Integrating the Scientific Evidence with the Genesis Narrative

I find that theological considerations are, in the mind of many people, both Christian and non-Christian alike, just as important or even more important than scientific considerations in assessing that an evolutionary account of creation.

The objections are basically versions of the problem of evil, not the problem of moral evil, but the problem of natural evil. Two aspects of evolution are thought to be incompatible with God's goodness, power, or wisdom: the flaws in nature, and nature's cruelty.

I. First, let's talk about design flaws in nature. It's pointed out that certain features of organisms are not optimally designed. For example, in the human eye the optic nerve passes through a hole in the retina resulting in a blind spot in our visual field. In the octopus eye, by contrast, which closely resembles our own eye, no such hole is required and there is no blind spot as a result.

There are various ways in which the Christian theologian might respond to these alleged flaws thought to be incompatible with God.

First, he might challenge the assumption that these alleged flaws really are flaws at all. Take for example the claim that the placement of the optic nerve in the human eye is flawed. Might God have a good biological reason for so designing the eye? Yes, indeed. As Michael Denton explains, the difference in the placement of the optic nerve in the human eye in comparison with the cephalopod eye is because of the need for a greater supply of oxygen in warm-blooded animals. So this alleged flaw turns out not to be a flaw at all. Over and over again we found that what we

had first thought were flaws in nature's design have, with greater understanding, turned out not to be flaws at all.

But, second, suppose that there are flaws that seem to be the result of the adaptation of previous structures by natural selection. Fine. Even special creationists usually hold that the kinds created by God in Genesis were on the biological level of the order or family and that evolution took over from there. So, for example, God created the common ancestor of the family *Ursidae*, or the bear family, which has since evolved into eight different species of bears. It's hardly surprising, then, that one species of bear has evolved the so-called panda's thumb which is sometimes touted as a design flaw. It hardly needs to be said that theologians who accept the thesis of common ancestry are not at all surprised that organisms would bear the imprint of their ancestors. So I don't think this argument from design flaws is very serious as a theological problem at all.

II. What, then, about animal behaviors that strike us as cruel? Most of the examples people give are among insects. For example, after meeting, the female praying mantis will sometimes decapitate her partner. Once again, even creationists embrace evolution within broad kinds, which permits animal cruelties to evolve. So they do not need to affirm that God created every single example of animal cruelty.

Now, of course, this appeal to limited evolution within broad kinds won't ameliorate the general problem of animal suffering. Here I think we need to consider more critically the nature of animal suffering. Michael Murray in his book *Nature Red in Tooth and*

Claw explains a pain hierarchy within the animal world that consists of three levels.

Level 1, the lowest level, is just information states in the organism that cause aversive behavior to stimuli. Level 1 is the information-bearing neural states that are produced by noxious stimuli and results in aversive behavior on the part of the organism. Examples of something like this would be when you poke an amoeba with a needle it recoils and pulls back, not because it senses pain but simply because it has an aversive reaction to noxious stimuli.

Level 2 is a first-order awareness of pain by an organism. An organism like a cat or a dog has a phenomenal awareness of pain.

Level 3 is a second-order pain awareness that one is oneself experiencing level 2.

Spiders and insects – the sort of creatures that exhibit the kinds of cruel behaviors that are often mentioned by the detractors of creation – exhibit level 1. But there's no reason to ascribe to spiders and insects a level 2 pain awareness. It's plausible that they aren't sentient beings at all that have some sort of inner subjective experience. That sort of experience plausibly doesn't arrive until you get to the level of vertebrates in the evolutionary scheme of things. Vertebrates would have a level 2 pain awareness. Organisms on level 1 alone are effectively like little machines which do not in any way suffer.

Sentient life, such as vertebrates, do have a subjective experience of pain, as is obvious when we see animals suffer. But even though higher animals do experience pain, nevertheless the evidence is that they don't experience level 3, that is to say, the awareness that they are themselves in pain, for animals are not self-conscious

beings. As the philosopher Immanuel Kant put it, they cannot put “I think that” in front of their states of awareness. They do not have a transcendental ego which is capable of objectifying their own selves. Thus even though animals may experience pain, they are not aware of being themselves in pain. God in his mercy has apparently spared animals the awareness of being in pain.

This is a tremendous comfort for those of us who are pet owners! It means that even though your cat or your dog may be in pain, he or she really isn't aware of being himself or herself in pain. Therefore, your dog or cat doesn't suffer the way that you would if you were in pain because you would be aware of being in that pain state.

What this also means is that arguments based upon nature’s so-called cruelties are guilty of the fallacy of anthropopathism, which is ascribing human feelings to non-human entities. We human beings have an inveterate tendency to ascribe personal agency to non-human creatures and even to objects. For example, we talk to our cars, to house plants, to our computers. When we attribute agency and pain awareness to animals, we commit the fallacy of anthropopathism.

Of course, questions still remain. Why did God create a world featuring an evolutionary prelude to the appearance of man? Well, maybe a world with an evolutionary history is a richer and more wonderful world of creatures. After all, seriously, aren't you *glad* that God created dinosaurs? I am! Ever since I was a boy, I've been thrilled with the dinosaurs and the Ice Age mammals. What's not to love about these fascinating, wonderful, colorful, and often bizarre creatures? Why shouldn't God delight, as we do, in all creatures great and small?

But I suspect that the final answer to the question is going to have to do more fundamentally with God's wider plan for humanity, with his desire to create an ecosystem where autonomous human beings can flourish and make an uncoerced decision to embrace or to reject God's offer of saving grace. Any viable ecosystem will involve animal predation and death for the health of the system as a whole. To give an example, I heard several years ago of a decision on the part of the Canadian government to introduce wolves into the wild in Canada in order to preserve the health of the caribou herds upon which they preyed because in the absence of the wolves to pick off the aged and the sick the caribou were over-grazing and as a result starving to death. So, for the good of the caribou, predators had to be introduced into the wild so that they might flourish.

So you can't just consider the welfare of any individual organism in isolation from the whole. God's ultimate purpose for this planet concerns bringing men and women freely into his Kingdom. The evolutionary history of the Earth is ecological scene-setting, as it were, for the advent of human beings on this planet and the working out of God's purposes among them. The primeval forests of those prehistoric ecosystems laid down the deposits for the fossil fuels which have made human advancement and modern civilization possible.

How do you know that God's purposes for the human race are not better achieved by having a genuine ecological history on the Earth rather than creating an illusory history or a world with no apparent history at all? How do we know how many people or what percentage of people would have freely come to know God and his

salvation in such worlds? What would best serve to advance the Kingdom of God on this planet is the overriding consideration in what God permits or disallows, and we are largely ignorant of what that entails. We are in no position at all to speculate about such matters. But then we're in no position to speculate whether or not evolution was not a viable way for God to create life on this planet.

So, as agonizing as the problem of animal suffering is, in the end, I do not think we can say that it precludes God's using an evolutionary process to bring about life and biological complexity.

We finally come at long last to the concluding section of our excursus on creation and evolution. As we finish out our series, what lessons have we learned from our study?

1. First and foremost, I think we've seen that there are a plethora of different interpretations of Genesis chapter one with respect to the origin and evolution of life. It is wrong for Christians to box other Christians into their view, and to denounce them as heretics if they disagree. The undeniable fact is that there are good Bible-believing Christians who hold to a wide diversity of views. I hope that I've convinced you that a literal interpretation of Genesis is not at all incumbent upon the Bible-believing Christian. There is abundant evidence in the text itself that the author did not intend for us to take it literally, and a careful analysis of the literary genre to which Genesis 1 - 11 belongs, supports the view that it is not the type of literature that is to be read literally.

2. Second, if that is the case, then that means that Bible-believing Christians are free to follow the scientific evidence concerning the origin and evolution of life wherever it leads. There

is nothing to be afraid of. There is no reason to discourage our children from thinking honestly about these matters.

3. Third, it is clear that contemporary science is nowhere near understanding the origin of life on this planet. Not only do we have no idea how the macromolecules essential to life could have formed, but it is incomprehensible how such chemicals organized into a living cell. If we want to advocate a creationist position on the origin of life, there is no obstacle.

4. Fourth, we've seen that there is good evidence for the thesis of common ancestry, the thesis that all living organisms are genealogically related. But the mechanisms of evolutionary change remain a matter of uncertainty and controversy. It seems to me that some sort of progressive creationism fits the evidence nicely. Progressive creationism suggests that God intervenes periodically to miraculously bring about new forms of life and then allows natural mechanisms of evolutionary change to take place with respect to those life forms. Progressive creationism differs from theistic evolution in the degree of confidence that is placed in the explanatory mechanisms of evolutionary biology. Theistic evolutionists repose great confidence in the adequacy of those mechanisms to produce evolutionary change. Progressive creationists are more skeptical. The progressive creationist does not necessarily envision creation of organisms *ex nihilo*. Perhaps God miraculously causes, for example, certain chemical combinations or mutations to occur at key junctures that would not in all probability occur by purely natural means. We noticed that when God creates in the Genesis narrative he uses nature. For example, he says, *Let the earth bring forth vegetation and fruit*

trees. Let the earth bring forth terrestrial animals. He creates man out of the dust of the earth, not *ex nihilo*. He uses means. So it may well be that God uses pre-existing chemicals and lifeforms as the stuff on which he acts miraculously. Such a view would explain the presence of a similar genetic code among living organisms and the genetic traces which are indicative of common ancestry. But it would also explain why we don't find many transitional forms in the fossil record. Because of progressive creationist interventions, grand evolutionary change might not leave many fossil traces of transitional forms. Rather you would find discontinuity along with genetic similarity.

So some kind of progressive creationism is the view that I personally find the most attractive. But again I want to reiterate that these are issues on which I have no final and fixed viewpoint. Like you, I am an interested layman in these subjects, interested in learning and studying further, and exploring them more deeply.