



Replies to Commentators on Mere Theistic Evolution

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Churchill: On Drawing Theological Boundaries

We want to start off by thanking all of our commentators again for the care and attention that they gave to our paper. I will comment first and then Michael Murray will comment.

Tom McCall takes up a number of the items that Murray and I discuss in our paper. He provides thicker and more perspicuous treatments of these as well as added biblical and theological sophistication. He does this in a number of cases, and in each case Murray and I are happy, grateful even, to take his expanded treatment on board as an aide and further illumination of what we wrote. Here we'll just highlight one of these, namely his discussion of the historical Adam and Eve.

We think McCall has done all of us a service by parsing one of Wayne Grudem's challenges to theistic evolution in an argument form and then attempting to respond to that challenge. In McCall's characterization there are two main premises. First, evolution is ultimately inconsistent with commitment to an initial human pair, or Adam and Eve, from which all other humans descend. And second, a commitment to just such a pair is necessary in any biblically faithful view of humanity. The conclusion follows straightaway: evolution is therefore inconsistent with a biblically faithful view of humanity.

In responding to this argument, McCall takes what for many might seem a surprising approach. He chooses not to dispute that second premise. He concedes for present purposes that if we are to be faithful to the Bible we must commit to the doctrine that all of us descended from an initial human pair. Rather, McCall challenges the first premise. He argues that evolution is, after all, consistent with commitment to Adam and Eve, with our descent from them, and with associated doctrines like original sin. He demonstrates this by way of illustration presenting two recent proposals, one by philosopher Peter van Inwagen¹ and one by geneticist Joshua Swamidass, where each of those two recent proposals affirm both evolution and an initial human pair as the ancestors of us all. They do that in very different ways.

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We have nothing to add to what McCall has given us here except to say that we hope in the future to see more proposals like those by van Inwagen and Swamidass—that is, more rigorous attempts and creative attempts to explore the potential harmony between biology on the one hand and Christian theology on the other. And we hope to see more presentations like McCall's, which explain these proposals in sophisticated but accessible fashion. Thank you, Tom.

William Lane Craig raises important questions about many components of the paper that Murray and I wrote. These final comments will touch directly on just one of his points, but in a way that we hope will indirectly address some of his other questions.

Craig wants to know what, in our opinion, is the degree of miraculous activity that mere theistic evolution permits, especially miraculous activity in the evolutionary development of life. In our paper we try to make very clear that mere theistic evolution does not preclude God's providentially directing the development of biological complexity and diversity, including directing this development via *miracles*. This is one of the reasons why Murray and I think that intelligent design and theistic evolution are friendlier to each other than is often supposed. So Craig's question is a very good one. On our account, how much miraculous activity can you posit within evolutionary history before you cross a line and no longer count as a theistic evolutionist?

Here's our answer: *some* miraculous activity, but *not too much!*

At first glance this is apt to look like a dodge. But it's not. The reason why it's not is because we don't believe that theistic evolution should be thought of as having sharp boundaries on this issue. That's why we intentionally proposed criteria that would allow many clear cases of views that would count as theistic evolution, many clear cases of views that would not count as theistic evolution, and some vague cases in between where the difference between these can depend in part on differences in the kind and amount of miracles proposed in each case.

The fact that views can fall along a spectrum in this way stems from what we proposed in the third definitional feature of mere theistic evolution, namely, commitment to evolutionary processes as providing the best explanation for the complexity and diversity of life. Importantly, one can commit to something as the best explanation for some phenomena without thereby committing to it as an *exclusive* or *exhaustive* explanation of those phenomena.

By way of analogy—and as we noted in the paper—one might hold that meteorological science provides the best explanation for the patterns of weather even though those explanations aren't comprehensive

1. Peter van Inwagen. *The Problem of Evil*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006)

because, for example, when God miraculously guides the weather (as in Jesus's calming of the wind and waves) that specific change in the weather is produced by a miracle rather than by ordinary meteorological processes. This would mean that there are weather events that meteorological science does not and will not explain. But that wouldn't lead us to question the explanatory power of meteorological science.

Likewise in the case of evolution. There's room for people to commit to evolution as the best explanation of the complexity and diversity of life and nevertheless appeal, to some extent, to God's miraculous activity in explaining this complexity and diversity. We give some examples in our paper of views like this. We think that versions of the two historical Adam proposals that McCall mentioned in his paper, but didn't have time to discuss, would count as well. So I'm going to take one of those. I don't think you need any background information on it. Let's suppose someone adopted a version of [geneticist Joshua Swamidass's recent proposal](#) that went like this. God guided evolutionary processes through ordinary providence until the creation of the original human pair, which he brought about de novo through a miraculous act. We think that someone who holds to such a view is very naturally described as a theistic evolutionist who believes in the special creation—or miraculous creation, or direct creation—of human beings. The reason we think this is that such a person accepts that there's an evolutionary story for virtually all of the biological complexity and diversity we find in the world; they just object to evolutionary explanations for a tiny set of the phenomena.

This is not to say that it's all a numbers game—that it's simply the amount of miracles that matters when classifying something as theistic evolution or not. For we think it's clear that the kind of miracles that are posited makes a difference as well. To see this, consider two views. The first view holds that God miraculously created ten thousand (roughly) of the world's plants and animal species de novo, in their current form, at some time in the past, where this set of species boasts an impressive array of complexity and diversity. Such a view, we believe, would be one on which evolution fails to explain such a significant amount of the world's biological complexity and diversity that we can no longer say that it constitutes the best explanation of this phenomena as a whole. And so it would not count as a version of theistic evolution. Now consider a second view on which God performs roughly a million miracles—a hundred times more than the first view—in order to bring about hundreds of thousands of species, but where in each case the miracle is one that is integrated into evolutionary processes; for example, God might miraculously erect a land barrier or a water barrier to foster speciation, or miraculously provide a food source to a dwindling population, or bring about a mutation that would have been physically impossible in the circumstances. In each case, God's activity does not supersede evolutionary processes. Rather, God operates fully within those processes by miraculously changing the conditions under which evolution will take place. This allows for evolution to be affirmed as the best explanation for biological complexity and diversity (keeping in mind that “best” need not mean “exhaustive” or “exclusive”), which in turn would put such a view fully within the fold of theistic evolution, despite the fact that it posits a hundred times more miracles than the first view.

In sum, if you're looking for sharp criteria to tell you the exact amount and kind of miracles that a view can admit within an evolutionary account and still count as theistic evolution as we understand it, then

you're not going to find it here. But we count this as a virtue rather than a vice, and for two reasons. First, we think this is exactly the right way to think about the matter. Unlike whether or not a number is even or whether or not an argument is valid, whether or not something counts as a version of a theistic evolution will sometimes be a vague matter. But second, our view does have sufficient resources to allow us to classify clear views correctly. So despite the vague thresholds, we can confidently identify many positions as within the fold of theistic evolution and many others as outside that fold.

Murray: Where We Go from Here

We did not have in advance the comments from Steve Meyer so I am not prepared to comment on many of the details in his remarks. But let me say just a couple of brief things that I think is good for all of us to keep in mind as we think about this topic.

First of all, it's certainly true that evolutionary theory itself has evolved over time. That isn't surprising. Evolutionary theory is a theory that purports to explain a lot—the complexity and diversity of life. There's a lot of life and a lot of complexity. So we shouldn't expect that a simple algorithm is going to explain it all. There might be such an algorithm, and people once thought they knew what it was—namely variation and selection. But as we learn more we realize the algorithm doesn't provide a complete explanation. So evolutionary theorists began to ask: What are the other sorts of explanations that we should look for? Frankly, this sort of evolution of the theory is on par with what one finds when it comes to other large-scale scientific theories with wide scope: the standard model of particle physics or the twin pillars of quantum theory and relativity. They're big theories that aim to explain a lot, and they admit anomalies, and that leads to puzzlement and disagreement and revision. But the theories aren't “in crisis” except in the sense that all such big theories are. That is, they seek to explain a lot, we find anomalies, we try to figure out what's wrong with them, and we see whether or not we can fix it. Sometimes those anomalies lead to revisions; sometimes they lead to scientific revolutions. What's going to happen in this case? You don't actually know. There are anomalies, and we're going to keep looking into them.

Meyer mentioned this really important conference that happened at [the Royal Society in 2016](#) where a number of folks who were challenging the modern synthesis came together. And in many respects (not entirely) it was kind of the launch, at least publicly, of what's now known as the “extended synthesis.” A lot of work has gone on since then. That conference was sponsored by the Templeton Foundation where Churchill and I used to work. We sponsored it because we were sitting around in the offices looking at some of the various challenges that have been raised in evolution, talking with some of those who had concerns about the inadequacies of evolutionary theory—at least the modern synthesis version of it—to explain all the complexity and diversity of life. We recognized that there were some interesting alternatives that hadn't really been given full voice. We thought: let's bring these folks together and see where it leads and see if there's a way we can marshal these novel scientific explanatory resources as a way of explaining what the modern synthesis can't explain. Will that happen? We don't know. Right now, a lot of that work is actually playing out. What we're learning is that there are other forms of scientific inheritance that weren't taken into

account as much as they should have been in the past. These are things that we just need to let the scientific community work out. Will it work out in the end? Honestly, we don't know. We don't know whether fully naturalistic explanations are going to work out, but the only way to find out is to let the experts carry out the discussion.

For those of us who aren't scientists, who are maybe just ordinary lay Christians, or those of us who are academics but aren't scientists, why should we care about this? I think one reason we cared about it a lot in the past was because we were under the impression that evolutionary theory created significant theological problems. In fact, that's the premise of much of the book—that there are significant theological problems that you're faced with if you have to embrace evolutionary theory. What we showed in the paper, or at least we claim to show in the paper, is that those are illusions. Those theological problems don't exist. We know they don't exist now because over the last thirty years or so a lot of really great Christians who understand the science and understand the theology have asked themselves: How do these things fit together? We don't know. Let's try to work it out. And they've come with some really interesting alternatives. I think those alternatives show that many of these supposed theological problems that come along with theistic evolution just don't exist. So we don't have that as the motive anymore for thinking we need to find a way to defeat evolution because if we don't, all these theological claims are now in peril. No, that's not it.

I think maybe there's something else, and that is there is this presumption of noxious naturalism—that naturalism pervades the academy in some way or science in some way or evolutionary theory in some way. No doubt there's a significant extent to which that's true. But it's not universally true. There are, of course, scientists who are theists who think that there's something right about the evolutionary account broadly construed, and that we can look at the evolution of life through a theistic lens in a way that turns out to be more explanatorily fertile and fruitful than we could have if we were just looking at it as a naturalist. *So bringing those background commitments to bear actually leads us to look for things we wouldn't have otherwise expected, and sometimes we find them and we actually learn something the naturalist probably wouldn't have found on their own.*

Here's an example of this. If you buy into the broad evolutionary picture, you think that over time, life going from the very simple to the complex over time, is leading somewhere. As a Christian I think we think that one place it's leading is to the origins of organisms that manifest the divine image. How is that supposed to happen? You might think—you might be wrong, but you might think—the way this is

going to happen is there's going to have to be certain kinds of guardrails in place, guardrails that kind of push evolution in the direction of realizing the existence of organisms that manifest the divine image in some way. You might go out and look for those guardrails. Maybe you go out and you find them. Some people think actually that we have found them. Some of those who are motivated to do research on evolutionary convergence were motivated by these kinds of theological considerations. By going out and looking for these guardrails, they found them, or so they claim. There's good reason to believe them. *So by bringing these theological commitments to the table when we're doing our science, we can actually do science better than the naturalist. That's a good thing.* We should celebrate that. But we can only do it if more of us are doing it—if we invite the Christian community to bring those theological convictions to the table and to do that work in a way that leads to those ends.

One last thing. I think that one thing you hear from Meyer and many of those who are part of the intelligent design movement is that they feel that their arguments are unfairly excluded because they're not willing to drink the naturalist's Kool-Aid. To some extent I think that's true. There are certainly people who don't give them a fair shake. You can read reviews of their work in scientific venues that clearly are not giving them a fair hearing, and probably not giving them a fair hearing because the ID folks haven't drunk the naturalist's Kool-Aid. But I think what many of us need to recognize is that within the academy it's not the case that only naturalistic perspectives get taken seriously. You can see that in a variety of different places. You can see it in the philosophy of physics and cosmology where scientists who are part of the academy are taking fine-tuning explanations seriously, and it's a competitor in the intellectual space. You can see it in philosophy of religion. You can see it in philosophy of mind where even though dualism is a minority position it's still one that people can advocate for and can get tenure for writing articles about it. So we can't just say that there's this naturalistic bias and it rules out Christian scholars doing their work from a nonnaturalistic perspective. We know that that's not true. Maybe it's more pronounced in this particular case than in others but the first step that has to happen in order to get these non-naturalistic perspectives on the table is those who are advocating for them have to get them published in peer-reviewed journals. They have to get others who are part of the community to sign on. Even many, many Christians in biology have not yet signed on to the intelligent design program. We just need to see how this plays out, but I think the theological significance of it is much less grave than we once thought that it was. It's important for us to keep that in mind as we think about what to do with theistic evolution more broadly.

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