Abstract

The German mathematician and philosopher Leibniz introduced the term “theodicy” in 1710 in an effort to justify belief in a good God who appears to preside over a world that manifests evil. Theodicy since that time has remained an ongoing problem. Attempts to rationally demonstrate God’s good presence to an increasingly skeptical world has often appealed to the evidence of design in nature. However the Intelligent Design argument has not answered the theodicy issue. Some have claimed that Intelligent Design has made this problem worse because the argument fails to distinguish between good and evil design and requires value judgments to be assigned that appear arbitrary. The following paper examines the limitations of Intelligent Design and its theological parent Natural Theology in light of New Testament claims for the witness of creation. The paper explores whether the evolutionary narrative has more in common with the Bible narratives than has been acknowledged previously.

The Problem of Discerning Natural Evil

Ralph Winter, the founder of the USCWM and the Roberta Winter Institute, once asked whether pathogenic bacteria, other invasive disease causing organisms and viruses all represent examples of evil intelligent design. Winter made an analogy with computer viruses being intelligently designed programs that execute a malevolent purpose on an infected computer. Why should we not acknowledge the presence of evil intelligent design in nature? Winter put this question to an advocate for Intelligent Design. He was told that it was difficult enough to put forward the basic idea of “design” as a rational challenge to the theory of unguided evolution through the process of natural selection. Differentiating between the designs of God and those of the devil would be too much for people to understand.1

Winter’s analogy to computer viruses is similar to Michael Behe’s comparison of the “molecular machinery” of cells to the complexity of familiar...
mechanical devices that are composed of specific parts. If the device is to function properly all the required parts must be present and fully functional themselves. Behe referred to this as “irreducible complexity.” He has applied the irreducible complexity principle to living cell and organ structures to advance the notion that an intelligent designer necessarily has assembled these biological machines at some point so that evolution could continue the process. The resort to human designed objects to make points about intelligent design in nature is generally credited to William Paley’s “Watchmaker Analogy.”

Paley used the watchmaker analogy in his 1802 book *Natural Theology* to assert that design in nature made it necessary to believe in a divine designer. The watchmaker analogy claimed that if one kicked up a rock while walking in a field one would not tend to ask where the rock came from. One might conclude that it had always been there in the field from the beginning of time. If on the other hand one kicked up a watch in the field one would attribute its presence to someone who had placed it there and ultimately to a watchmaker who had purposely designed the watch for the specific function of measuring time. Paley argued that plants, animals and human beings, are possessed of such structural complexity that is analogous to the watch that it gives natural testimony to the hand of a divine creator who had both designed them and placed them on the earth. Paley’s argument that design revealed God’s necessary involvement in creation appeared to conflict with the growing concern over the observable indifference of nature with regard to life. Did this mean that God too was indifferent to life? This question lay at the heart of the problem of theodicy.

The term “theodicy” which is Greek meaning “justifying God” entered usage by way of the German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In 1710 Leibniz published his *Essays on Theodicy: The Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* in which he postulated that the observable universe created by God constituted “the best of all possible worlds.” His argument originated from perceived design and the interactions of nature and the mechanisms revealed in the motions of the cosmos moderated by gravity. The modern view of Leibniz’ theodicy tends to be colored through the lens of Voltaire’s caricature of him as the naively optimistic Dr Pangloss in the novelette *Candide*. Leibniz reasoning began with the assumption that God is good. He also held that God, being omniscient or all knowing knew absolutely what would constitute the optimal universe out of all possibilities. Leibniz further assumed that because God is omnipotent He had the power to create whatever He desired and would not have created anything less than the best that was possible. Therefore in Leibniz’ view, the earth and the universe we know could only be “the best of all possible worlds.”

Leibniz wrote that “God is the cause of all perfection in the nature and action of the creature, but the limitation of the receptivity of the creature is the cause of the defects there are in its actions.” Thus evil and sin are caused by the limitations and free will of God’s creatures both human and angelic that can act in opposition to God. Other writers suggested that what might be called “evil” actually held a divine purpose. Just four years before the publication of Paley’s *Natural Theology*, British social philosopher and clergyman Thomas Malthus had argued that population increases geometrically while subsistence or food supplies increased only arithmetically given the farming methods then in use. In light of this unalterable imbalance Malthus put forward the idea that disease, famine and disaster were the means instituted by God in order to keep populations in check and promote the continued industry of mankind.

New Testament Origins of Natural Theology

New Testament writings of the Apostle Paul do make an argument for natural theology. Paul’s letter to the church in Rome refers to God’s evident working in the natural universe as being obvious for man to observe. Paul wrote: “For what can be
known about God is plain to them (those who have no other revelation through the word) because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1: 19-20).

It is important to note that according to this statement the visible creation only gives only limited truth about God. Specifically only two aspects or attributes of God’s being are revealed. The first attribute is God’s eternal power that can bring into physical being the vastness of the universe. The second attribute of God that is revealed in creation is the majesty of his deity through the vastness of both the earth and the heavens. Paul says nothing of any of the other attributes of God being revealed to man by creation. These attributes made visible in creation are to inspire man to what the Bible elsewhere calls the fear of The Lord.

Thus we can ascribe infinite but otherwise inscrutable majesty to God by virtue of the vastness of His creation. No further enlightenment is provided to us. It is not possible, according to Paul, to know any more than the attributes of power and majesty from what is observable in nature.

William Dembski essentially agrees and argues that issues of theodicy should not enter into the scientific discussion of Intelligent Design. He writes:

“Critics who invoke the problem of evil against design have left science behind and entered the waters of philosophy and theology... The existence of design is distinct from the morality, aesthetics, goodness, optimality, or perfection of design.”

Thus Dembski equates any attempt to distinguish good from evil through intelligent design as going too far.

The attempt to use design and complexity in nature as a midway point between Darwin’s natural selection and the Creationists’ seven days remains unsatisfying to either side in the debate between science and faith. Indeed Dr. Winter with whose paper we began, expressed more preference for the Darwinian argument that makes natural selection the reason that predation and disease have come about in nature rather than being the specific creation of God. Ralph Winter’s original question was whether or not a theodicy could be found for pathogenesis that preserves the character of God as good and loving. If an appeal to design itself does not offer help then where else might one look? We turn to the evolutionary narrative to ask if mechanisms can be found that helps us better understand the origins of pathogenesis in relation to the biblical narrative besides the attribution evil influence.

An evolutionary narrative of Pathogenesis

The study of molecular genetics has shown that pathogenesis is a combination of genomic gains and losses in bacteria and to a similar degree in the host. These gains and losses in genetic information have enabled the bacteria to become more invasive while at the same time narrowing their host range in many cases to human beings only. It is estimated that human restricted pathogenic microorganisms began to appear in human populations 30,000 to 40,000 years ago and thus many species are believed to have “co-evolved” with man over that long period of time. The time span corresponds roughly to the upper paleolithic appearance of modern human ancestors termed Cro Magnon man. Somewhere in this time significant changes began to occur in bacterial Genomes. This has been recognized by formation of what are called pseudogenes or disabled genes in bacterial DNA. Pseudogenes are disabled genes that are still present in the genome but are no longer capable of being expressed. Patterns of pseudogene formation in the genomes of various bacterial species show they have undergone changes in their environmental niche. The belief is that changes in niche made the expression of certain genes unnecessary. In many cases of human adapted pathogens, the genes that have been lost appear to be those that once enabled them to live in a broad range of hosts or independently.
The disabling of genes represents evidence of some sort of environmental “event” that the organisms themselves could not control but to which they adaptively responded as a result of competition. The host range for these bacteria was narrowed by the accumulation of pseudogenes in their genome. At the same time their virulence or invasiveness was increased by the acquisition of new genetic information through horizontal gene transfer mechanisms between closely associated bacteria sharing the same environments like human skin, the human gut or the nasopharynx.13

The biblical narrative and the evolutionary narrative are not mutually exclusive with respect to accounting for the rise of the phenomenon of pathogenesis. Both seem to agree that there was a time however brief, in human history when both bacteria and man may have gotten along either independently or had established commensal relationships. Then something happened, a “massive event” or events occurred that caused humans or bacteria or both to rapidly change environmental niches. At that point the evolutionary model says that recent environmental changes are reflected in the formation of large numbers of pseudogenes in the genome.14

**Biblical Points of Agreement with the Evolutionary Narrative**

The biblical record gets specific about the occurrences of periodic environmental changes that resulted from “massive events.” These include the expulsion of man from the garden of Eden or that point at which everything in nature was “getting along.” The Flood narrative from the time of Noah and the scattering of mankind into separate nations and tribes resulted in man occupying vastly differing geographies and climates. The Bible suggests that these changes were traumatic reflected in the continual decline of human life spans from upwards of 900 years in the first 10 generations from Adam to Abraham’s life span of 175 years.

The life experience of Abraham’s family group particularly also may reflect the outcome of accumulated changes at the genomic level. The narrative dispassionately states “Terah became the father of Abram (Abraham) Nahor and Haran and Haran became the father of Lot. While Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth” (Genesis 11: 27-28). The fact that this alone of the generation narratives from Adam specifically contains a record of a father outliving his son is possibly a reference to fatal disease and would be the first such in the biblical narrative. In fact it may be a reference to epidemic disease from which the family fled to reach a well watered area of Mesopotamia beside the Euphrates River in the Fertile Crescent. The Genesis narrative indicates that when the family left Ur it was with the intent of going to Canaan with its established cities and lucratice Bronze Age trade with Egypt and other culture that was similar to the Sumerian culture of Ur. “But when the clan of Terah came to “Haran” (on the Euphrates) they settled there. Terah lived 205 years and died in Haran” (Genesis 11: 31-32).

**Understanding Evolution as Language**

The narratives of the Bible and of evolution have some essential commonalities. It is appropriate to ask whether Darwinism and its elements of natural selection, genetic mutation and the like should be understood as a type of human language instead of being regarded as a belief system that is intrinsically opposed to God. Technically, anything that is of human origin can be thought of as being intrinsically opposed to God. Can the language of evolution become a starting point from which to aid people in understanding that truth revealed is not antithetical to truth discovered? By contrast, if we assume that nothing good can come from evolution, we will move in a different direction. Creationists have tended to take the latter path by establishing an alternative science of Creationism. The result of this has been to deepen the rift and intensify the rhetoric with the objective of one side to defeat the idea of evolution and of the other to uphold it at all cost.

The rift between faith and the sciences has
been to solidify the notion that religion and science are irreconcilably opposed to one another. In addition as with all conflicts the rift between religion and science consumes both intellectual and material resources that could be directed toward practical efforts for the good of mankind.

Cross-cultural workers spend a great deal of time and effort studying the language and culture of the society to which they are sent. This is with the intention of working successfully in that society and also to be able to present the gospel in a culturally appropriate way within that society. The Christian’s effort to learn language goes far beyond simply understanding the one to one meanings of words so as to translate a message from the missionary speaker to the cultural hearer. The effort is to understand the cultural context of the language speakers from which to draw what have been called “redemptive analogies” that speak specifically to the cultural longings of those in that society. 15

Conclusion

The curse that God pronounced upon Adam after his disobedience in the garden declared that man would no longer live in an environment that would serve him. Rather man would have to compete for his living in an environment that would not willingly yield to his efforts. The land would yield thorns and thistles that would harm him as much as it would yield bread that would sustain him. This radical change in man’s environment and in effect in the environment of all creatures established competition between all species from the microbial level all the way to man. That competition would be dominated by the forces of adaptation and natural selection. In other words nature would be allowed by God to take its own course and not be interfered with by God. Nature would be governed as a rule by dispassionate natural law. Only on an exceptional basis would God intervene by miraculous intrusion. Man would have to make the choice between relying on his own ingenuity or of relying upon God through the application of faith.

As it turned out, Man’s capability for reliance on himself and his own ingenuity is quite prodigious. Man’s technical advancements through science have in large measure overcome the gloomy assertions of Malthus who theorized that poverty among people can only be cured by disease, disaster and war. Modern agricultural methods and modern medicine have enabled mankind to overcome the effects of famine and even to bring some dread disease like Smallpox to extinction and Polio to near eradication. However despite this effort, suffering and death still accompany man’s existence and prove the ultimate truth of God’s pronouncement to the first disobedient humans that “Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return” (Genesis 3:19). As long as the curse is in effect, the physical frame of man remains under the serpent’s power to turn it to dust and consume it in death. Jesus however, has come to destroy both the works of the devil that are manifest in sin and death (I John 3:8) and ultimately to destroy the power of devil himself through our turning back to God in faith. (Hebrews 2:14).

Endnotes


10. IOM, 123.


12. IOM, 123.

13. IOM, 124.


15. Don Richardson, “Redemptive Analogy” in P e c i e on he World Chri an Mo emen , ed. Ralph Winter et al. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), 430-436.