

Christianity and the Question of Origins: Major Positions along the Creation/Evolution Continuum

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"One of the attractions of the popular caricatures that reign in this area is that they make confident choice appear supremely easy. Unfortunately, the more accurately one sees the issues, the more difficult is the resolution."
– Del Ratzsch (*The Battle of Beginnings*, InterVarsity Press, 1996)

"Many—if not most—Americans think of the creation/evolution controversy as a dichotomy...The true situation is much more complicated. I encourage people to reject the creation/evolution dichotomy and to recognize the creation/evolution continuum."
– Eugenie Scott (*Reports of the National Center for Sci. Educ.*, July/Aug. 1999)

I. Introduction: Christianity and the Question of Origins

- A. The question before us: How ought we as Christians to think about the question of origins?
- B. My purpose is four-fold: to inform, to encourage, to remind and to caution
 - 1. To *inform* you of the major positions, not to persuade you of the validity of one of them
 - 2. To *encourage* us all to become better informed of our own positions and those of others
 - 3. To *remind* ourselves that, with respect to origins, sincere Christians differ sincerely
 - 4. To *caution* us all not to use our own position as a "litmus test" in judging other Christians

II. Origins: The Creation/Evolution Continuum

- A. We need to recognize not a creation/evolution *dichotomy* but a creation/evolution *continuum*.
 - 1. Major positions along the continuum: young-earth creationist, old-earth creationist, theistic evolutionist, naturalistic (or materialistic) evolutionist
 - 2. Intelligent design as a relatively recent approach to the challenge of giving the creationist position an intellectual foundation
- B. My goal here: to lay out the major positions along the continuum
 - 1. I will try to present what I consider to be the main features of each position as they might be set forth by a person who holds that position
 - 2. I will also try to point out the strengths and weaknesses of each position, at least as I assess them
- C. Some important definitions
 - 1. *Evolution*, including the distinction between *microevolution* and *macroevolution*
 - 2. *Creationism*, including the distinction between *young-earth* and *old-earth creationists*
 - 3. *Naturalism*, both as scientific explanation of nature and as philosophical world view

III. A Young-Earth Creationist Speaks

- A. Major tenets of Young-Earth Creationism (YEC)
 - 1. All of Genesis is to be taken literally, notably Chapters 1 and 2 (and 6-9 for the Flood)
 - 2. God created humans and all other species in acts of special, separate creation
 - 3. The earth is between 6000 and 10,000 years old; apparent evidence to the contrary can be explained and discredited
 - 4. Though not often said, YECs accept microevolution but definitely not macroevolution
- B. Features of this viewpoint
 - 1. This view dates in its present form from the publication in 1961 of *The Genesis Flood* by Henry Morris and John Whitcomb, which was the first significant 20th century effort to present a *scientific* rationale for Special Creationism
 - 2. The YEC flagship institution: The Institute for Creation Research (ICR), San Diego, CA
- C. Some prominent YECs: Henry Morris, John Whitcomb, Gary Parker, Duane Gish

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-----Major difference: Age of the earth (young versus old) -----

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IV. An Old-Earth Creationist Speaks

- A. Major tenets of Old-Earth Creationism (OEC)
 - 1. God is the active causal agent in creation, with the exact nature of His involvement (*i.e.*, *how* He created) regarded as of secondary concern
 - 2. OECs accept microevolution but not macroevolution
 - 3. Special creationism can be harmonized with data showing that the earth is ancient
 - 4. The nature of that harmonization differs among OECs

- B. OECs accommodate science and the text of Genesis 1-2 in any of several ways
 - 1. *Gap Creationism*: Assumes a large temporal gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2
 - 2. *Day/Age Creationism*: Understands the “days” of creation to be long periods of time
 - 3. *Progressive Creationism*: God created “kinds” of organisms sequentially, over long periods of time; evolution within a “kind” occurred but not descent by modification
- C. Some prominent OECs: Hugh Ross, Phillip Johnson, Walter Bradley



-----Major difference: Mechanism (creation versus evolution) -----



V. A Theistic Evolutionist Speaks

- A. Major tenets of Theistic Evolution (TE)
 - 1. God the Creator used evolution to bring about the universe according to His plan
 - 2. Astronomical, geological, and biological evolution are therefore acceptable
 - 3. Especially important is the role of God in the creation of the human soul
- B. This is the official position of the Roman Catholic Church, as stated by Pope John Paul II in 1996 and is also the *de facto* position of many, maybe even most, mainline Protestant denominations
- C. A major problem with this position is that it is viewed with considerable suspicion by both creationists and naturalistic evolutionists alike
 - 1. Creationists reject this view because it assumes not just micro- but also macroevolution
 - 2. Naturalistic evolutionists reject it because it invokes a supernatural power.
- D. Some prominent TEs: Howard Van Till, Clarence Menninga, Francis Collins



=====MAJOR DIFFERENCE: AGENT (GOD VERSUS CHANCE) =====



VI. A Naturalistic Evolutionist Speaks

- A. Major tenets of Naturalistic (or Materialistic) Evolution (NE)
 - 1. All of the natural world can be explained by the occurrence of natural events without the need to invoke supernatural or intelligent agents of any sort
 - 2. All forms of life can be explained in terms of random events, natural selection, and descent by modification, the evolutionary process first described by Charles Darwin
 - 3. It is therefore not necessary to see man (or any other present-day organism, for that matter) as the product of design or the result of a purposeful process or as special in any way
- B. Evolution as a scientific explanation *vs.* a philosophical worldview: an important distinction
 - 1. As a scientific explanation, evolution is consistent with the methodological materialism of modern science: the natural world is to be explained in terms of natural processes
 - 2. As a philosophical worldview, many, though not all, naturalistic evolutionists go on to say that the laws of nature are all there is – *i.e.*, that the supernatural does not exist.
- C. Some prominent NEs: Richard Dawkins, Stephen Jay Gould, Carl Sagan

VII. Intelligent Design: What Is It and Where Does It Fit In?

- A. The concept of Intelligent Design (ID)
 - 1. ID is an argument for the existence of a *designer* based on the premise that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not by undirected processes such as random chance and natural selection.
 - 2. ID is therefore a means of advocating the concept of *design* – and hence of a *designer* – without specifically identifying the designer as the Judeo-Christian God (or any other god, for that matter)
- B. Major tenets cited in support of ID (and actively disputed by its opponents)
 - 1. *Irreducible complexity*: All parts are needed for a system to function (mousetrap, flagellum)
 - 2. *Specified complexity*: Anything that is both complex and specified has likely been designed
 - 3. *Fine-tuned universe*: The many features that make life possible cannot be attributed to chance
- C. The ID Flagship institution: The Center for Science and Culture at the Discovery Institute, Seattle, WA
- D. Some prominent IDs: Michael Behe, William Dembski, Guillermo Gonzalez, Phillip Johnson

VIII. Conclusion: How Then Shall We Think About Origins?

- A. My answer: With humility, forbearance and charity
- B. My plea: Remember that this is a topic about which sincere Christians can and do differ sincerely
- C. Final note: Whatever our specific views, we can join together in praising the Lord that He created the entire universe and that as the Lord of all creation, He cares about each one of us as His creatures!