

Is Theistic Evolution the Only Viable Answer for Thinking Christians?

*Steve Cable examines Francis Collins's arguments for theistic evolution from his book *The Language of God* and finds them lacking.*

Francis Collins and Theistic Evolution

Dr. Francis Collins, recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom for cataloging the complete human DNA sequence, put forth his views on science and Christianity in his 2006 book, *The Language of God*^{1}. Could his theistic evolution view resolve the apparent conflict between modern science and the Bible? In this article, we will examine this belief and his arguments for it.



Collins grew up agnostic but became an atheist in his student years. At twenty six, he took on the task of proving Christianity false. Like many before him^{2}, this hopeless task resulted in accepting Christianity as true: Jesus as God in the flesh bringing us eternal life. In his role as a medical researcher into the genetics of man, he found himself dealing in a world where many questioned the validity of Christian thought as anti-science.

These conflicting forces led him to develop views reconciling the current positions of science and the truths of the Bible. As Collins states, "If the existence of God is true (not just tradition, but actually true), and if certain scientific conclusions about the natural world are also (objectively) true . . ., then they cannot contradict each other. A fully harmonious synthesis must be possible."^{3} Certainly, this statement is one we all should agree on if we can agree on which scientific conclusions are objectively true.

His resulting beliefs rest on the following premises^{4}:

1. God formed the universe out of nothingness 14 billion years ago.
2. Its properties appear to have been precisely tuned for life.
3. The precise mechanism of the origin of life remains unknown,
4. Once evolution got under way, no special supernatural intervention was required.
5. Humans are part of this process, sharing a common ancestor with the great apes.
6. But humans are unique in ways that defy evolutionary explanation, pointing to our spiritual nature.

Rather than interceding as an active creative force, God built into the Big Bang the properties suitable for receiving the image of God at the appropriate time. Purely random mutations and natural selection brought about this desired result. Being outside of time, God would know that this uninvolved approach would result in beings suitable to receive the breath of God.

The Argument for Theistic Evolution

Is Francis Collins' theistic evolution the way to reconcile theology and science?

Collins argues the Big Bang and the fine-tuning of this universe are clearly the work of God. After that, no intelligent intervention occurred, even though scientists have no idea how life began.^{5} At some point, God intervened—first, by giving humans moral and abstract thinking, and second, by sending Jesus Christ to perform miracles, be crucified and resurrected, and bring us eternal life.

In Collins's view, God is allowed to perform miracles to redeem mankind, but not in creating physical humans. The alternative theories make the scientific process messy and unpredictable. This position allows him to side with the naturalist scientists who hold sway today. However, it does not prevent naturalists from laughing at your silly faith.

He also appears to believe we are looking forward to new glorified bodies living in a new earth with Jesus. Apparently, at that time, God will disavow His penchant for not making changes in nature.

Collins wrote^{6} that our DNA leads him to believe in common ancestry with chimpanzees and ultimately with all life. His conclusion is partially based on the large amount of "junk DNA" similar across humans and other animals. If similar segments of DNA have no function, these must be elements indicating a common ancestry.

Subsequent research undermines this belief. "DNA previously dismissed as "junk" are . . . crucial to the way our genome works. . . . For years, . . . more than 98% of the genetic sequence . . . was written off as 'junk' DNA."^{7} Based on current research,^{8} almost every nucleotide is associated with a function. Over 80% of the genome has been shown to have a biochemical function and "the rest . . . of the genome is likely to have a function as well."^{9} Collins agrees that his earlier position was incorrect.^{10}

In this case, the argument of reuse by an intelligent designer now makes more sense.

On theistic evolution, Collins could be right and it would not tarnish the absolute truth of the Bible. However, in all likelihood, Collins is wrong. From both Scripture and current observations, it appears much more likely God actively interceded in creation.

Irreducible Complexity

One area of Intelligent Design Francis Collins attacks is the concept of irreducible complexity.

ID researchers define it as: "[A] system of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of them causes the system to cease functioning. [It] cannot be produced directly by slight, successive modifications of a precursor system, because any precursor . . . that is missing a part is by definition nonfunctional."^{11} A mindless evolutionary process cannot create a number of new, unique parts that must function together before creating any value.

However, Collins believes nothing is too hard for evolution given enough time. He states, "Examples . . . of irreducible complexity are clearly showing signs of how they could have been assembled by evolution in a gradual step-by-step process. . . Darwinism predicts that plausible intermediate steps **must have existed**, . . . ID. . . sets forth a straw man scenario that no serious student of biology would accept."^{12}

One of Collins's examples, the bacterial flagellum, is "a marvelous swimming device"^{13} which

includes a propeller surface and a motor to rotate it. ID researchers identify it as an irreducibly complex. Collins suggests this conclusion has been “fundamentally undercut,” stating that one protein sequence used in the flagellum is also used in a different apparatus in other bacteria. “Granted, [it] is just one piece of the flagellum’s puzzle, and we are far from filling in the whole picture (if we ever can). But each such new puzzle piece provides a natural explanation for a step that ID had relegated to supernatural forces, . . .”{14}

Today, seven years later, ID researchers are not backing off. A recent article concludes, “The claim . . . to have refuted . . . the bacterial flagellum is unfounded. Although there are sub-components . . . that are dispensable . . ., there are numerous subsystems within the flagellum that require multiple coordinated mutations. [It] is not the kind of structure that one can . . . envision being produced in Darwinian step-wise fashion.”{15}

Evolutionists have been trying for over 15 years to attack irreducible complexity. Rather than discrediting the theory, their efforts have shown how difficult it is to do so. Collins’s claims put him in the company of those relying on the ignorance of their audience to cow them with logically flawed arguments.

God of the Gaps and *Ad Hominem* Attacks

Francis Collins states, “ID is a ‘God of the gaps’ theory, inserting . . . the need for supernatural intervention in places its proponents claim science cannot explain.”{16}

This statement mischaracterizes Intelligent Design. “ID is not based on an argument from ignorance.”{17} It looks for conditions indicating intelligence was required to produce an observed result. The event must be exceedingly improbable due to random events and it must conform to a meaningful pattern. “Does a forensic scientist commit an ‘arson-of-the-gaps’ fallacy in inferring that a fire was started deliberately. . .? To assume that every phenomenon that we cannot explain must have a materialistic explanation is to commit a converse ‘materialism-of-the-gaps’ fallacy.”{18}

ID researchers identify signs that are consistent with intelligent design and examine real world events for those same signs. In addition, a number of non-ID scientists having reached the conclusion that Darwinism is not sufficient, are looking at other mechanisms to explain certain features of life.

Another aspect of Collins’s defense of theistic evolution is using overstated and unsubstantiated attacks to discredit other views.

Of the young earth creationists, he states, “If these claims were actually true, it would lead to a complete and irreversible collapse of the sciences of physics, chemistry, cosmology, geology, and biology.”{19} This is a gross overstatement. In truth, belief in a young earth creation does not prevent one from making predictions based on micro-evolutionary effects or investigating the physical laws of the universe from a microscopic to an intergalactic level.

Collins also states, “**No serious biologist** today doubts the theory of evolution.”{20} And, “ID’s central premise . . . sets forth a straw man scenario that **no serious student** of biology would accept.”{21} So, those differing with Collins are not even serious students of biology. Collins ignores the over 800 Ph.D.s who signed a document questioning the ability of Darwinian theory to explain life.{22}

In discrediting ID, he misrepresents the premise of this field, saying ID is designed to resist an atheistic worldview. As one researcher, William Dembski, explains, “Intelligent Design attempts only

to explain the arrangement of materials within an already given world. Design theorists argue that certain arrangements of matter, especially in biological systems, clearly signal a designing influence.”{23}

Collins would rather pursue an answer that was wrong and exclude the actions of an intelligent designer, than consider the possibility of intelligent design.

Perverting the Views of C. S. Lewis

Did C. S. Lewis support theistic evolution? Francis Collins quotes Lewis{24}, postulating God could have added His image to evolved creatures who then chose to fall into sin. Although consistent with theistic evolution, Lewis’ thoughts are more consistent with ID tenets.

Lewis begins, “For long centuries, **God perfected** the animal form which was to become the vehicle of humanity and the **image of Himself. He gave it** hands whose thumb could be applied to each of the fingers, . . .”{25} So, God was actively involved in bringing about the human form; God intervened to produce the desired outcome. This view contrasts with Collins’s view that God took whatever evolution produced and breathed into it His image.

BioLogos extends the thought, stating “(Lewis) is clearly a Christian Theistic Evolutionist, or an Evolutionary Christian Theist.”{26} They point out passages from Lewis showing the evolutionary theory of physical change was not contradictory to the gospel. They suggest Lewis would accept today’s theories as truth and reject ID.

John West’s research{27} finds Lewis was not saying evolutionary theory was definitely true, but rather that it did not refute Christian belief. Lewis wrote, “belief that Men in general have immortal & rational souls does not oblige or qualify me to hold a theory of their pre-human organic history—**if they have one.**”{28} In *Miracles* he wrote, “the preliminary processes within Nature which led up to” the human mind “**if there were any**”—“were **designed** to do so.”{29} In both these quotes, Lewis caveats evolutionary theory by adding a big “if.”

Lewis did not embrace a simple-minded view of natural science as fundamentally more authoritative or less prone to error than other fields of human endeavor. Lewis argued that scientific theories are “supposals” and should not be confused with “facts.” . . . We must always recognize that such explanations can be wrong.{30}

Clearly, Lewis did not feel that a young earth view a necessity. But, he was adamantly against the thought that science trumped theology. Although, one cannot know with certainty, it appears that Lewis would resonate with the methodology and claims of Intelligent Design theorists.

I appreciate Collins’ faith journey. However, I wish he would say “We really don’t know the details of man’s creation, but we know God was intimately involved.”

Notes

1. Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).
2. See for example, Josh McDowell’s story in *Undaunted: One Man’s Real-Life Journey from Unspeakable Memories to Unbelievable Grace*, Lee Strobel’s story in *The Case for Faith*, and Viggo Olsen’s story in *Daktar, Diplomat in Bangladesh*.
3. Collins, p. 169.
4. Collins, p. 200.

5. Collins, p. 90.
6. Collins, p. 109-142.
7. *UK Guardian*, September 5, 2012.
8. ENCODE is an acronym for the Encyclopedia of DNA Elements project.
9. Casey Luskin, Junk No More: ENCODE Project Nature Paper Finds “Biochemical Functions for 80% of the Genome”, 2012, www.evolutionnews.org/2012/09/junk_no_more_en_1064001.html (Accessed Mar. 30, 2014)
10. Jonathan McLatchie, Has Francis Collins Changed His Mind On “Junk DNA”? www.evolutionnews.org/2011/03/has_francis_collins_changed_hi044601.html (Accessed Mar. 30, 2014).
11. Michael J. Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biological Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1996).
12. Collins, p. 188-190.
13. Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box*.
14. Collins, p. 192.
15. Jonathan McLatchie, Two of the World’s Leading Experts on Bacterial Flagellar Assembly Take on Michael Behe, March 2013, www.evolutionnews.org/2013/03/kelly_hughes_an069881.html (Accessed Mar. 30, 2014).
16. Collins, p. 193.
17. Jonathan McLatchie, Once Again, Why Intelligent Design is Not a “God-of-the-Gaps” Argument, 2013, www.evolutionnews.org/2013/01/why_intelligent068151.html (Accessed Mar. 30, 2014).
18. Ibid.
19. Collins, p. 174.
20. Collins, p. 99.
21. Collins, p. 190.
22. www.dissentfromdarwin.org
23. William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 248.
24. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 69.
25. Lewis, p. 68.
26. Michael L. Peterson, C. S. Lewis on Evolution and Intelligent Design biologos.org/blog/series/lewis-id-series, p. 13 (Accessed Mar. 30, 2014).
27. John G. West, *The Magician’s Twin: C. S. Lewis on Science, Scientism, and Society* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2012).
28. West, p. 114.
29. West, p. 131 quoting from *Miracles* by C. S. Lewis, 1960.
30. West, p. 140-141.