

Evolution: The Key to Knowledge of God?



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The process of evolution has shaped our world and our own species. It has also definitively shaped the way we know about this world. What does this imply for those who claim to know about God through religious belief and theological reflection?

Evolution by natural selection has traditionally, and famously, been regarded by many as a foe of Christian theology. As we progressively learn more about how the evolutionary pressures of the past affect the way our minds operate today, the theory now appears to be posing a new challenge to religion. While it has long been accepted that religious attempts to make sense of the meaning of our lives are embedded in and shaped by social, historical, and cultural factors, we now have to come to terms with the possibility that religious faith might also be shaped profoundly by the biological origins of our minds and of our self-awareness. This goes beyond the traditional challenge for Christian theology to take seriously biological evolution by natural selection.

Far from seeing this as a potential threat to religious belief, many Christian theologians are happy to accept the direct impact that our biological origins may have had on the way we think about religion, faith, and knowledge. They embrace this possibility convinced that the theory of evolution, far from attacking religion, could actually reveal something positive about the way religious believers claim to have knowledge about God.

Philosophers, of course, have long argued that human intelligence can be seen as naturally arising through evolutionary processes and as such provides us with one very effective way of survival. The question now is, Could the same be claimed for religion and religious faith?

Some neo-Darwinians have famously claimed that religion is just an extraneous “virus of the mind” and that distant religious “memories” of

our species are not to be trusted. This position, however, does not take into account the amazing pervasiveness of religion through the ages. Certain Christian theologians are claiming that the universal prevalence of religious or metaphysical beliefs shows that they are closely related to the evolution of human cognition. On this view, metaphysical and religious beliefs are not at all in conflict with evolution, but are actually made intelligible by evolution.

For believers in a supernatural being, or God, this may have startling consequences: even if the theory of evolution by natural selection successfully precludes “deistic” or too “narrow” notions of God, it certainly does not by itself sufficiently explain religious belief or why some of us have faith in God.

These arguments from theologians who are trying to find ways to constructively appropriate evolutionary theory depend greatly on the claims of evolutionary epistemologists that all our different forms of knowledge are deeply integrated and embedded in the biological roots of the human mind. The basic assumption of evolutionary epistemology is, therefore, that we humans, like all other living beings, result from evolutionary processes and that, consequently, our mental capacities (our superior intelligence, our ability to construct metaphysical beliefs) are constrained and shaped by the mechanisms of biological evolution. What is now also argued, by at least some theologians, is that not only are all our different forms of human knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, firmly grounded in biological evolution, but also our claims to religious knowledge. On this view, the study of evolution becomes important not only for understanding the phenomenon of knowledge but also for understanding the claims of religious knowledge.

An even bolder assertion is that not only are metaphysical and religious beliefs in humans related to evolutionary processes, they now extend so hugely beyond biological evolution into cultural evolution that biology alone can no longer explain religion or religious faith.

The surprising result of this latter argument is that acceptance of an evolutionary account of the origin of human intelligence leaves ample scope for humans to develop meaning, values, and purpose (including religious meaning, values, and purpose) on a cultural level.

Christian theologians would rarely claim that this in any way constitutes an argument for God, or for the existence of God. What is claimed is that a responsible theological reinterpretation of these matters could make it clear why the idea of God, and of God's presence in this universe, could move us beyond well-known disputes like whether evolution operates through blind chance or providence, and whether "naturalism" or "supernaturalism" are really the only two narrow options open to Christian believers. This view asserts that evolution, rightly understood, can actually enrich our religious faith considerably, and may set the stage for a friendlier and more rewarding conversation between religion and the sciences.

No wonder, then, that the impact of the theory of evolution is again today felt far beyond the boundaries of biology. What is different, though, is that for some theologians at least, much of the earlier animosity and conflict between science and religion is fast disappearing. By revealing the biological origins of all our knowledge—including our religious knowledge—evolutionary epistemology becomes a handy tool for theologians who are looking for a meaningful interdisciplinary dialogue with the sciences. Within the context of this conversation, God and nat-

ural selection do not have to be competing hypotheses anymore. For the Christian theologian God's presence in our universe seems to be the best explanation of progress toward greater consciousness and intentionality in the evolution of life on Earth.

For the Christian believer the experience of religious faith has always profoundly mediated a personal presence. The experience of this presence obviously cannot prove the existence of God. It does, however, have far-reaching implications: it places religious belief within a wider set of general beliefs about the natural world, and it shows how it may integrate coherently with them.

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