

WHAT VAIN PURSUIT

Theistic Evolution; A scientific, philosophical, and theological critique.
Moreland JP, Meyer SC, Shaw C, Gauger AK, Grudem W (eds.) 2017.
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Jim Gibson, PhD
Geoscience Research Institute

Theistic Evolution is an important book that should be read by every serious scholar who is interested in theories of origins. However, at around 1,000 pages, it is not intended as a casual read during commercial breaks while watching television. It is a scholarly book that is well argued and requires careful and thoughtful reading. The book consists of introductions by both a scientist-philosopher and a theologian, followed by a total of 31 chapters, contributed by 25 authors. The chapters are organized into three sections: science; philosophy; and theology. The reader will greatly benefit from having some acquaintance with each of these disciplines.

Theistic evolution is a term that has been used in a variety of ways, but the meaning used in this book is the idea that God caused evolution to proceed in the manner described by neo-Darwinism, but in such a way that He did not directly intervene in the process in any way that is detectable by science. This is the theory most scholars have in mind when they discuss “theistic evolution.” It is the theory endorsed by the influential group, Biologos, which includes several well-known scientists and scholars.

The authors do not casually brush off the theory because of its obvious oxymoronic status (an explanation cannot be both materialistic and theistic at the same time). Rather, they engage the theory from the evidence in science and its implications for philosophy and theology. The authors bypass the question of the age of the earth and mostly base their arguments independently of this issue. Much of the information is available in other sources, but the book offers at least two substantial benefits to the reader. First, it makes a great deal of pertinent information available in one source, which is convenient. Second, and more importantly, it presents up-to-date arguments cogently, with tight logic and well-supported conclusions.

Some readers will wish the authors had included arguments addressing the age of the earth. However, this would probably result in evolution defenders focusing on that topic and avoiding the issues raised in the book. I regard it as a strength of the argument that it does not depend on any specific chronology. Evolution fails regardless of the length of time,

because it is a flawed theory that is maintained only by a grim determination to hold to a materialistic philosophical stance. Another criticism of the book is its assumption of an immortal soul in humans – an unbiblical idea derived from Greek philosophy. However, this assumption can be readily overlooked, and it does not detract materially from the strength of the arguments presented.

The first section has two parts. The first part, with nine chapters, addresses the failures of neo-Darwinian theory in explaining the origin of life, the origin of biological information, and the origin of organismal form. Chemical evolution is clearly implausible, and mutations and natural selection are manifestly insufficient to explain the origins of morphological novelty. Attempts to improve the theory in what is called the extended evolutionary synthesis do not solve the problems. Embryological evidence is problematic for evolutionary theory. Since the scientific evidence does not support the sufficiency of evolutionary mechanisms, Christians are unjustified in claiming that these are the mechanisms used by God in creation.

The second part of the first section includes eight chapters, and consists of two subsections. The first subsection focuses on the claim of universal common ancestry. Evidence is examined from the fossil record, widespread phylogenetic conflicts, and the necessity for complete series of viable transformational stages. The second subsection analyzes the evidence for human origins. Claims of fossil links between humans and apes are criticized and the uniqueness of humans is described. Claims that population genetics rules out a single ancestral pair of humans are refuted. The section closes with a commentary on bias in science and how that affects discussions of human ancestry.

The second section contains nine chapters organized around the theme of a philosophical critique of theistic evolution. Methodological naturalism is criticized for displacing science as the basis for acceptance of universal common ancestry. The logical inconsistency of theistic evolution in attempting to combine naturalism with theism is noted. To be consistent, theistic evolutions should reject methodological naturalism. The question of God's action in the world entails recognition of the distinction between God's actions in miracles and in all natural events. This distinction is important for a Christian view of the problem of natural evil, a problem for which theistic evolution offers no help. The complementary model – that science and Scripture are two independent realms of experience – is rejected for its scientism. The origin of morality is another issue that theistic evolution fails to explain. The section closes with a review of the

thinking of C S Lewis on evolution, concluding that theistic evolution is incompatible with his thinking.

The third and final section includes five chapters dealing with the theological implications of theistic evolution and the striking conflicts between the theory and the teachings of Scripture. The theory not only contradicts the creation account in Genesis, but also the general teachings of both the Old and New Testaments. It also is contradictory to several important historical Christian doctrines. Denying the Fall of Adam and Eve undermines the doctrine of atonement, and brings into question the meaning of the gospel, which is the central point of Christianity. This section ends with a review of the position of the theologian, B B Warfield, and concludes that the theory is incompatible with his views.

Having briefly described the structure and contents of the book, I would like to point out some statements from the book that seem particularly interesting. I will limit my remarks to the first two sections, both dealing with science.

The first nine chapters are designed to address the question of whether Darwin's attempt to exclude intelligent design from biology succeeds or fails. The authors are unanimous in concluding that Darwinism fails.

In the first chapter, Douglas Axe notes that everyone has an intuition of design, and it is only by considerable effort that this intuition can be suppressed and evolution accepted. He states (p 83) "All accidental explanations of life, whether Darwinian or not, are demonstrably implausible."

In Chapter 2, Stephen Meyer (p 107) makes an important point that is repeated in other parts of the book. I quote, ". . . there is little (if any) rationale for marrying either theism or Christianity to a failing theory of biological evolution, just as that theory is being abandoned by its own philosophical allies as empirically insufficient, or simply false." This is a good summary of much of what this book is about – if evolution is false, it cannot have been the method God used in creation.

In discussing attempts to study bacterial evolution in the laboratory, Matti Leisola (p 141, Chapter 3) writes "Every attempt to mimic evolution in the laboratory is an example of design, not an example of what actually happens in nature."

The study of the hypothesis of abiogenesis is evaluated by James Tour, who writes (p 188, Chapter 4) "With each added step, difficulties are compounded by improbabilities so overwhelming that no other field of science would depend upon such levels of faith."

In Chapter 5, Winston Ewert discusses attempts to simulate evolution digitally. He notes that such simulations may give the appearance of success, but “Success is not due to some efficacy of the Darwinian process, but rather it is due to teleological fine-tuning by the programmer in the creation of the simulation.” In other words, such simulations show what can be accomplished by intelligent design. They do not show anything about what can happen without design (p 214).

Stephen Meyer challenges the notion that God established the laws of nature in the beginning in such a way that evolution without further guidance was inevitable. He points out that laws specify what must happen but information is based on what does not have to happen. Events that follow natural law do not convey information. He states (p 227) “To say that the processes that natural laws describe can generate functionally specified information sequences is, therefore, essentially a contradiction in terms.”

The “central dogma” is critiqued by Jonathan Wells in the context of development. Are changes in DNA the cause of changes in body plans and creation of new types of organisms? By “central dogma,” Wells means “DNA makes RNA makes protein makes us.” However, neither DNA nor RNA contain all the information used to make proteins, and proteins decidedly do not contain sufficient information to construct a body – they are only one of the sources of information. Wells concludes (p 256) “So to judge from the available evidence, mutating the DNA of a fruit fly embryo leads to only three possible outcomes: a normal fruit fly, a defective fruit fly, or a dead fruit fly. Hardly the raw materials for evolution.”

The so-called “extended evolutionary synthesis” (EES) is an attempt to rescue naturalistic explanations of life from the evidence at hand. Steve Meyer, Ann Gauger and Paul Nelson team up to explore this topic. They regard the most significant part of the EES to be evolutionary development (“evo-devo”). They state (p 263): “. . . the main proposal of the evolutionary developmental biologists, that early-acting developmental mutations can cause stable, heritable, large-scale changes in animal body plans, contradicts the results of a hundred years of mutagenesis experiments on organisms such as fruit flies and nematodes (roundworms).”

Sheena Tyler (chapter 9) continues the exposition of the failure of neo-Darwinian theory in the area of development by describing the careful “orchestration” required for development of specific examples of tissues and organs. After discussing evidence for separate origins of numerous different types of animals, she summarizes her ideas, and probably that of the other authors as well: “The challenge for theistic evolutionists is whether they want to align themselves with speculative naturalism, or whether

they are willing to follow the evidences for design and for discontinuity wherever this leads” (p 324).

The theme of the second section is whether common ancestry is scientifically established. Three chapters deal with the question of universal common ancestry, and three chapters point out flaws in the claims of common ancestry for humans and chimpanzees.

In reviewing the fossil record, Gunter Bechly and Stephen Meyer point out the dominant pattern of discontinuity and conclude (p 356), “For this reason, to decide whether a polyphyletic or monophyletic view of the history of life best fits the data, we think the most important class of evidence to consider remains the pervasive pattern of discontinuity and the abrupt appearance of major groups of organisms.”

If biodiversity has arisen through continuous, gradual genetic change, we would expect to find congruence in phylogenetic trees, regardless of which gene or morphological trait we use. The real situation is very different. “To put it another way, conflicts between morphological and molecular trees seriously challenge common ancestry – and, as we will soon see, undermine the methods used to infer it” (Casey Luskin, p 384).

Paul Nelson (chapter 12) addresses the point that evolutionary change is restricted to pathways in which every step along the way is a viable organism. This requirement is absolute, and presents a strong burden of proof on the claim of universal common ancestry, and invites testing of that claim. “This claim, namely, that species can be, and were, viably transformed over time fundamentally distinguishes both UCD [universal common descent] and CD [common descent, such as within a taxonomic group] from separate origins” (Paul Nelson, p 414).

The fossil record of hominids is surveyed by Casey Luskin, who concludes the evidence does not support a common ancestry for humans and chimpanzees. He states (p 472), “While the hominin fossil record is marked by incomplete and fragmented fossils, known hominins fall into two separate groups: ape-like and human-like, with a distinct gap between them.”

Humans do share many genetic similarities with chimpanzees, but humans have many unique features that point to separate origins. Similarities are not necessarily due to common ancestry, but may be due to common design. “On the other hand, if genetic change is directed rather than random, the trait is most likely shared because the organisms use similar solutions to a physiological need” (Ann Gauger, Ola Hossjer, and Colin Reeves, p 496).

Evolutionists, including theistic evolutionists, have claimed that humans contain too much genetic variation to have derived from a single ancestral pair. However, the argument is not convincing. Two original parents would have four sets of chromosomes. Since there are only four different DNA nucleotides, four parental sets of chromosomes would allow for maximal nucleotide diversity. In contrast, the authors point out (p 516): “This DNA block structure is remarkably consistent with a unique origin hypothesis” (Ola Hossier, Ann Gauger and Colin Reeves, p 521).

The final chapter dealing with science addresses the problem of bias in science, and the difficulty of getting funding or opportunities for publication of ideas that differ from the established academic order. “On the other hand, the current system of peer review both in funding for research and in publication of papers is highly focused on maintaining the status quo and is often highly dismissive of genuine ideas and novel findings” (Christopher Shaw, p 538).

These statements provide a very brief, but hopefully helpful, sample of the kinds of ideas that are discussed in the sections of the book that deal with science. The reader can expect to find additional statements of interest in the sections on philosophy and theology. Overall, the book provides a rich source of information that points out many of the important evidential flaws in evolution, and by logical extension, to theistic evolution. There is no justification for Christians to adopt evolutionary theory, with or without the addition of an alleged divine influence.