

A CHRISTIAN'S GUIDE TO CREATION AND EVOLUTION

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Introduction

The mere mention of the phrase “creation and evolution” conjures up visions of heated debates, accusations of fraud and dishonesty on both sides, entrenched positions with no hope of compromise, and an endless stream of books that continues to flow off the presses into the vast sea of literature on the subject. Small wonder that many of us are wary of plunging in. It would take a vast amount of time and effort, and it is not even clear that the issue is important. Perhaps all the fuss consists of little more than “profane and vain babblings” (I Tim. 6:20).

If the only thing at stake in the issue of creation and evolution were the status of a particular scientific theory or the meaning of a few Hebrew words in an unclear passage of Scripture, then it would indeed be a relatively unimportant issue in a world with so many other pressing problems. But in fact the stakes are much higher. Ian Barbour [Bar, Chapter 4] suggests that there are four challenges that evolution has presented to Christians: the challenge to Scripture, the challenge to design, the challenge of evolutionary ethics, and the challenge to human dignity. These challenges strike at the core of our faith.

For example, consider the challenge to Scripture. To take an extreme case, if evolutionary theory shows that Genesis is unreliable, then potentially all of Scripture could be cast into doubt. Conversely, if Scripture shows that evolutionary theory is false or even pernicious, then as ambassadors of Christ in this world we ought to take a stand against it. Finally, even if evolution is compatible with Scripture, it could have important implications for our understanding of fundamental biblical teachings on sin and salvation (see Romans 5 for example).

It is clear, then, that the issue of creation and evolution should not be dismissed with a wave of the hand. But there remains the problem of navigating our way through the immense and confusing literature. How can we get our bearings?

In this paper I give a brief (and far from comprehensive) outline that I hope will help the reader organize his thinking as he studies the issue further. At the end, I list a few key issues that I believe are good to keep in mind as one thinks through the problems.

There are many ways to categorize the major viewpoints on this topic. I have chosen in the outline below to organize them according to their attitude towards the relationship between science and Scripture. (It is a modification of a categorization by J. P. Moreland [Md1, Chapter 7].)

Outline

1. Scripture is a road to truth but science is not.
2. Science and Scripture are both roads to truth but they deal with nonoverlapping domains so that conflict is not possible even in principle.
3. Science and Scripture are both roads to truth and deal with overlapping domains.
 - a. The results of exegesis ought to dictate our science.
 - b. The results of science ought to dictate our exegesis.
 - c. Exegesis and science ought to proceed interactively.
 - d. Exegesis and science ought to proceed independently of each other.

Comments

Most people take “creation” and “evolution” to be proposed accounts of *the way things have actually occurred*. Conflict then arises if the two accounts are seen to be incompatible.

In view of this, we see that one way of forestalling conflict is to maintain that one or the other of creation and evolution (or more generally Scripture and science) actually does not try to provide a factual account. Gordon Clark [Cla], for example, is a scientific *anti-realist*; he denies that science is a road to truth, and thus he falls into category 1. (For a survey of anti-realism in the philosophy of science, see [Md2, Chapter 5].) This succeeds in resolving the problem of creation and evolution, but it is a rather drastic approach.

Another way to forestall conflict is to maintain that science and Scripture are both roads to truth, but that Scriptural truth and scientific truth are different in nature (Langdon Gilkey), in scope (Howard Van Till), or in approach (Donald MacKay). MacKay, for example, would say that a statement such as “I prayed about my illness and God healed me” is just as true as a description of the same events in purely mechanistic terms; scientific and religious languages are not competitive but *complementary*. We can thus be confident *a priori* that the findings of science and exegesis will never conflict. In particular, we never need to be afraid that the harmony between science and Scripture will be destroyed by the next revolution in science. This approach I have labelled category 2. Many so-called “theistic evolutionists” (who accept evolution but believe that it is guided and controlled by God and that it is not a purely naturalistic process) fall into this category.

While the above options have several attractive points, the majority of people fall into category 3, i.e., they believe that there are some cognitive statements that both Scripture and science deliver a verdict on.

Categories 3a and 3b are quite common views among Christians. The most extreme adherents of 3a regard the contents of Scripture as being completely transparent. According to them, God has directly told us that the world was created in six twenty-four hour days, and hence there is no room for believing in evolution. Less extreme adherents of 3a acknowledge the possibility of errors in interpreting Scripture and may even agree that the evidence for an old earth and for evolution is reasonably good; however, they believe that careful exegesis indicates otherwise and that this should take priority over scientific investigation lest we place reason above revelation and allow science to undermine the authority of Scripture. (Some even go so far as to declare the scientific evidence for evolution completely convincing but explain that God planted it there to test our faith.) Coming from a slightly different perspective is the Roman Catholic church, which is fairly tolerant of evolution, but which declares that some theological doctrines place limits on science, e.g., a scientific theory that denies that all men are descended from Adam is unacceptable. (See [Bar, Chapter 12].) Extreme adherents of 3b tend to view science as providing infallible proof of its claims, so that if Scripture says otherwise then we must be misreading Scripture. Less extreme adherents recognize the tentativeness of all science but nevertheless regard science as objective and reliable and exegesis as subjective and unreliable. In support of this they point out that many texts admit a staggering variety of plausible interpretations, and compared to science there is much less consensus about what constitutes an objective test for accuracy.

Category 3c is a compromise between 3a and 3b; J. P. Moreland and Wolfhart Panenbarg are advocates (though their respective approaches are quite different). The idea is that both exegesis and science are routes to the same truth and that we are capable of making errors in both areas, so that the most prudent course is to marshal all our resources in a unified search for truth. Moreland, for example, takes an eclectic approach, in which theology sometimes indicates the boundaries of science and science sometimes indicates where theology can step in, although he does not appear to allow science to set limits on theology.

Those in category 3d all follow a basically similar *approach*: they hold that exegesis and science will each independently converge on the truth, without having to be “corrected” by the other. However, they have arrived at a variety of different *conclusions*. In particular, some of them declare that the scientific evidence does not support evolution, while others accept evolution. The Institute for Creation Research (ICR) and the Creation Research Society, for example, argue that Scripture and science independently point towards a young earth and six-day creationism. (See [Mor][M-P]. Note, however, that when speaking within the Christian community, some ICR representatives seem to fit category 3a better.) Others, such as Hugh Ross [Ros] and Davis Young [You], defend an old earth and long creation days. Still others such as Thomas Chalmers argue for the so-called “gap theory,” in which there is a long time period between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2 and/or between Genesis 1:2 and Genesis 1:3 (see [Boi, Chapter 7]).

We remark that although in most of the above cases the “official” position is that

Scripture and science are harmonious, in practice many people secretly belong to category 3a or 3b, e.g., they harbor prior convictions about the validity of evolution and then go about showing that Scripture “independently” shows the same thing (or vice versa). We mention this in order to warn the reader that as a result of this attitude, some of the literature on creation and evolution contains serious misrepresentation and distortions of facts.

Deciding what the Bible actually says and what the scientific evidence indicates requires detailed technical study, which we cannot provide here. Instead, we point the reader to some relevant literature. See the appended bibliography.

Some key issues

Here are some recommendations about issues to keep in mind while studying the creation/evolution literature.

1. What is the relationship between Scripture and science? Can science potentially show that Scripture is wrong? Can Scripture potentially show that science is wrong? Which category in the above outline is the right one?
2. Must evolution be rejected if we are to remain faithful to the account of creation in Genesis? faithful to the concept of God’s sovereignty and providence? faithful to biblical teaching about death, sin, and the soul?
3. Must evolution be accepted if we are to be intellectually honest?

Notice that I have not included “does the scientific evidence support evolution?” as a key issue. Plunging into a detailed examination of the scientific evidence for evolution with a subconscious feeling that evolution is a threat to one’s faith (or that disproving evolution will be some kind of victory for Christ) may adversely affect one’s objectivity. It is therefore important to first clarify explicitly in our own minds the relationship between science and our Christian beliefs.

Bibliography

The following bibliography is intended to be representative rather than comprehensive; in many cases there exist texts just as good as the ones mentioned. We apologize to knowledgeable readers who find their favorite books omitted.

For discussion of some of the exegetical issues, see [Boi] and [Ybd]. For an introduction to evolutionary theory, see [Daw] or [Fut] (the former is a popular account and the latter is a college-level textbook). For criticisms of evolutionary theory, see [Den], [Hay], [Joh] and [Pit], as well as the previously mentioned books by the ICR and Hugh Ross. For responses from scientists, see [A-T], [Eld] and [God]; some material is also available

from the National Center for Science Education (P. O. Box 9477, Berkeley, CA 94709). For a response to the claim that “chance” in evolutionary theory is incompatible with Christian theism (which Johnson and Dawkins seem to maintain), see [Mac, Chapter 16]; also see [Pol] for the idea that the concept of chance (in quantum theory) may actually be beneficial to theology. Regarding a young earth and flood geology, [Ros], [VYM] and [You] are books written by Christians criticizing ICR arguments. An ICR response to some of these criticisms appears in [M-M]. Finally, we mention that some material of varying quality is available by anonymous ftp from `ics.uci.edu` in `/pub/origins`.

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