

Does evolution explain human nature?



Francis Collins

Not entirely.

The evidence in support of Darwin's theory of evolution is overwhelming. In my own field of genomics, the digital record of the long history of life on this planet—a complex and awesome story of gradual

change in DNA acted upon by natural selection—provides incontrovertible proof of descent from a common ancestor. As the noted geneticist and evolutionary theorist Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote several decades ago, “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.” And that includes humankind.

But Dobzhansky believed in God. And so do I.

Regrettably, much of the current culture in the United States sees evolution as an affront to belief in God. But the 40 percent of working scientists who are believers have a different view. Most of us are theistic evolutionists. We see evolution as God's method for creation—and what an elegant method it is! Put another way, we see life (bios) as the consequence of God's Word (the Logos). Thus, I like to refer to theistic evolution as “biologos.”

Scientists who share my view do not see evolution as incompatible with the Bible, and we are puzzled and distressed that so many modern-day Christians insist on an ultra-literal reading of Genesis, when thoughtful believers down through the centuries have concluded that this story of God's plan for creation was never intended to be read as a scientific textbook. We see science as the way to understand the awesome nature of God's creation and as a powerful method for answering the “how” questions about our universe. But we also see that science is powerless to answer the fundamental “why” questions, such as “Why is there something instead of nothing?,” “Why am I here?,” and “Why should good and evil matter?”

Let's focus on this last question. One of the most notable characteristics of humanity, across centuries, cultures, and geographic locations, is a universal grasp of the concept of right and wrong and an inner voice that calls us to do the right thing. This is often referred to as the moral law. We may not always agree on what behaviors are right (which is heavily influenced by culture), but we generally agree that we should try to do good and avoid evil. When we break the moral law (which we do frequently, if we are honest with ourselves), we make excuses, only further demonstrating that we feel bound by the moral law in our dealings with others.

Evolutionary arguments, which ultimately depend on reproductive fitness as the overarching goal, may explain some parts of this human urge toward altruism, especially if self-sacrificing acts are done on behalf of relatives or those from whom you might expect some future reciprocal benefit. But evolutionary models universally predict the need for reflexive hostility to outside groups, and we humans do not seem to have gotten that memo. We especially admire cases in which individuals make sacrifices for strangers or members of outside groups: think of Mother Teresa, or Oskar Schindler, or the Good Samaritan.

We should be skeptical of those who dismiss these acts of radical altruism as some sort of evolutionary misfiring. And if these noble acts are frankly a scandal to reproductive fitness, might they instead point in a different direction—toward a holy, loving, and caring God, who instilled the moral law in each of us as a sign of our special nature and as a call to relationship with the Almighty?

Do not get me wrong. I am not arguing that the existence of the moral law somehow proves God's existence. Such proofs cannot be provided by the study of nature. And there is an inherent danger in arguing that the moral law points to some sort of supernatural intervention in the early days of human history; this has the flavor

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of a “God of the gaps” argument. After all, much still remains to be understood about evolution’s influence on human nature. But even if radically altruistic human acts can ultimately be explained on the basis of evolutionary mechanisms, this would do nothing to exclude God’s hand. For if God chose the process of evolution in the beginning to create humans in *imago Dei*, it would also be perfectly reasonable for God to have used this same process to instill knowledge of the moral law.

A deeper question raised by this debate is the fundamental nature of good and evil. Does morality actually have any foundation? To be consistent, a committed atheist, who argues that evolution can fully account for all aspects of human nature, must also argue that the human urge toward altruism, including its most radical and self-sacrificial forms, is a purely evolutionary artifact. This forces the conclusion that the concepts of good and evil have no real foundation, and that we have been hoodwinked by evolution into thinking that morality provides meaningful standards of judgment. Yet few atheists seem

willing to own up to this disturbing and depressing consequence of their worldview. On the contrary, the most aggressive of them seem quite comfortable pointing to the evil they see religion as having inspired. Isn’t that rather inconsistent?

I was once an atheist myself, and so I understand the temptation to fall into a completely materialistic view of human nature. But seeing all of humanity’s nobler attributes through the constricted lens of atheism and materialism ultimately leads to philosophical impoverishment and even to the necessity of giving up concepts of benevolence and justice. I found that a whole world of interesting questions opened up for me once I accepted the possibility of a spiritual aspect to humanity.

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