

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2006

Darwin and Christianity: Duel, Duet, or Draw?

The long-running conflict between anti- and pro-Darwin elements within the Christian community entered the new sphere of liturgical celebration this week. This past Sunday, hundreds of [churches celebrated Darwin's birthday](#). The expressed purpose of the celebration was to communicate to the culture that one need not choose between Christianity and Darwin. Faith and science are compatible.

Now the basic message that faith and science are compatible (or at least not incompatible) is one I am happy to proclaim. But does Darwin really belong on the Church's calendar of worship? Such advocacy increased my dissatisfaction with both sides of the current debate. Is there not a third way?

On the one side, you have the **duel** view. Darwin and Christianity are in a fight to the finish. The claims of Darwinian evolution conflict with the Bible and Christian theology. One must choose between them. Christianity must ally itself with scientific schools that challenge evolutionary theory and offer alternative explanations. The integrity of faith and science are at stake. Despite my misgivings toward such an approach, this perspective should be commended for taking seriously the genuine cognitive dissonance created by attempts to simultaneously hold a theological *and* evolutionary anthropology.

On the other side, you have the **duet** view. Christianity and Darwin are not in conflict. Moreover, they will together reveal a holistic view of the world and humanity. Evolutionary theory not only tells us about the world in itself, but reveals to us how God creates and interacts with the world. Christianity and Darwinism are mutually illuminating fields that together can work toward positive social change in the world. Despite my misgivings toward this approach, those who hold the duet view have the courage to develop their theology in light of contemporary science with a genuine concern for the integrity of the believer.

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blogs

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Is there another way? Although for some it will prove even more dissatisfying than the first two, I have been persuaded toward the **draw** view. The Christian believer encounters the apparently problematic claims of contemporary science right in the eye and says, "Let's call it a draw." This view has the confidence to say that if Darwin is right, then surely Christian faith can accommodate it (or at least the mind of God can). But it also has the confidence that the Gospel need not accommodate it to be effective. Furthermore, this view wisely takes the long-term perspective that scientific theories come and go. Who knows, maybe Darwin will just go away. And if not, this view calmly remembers that those theories that stay will eventually be assimilated by the Christian community without the need for aggressive maneuvers either for or against. We certainly don't need to hold seminars or celebrate Darwin's birthday.

So the next time someone asks me about Christianity and Darwinism, I'm going shrug and reply, "What, me worry?" Then I'll mention something about preaching Christ alone and him crucified.

Labels: [Practice of Theology](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 9:48 PM

[29 comments](#)

29 Comments:

At [8:25 AM, February 18, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

I wish I could "Duet with Darwin," but this is an issue whose theological complications I haven't resolved in my own mind. I don't want to duel with Darwin too much either. I believe that since biologists use the same methods to come at evolution that give me a cell phone and this computer, I would be a hypocrite (and reinforce the "Christians are stupid" impression) if I acted like evolutionists are ignorant conspirators.

Science can change, and theology has changed on some issues like this in the past. But I don't feel good about calling it a draw. I'm waiting for you to give me an ingenious resolution to the perceived tensions :)

At [3:55 PM, February 18, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

My theological beliefs aside I'm not sure I could ever buy the whole evolution thing or any science that deals in millions of years. It's probably the redneck in me but I just think the notion that you can prove that something is 2.4 billion years old is silly. It can't be reproduced in the lab (well, not for 2.4 billion years) and after all isn't that the definition of science?

I also have this whole mature earth theory but we don't need to get

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into that right now.

At [5:03 PM, February 18, 2006](#), [daniel](#) said...

I just wish christians would stop meddling with this issue. Let us leave theology to the theologians and biology to the biologists. Religious leaders shouldn't be debating science any more than scientists should be debating religion. Both sides come out sounding ignorant if they do. Science is the exploration of the natural world. Religion is the exploration of the supernatural. Not many have tried to combine the two disciplines since the alchemists. You cannot disprove science with religion any more than you can disprove religion with science.

@aj - actually, tests of age CAN be reproduced in the lab. Certain elements break down at a very specific rate - like CLOCKWORK. You put yourself in an odd position when you say you'll only believe in things that can be reproduced in a lab. Here are some things you probably believe in that cannot be reproduced in a laboratory:

God
Love
Faith
Mountains
Sunrise
Your first kiss
Christ crucified and resurrected
Your dreams

Do you see? Science is limited to the tangible and quantifiable. Religion and philosophy deal with those things that are distinctive to the human "soul".

At [3:33 PM, February 19, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

Daniel,

The problem comes to a head though when dealing with a God who is active in the world, and who created the natural order of the universe.

Science and Religion either have to work together or collide, am I wrong?

The goal is not to disprove one another. But to come to truth. (Come on Schenck, I was expecting the classic "the truth does not care" line from you on this one. I used that line in a witnessing opportunity this weekend. I hope it is ok that I borrowed it for one night).

["The Father is Greater than I" \(Bible Brain Buster...](#)

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As far as theology and biology, aren't I engaging in both every day of my life? Is it truly possible for me to leave one to a certain group of persons, and the other to another group?

At [4:13 PM, February 19, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

I would agree with Sniper that we can't just put up a dividing wall between the so-called worlds of science and faith. They both take up space in our minds and they from time to time speak to overlapping topics. Here is the wisdom of both the duet and duel positions: they identify the real interaction between these fields. I have no interest in denying the overlap when I call it a draw. Rather, I am simply taking the wise and patient road of waiting out the storm. While I accept an interaction, I reject any easy synthesis of the two fields. I think a more honest dialogue will begin when we stop trying to wed the two in our minds and start listening to each other as real people with conflicting ideas buzzing in our heads. Only then will we really progress toward a genuine synthesis. As for me, I am willing to wait a long time to get that kind of synthesis. I am simply not in a rush. Is that a failure or nerve on my part?

At [6:09 PM, February 19, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

I think the most important part of what you've said is the idea that the "Draw" approach (which I suspect you gleaned from Barth) is a patient-long-term view. Your Draw approach says "the jury is out" on these ideas.

I would contest that is a very scientific way to treat a theory such as evolution and the writings of Darwin. Some of his thinking has indeed not stood the test of time. Others still persist and help unify much of biological theory. He is no doubt one of the most important scientists of all time. I can celebrate him for that--but not in church.

I like your long term view because of the same reasons you give. It's more balanced than both. My ambivalence about this debate can be found at this link:

<http://www.drurywriting.com/david/05-MAIL-EvolCreate.htm>

By the way, at first Darwin himself didn't think that his theories developed in the years after his voyage on the "Beagle" ended really challenged belief in God. He found them to be unrelated.

But later in life he changed his mind and determined the two views were incompatible, and promptly became an atheist.

At [6:17 PM, February 19, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

For me the jury is not out on this: *I believe in God the father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.* How he did it was/is up to Him, but **that** he did it is incontrovertible for me as a Christian. I start with this assumption then examine science to see what theories of how might explain the world—but as to **who** I am sure...since I am a Christian. ;-)

At [10:49 PM, February 19, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

well put Keith...

John, I really like the "draw" approach, although I see where it lacks in synthesis. In essence, is this what Keith (and myself) are doing when we simply relegate the "who" to God and leave out the "how's" to be figured out later? What are your thoughts? Where does that view fall?

To add to David's discussion on Darwin's own lack of faith in his findings, I read awhile back a portion of his writing on the human eye. He could not fathom how the human eye came from his evolutionary theory. At the end of the paragraph, he seemed exhausted, and basically threw up his hands exclaiming that the human eye was far too advanced to just be put together by an evolutionary process. Is the Beagle experiment you speak of similar to this finding?

At [10:02 AM, February 20, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Keith,

I firmly believe in who created the world and am in no way threatened by Darwin on that front. Thanks for reminding us of the central affirmation that no theory can challenge.

However, I do not think Christians can be completely agnostic about HOW it was created. The real threat of Darwin in the 19th Century (and still today in my opinion) is NOT the literal interpretation of Genesis. The deeper theological issue is the goodness of creation and the relation of human sin to natural evil. If humanity entered an already violent and evil survival-of-the-fittest world, then we didn't even have a chance to not Fall. That is the issue at stake here. So the HOW does come into play.

Now there are many ways through this issue, but it requires major

revision of classic doctrine and therefore should be approached with caution.

For some of these options, consult: - P. Tillich, Systematic Theology Vol. II

- R. Niebuhr, Nature & Destiny of Man Vol. I
- K. Barth, Church Dogmatics III/3
- C. Hartshorne, Philosophers Speak of God
- W. Hasker, Providence, Evil and the Openness of God

At [2:49 PM, February 20, 2006](#), Josh said...

I wish there could be some sorta "biologist round table" on PBS to discuss the real reason why evolution can/can't be refuted scientifically. Every argument I've seen from a naturalist basically involves a comment like this, "You can't really be a creationist in the 21st century? Evolution isn't a theory it's a law." (With sarcastic smugness) And I wanna go, that's not a scientific response.

I'm a total science hack, but from what I've seen of evolution I believe the idea of "micro-evolution", (biological change through parental gene-swapping". This is how breeders change animal traits.

But I have trouble swallowing "macro-evolution" (single celled organisms in the ocean, eventually turning into racoons, eagles, zebras, and humans through mutation, given billions of years)

At [3:09 PM, February 20, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

I think that their has to be a duel view, in which the Word wins, in order for the Gospel to be effective. If you can't really believe the creation story, then how is any of it going to be credible? I think science hasn't tested the assumptions they've been operating on for the last century or so. How much credibility would the scientific community lose if they came out and said, "Oops we were wrong about the whole evolution thing. But you can still trust out medical advice...." I don't see it as a conspiracy, but I'm sure there is some vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

At [4:03 PM, February 20, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

Daniel said ----> "Science is the exploration of the natural world. Religion is the exploration of the supernatural."

I couldn't agree LESS. Mostly because theology is probably more what is being discussed here and not religion (they are not necessarily one in the same). And Theology is the study of God, and for those who

believe God is who He says He is, theology is the intersection of the natural and the supernatural (perhaps even the life seeking God at all is that intersection). to separate the natural from the supernatural is to deny who God is who we are. it is almost Gnostic in its approach, correct me if I am wrong you resident experts...

and that my friend, is not good eats... er... nevermind.

At [4:11 PM, February 20, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

Amen and Amen, Keith. for Christians, followers of The Way that Jesus lived out, and for Jews, you have to go back to the start. Who God is cannot be changed to fit our "new scientific findings"

also... some of the "rock solid" scientific findings can be fabricated by natural causes. like the "million year old trees" that Mt St Helens produced.

At [4:52 PM, February 20, 2006](#), [daniel](#) said...

jay,

theology: The study of the nature of God and religious truth; rational inquiry into religious questions.

Saying that the study of God is not the study of the supernatural is implying that God is restricted to the boundaries of this universe and is no greater. As a christian I believe that God has no bounds and therefore is supernatural. The study of God is the study of the supernatural and there is no other way to slice it. aka "you cannot put God in a box".

science:

- 1a) The observation, identification, description, experimental investigation, and theoretical explanation of phenomena.
- 1b) Such activities restricted to a class of natural phenomena.
- 1c) Such activities applied to an object of inquiry or study.

I agree with Keith that God created the universe but I CERTAINLY don't believe that the book of Genesis is the final word on anything. I mean, c'mon, God was talking to primitive hearers about how He created the universe. I would be fairly surprised if they even HAD a word for something like "gravity", or for "cell" or even "biology". Our language is completely different and not just at a "saying different words" level but at a "entirely new concepts for human beings" level.

Finally, of COURSE God does not change. However, human knowledge and understanding DOES change. If anything, through science, we are understanding the laws governing God's universe better and better.

We have discovered that the earth is no longer flat, insects have six legs, and that the Earth is humbly small (and humans are even smaller) in the vast expanses of the universe. God has not changed but our understanding of Him and His creation has. We have eaten from the tree of knowledge, and now we must face and accept the truth.

At [5:28 PM, February 20, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Wow!

I agree with you, John, that the problem is not with Genesis 1. As you imply, the problem is with the Christian understanding of Genesis 2 and 3 (ironically, not even Genesis 2 and 3's understanding of themselves). So far, my thoughts on how to stay conservatively orthodox and affirm evolution would amount to two rules:

1. You would have to see Adam as a unique point in evolutionary development, probably a moment in which God "supernaturally" stepped into the evolutionary process.

2. You would have to take the idea of "death entering the world through Adam" (Rom. 5) as a comment in relation to spiritual death rather than purely physical death, although a move a pre-modern interpreter might use is to turn to the necessity in Genesis 3 for Adam to eat from the tree of life to live forever. In other words, the story does not assume that Adam lost an innate immortality but that he always needed something more to have it in the first place.

I have little doubt but that these thoughts have long since been made in the readings you suggest.

At [6:55 PM, February 20, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

Daniel said ---> "Saying that the study of God is not the study of the supernatural is implying that God is restricted to the boundaries of this universe and is no greater."

if you read what i said, i said that it is the intersection of natural and supernatural. I did not say it was NOT about the supernatural. it sounds as if you are almost putting God into a supernatural box and disregarding the natural.

i think that's one of the problems with some christians today... this detachment from the natural world around us is as unhealthy as being detached from the supernatural. feel free to disagree.

and for the record, i agree that mirco-evolution is absolutely

provable, but i don't buy macro-evolution.

At [7:21 PM, February 20, 2006](#), [daniel](#) said...

Jay,

Can you please describe to me how the natural and supernatural might intersect?

You may say that Jesus was both natural and supernatural -- but then, that only means He was supernatural. A thing that is completely natural cannot be in any way supernatural. A thing that is supernatural, by its very definition, could never be classified as natural although it may interact with the natural world. In those instances where a supernatural being changes the natural course of things, those events are said to be supernatural events.

Jesus was supernatural through and through. He was born supernaturally. He lived a supernatural life. He couldn't even spit in the dirt without performing a supernatural event. I think we call these miracles. His death SEEMED natural - but a few days later it turned out to be anything but....

You say, "if you read what i said" and I say, "if you spoke the english language".

:P-----

At [8:09 PM, February 20, 2006](#), [::athada::](#) said...

Has anyone mentioned that God created "kinds"? Obviously, we see speciation today (one species becoming two over time) as scientific fact. But whether a lizard can turn into a bird is the bigger question. The "kinds" thought it that God created plants / animals at a certain taxonomic level (he created one kind of parrot, but not 20 species).

At [10:07 PM, February 20, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Sinper = The "Beagle" was the name of the ship Darwin was on for his exploratory voyage and his time at the galapagos islands. So no, it wasn't an experiment involving beagles.

On a related note, our family owned two different Beagles when I was growing up, and if Darwin had looked into their personality and character I'm sure he would determine that the devil himself created their breed.

However, our family also owned Golden Retrievers, and thus our belief in God as Creator is unshakable. They are nearly divine.

:~)

At [10:08 PM, February 20, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Keith -- nice evasion of the question. Well done.

At [1:38 PM, February 21, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

"You may say that Jesus was both natural and supernatural -- but then, that only means He was supernatural. A thing that is completely natural cannot be in any way supernatural.... Jesus was supernatural through and through. He was born supernaturally. He lived a supernatural life. He couldn't even spit in the dirt without performing a supernatural event."

then what do you do with the fact that Jesus was VERY God, and VERY man? yes, spitting in the dirt became a miracle, because He willed it. but Jesus also ate, slept, went to the bathroom, scratched itches, and took walks without any miracles happening. If this was not the case then Jesus would have been a spectacle long before He started performing miracles.

if Jesus made an Adirondack deck chair (he was a carpenter, although deck chairs hadn't been invented yet I am pretty sure) someone might sit in it and say that it was a fine Adirondack deck chair... but I doubt it would have flown them around the Middle East like a magic carpet. Jesus did plenty that was natural. And He did plenty that was supernatural. isn't that the mystery of the incarnation?

I'd love to hear what Keith, John, and David have to say about this particular thread which is waaaay off topic from evolution and Darwin :)

also, I had a neighbor with a Beagle that howled all the time. I did not like that Beagle.

At [6:50 PM, February 21, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

David,

Thanks for pointing out my lack of knowledge in Beagles.

I rest my case that I know nothing further on this topic.

I'm just going to sit back and watch daniel and just.jay argue the same thing from two different perspectives with similar yet different vocabulary, splitting hair aftet hair...only to get more and more

confused as to what the other person actually thinks is truth.

At [9:12 AM, February 22, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

Daniel - I didn't say I only believed things that could be reproduced in the lab I said that scientifically speaking I doubt things that can't be. How can you say that certain elements break down at the same rate over millions of years if you have not watched it happen? The fact that it breaks down at a consistent rate for 10 years doesn't mean it couldn't slow down or speed up after 1 thousand. I'm just not convinced by the whole thing.

I agree that what is really at stake here is not veracity of the genesis account but the world view that the whole Bible is based on.

At [12:48 PM, February 22, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

sniper, i am not sure that daniel and i happen to be arguing the same thing. well, perhaps we are, but the assertion that Jesus was wholly supernatural and therefore cannot be natural can lead down a bad road.

and aj restates a good point in that this evolution mess really boils down to how you view the Bible.

At [2:00 PM, February 22, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

Gee, I had a one-way ticket from Athens to jerusalem--maybe I'd better buy a return ticket and enter this debate? ;-)

At [5:32 PM, February 22, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

just. jay

I agree that saying that Jesus is entirely supernatural and therefore cannot be natural is a horrible road to go down.

However, what I suspect, is that you and Daniel are operating on two different sets of vocabulary. The way you define supernatural vs. natural seems to be different than his (although, I do agree with yours more). I feel he is arguing with philosophical rhetoric, while you are using theological and biblical ideas of creation and Christ and so on.

In the end, I see it getting no where until we start defining things the same way. But, then again, I'm a 22 year old undergraduate without a current grad school to go to, so, I would not sweat my opinions in the least

At [8:18 PM, February 22, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Daniel and Just.Jay,

You are engaging both my favorite topic and arguably the central topic of Christian theology. Keep it up.

I believe Sniper's suggestion would be helpful. If you want to continue the debate on supernatural/natural in Christ, maybe each of you could independently post definitions of these two terms.

Also, you might want to consider engaging some of my previous posts on this very topic. They may or may not be helpful in clarifying the issue. If not, please ignore. If so, please feel free (but no pressure) to move the convo to comments page to one of the following relevant posts:

Where is Jesus? 10.27.05

Is Jesus God? 9.28.05

Was Jesus Tempted? 9.7.05

Or a number of other posts with "Jesus" in the title. ;-)

At [2:04 PM, February 23, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

I agree with you both... there needs to be some defining of terms. That's what I appreciate so much about Eugene Peterson's book "Christ Plays In 10,000 Places." He spends the first quarter of the book defining terms. I am no expert... I don't know that I could do an adequate job of fully communicating myself.

and John, I have read all of your posts for quite some time, and the post on "is Jesus God?" is one of my favorites. I love the Rev. Lovejoy quote and I do believe it is applicable in this particular conversation/debate/argument/discussion :)

I do not think Daniel is a heretic... I do think an extreme distance down the road of "Jesus being fully supernatural" leads to one of the early church heresies. that's why i didn't want to let it go. not because anyone here is bad, but because it was an important sticking point.

i appreciate all the feedback, it is really helpful for me!

At [7:36 PM, February 25, 2006](#), [daniel](#) said...

Guys,

I was using this definition of supernatural (borrowed in its entirety from dictionary.com)

1. Of or relating to existence outside the natural world.
2. Attributed to a power that seems to violate or go beyond natural forces.
3. Of or relating to a deity.
4. Of or relating to the immediate exercise of divine power; miraculous.
5. Of or relating to the miraculous.

In general, when I use the word, I mean definitions 1, 2 and 5. 3 and 4 seem a little too ambiguous to me (as is being discussed in the most recent post here.)

Jesus certainly seemed to be unbound by natural forces (definition 2) in every way. His mere existence was miraculous (virgin birth) - so everything He did whether "magical" or "mundane" are miraculous in my books. I mean, think about it, if a magical fairy sat down and made shoes in your living room, it would be "miraculous" not because shoes were made, but because it was a magical fairy making the shoes. I don't mean to imply that Jesus is a magical fairy but I think you're smart enough to understand the parallel. A God-Man making a deck chair isn't miraculous because a deck chair has been made, it is miraculous because it was the God-Man making it. (I know, extremely oversimplified but it's the best way I can put my viewpoint for now)

take care,
daniel

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