionary theory.”¹³ That still leaves me wondering. Suppose the postulated miracles are infrequent but nonetheless occur at pivotal junctures in the evolutionary development of life forms. I suspect that in order to distinguish theistic evolution from progressive creationism, Murray and Churchill will want to preclude such a view as counting as theistic evolution.

But then later they say, “theistic evolutionists can affirm that God acted miraculously in order to bring forth various species, without having to deny any of the principles essential to theistic evolution. Indeed, as noted in sections above, theistic evolution is even compatible with at least some sets of claims that affirm that God acted miraculously *outside of evolutionary processes* to bring about changes in the biological domain.”¹⁴

This leaves me confused as to the degree of miraculous activity mere theistic evolution permits. Again, I see nothing doctrinally objectionable in a view that postulates very little divine miraculous activity in the course of the evolution of biological complexity. We have no theological grounds for requiring that God’s interventions must be frequent or pivotal. Rather the question is again scientific: is an account of the development of biological complexity which appeals to practically purely naturalistic causes explanatorily adequate?

3. Natural Theology

The third doctrinal commitment concerns the viability of natural theology. Murray and Churchill point out that the resources for a robust natural theology are much broader than the development of biological complexity. In my own work I have defended at least six arguments for the existence of God, none of which appeals to biological complexity as a basis for inferring God’s existence. Indeed, the cutting edge of design arguments these days concerns the fine-tuning of the fundamental constants and quantities of nature which must be in place before the origin of life and the evolution of biological complexity can even take place. Theistic evolutionists can be strong proponents of arguments for an intelligent designer of the cosmos based on fine tuning.

Here Murray and Churchill make what is in my opinion perhaps the most important point of their paper: theistic evolution is not offered as a scientific theory. Rather it is a way of integrating a scientific theory with a theological perspective. They explain, “*the epistemic value of theistic evolution lies primarily in its power to unify or synthesize two sets of claims*. On the one hand, we have a set of theological claims concerning the God who created the world and providentially governs His creatures; on the other, we have a set of scientific claims that posit evolutionary explanations for the complexity and diversity we

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see in biology. Theistic evolution provides a coherent synthesis of these two sets of claims, and this is its primary epistemic value.”¹⁵

I think that because ID is offered as a scientific theory, ID proponents mistakenly think that theistic evolution is so offered as well and therefore criticize its scientific value. It is so important for mutual understanding that ID advocates realize that theistic evolution is not a scientific theory, much less a rival scientific theory. Rather it is a view which tries to integrate scientific theory and theology.

4. Nonphysical Souls

The fourth and final doctrinal commitment is to the reality of nonphysical souls. While I think that it is true that non-physical souls fit much better within a theistic worldview than within a naturalistic worldview, I see no reason to think that the theist cannot maintain that at some point in hominid evolution, once the brain had sufficiently evolved, God created a soul and incarnated it in a hominin he had prepared to become the first human being.

So I agree with Murray and Churchill that theistic evolution is compatible with the four Christian doctrinal commitments they mention.

ID and Theistic Evolution

Murray and Churchill go on to contrast ID and theistic evolution in various ways. I realize that they are presenting just sample versions of ID and theistic evolution. Nonetheless, I think that their presentation serves to foster the false image of ID that is as much an obstacle to mutual understanding as is the false image of theistic evolution as a scientific theory.

I suspect that many theistic evolutionists misunderstand ID because they take it to be, like theistic evolution, a view integrating theology and science rather than a scientific theory. Just as some ID theorists wrongly take theistic evolution to be a scientific theory rather than an integrative view, so some theistic evolutionists take ID to be an integrative view rather than a scientific theory. Each advocate is viewing the other as a mirror image of himself.

But ID theorists have been adamant in insisting that ID is not theistic. Over and over again they have explained that they are offering a theory that infers to intelligent design and no more as the best explanation of biological complexity. The designer could be extraterrestrial life forms or laboratory technicians experimenting with our microworld in their lab. I recall a conversation I had with ID theorist John Bloom about the objection that ID would require no more than Zeus as the explanation of biological complexity. He nodded slowly in approval. “Zeus will do,” he said. “Zeus will do.”

I suspect that many people think that ID theorists’ denial that their theory is theistic is disingenuous, a way of sneaking creationism into public schools with a wink and a nudge. But that fails to take ID seriously as a theory. That ID theorists are serious in not positing God as the best explanation of biological complexity is evident in their response to the problem of natural evil in the course of evolution. They rightly point out that ID makes no claim whatsoever that the designer is good. ID is not a view attempting to integrate theology and science. It is a rival scientific theory to mainstream biology that postulates intelligent design as an explanatory component of that theory.

¹⁵ Citation to M&C inserted by editor at typeset.

Indeed, my main reservation about ID is whether the inference to intelligent design is not better thought of as a meta-physical inference, rather than as a scientific inference. My inclination would be, not to offer an alternative scientific theory to the current paradigm, but just to question that paradigm's explanatory adequacy and to supplement it with a philosophical postulate of a designer.

I have good friends and colleagues on both sides of the debate, and I hope that my comments here today may promote better understanding and serve to bring us closer together.