

Evolution and the Divine: A Third Way

By David E. Roy

"Natural Selection." "For God's sake, *Intelligent Design!*" "No, Natural Selection – for Darwin's sake!!" "*Intelligent design, for all that's Holy and Biblical!!!*" "NATURAL SELECTION, YOU RELIGIOUS NUT!" "*INTELLIGENT DESIGN, YOU GODLESS IDIOT!*"

Sometimes these debates over evolution and whether or not the Divine is a part of the process make almost as much sense as the old beer commercials where the voices shouted "Tastes great!" and "Less filling!" back and forth as though there were a serious debate about which was the more important feature of the brew.

In the case of the beer, we were supposed to realize it was not either/or, but both/and. Could something similar be the case with this far more serious and deeply polarizing debate about the role of God in evolution?

Back to Darwin

In *Back to Darwin: A Richer Account of Evolution*, theologian John B. Cobb Jr., who served as editor, guides a complex, detailed, multi-faceted and nuanced debate on this topic. The book is the result of a conference that featured scientists (including key figures in biology) along side philosophers, theologians and other scholars.

The title refers to the suggestion by Cobb and others that getting back to the original theory by Darwin and then moving forward could help avoid some of the conceptual dead ends that have accrued to the field over the past 150 years.

Cobb encourages those representing mainstream science to present their arguments in full. In particular, UC Irvine biology professor, Francisco J. Ayala, is given a great deal of room to set forth the contemporary arguments, data, and theories that constitute Neo-Darwinism.¹

Ayala, described by the NY Times as the "Renaissance Man of Evolutionary Biology," has published more than 900 articles in his field and authored or edited 31 books. He received the 2001 US National Medal of Science. He is a major figure in his field.

A Non-Dogmatic Critique of Science

Cobb's approach is to dive deep into the material prepared by Ayala and others and lift out the places where the current scientific arguments breakdown. It is clear that Cobb fully comprehends the material he is critiquing. His rational, intellectual manner, with an emphasis on fairness and respect, is far from the kind of dogmatic approach that readers might be accustomed to from the religious right.

This book is full and rich. This article cannot begin to adequately account for all the material in the volume. My aim is to give an idea of some of the important lines of thinking.

Process Thought Supports Progressive Values

These lines of thinking emerge from a way of looking at our world (process thought) that embraces and affirms what many social and political progressives value, such as the belief that all human beings deserve the same rights for freedom, respect, opportunity, and physical and mental well-being; and that justice has not been served until this equality has been established. Or, that our personal well-being depends upon the well-being of the entire planet. And so on.

Underlying these values are certain core intuitions, among them being the awareness that human beings are all essentially alike, including the fact that my preciousness is no different from yours – what Jewish theologian Martin Buber referred to as the I-Thou experience.

A second is the understanding that we are profoundly and inherently interconnected, not just with other people but with the world as a whole.

A third, melding the first and second, is that there is an inherent preciousness in all elements of the world; and that this is at the center of our interconnectedness.

While these intuitions express the heart of many of the world's great religions and have served as the motivation for many of the greatest social movements, they tend not to survive in the hot world of power and in the cold world of science. This is certainly true in the scientific study of evolution.

Additionally, science has long-sought to eliminate concepts like meaning, purpose (i.e., aiming at a goal) and subjectivity (which would include intrinsic value²).

The ascent of the scientific worldview has provoked intense responses from the religious domain, Creationism and Intelligent Design being the most well known. While they are not identical, they tend to be joined in the minds of a great many, both pro and con.³

There clearly is fault on both extremes with the result that any larger, more inclusive picture is seldom seen let alone understood. I am not alone in believing that when the more inclusive understanding is allowed to emerge, the world will be better served.

Fortunately, there is a viable third way that solidly affirms the well-established findings of evolution on a broad or macro basis; and provides an intellectually strong non-supernatural explanation of the role of God in this development.

Shift from a Substantialist to a Process Worldview

To more fully appreciate the lines of thought in the approach to evolution taken in *Back to Darwin* necessitates a shift in understanding from the dominant consensus that reality is best understood as constituted out of things (i.e., substance or matter) to the perspective that the fundamental nature of reality is as a *process* that, among other things, involves a degree of subjective experience for all elements. This is called *panexperientialism* (which is **not** to be equated with consciousness).

If each and every element of the universe has as a component of itself a phase of subjective experience, then there is an essential similarity in all of reality. This similarity extends to an enormous array of factors that are seldom attributed to the material world, including value and purpose.

Science Dismisses Value, Purpose, Subjectivity & Novelty

While most people live their lives as though these are essential factors, science – including Neo-Darwinism – deems them either irrelevant or imaginary. Additionally, as mentioned previously, science also rejects subjectivity (or, more fully, subjective *experience*) and it cannot make a place for radical novelty (something that is truly new, that has never before been actualized) without abandoning the idea that antecedent causes, when fully understood, explain all there is to explain.

The problem is that most people conduct their lives as though they have some measure of free will; and are often highly motivated to seek out or create something.

Are We All Deluded?

If we do all of this and we also feel down deep that our lives have meaning and purpose, then the world of science with its present set of metaphysical assumptions is not capable of understanding the full picture. The only other choice is to assume, as would some of these same scientists, that this is all an illusion. Sounds a bit like the tale of the Emperor's New Clothing, perhaps in reverse.

Process Thought Affirms Science *and* What Science Dismisses

The process view of reality is important because it allows us to embrace what we know through science and yet also embrace what we know in other ways to be true as well.

This latter knowledge provides an affirmation of the importance of purpose and meaning as well as our mutual preciousness and interconnectedness, solid support for our trust in having free will, clarity about the reality of novelty and, for some, the realization that there is an essential role for God in the world that does **not** violate the so-called laws of nature nor challenge the fact of evolution.

The Process View of God: In Nature in a Natural Fashion

In Alfred North Whitehead's major work, *Process and Reality*, he offers a few sketches of the role of God in creation.⁴ God's chief role in the universe is to continuously initiate its creative development by seeding reality with the most relevant possibilities for the next step in the on-going progress of everything everywhere.

When these sacred seeds⁵ of possibility take root – are actualized – then there is progress, development, evolution. In one sense, these seeds become as much a part of the world as an apple or a sip of water becomes a part of us.

The "Habits" of Nature vs. the Laws of Nature.

Further, these seeds are lures, not demands: Whitehead said the laws of nature are better understood as the habits of nature. The fact that the habits of nature appear

to be laws is because the micro events studied by most areas of science conform in a largely unchanging fashion to the limited range of possibilities offered.

It is only when much complex and extensive systems are studied that the freedom to choose novel possibilities comes into play, such as is the case with biological evolution.

God is *Not* Supernatural

So, how is it that God is involved in what science and the general public call evolution? Was this only at the start of the universe, is it intermittent or is it continuous? Is this involvement jarring and unpredictable or is it seamless for the most part?

The bare bones understanding from the process perspective is that God is actively involved in every element in the world all the time and without exception in a basically seamless fashion.

God is an essential ingredient in the world, everywhere and at every moment. But, God is not (!) supernatural. God does not sit outside the world and only intervene at odd, arbitrary moments and in ways that radically defy the world's fundamental nature.

God Aims at Intensity of Experience

Among other things, God from the revised, process perspective provides the ultimate meaning and purpose of life of which we partake, adding our own richness to the mix.

One of God's chief aims is the evocation of intensity of experience based upon the harmonization (or integration) of complexity. God's aims are served, in other words, when what comes into being in the world becomes more and more complex. This clearly is a theme in evolution.

Some of the Data that Science Finds Challenging

1. The Development of Complexity

The development of the universe has moved from a single point to billions of galaxies and trillions of stars. Evolution on earth has moved from the inorganic to the organic, and within the organic, from protobionts to prokaryote cells, eukaryote cells ... and eventually (after a few billion years), to the human being with its exceedingly complex brain that supports a psyche capable of a great deal of complexity and therefore intensity of harmonized experience.

The standard Neo-Darwinist view that this can be explained solely on the basis of natural selection coupled with random genetic mutations is problematical in many ways, according to many of *Back to Darwin's* contributors.

2. Emergent Phenomena

Science has been challenged by what are termed emergent phenomena. The fields of science are organized hierarchically, with multiple stages passing through physics to chemistry and eventually to biology. Traditionally, each area seeks its full and complete explanation from its underlying area (biology from chemistry, chemistry from classical physics, classical physics from quantum mechanics).

Yet there are properties unique to each level that cannot be explained by the more fundamental level. These properties “emerge” and have their own set of rules. While scientists have long recognized and studied these emergent properties, they generally still seek to find the necessary and sufficient explanation in the properties out of which a field is constituted.

3. Other

The book contains lengthy discussions on a number of other issues related to this section. This could be the subject of a future column, if readers are interested.

Conclusion

When it comes to evolution, the philosophers, theologians and scientists who have been steeped in Whitehead’s process philosophy and who have contributed to the extension of his metaphysics to many other disciplines, support the idea that the Divine Eros is centrally and intimately involved in the evolutionary process; and that evolution reflects a purpose to reach a goal; and that evolution is a natural phenomenon that continues to be thoughtfully guided by what Whitehead called the Poet of the World.

¹ Neo-Darwinism is used in the book to refer to the synthesis of Darwin’s theory of Natural Selection with Mendelian genetics.

² Intrinsic value means that something has value for itself, simply because it is, so to speak. This is contrasted with extrinsic value which is the value something has for something else.

³ Creationism is the idea that God created the world only a few thousand years ago, though God made it all look like it was billions of years old. Intelligent Design generally asserts that God created all the plants and animals as discrete entities without the need for evolution.

⁴ This is one of the reasons that many academics as well as scientists have dismissed his work. In Whitehead’s later work, he shifted from “God” to the “Divine Eros.”

⁵ Whitehead referred to these seeds as *eternal objects*. Eternal objects have influence; they serve as “lures” for events, luring them in the direction that will be most fulfilling for all.