

## § 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

### Lecture 34

#### Progressive Creationism – Integrating the Scientific Evidence with the Genesis Narrative

We today come at long last to the concluding section of our excursus on creation and evolution.

How might one integrate the scientific evidence that we've surveyed with the Genesis narrative? It seems to me that so-called progressive creationism fits the evidence nicely. Progressive creationism suggests that God intervenes periodically to bring about miraculously new forms of life and then allows natural 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 grand evolutionary change. Progressive creationists are more skeptical. On the progressive creationist viewpoint, grand evolutionary change would require miraculous creationist acts of God as he intervenes in the process of biological evolution to bring about significant evolutionary change. This does not necessarily envision acts which are independent of natural mechanisms. Perhaps God miraculously causes, for example, chemical combinations or mutations at key junctures that would not in all probability occur by purely natural means. This sort of creationism is progressive over time and may involve natural mechanisms.

How would this view comport with the thesis of common ancestry? I think that this doctrine could either affirm or deny the thesis of common ancestry. That would depend on whether or not you think that God's miraculous acts of intervention would be acts of creation *ex nihilo*. For example, we can imagine a bare lake existing at some point in the distant past. All of a sudden, out of nothing, some ducks would appear on the surface of the lake miraculously created by God. I think it's certainly within God's power to create ducks in this way, but I must confess that it smacks a little bit too much of magic to me. I 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. For example, to create birds God could bring about a systemic macro-mutation so that a bird would hatch out of a reptile egg. Something of that sort is so fantastically improbable it would never occur by the normal mechanisms of mutation and natural selection, but God could produce a system-wide mutation that would yield grand evolutionary change as a result. Nor need the progressive creationist envision such extreme examples of mutational change wrought by God. 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 wouldn't leave any fossil traces (or few) 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.

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I guess the bottom line here is that if God exists anything is possible.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, but it's not the bottom line because we're not interested in just possibilities. We're interested in what provides an integrative synthesis of both the scientific evidence and the biblical material. For example, while Young Earth Creationism is possible, it would fly in the face of scientific evidence and therefore wouldn't provide a good integrative view. So it's not enough just to appeal to possibility. We need to find something that will do justice to all of our sources of knowledge about the origin of lifeforms.

*Student:* The question that would be: how long would this progressive bit be from day to day leaving a fossil record? I think it would imply that in certain periods of time that there was death when there shouldn't have been because death only arrived after sin so you had fossil records there.

*Dr. Craig:* Wow. OK, you raised a question that would take us in a very different direction. When you say there would be death where there shouldn't have been, you are presupposing an interpretation of the Genesis story that I just reject. If you ask why, we spent months on that some time ago, and I can't go back and rehearse all that again. But I simply see no reason to think that the evolutionary timetable is incompatible with Genesis chapter 1 or the first eleven chapters of Genesis. So I'm presupposing the geological timetable that is accepted in modern science and asking how can we best integrate our theology with what we learned from contemporary science about the origin of life and biological complexity.

*Student:* What would be the dividing line between deism (where God sets things in order and then just lets them happen) and then this progressive creationism where he's still personally involved.

*Dr. Craig:* This is a great question. He's asking about the difference between theistic evolution and progressive creationism. I think this is a kind of continuum. It's not as though there is a clear dividing line. Based upon my discussions with theistic evolutionists – next month I'll be participating in a panel discussion at the Evangelical Philosophical Society on this very question – I think that we would say that the theistic evolutionist reposes a great deal of confidence in the explanatory mechanisms of evolutionary biology (things like random mutation, natural selection, epigenetic factors that influence embryological development, and some of these other new proposals that we talked about a few weeks ago), whereas the progressive creationist is more skeptical of the adequacy of those explanatory mechanisms to produce the grand evolutionary story that the past seems to tell.

*Student:* Progressive creationism, which does seem to resemble a theistic evolution, one issue that comes up is whether we are diluting the inference from the complexity of nature to the existence of a creator. The two passages that are usually cited for natural theology are Psalm 19 and Romans 1. Psalm 19 says, *The heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament showeth his handiwork.* Romans 1 says, *God's invisible attributes, eternal power and divine nature, are clearly seen from what is made and people suppress that truth in unrighteousness.* It seems like if we don't maintain the argument that that is the inference people should draw from the complexity of nature we are giving up or watering down the design argument. I wrote down in my notes a few weeks ago when you started this topic, we're not trying to justify the design inference. It seems to me that that's what we want to do. I just wonder what your comment is.

*Dr. Craig:* As natural theologians we might want to run a design argument, but that's not our project here. Our project here is theological integration. We want to assume the truth of divine revelation and of the Bible, and then we want to see how that is best integrated with the data of modern science. So we're not interested now in an argument for the existence of God based upon biological complexity. Having said that though, I would be very cautious about placing too much theological freight on those verses that you cited. I think one can affirm that the creation shows forth the glory of God clearly without having to deny that things are evolutionarily related to one another. Indeed, the whole progress of evolution from the prebiotic soup right up through *Homo sapiens* on this planet itself, I think, bespeaks divine design and the existence of a creator. The very evolutionary process, it seems to me, cries out for design. You'll remember I quoted Barrow and Tipler concerning ten steps in the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, each of which is so improbable that before it would occur the sun would have completed its stellar evolution and incinerated the Earth. And yet, all ten, in their view, have occurred. These are persons who endorse the standard evolutionary paradigm. They're not creationists. They say that this has happened, but that it is so improbable that I think it cries out for saying that God

exists and is behind it all. I'd be careful about trying to load too much onto those verses which simply says that on the basis of nature around us we can see that there is a divine creator.

*Student:* Of course, Dawkins, as we've talked about, presents sort of what I take to be the standard view of neo-Darwinians, for example, in *The Blind Watchmaker*. There's no room for God, he says, in the evolutionary process. But it seems to me that (I guess this may be a diversion but) if you run the design argument based merely on the initial conditions of the Big Bang (the fine-tuning argument) then you lose the impact that is described in Psalm 19 and Romans 1 because we can't see the initial conditions of the Big Bang. We can see the complexity of nature, and to me that's the power of the design argument. From what you see, you infer a designer.

*Dr. Craig:* All right, but I didn't appeal to fine-tuning in my answer to your question. I think you're quite right in what you said, but that wasn't my response. My response was that when you look at nature around us the existence of a designer and creator is evident. I'm sure that what Paul was talking about was not biological evolution or fine-tuning. He was talking about the grandeur of the heavens above, the beauty of the animal world, the intricacy of a leaf and its structure. This is an appeal to ordinary experience that any ancient person could have as he looked around the world and saw its beauty. You can show similar statements in Aristotle and Plato that read just like Romans 1, written wholly independently of biblical revelation in which Aristotle says when you look at the grandeur of the skies and the stars at night and the world around us he says it's indisputable that there exist gods and that the world is the handiwork of these gods. I think Paul is offering a kind of ordinary, common-sense argument there, and that where biological evolution and so forth would become relevant would be when the person tries to deny that inference, like Dawkins does, by postulating, for example, naturalistic evolutionary mechanisms to explain what we see around us. But you've heard my criticisms of those mechanisms. I am skeptical of them, and therefore think that it's very attractive to think that God has intervened miraculously in the evolutionary process along the way. Otherwise it wouldn't have evolved the complexity that we do see.

*Student:* Can you clarify the word “progressive” – what do you mean by that?

*Dr. Craig:* Over time. This isn't meant in a political sense. *[laughter]* In other words, it's not a creationism that imagines a single act right at the beginning, but it imagines ongoing creative acts of God throughout history to bring about evolutionary change. Thank you for asking for that clarification.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's talk now about theological considerations. I found 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 thinking that a progressive creationist account such as I've suggested will not work. There is a sort of unholy alliance today between Young Earth Creationists and naturalistic evolutionary biologists aimed at invalidating any account that would integrate theism and evolutionary biology. Young Earth Creationists and naturalists agree that theism and evolutionary biology are incompatible. Creationists conclude that therefore evolutionary biology is false, whereas naturalists conclude that therefore theism is false. So what are the arguments that convince them both that a progressive creationist account cannot be true?

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.

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. 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 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 don't embrace special creationism but 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.

What, then, about animal behaviors that strike us as cruel? Once again, even creationists embrace evolution within broad kinds which permits organisms to change. For example,

pathogenic, or disease-producing, bacteria were once free-living organisms which evolved to become pathogenic parasites. Genome sequencing has revealed this to be a sort of “devolution” characterized by a massive *loss* of genes.

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. Level 3 is a second-order pain awareness that one is oneself experiencing level 2. So we have: first, information-bearing neural states produced by noxious stimuli resulting in aversive behavior, then at level 2 a first-order subjective experience of pain, and then at level 3 a second-order awareness that one is oneself experiencing level 2.

Spiders and insects – the sort of creatures that exhibit the kinds of behavior that is often mentioned by the detractors of creation – exhibit level 1. For example, praying mantises may decapitate their partner after copulation. 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 the “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. The opponent of progressive creationism or theistic evolution would have to show that animals are self-conscious in order to attribute this sort of third-order pain awareness to them, but there's no clear evidence for this. Biologically, self-awareness seems to be connected with the prefrontal cortex of the brain which is either missing or underdeveloped in all animals except for the humanoid primates (the great apes and *Homo sapiens*), and 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 anthropomorphism, 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 anthropomorphism.

Of course, questions still remain, why did God create a world featuring an evolutionary prelude to the appearance of man? Maybe a world with evolution 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 age of the dinosaurs and the Ice Age mammals with their wonderful prehistoric creatures. 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. Proponents of the so-called Gaia hypothesis, which emphasizes that the entire world is like a living organism, have emphasized how this ecosystem as a whole functions to produce its life-giving qualities. 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. Should God then have just created the Earth with the illusion of age with fossil fuels that were never in fact laid down by primitive forests? Why think that that would have better achieved God's purposes for

humanity? 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.

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* The whole thing about the consciousness – the self-awareness and all that – and about how animals are conscious and they feel pain but they're not aware that they feel pain. I've always had a difficult time grasping how that works, and even more of a hard time trying to explain to people how that might work. I know you've mentioned in other contexts the phenomena of blindsight which is so weird to me. If you show them a picture, they can't tell you what the picture is but if you throw a ball at them they'll catch the ball or they could walk through an obstacle course.

*Dr. Craig:* That is the analogy that Michael Murray gives for this third-level awareness. Some people are blindsighted. As you indicate, for all practical purposes, they are blind. They have no visual apprehension of things. But, in fact, they really can see. As you say, if you threw them a ball they'll catch it. If you ask them to come to the other side of the room they will walk around the table. They can see but they don't know that they can see. It's rather analogous to being in pain, but not being aware that one is oneself in pain. This second-order awareness requires the apprehension of oneself as a self – what philosophers call a transcendental ego. The ability of the self to stand back and objectify itself and think about itself. It seems that apart from the advanced primates this ability doesn't seem to exist in the animal world. Hopefully that analogy can make it more comprehensible.

*Student:* I seem to recall – I can't remember if you said this or maybe you were quoting from Michael Murray – he talks about where, I think it was, Nazi scientists or somebody were cutting people's brains a certain way and there were some people who, when they got poked or made to feel pain, they felt pain but it doesn't bother them.

*Dr. Craig:* I'm not familiar with that, but there are these different neural pathways. So you're suggesting this person who doesn't have this third-order awareness can feel the pain – *Yes, I'm in pain. That really, really hurts, but it doesn't bother me. I'm not worried about it.* My wife actually experienced something like that when she had laughing gas

during childbirth. She said it didn't anesthetize her. It didn't take away the pain. She felt it, but she didn't care. That's something like this.

### **END DISCUSSION**

With that, let me draw our session to a close in view of the time.

I think that the theological objections to progressive creationism are ultimately unsuccessful. So whether considered scientifically or theologically, I think progressive creationism provides a plausible and attractive integration of theology and science.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ?Total Running Time: 39:28 (Copyright © 2019 William Lane Craig)