

## Creation, Evolution, and Original Sin

The thoughts here are based on some assumptions about the relationship between the account of creation in scripture and the current state of scientific knowledge. Before I became a follower of Jesus, I was a scientific atheist, so I take the scientific view of evolution seriously. From the scientific side, I think that:

- We have uncovered some but not all of the principles and processes behind the way that our universe works.
- Natural selection was one of the processes involved in creation.
- Whoever thought up the mathematics behind the way the universe works was smarter than me (or anyone I have met so far).

After I accepted that Jesus would be my role model for living and then later accepted him as my savior, I needed to understand how and why the biblical account came to be. From the biblical side, I assume that:

- The biblical account of creation reflects the best understanding of its writers using the concepts and language available at the time.
- The biblical and scientific views of reality are different ways of expressing a single underlying truth.

As a result, these ideas are built on the validity and the incomplete understanding of both perspectives. I am convinced that there was an active intelligence present and working during the process of creation. Not having been there, we human beings are only able to make our best guesses about what happened at that time, based on the information available to us.

### Natural selection

Natural selection is a process through which the genetically determined characteristics of a species change over time. Those patterns which are more effective survive to reproduce in greater numbers. The characteristics they include then become more common in the population. In competition for the resources needed to survive, those who are more effective competitors over time replace those who are less effective.

Natural selection appears to work well in refining physical characteristics that have advantages for survival. It also appears to work well in encouraging cooperative group behaviors—protecting the young, obtaining food, defending against predators, and so forth.

Competition for resources leads to change toward more successful patterns for all kinds of living organisms. As human beings, we can trace many aspects of our physical make-up and our behavioral options to the effects of competition and natural selection.

Natural selection favors both cooperation and competition in order to survive effectively. Cooperative groups form for self-preservation, for the benefit of each participant. For each participant the benefit to the others is only a secondary effect of the need for help for one's own survival. This leads to a form of cooperation which is essentially self-serving, continued only as long as the association with others is of benefit to the self.

### Mimetic rivalry

Rene Girard used the term mimetic rivalry to describe the human experience within a cultural group. Both cooperative and competitive processes are active for members of a group, and common needs within a cooperating group will lead to rivalry among the group members. The rivalry is intensified as imitation of each other raises desire and competition for particular resources. The result is increased competitive pressure within the group.

This rivalry leads to a paradoxical situation between members of the group. The behavior which has always worked for the group in competition with other groups—take what we need however we can, including by violence—threatens the group's ability to continue to work cooperatively when directed toward each other.

The tension between the need to cooperate and the pressure to compete leads to attempts to find an outlet for the growing tension, usually in violence against an external enemy or an internal scapegoat.

### **Original sin**

Original sin, as portrayed in the biblical account of creation, is an alternative way of looking at this structural pressure toward self-preservation through competition and cooperation. It is no accident that the second-generation heirs to original sin give and receive murderous violence between brothers. In the way complete self-centeredness and competitive violence win out over brotherly cooperation, the biblical story reflects the impact of formative competition and rivalry on human relationships.

The evidence from three different scientific disciplines—examining the fossil record, mapping genetic shifts through DNA analysis, and studies of the development of language structures—all indicate a single point of origin for human beings as we know them. At the point of origin, humankind developed its ability to use language.

Language included not just as having symbols for concrete objects and actions. Some primates have successfully learned to use language at this level. For humans, language includes the ability to use abstractions and reason conceptually—to generalize, to compare, to distinguish, and to evaluate.

With the ability to use information symbolically, humans were able to accumulate and share knowledge. This also made it possible to evaluate and share judgments about what is pleasant or painful, kind or cruel, and good or evil.

Those first humans who received this linguistic capability still bore the heritage of the long years of development into creatures able to use this gift. They still embodied the self-focused need to compete to survive, and they still valued others only insofar as others could be helpful to their own survival.

In the ability to reason and discern, humans acquired one aspect of the image of God, but the self-centeredness of their physical nature was still their primary and effective motivation. The capability for knowledge of good and evil that comes with language is the first step toward human responsibility for behavior. Only then are self-awareness, planning, evaluation of alternatives, and awareness of one's own intentions possible.

### **Original sin is no mistake**

Original sin is typically considered a fault on the part of human beings or a failure on God's part in allowing humans to fail in this particular way. In fact, original sin is no mistake of God's, but rather a characteristic of being human at the point of human origin.

Self-centeredness, rivalry, and using others for one's own gain are all aspects of character that grew out of need for individual survival in a competitive environment. Sinfulness turns out to be the tendency to act out of the expectations of evolutionary competition. The resulting bad behaviors, individual sins, are actions that we engage in which cause harm to others and ultimately to ourselves.

In the second creation account in Genesis, God does not deny the first humans access to the knowledge of good and evil, even though they are forbidden to take it. They promptly demonstrate their self-centeredness, the primacy of satisfying their own desires, their reluctance to take direction even from God whom they should respect, and their willingness to blame whoever is handy for the problems they cause themselves.

God does not seem surprised or angry at what they have done, but God clearly explains the consequences of their actions. Men will be aware (able to understand and compare) of the difficulty of sustaining life, women will become aware of their suffering in childbirth, and both will become aware of the consequences of their mortality. With the evidence of character that these first humans showed by their actions, they are specifically denied access to eternal life.

The sons of Adam and daughters of Eve will have the opportunity in their own lifetimes to grow out of the complete self-absorption of infancy. This can move them into a maturity that reflects, for some more and for others less, the fulfillment of the image of God that is latent within them.

They will be given a way over time to move toward a life that is God centered and other centered rather than strictly self-centered. Humans will be given teaching and law to show them the way they should live as a part of God's plan. At the appropriate time, human beings will ultimately receive a complete demonstration of what it means to live a loving and other-centered life through the presence of Jesus.