# Animal Liberation: Do the Beasts Really Benefit?

## Are You a Speciesist?

"When it comes to feelings, a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."(1) That is the moral bottom line for Ingrid Newkirk, founder and director of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (or PETA). I intend to discuss in these pages the contentious issue of animal rights; yet for Ms. Newkirk the issue is settled: a boy has no more (and no less) rights than a rat.

Almost every week there is a story in the media about a research project stopped by an animal rights group, a protest against women wearing furs, a laboratory bombed by a militant animal rights activist, or a media figure protesting the conditions of animals on factory farms. What are all these protests about, and how should a Bible-believing Christian approach these issues? That is our subject in this pamphlet.

In 1975 Australian Peter Singer wrote a book whose title was to become the banner of a new movement: *Animal Liberation*. This book laid the foundation for most of the discussion since 1975, but it also set the tone of that discussion as specifically anti-Christian. Singer is quite clear about his distaste for Christianity: "It can no longer be maintained by anyone but a religious fanatic that man is the special darling of the universe, or that animals were created to provide us with food, or that we have divine authority over them, and divine permission to kill them."(2)

By using the echoes of specific passages from the Bible and claiming that only a "religious fanatic" could still believe them, Singer is making clear not only that his view is not

based on anything resembling a biblical worldview, but that, in fact, the Bible is the root of much of the problem.

It was Peter Singer's book that also made popular the rather ponderous term "speciesism." He writes of this as, "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species."(3) Singer says speciesism is just as bad as sexism or racism.

So what does "speciesism" really mean? If you think it's acceptable to test a medicine on laboratory animals before giving that medicine to a sick child or a cancer patient fighting for life, then you, too, are a speciesist. If you believe it is all right to eat meat or fish or shrimp, you are clearly a speciesist, just as guilty as someone who thinks that slavery is an acceptable way to treat another human being, according to Singer and others in the animal rights movement.

Why should Christians even bother to think about issues like animal rights when people are not even treated as well as animals in places like Bosnia or Iraq or many inner cities? Christians need to be actively involved in speaking out and acting clearly on this issue because the very definitions of humanity, of human dignity, and human responsibility are being rapidly reconstructed and any hint of man as created in the image of God or of a God who creates and gives value is seen as "speciesist" and dangerous.

## Are We the Creation's Keeper?

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them…. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. That's how God describes His coming kingdom in

Isaiah 11.

Clearly God is concerned for all the animals He has created, and they will share a future, a non-violent future, with us. But what of today? How does God intend us to treat animals now?

The animal liberation movement opposes favoring humans over other animals. “Speciesism,” they say, is treating humans as if they were more valuable than other animals. What does the Bible say?

God, in Genesis, tells us we have a responsibility as stewards to care for His creation. We are God’s representatives on earth, but we are not Lords of the earth. In Proverbs Solomon says that “a righteous man cares for the needs of his animal” (Prov. 12:10). It is a mark of righteousness that we give animals the care they need. But at the same time we must understand that both we and the rest of creation have value because a sovereign God created us and gave us value because He cares about us. Our value comes from God and not ourselves.

Our concern for animals does not mean we should give up the Bible’s insistence that we are unique in all of God’s creation because we bear His image, or that we should immediately eliminate all use of animals for any purpose and live resolutely vegetarian lives. What place, then, should animals have? In Matthew 12:11-12 Jesus berates the Pharisees’ willingness to help an animal on the Sabbath but not a human.

> *If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.*

Jesus’ point is clear: we should have compassion on animals in trouble, but have even more compassion for human beings, because they are “much more valuable” than sheep! But

Christians sometimes show little compassion for either.

As Christians we have often not lived up to our responsibilities to animals as creations of God. Frequently we have acted as if all animals are here **only** for our use, to do with whatever we wanted. We have taken God's statement in Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth," as giving us the right of despots, not the responsibilities of stewards. As Christians we have not set an example for the world of valuing the rest of creation because it belongs to God, and we have often abused the creation with no sense of damaging a creation that is not our own.

Next, we will look at what happens when people who deny God try to find an adequate basis on which to build value for themselves or animals, and how far into dangerous territory this can lead them.

## From Animal Rights to Abortion: A Small Step from Man to Animal

"Six million Jews died in concentration camps, but six billion broiler chickens will die this year in slaughterhouses."(4) This is how Ms. Newkirk of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals sums up her outrage at the killing of animals. What happens when well- meaning people try to give animals value without God? Ms. Newkirk may think she has improved our view of chickens by comparing them to Jews who were killed in concentration camps. But actually she only trivializes one of the most brutish examples of evil in our century. In her view numbers are everything; if more chickens than people were killed, then poultry farming is worse than Nazi Germany.

What is the foundation of Ms. Newkirk's sense of value? She speaks of Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation*, as "the Bible of the animal-rights movement." Singer develops a purely

utilitarian view of the greatest good for the greatest number of beings that can experience pain. For Singer there can be no God over creation. He almost sarcastically says: "The Bible tells us that God made man in His own image. We may regard this as man making God in his own image."(5) So Singer turns to evolution to consider how we are related to other creatures.

Singer believes the evolutionary history of humans and other animals, particularly mammals, makes our central nervous system and theirs very similar. His conclusion? That many animals must feel pain like we do. Since we have no basis, in his view, to see humans as any different from other animals, if it is bad to do something to another pain-feeling human being, then it is wrong to do it to any other pain-feeling animal. The logic is simple, but it leads to just the kinds of confusion that cannot separate Jews dying in gas ovens from chickens dying in processing plants.

Where does a view like this ultimately lead? Singer willingly points the way in its application to new-born children. Writing for physicians in the journal *Pediatrics*, he shows how his ethic applies to humans,

> *Once the religious mumbo jumbo surrounding the term "human" has been stripped away…we will not regard as sacrosanct the life of each and every member of our species, no matter how limited its capacity for intelligent or even conscious life may be.(6)*

With chilling clarity, Singer says that once we come to his position of valuing a life only if it meets certain requirements, it is much easier to take the life, not only of the unborn, but of those who have a "low quality of life." He argues for the right to take the lives of new-born children who do not have certain capacities for "intelligent or even conscious life." Singer concludes:

> *If we can put aside the obsolete and erroneous notion of the sanctity of all human life,…it will be possible to approach these difficult decisions of life and death with the ethical sensitivity that each case demands, rather than with a blindness to individual differences.(7)*

In other words, if a baby does not measure up to Singer's standards, it is not kept alive. The values of animal rights, applied to people, lead coldly to abortion and euthanasia.

While there are many areas where Christians might disagree with the animal rights movement, one might well ask, Have we Christians lived up to the responsibilities God gave us towards animals?

## Are Farm Animals Just Machines?

After the Flood, God tells Noah: "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything." God also makes a covenant, not only with Noah, but "with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth" (Gen. 9:3, 10).

So, while there is no question that God has given us permission to eat meat, we must also remember that we are moving towards a kingdom in which, as we saw in Isaiah 11, all of creation will live at peace with one another. So what should we be doing now, as we await perfection?

We have already looked at problems with the animal rights position. On the other hand, there are some uses of animals that should cause Christians significant concern.

One of the great changes in Western economies has been the change from the small family farm to the huge "agribusiness." With this change has come not only increased production and

lower food prices, but the treatment of animals as machines and land as a commodity. One area where animal rights activists have done commendable work is in showing the appalling conditions under which most farm animals now live.

Chickens live in battery cages that, on average, allow them only 36 to 48 square inches. This means that two chickens live in less space than a page of paper. Generally four or five chickens share a cage, so that they must almost physically live on top of each other. Does this sound like what Solomon means when he said that "a righteous man cares for the needs of his animal"?

As one other example, pigs too are treated as machines to produce food. The United States Department of Agriculture tells farmers: "If the sow is considered a pig manufacturing unit, then improved management…will result in more pigs weaned per sow per year." This is surely not man acting as a good steward of created beings that belong to God. The decline of any belief in God has been accompanied by a decline in any attempt to treat animals on farms as anything other than "manufacturing units" to be treated in whatever way will cause them to produce the most.

If we truly believe what the Psalmist says, that "The earth is the LORD's and all it contains" (Ps. 24:1), then we must not accept how those who do not believe this have acted. While we are directly given permission in Scripture to eat meat, it might well make a great difference in how animals are treated if Christians choose not to buy from those meat producers who do not tend to their animals as if they really did belong to God.

In the same way that if we believe in the sanctity of human life we must stand against abortion, so too, if we believe that "the earth is the LORD's" then we must consider whether we can support those who do not treat animals as animals but only as "manufacturing units."

I want to conclude this discussion with some suggestions about how we can both uphold the uniqueness of humans and stand against the mistreatment of God's creation.

## Recovering the Creation as Compassionate Stewards

I have pointed out the disturbing consequences of abandoning the biblical view that humans are created in the image of God. As theologian and social critic Richard John Neuhaus perceptively puts it: "The campaign against `speciesism' is a campaign against the singularity of human dignity and, therefore, of human responsibility…. The hope for a more humane world, including the more humane treatment of animals, is premised upon what [animal rights activists] deny."(8)

If we are merely animals, we have no reason to be less species- ist than other animals. Dogs show no concern for the welfare of cats. If we are moral in a way that other animals cannot be, then we are both different from other animals and responsible to God for that difference. Because we have a spiritual aspect that no other animal shares, what the Bible calls the "image of God," we also have a responsibility to care for what God has entrusted to us. How should we live out that responsibility?

First, we must live in obedience to Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who reminded us that God clothes even the grass as an example of His care for all His creation. We need to demonstrate in our actions and in how we teach our children that we, too, consider all of God's creation as something that shows His glory.

Secondly, we must consider what our own role is as God's stewards. Just as not all are called to give their lives in vocational missionary service, so, too, not all are called to be full-time activists for better treatment of God's creation. But we are all called to be missionaries, and we are all

called to be stewards and not spoilers of the natural world.

Medical research and experiments on animals provide an excellent place for Christians to be proactive. Animals must be humanely treated, but at the same time we have much to learn about the treatment of cancer, diseases of the nervous system, and the management of serious injuries from animal experiments. If a cure for AIDS or any one of a number of genetic diseases is to be found, it should first be tested on animals. However, just as on farms, we have a duty as stewards to see that animals are treated with the respect due them as part of God's creation. Like Jesus, who regarded helping the sheep out of the well as more important than keeping the Sabbath, so too we must speak out strongly for the humane treatment of animals whenever they are used by humans.

We have been given the right and the responsibility to rule over the earth by its Owner, God. Once Christians led in this area, starting the whole movement for the humane treatment of animals. Now we have little to say to our culture about real stewardship. We must read our Bibles carefully and prayerfully consider how God would have us help recover His creation. Animals may not have rights, but we as Christians clearly have responsibilities to them.

As Christians we must stand for man as created in the image of God and His creation as a reflection of His glory. Let us say with the Psalmist: "How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (Ps. 104:24).

**Notes**

1. Ingrid Newkirk cited in Charles Oliver, "Liberation Zoology," *Reason* (June 1990), p. 22.
2. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1975), p. 215.
3. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, new revised ed. (New York:

Avon Books, 1990) p. 6.
4. “Liberation Zoology,” p. 26.
5. *Animal Liberation*, new rev. ed., p. 187.
6. Peter Singer, “Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life,” *Pediatrics* (July 1983), pp. 128-29. (Cited in Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*.)
7. Ibid.
8. Richard John Neuhaus, “Animal Lib,” *Christianity Today*, 18 June 1990, p. 20.

**See Also *Probe Answers Our E-Mail:***
- What’s Up with Animal Rights?

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# The Grand Canyon and the Age of the Earth – A Christian Scientist’s View

*As a Christian scientist, Dr. Bohlin is open to examining the theories of both young-earth and old-earth scientists to explain what we can observe today. The Grand Canyon provides an excellent venue to consider the theories of both groups on how the geological layers were formed and when this occured.*

## The Age of the Earth and Genesis 1

How old is the earth? How long has this planet been here? Ask most Christians this question and you will likely receive a

quick, self-assured answer. All would be well if you could count on receiving the same answer! However, some will very quickly tell you that the earth was created during creation week and can be no more than six to ten thousand years old. Other Christians will tell you, with just as much confidence, that the earth is 4.5 billion years old. This is no minor discrepancy! What adds even more to the confusion is the fact that you can find both opinions within conservative evangelical circles. You can even find both opinions within the ranks of the few Christian geologists with Ph.D.s! Let me assure you that this is just as confusing for me as it is for you.

The age of the earth is a question both of biblical interpretation and scientific investigation. Unfortunately, neither Christian conservative Old Testament scholars nor Christian scientists are in universal agreement. This topic covers a broad spectrum of issues so I am going to try and narrow the focus of the discussion. I will first briefly discuss the biblical aspects of the question, then move on to geology, the flood, and the Grand Canyon.

First, how do the “young-earth” and “old-earth” positions view the Scriptures? Let me emphasize right at the start that both young- earth and old-earth creationists bring a reverent and submissive attitude to Genesis. The difference is a matter of interpretation. Well-known young-earth creationists Henry Morris, Duane Gish, and Steve Austin, from the Institute for Creation Research, interpret the days of Genesis 1 as literal 24-hours days, the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 as consecutive or nearly consecutive generations, and the flood as a universal, catastrophic event. This leaves little room for much more than ten to thirty thousand years as the true age of the earth.

Old earth creationists such as astronomer Hugh Ross of Reasons to Believe see the days of Genesis as long periods of time, perhaps even millions of years. Genesis 1, then, describes the

unfolding of God’s creation through vast periods of time. God still does the work, it is still a miracle, but it takes a lot longer than seven days. The flood of Noah necessarily becomes a local event with little impact on world-wide geology. Other old-earth creationists simply suggest that what is communicated in Genesis 1 is a literary form of the ancient Near East describing a perfect creation. Genesis 1 was never intended to communicate history, at least in their view. Personally, my sympathies lie with a Genesis interpretation that is historical, literal, and with 24-hour days in the recent past. But the testimony of science, God’s natural revelation, is often difficult to correlate with this view. The earth has many layers of sediments thousands of feet thick. How could one year-long catastrophe account for all this sediment? The answers may surprise you!

## The Grand Canyon

The Grand Canyon is almost three hundred miles long, a mile deep, and four to twelve miles across. One’s first view of the Grand Canyon is a humbling experience. You truly have to see it to believe it. I was mesmerized and could hardly contain my excitement when I caught my first glimpse of the canyon. I was there to partake in a six-day geology hike into the canyon with the Institute for Creation Research, a young-earth creationist organization. ICR believes that the strata, the layers of rock in the Grand Canyon, were primarily formed during Noah’s flood perhaps only five thousand years ago. Most geologists, including Christian old-earth creationists, believe that the strata were laid down over hundreds of millions of years. What better way, then, to equip myself for the study of the earth’s age, than to spend nine days around the Grand Canyon (six of them in it) with ICR geologists, physicists, and biologists. ICR has been conducting these tours for over ten years, so everything runs extremely well. Though I was a member of a hiking group, they also sponsored a group going down the Colorado River in rafts and a group

touring the whole area by bus. All were accompanied by ICR scientists. Each day we received mini-lectures from the leaders as we broke for lunch or at points of interest along the trail. Topics included the sudden appearance of fossils, the complexity of the earliest canyon fossils such as the trilobites, the age of the earth's magnetic fields, the role of continental drift in the onset of the flood, where does the ice age fit into a young-earth model, water- canopy theories, carbon-14 dating, and the dating of the Grand Canyon basalts (rock layers derived from ancient lava flows).

We examined many evidences for rapid formation of rock layers, which is essential to the young-earth model. We spent nearly two hours at the Great Unconformity between the Tapeats Sandstone, which is dated at about 500 million years old, and the Hakatai Shale, which is dated at about 1.5 billion years old. These two formations were formed nearly one billion years apart in time, yet one lies right on top of the other. Nearly a billion years is missing between them! The night before entering the canyon for the hike, I wrote these words in my journal:

> *If these strata are the result of Noah's flood and the canyon carved soon afterward, the canyon stands as a mighty testament to God's power, judgment, and grace. Even if not, what a wonderful world our Lord has sculpted for us to inhabit. His love is bigger than I can grasp, bigger—infinitely bigger—than even the Grand Canyon!*

## Evidence of Noah's Flood in the Grand Canyon

One of the more obvious formations in the Grand Canyon is the Coconino Sandstone. This prominent formation is found only a few hundred feet below the rim of the canyon and forms one of the many cliffs in the canyon. Its distinctive yellow cream color makes it look like a thick layer of icing between two

cake layers.

Evolutionary geologists have described this sandstone as originating from an ancient desert. Remnants of sand dunes can be seen in many outcrops of the formation in a phenomenon called cross-bedding. There are many footprints found in this sandstone that have been interpreted as lizards scurrying across the desert.

These footprints would seem to pose a major challenge to young- earth geologists who need to explain this formation in the context of Noah's flood. Since there are many flood-associated layers both above and below this sandstone, there is no time for a desert to form in the middle of Noah's flood. Recent investigations, however, have revealed that the cross-bedding can be due to underwater sand dunes and that some footprints are actually better explained by amphibians moving across sandy-bottomed shallow water. Perhaps this formation can be explained by sand deposited under water.

This explanation does not entirely solve the young-earth geologists' problem, because it is still difficult to determine where the amphibians came from and how they could be crawling around in shallow waters on top of sediments that would have to be deposited halfway through a world-wide catastrophic flood. But let's go on to another flood evidence. Earlier, I mentioned the Great Unconformity. This can be observed throughout the Grand Canyon where the Tapeats Sandstone, a Cambrian formation estimated to be 570 million years old, rests on top of any one of a number of Precambrian strata ranging from one to two billion years old.

Our group observed a location in the Unconformity where the time gap between the two layers is estimated to be one billion years. It is very unusual, even for evolutionary geology, for two layers from periods so far apart, in this case one billion years, to be right on top of one another. It is hard to imagine that no sediments were deposited in this region for

over a billion years! Evolutionary geologists believe that the upper sandstone was deposited over hundreds of thousands of years in a marine environment. However, we observed large rocks and boulders from a neighboring formation mixed into the bottom few feet of the Tapeats Sandstone. This indicates tremendous wave violence capable of tearing off these large rocks and transporting them over a mile before being buried. This surely fits the description of a flood rather than slow deposition. We spent nearly two hours at this location and we were all quite impressed with the clear evidence of catastrophic origin of the Tapeats Sandstone.

That the Coconino Sandstone likely had a water-deposited origin and that the Tapeats Sandstone was laid down in a great cataclysm are necessary elements for a young-earth flood geology scenario for the Grand Canyon.

## The Erosion and Formation of the Grand Canyon

Perhaps one of the most interesting questions about the Grand Canyon is how it was cut out of rock in the first place. The answer to this question has a lot to do with how old the canyon is supposed to be. The puzzling factor about the Grand Canyon is that the Colorado River cuts directly through an uplifted region called the Kaibab Upwarp. Normally a river would be expected to flow towards lower elevation, but the Colorado has cut right through an elevated region rather than going around it.

The explanation you will still find in the National Park literature is that the Colorado began to cut the Grand Canyon as much as 70 million years ago, before the region was lifted up. As the uplift occurred, the Colorado maintained its level by cutting through the rock layers as they were lifted up. Thus the Grand Canyon was cut slowly over 70 million years! In recent years, however, evolutionary geologists as well as old-

earth creationists have abandoned this scenario because it just isn't supported by the evidence. A major reason is that even at the present rate of erosion in the Grand Canyon, it would take as little as 71,000 years to erode the amount of rock currently missing from the Grand Canyon. Also, all of the sediment that would have to be eroded away during 70 million years has not been located. And lastly, evolutionists' own radiometric dates of some of the surrounding formations indicate that the Colorado River has been in its present location for less than five million years.

Some old-earth geologists have tentatively adopted a new theory that requires a few rather strange twists. This theory suggests that the Colorado River flowed through the area of the Grand Canyon only recently. The Colorado originally was forced in the opposite direction of its current flow by the Kaibab Upwarp and actually flowed southeast toward the Gulf of Mexico. This ancestral Colorado River may have occupied the course of what is now the Little Colorado River, only in the opposite direction of its current course.

This theory further suggests that about five million years ago a westward-flowing stream began to erode, upstream or towards the east, over what is today the Grand Canyon, through the Upwarp and capturing the ancestral Colorado River! If this sounds a little fantastic to you, you're probably right. In a recent volume on the Grand Canyon, a geologist, while maintaining this theory to be solid, admits a lack of hard data and that what evidence there is, is circumstantial. Into this controversy step the young-earth creationists, who need to explain how the Grand Canyon was formed, strata and all, in less than 5,000 years. They suggest, quite reasonably I think, that the canyon was formed when the Kaibab Upwarp acted as a dam for three lakes occupying much of Utah, Colorado, and northern Arizona. These lakes catastrophically broke through the Upwarp, and the Grand Canyon was cut out of solid rock by the drainage of these lakes through this breach in the dam. A

small canyon was formed this way recently as a result of the eruption of Mount St. Helens. Grand Coulee in Washington state was formed when an ice dam broke at the end of the Ice Age. This breached-dam theory answers a lot of questions the old-earth theories do not, and it needs to be considered.

## Uncertainties of Dating the Grand Canyon

I have noted that old-earth creationists believe that the Grand Canyon strata were formed over hundreds of millions of years and that the canyon itself was carved out in less than five million years. Young-earth creationists, on the other hand, believe that the strata of the canyon were formed as a result of Noah's flood and that the canyon was carved out catastrophically less than five thousand years ago. A critical question to ask is, how can we know how old the rocks in the Grand Canyon really are? The usual solution is to date the rocks by radiometric dating methods, which are supposed to be capable of dating rocks billions of years old. Rocks of volcanic origin are the best ones to use in dating rocks this way, since radiometric elements are plentiful in them. The Grand Canyon has volcanic rocks near the bottom and at the top. ICR has been involved in a project over the last several years to date these volcanic rocks. Their results not only call into question the age of the Grand Canyon but also the reliability of radiometric dating.

The youngest rocks in the Grand Canyon are recognized by all to be volcanic rocks in western Grand Canyon that flowed from the top of and into the canyon. The oldest rocks that have been dated are volcanic rocks called the Cardenas Basalt, a Precambrian formation near the bottom of the canyon. The rubidium- strontium method, however, has dated the Cardenas basalt at one billion years and the lava flow on top of the canyon at 1.3 billion years. This is clearly impossible! Rocks on the bottom of the canyon are 300 million years younger than very recent rocks on the very top of the canyon! These dates

were obtained by ICR from samples they sent to several independent dating labs. Something is amiss, either in the interpretation of the rocks, the dating methods, or both.

As we have seen, ICR scientists have come a long way in showing that many of the Grand Canyon strata could have formed rapidly, that erosion of the canyon by the Colorado River has not been going on for tens of millions of years, and that there are significant problems with the dating of the canyon.

However, there are still significant questions that remain to be answered if the young-earth model is to be taken seriously by old- earth geologists. For example, why are there no vertebrates among the fossils of the ocean floor communities of the Grand Canyon strata when vertebrates inhabit today's ocean floors? How did the many different kinds of sediments in the Grand Canyon (limestones, sandstones, shales, mudstones, siltstones, etc.) find their way to Northern Arizona as a result of one catastrophe and become so neatly stratified with little mixing? I raise these questions only to indicate that there is much work to be done. I also want you to realize that when someone asks me whether the flood of Noah created the Grand Canyon, I have to say that I don't know. And that's okay! The creation was a real historical event, Adam and Eve were real people, and the flood of Noah was real history as well. But finding the physical signs of these events can be tricky business. We need to encourage scientific investigation from both a young-and old-earth perspective because the testimony of God's word and His revelation from nature will ultimately be in harmony. It may just be hard to discern what that harmony is right now.

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# Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality – A Christian Perspective

*Dr. Bohlin looks at the basic tenets of sociobiology from a biblical worldview perspective. Looking at them as a scientist and a Christian, he finds a lack of consistency and obvious paradoxes in this way of looking at our world.*

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

In 1981 I wrote an article for *Christianity Today*, which they titled "Sociobiology: Cloned from the Gene Cult."(1) At the time I was fresh from a graduate program in population genetics and had participated in two graduate seminars on the subject of sociobiology. You might be thinking, "What in the world is sociobiology, and why should I care?"

That's a good question. Sociobiology explores the biological basis of all social behavior, including morality. You should care because sociobiologists are claiming that all moral and religious systems, including Christianity, exist simply because they help promote the survival and reproduction of the group. These sociobiologists, otherwise known as *evolutionary ethicists*, claim to be able to explain the existence of every major world religion or belief system, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and even Marxism and secular humanism, in terms of natural selection and evolution. E. O. Wilson, a Harvard biologist and major advocate of sociobiology, claims that scientific materialism (a fully evolutionary worldview) will eventually overcome both traditional religion and any other secular ideology. While Wilson does admit that religion in some form will always exist, he suggests that theology as an explanatory discipline will cease to exist.

# The First Paradox

While the arrogance of sociobiology is readily apparent, it contains a number of paradoxes. The first paradox is simply that the worldview of sociobiology offers nothing but despair when taken to its logical conclusion, yet it continues to gain acceptance in the academic community.

## Four Foundational Principles of Sociobiology

The despair of the sociobiological worldview and the ultimate lack of meaning it presents are derived from what I consider the four foundational principles of sociobiology. The first principle is the assertion that human social systems have been shaped by evolutionary processes. Human societies exist in their present form because they work, or at least have worked in the past, not because they are based on any kind of revelation.

Second, there is what sociobiologist Robert Wallace called the **reproductive imperative**.(2) The ultimate goal of any organism is to survive and reproduce. Species survival is the ultimate goal. Moral systems exist because they ultimately promote human survival and reproduction.

Third, the individual—at least in respect to evolutionary time—is meaningless. Species, not individuals, evolve and persist through time. E.O. Wilson stated that the organism, your body, is simply DNA's way of making more DNA.(3)

Fourth, all behavior is therefore selfish, or at least pragmatic, at its most basic level. We love our children because love is an effective means of raising effective reproducers. Wilson spells out the combined result of these principles quite clearly in his book *On Human Nature* when he says that

> *…no species, ours included, possesses a purpose beyond the imperatives created by its own genetic history (i.e.,*

> *evolution)….we have no particular place to go. The species lacks any goal external to its own biological nature.(4)*

Wilson is saying that since humans have been shaped by evolution alone, they have no purpose beyond survival and reproduction. Even Wilson admits that this is an unappealing proposition.

## Hope and Meaning

Since sociobiologists claim that all behavior is ultimately selfish, that an organism's only goal or purpose is to survive and reproduce, and that it is species survival, not individual survival, that is ultimately required, personal worth and dignity quickly disappear. The responses of sociobiologists when they are confronted with this conclusion have always been curious to me. I distinctly remember posing a question about hope and purpose to a graduate seminar composed of biology students and faculty. I asked, "Let's suppose that I am dead and in the ground, and the decomposers are doing their thing. What difference does it make to me now whether I have reproduced or not?" My point was that if death is the end with a capital "E", who cares whether or not I have reproduced? After an awkward silence, one of the faculty answered, "Well, I guess that it doesn't matter at all." In response, I asked, "Don't you see, we were just discussing how the only purpose in life is to survive and reproduce, but now you admit that this purpose is really an illusion. How do you go on with your life when you realize that it really doesn't matter what you do? That there is no point to any of it?" After an even longer silence, the same faculty member said, "Well, I suppose that those who will be selected for in the future will be those who know there is no purpose in life, but will live as if there is."

To say the least, I was stunned by the frankness of his response. He was basically saying that the human race will be

forced to live with a lie—the illusion of hope and meaning. What was even more unsettling, however, was the fact that no one disagreed or offered even the most remote protest. Apart from myself, everyone there accepted evolution as a fact, so they were forced to accept this conclusion. (I would find out later that at least a couple of them didn't like it.)

A professor of philosophy at a university in Minnesota recently answered my challenge by saying that maybe there are two different kinds of hope and meaning: hope and meaning in small letters (meaning survival and reproduction) and Hope and Meaning in capital letters (meaning ultimate worth and significance). We all have hope and meaning in small letters, and maybe there just isn't any in capital letters. So what? But that was precisely my point. Hope and meaning in small letters is without significance unless Hope and Meaning in capital letters really exists.

## Three Responses

Over the years I have noted three responses of evolutionists to the stark realization that their worldview offers no hope or meaning in their lives. The first is strong disagreement with the conclusions of sociobiology without strong reasons for disagreeing. They don't like the result, but they find it difficult to argue with the basic principles. As evolutionists, they agree with evolution, but they don't want to believe that a meaningless existence is the end result.

The second response is simple acceptance. These evolutionists agree that there is no purpose or meaning in life. They just have to accept it, as the professor in the story did. Their commitment to an evolutionary worldview is total. I find this attitude most prevalent among faculty and graduate students at secular institutions. There is an almost eerie fatalism that stoutly embraces the notion that one's dislike of a theory is not sufficient cause to raise questions about it, especially when it is based on "sound" evolutionary principles.

The third response is an existential leap for meaning and significance when both have been stripped away. This leap is aptly illustrated by evolutionist Robert Wallace at the end of his book, *The Genesis Factor*. He writes:

> *I do not believe that man is simply a clever egotist, genetically driven to look after his own reproduction. He is that. But he is at least that. He is obviously much more. The evidence for this is simple and abundant. One need only hear the Canon in D Major by Johann Pachelbel to know that there are immeasurable depths to the human spirit….I am sorry for the person who has never broken into a silly dance of sheer exuberance under a starry sky: perhaps such a person will be more likely to interpret the message of this book more narrowly. The ones who will find it difficult to accept the narrow view are those who know more about the joy of being us. My biological training is at odds with something that I know and something that science will not be able to probe, perhaps because the time is now too short, perhaps because it is not measurable. I think our demise, if it occurs, will be a loss, a great loss, a great shame in some unknown equation.(5)*

What Wallace is saying in this passage is that something is missing, and it can't be found within the confines of the evolutionary worldview. So look wherever you can!

Some may argue that those who have trouble with the loss of hope and meaning are taking all this too seriously. I don't agree. On the contrary, I believe that they are being very consistent within their worldview. If everything has evolved, and there is nothing outside of mere biology to give meaning and significance to life, then we must live in despair, denial, or irrational hope.

Sociobiology is gaining in popularity because of the scientific community's strong commitment to evolution. If

something follows logically from evolutionary theory, which I believe sociobiology does, then eventually all who consider themselves evolutionists will embrace it, whether it makes them comfortable or not. They will have no other rational choice.

## The Second Paradox

In reflecting on the notion that all human societies and moral systems should have characteristics that seem to have evolved, I am led to a second paradox for sociobiology. The first paradox was that, despite the loss of hope and meaning in the context of a completely naturalistic worldview, sociobiology has continued to grow in influence. The second paradox involves Christianity. Since Christianity is based on revelation, it should be antithetical to or unexplainable by sociobiology, at least in some crucial areas.

It is not unreasonable to expect that some aspects of Christian morality would be consistent with a sociobiological perspective, since Christians in small and large groups do work for the betterment of the group as a whole, and the argument could be made that the survival of individuals is thus increased. However, if Christianity's claim to be based on revelation from a transcendent God is true, I would be surprised, indeed extremely disappointed and confused, if everything in Christianity's moral standards also made sense from a sociobiological perspective. What little I have seen in the way of an evaluation of Christianity from E.O. Wilson and other sociobiologists is a poor caricature of true Christianity.

I would like to offer a few suggestions for consideration. William Irons, in a discussion of theories of the evolution of moral systems, comments that nepotism is a very basic prediction of evolutionary theory.(6) Humans should be expected to be less competitive and more helpful towards relatives than towards non- relatives. He cites numerous

studies to back up his claim that this prediction, more than any other sociobiological prediction, has been extensively confirmed.

To be sure, the New Testament holds to very high standards concerning the importance of the family. Church leaders are to be judged first by how they conduct and relate themselves to their families (1 Tim. 3:12; Tit 1:6). Yet Jesus makes it quite clear that if there is any conflict between devotion to Him and devotion to our family, the family comes second. He said,

> *Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it. (Matt. 10:34-39).*

In other passages Jesus gives promises that if we give up our families and possessions for His sake, then we will receive abundantly more in this life and the next, along with persecutions (Mark 10:29,30). Jesus Himself preferred the company of those who do the will of God to His own mother and brothers (Matt. 12:46-50). The clear message is that, while our families are important, our relationship with the living God comes first, even if members of our family foce us to choose between God and them. Sociobiology may respond by saying that perhaps the benefit to be gained by inclusion in the group will compensate for the family loss, but how can the loss of an individual's entire genetic contribution to the next generation be explained away by any evolutionary mechanism?

## Common Ground

So far I have concentrated my remarks in areas where a Christian worldview is in sharp contrast with the evolutionary worldview of the sociobiologists. Now I would like to explore an area of curious similarity.

While Christianity should not be completely explainable by sociobiology, there are certain aspects of Christian truth that are quite compatible with it. I have always been amazed by the curious similarity between the biblical description of the natural man or the desires of the flesh, and the nature of man according to evolutionary principles. Both perceive man as a selfish creature at heart, looking out for his own interests. It is not "natural" for a man to be concerned for the welfare of others unless there is something in it for him.

Sociobiology seems to be quite capable of predicting many of the characteristics of human behavior. Scripture, on the other hand, informs us that the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit, that they are foolishness to him (1 Cor. 2:14). I have wondered if our sin nature is somehow enveloped by biology, or, to be more specific, genetics. Could it be that some genetic connection to our sin nature at least partially explains why "there is none righteous, there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:10,11)? Does a genetic transmission of a sin nature help explain why "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23)? Is this why salvation can only be through faith, that it is not of ourselves but is a gift of God, not a result of works (Eph. 2:8, 9)? Is this why the flesh continues to war in our bodies so that we do the thing which we do not want to do, why nothing good dwells in me, and why the members of my body wage war against the law of my mind (Rom. 7:14-25)?

If there is a genetic component to our sin nature, it seems reasonable to assume that only the Spirit of God can overcome the desires of the flesh and that this struggle will continue

in the believer until he or she is changed, until we see God face to face (1 Cor. 13:12; 15:50-58).

I ask these questions not thinking that I have come upon some great truth or the answer to a long-standing mystery, but simply looking for some common ground between the truth of Scripture and the truth about human nature we may be discovering from the perspective of sociobiology. All truth is ultimately God's truth. While I certainly do not embrace the worldview of the sociobiologist, I realize that there may be some truth that can be discovered by sociobiologists that can be truly captured to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

When I wrote that article for *Christianity Today* in 1981, I closed with this paragraph:

> *To know what to support and what to oppose, Christians involved in the social and biological sciences must be effective students of sociobiology. The popularity of sociobiology has gone unnoticed for too long already. We need precise and careful study as well as a watchful eye if we are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ."(7)*

**Notes**

1. Raymond G. Bohlin, "Sociobiology: Cloned from the Gene Cult," *Christianity Today,* 23 January (1981): 16-19.

2. Robert Wallace, *The Genesis Factor* (New York: Morrow and Co.,1979).

3. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge,Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 3.

4. E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978) 2-3.

5. Ibid., 217-218. Emphasis mine.

6. William Irons, “How Did Morality Evolve?” *Zygon* 26 (1991): 49-89.

7. Bohlin, “Sociobiology,” 19.

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# Darwin on Trial: A Lawyer Finds Evolution Lacking Evidence

*Darwin on Trial* is the title of a book on evolution that has ruffled the feathers of the secular scientific community. Though a Christian, author Philip Johnson critiques evolutionary theory from a secular standpoint as he examines the philosophical games many scientists play to protect their evolutionary ideology.

## Evolution as Fact and Theory

Johnson, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, attacks head-on the often-heard statement that evolution is both a fact and a theory, an evolutionary dogma that has been a major source of confusion for a long time. Evolution is a fact, Darwinists say, in that they know that evolution has occurred. It is a theory in that they are far from understanding the mechanisms by which evolution has occurred. In the eloquent words of evolutionist Stephen J. Gould,

> *Evolution **is** a theory. It is also a fact. And facts and theories are different things, not rungs in a hierarchy of increasing certainty. Facts are the world’s data. Theories*

> *are structures of ideas which explain and interpret facts. Facts do not go away while scientists debate rival theories for explaining them. Einstein's theory of gravitation replaced Newton's, but apples did not suspend themselves in mid-air pending the outcome. And human beings evolved from apelike ancestors whether they did so by Darwin's proposed mechanism or by some other, yet to be discovered. (Evolution as Fact and Theory)*

There are numerous problems with this explanation. First, if evolution is a fact, then evolution is equivalent to data. This hardly seems appropriate. Second, the comparison of evolution to gravity is misleading. We can go into any apple orchard and observe apples falling from trees. But where do we go to observe humans evolving from apelike ancestors? Apples falling from trees fits into the category of science we can term **operations science** which utilizes data that are repeatable and observable at any time. Humans evolving from apelike ancestors, however, would fall under the category of **origins science**. Origins science involves the study of historical events that occur just once and are not repeatable. We can only assemble what evidence we have and construct a plausible scenario, much like the forensic scientist Quincy did in the old television show. The so-called facts of human evolution, by Gould's own definition, are the fossils and the rock layers they are found in. That humans evolved from apelike ancestors is a theory that attempts to explain and interpret these facts.

Later in the same article Gould states the real definition of fact under which evolution fits. He begins by saying that fact does not necessarily mean absolute certainty. Then he says, "In science, fact' can only mean confirmed to such a degree that it would be perverse to withhold provisional assent.'" In other words, evolution is a fact because a majority of scientists say so, and you are "perverse" if you do not agree. We quickly begin to see that evolution holds a privileged

place in the scientific community, which will go to extraordinary lengths to preserve that status.

## A Theory in Crisis

Johnson's book, although the most recent, is not the first to question evolution's status as fact. Michael Denton, an agnostic medical researcher from Australia, caused quite a storm with his 1985 book, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*. Denton's point is that orthodox Darwinism has such a stranglehold on the biological sciences that contradictory evidences from fields such as paleontology, developmental biology, molecular biology, and taxonomy are passed off as intramural squabbles about the process of evolution. The "fact" of evolution is never really in question. Like Johnson, Denton points out that Darwinism is not a fact. It is a mechanistic theory that is still without a mechanism. While moths and fruit flies do respond to environmental stimuli, our observations of this process have been unable to shed any light on the means by which we have come to have horses and woodpeckers and wasps. The origin of complex adaptations has remained a mystery. The fossil record is pockmarked with gaps in the most embarrassing places. Darwin predicted innumerable transitional forms between major groups of organisms, yet the few transitions that are suggested are surrounded in controversy. Another "fact" that fails to withstand Denton's scrutiny is the assumption that similar biological structures owe their similarity to a common ancestry. Homology, which studies these similarities, assumes for example that the forelimbs of amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals are similar in structure because they evolved from the same source. Denton reveals, however, that these same classes of vertebrates go through remarkably different stages of early embryological development. This was certainly not a prediction of Darwinian evolution. Even more importantly, Denton reports that comparison of the sequences of proteins from different organisms actually supports the pre-Darwin system of

classification, which was based on creationist principles.

Also, the many chemical evolution scenarios are caught in numerous intractable dilemmas that offer little hope of resolution (see *Scientific American*, Feb. 1991).

## Rules of Science and Evolution

Another issue that Philip Johnson treats in his book is the fact that the rules of science tend to be stated and followed differently depending on whether you are talking about evolution or creation. Professor Johnson refers specifically to Judge William Overton's decision striking down the Arkansas Creation/Evolution Balanced Treatment law. In his written decision, which was reprinted in its entirety in the prestigious journal *Science*, Judge Overton reiterated five essential characteristics of science that were given by opponents of the bill during the trial. Science, in the judge's opinion, must be:

- *Guided by natural law*
- *Explanatory by reference to natural law*
- *Testable against the empirical world*
- *Tentative in its conclusions—that is, not necessarily the final word*
- *Falsifiable*

Judge Overton decided that creation-science does not meet these criteria since it appeals to the supernatural and is therefore not testable, falsifiable, or explanatory by reference to natural law. Johnson points out that philosophers of science have been very critical of the definitions of science given in the decision and have suggested that the expert witnesses provided by the ACLU attorneys got away with a philosophical snow job. Critics have pointed out that scientists are not the least bit tentative about their basic commitments, especially about their commitment to evolution.

From my own experience, all one has to do is attend any scientific meeting to see that some scientists are anything but tentative about their ideas. Also, scientists study the effects of phenomena (such as gravity) that they cannot explain by natural law. Finally, critics have noted that creation-science, as proposed by the Arkansas law, does make empirical claims (such as a young earth, worldwide flood, special creation). Mainstream science has said these claims are demonstrably false, which raises the interesting question, How can creation-science be both unfalsifiable **and** demonstrably false at the same time? Johnson clearly reveals that what is really being protected by these rules of science is not necessarily evolution, but the philosophical doctrine known as *naturalism*. According to Johnson, "Naturalism assumes the entire realm of nature to be a closed system of material causes and effects, which cannot be influenced by anything from the outside." While this doctrine does not deny the existence of God, it certainly makes Him irrelevant. Science, therefore, becomes our only reliable path to knowledge. The issue as Johnson states it, is

> *…Whether this philosophical viewpoint is merely an understandable professional prejudice or whether it is the objectively valid way of understanding the world. That is the real issue behind the push to make naturalistic evolution a fundamental tenet of society, to which everyone must be converted.*

The consequence of this kind of thinking is that evolution is made the basis of ethical and religious statements, which is precisely what most evolutionists find repulsive about creation.

## Darwinist Religion

A frequent refrain from evolutionists is that the evolution/creation debate is actually a collision between

science and religion. If creationists would just realize their view is inherently religious and that evolution is the scientific view, then there would be little to disagree about. Evolution belongs in the science classrooms and creation belongs only in the philosophy and religion classrooms. What gets left behind in this discussion, either intentionally or unintentionally, are the very firm religious implications of atheistic naturalism with evolution as its foundation. We only need to look at a few sources to see the religious nature of evolution. The first source is the blatantly religious statements of certain evolutionists themselves. Philip Johnson quotes the evolutionist William Provine as stating quite categorically that:

- *Modern science, i.e., evolution, implies that there is no purpose, gods, or design in nature.*
- *There are no absolute moral or ethical laws.*
- *Heredity and environment determine all that man is.*
- *When we die, we die, and that is all there is.*
- *Evolution cannot produce a being that is truly free to make choices.*

Statements such as these make it quite clear: the belief that science and religion are different spheres of knowledge is complete nonsense.

A second source that establishes the religious nature of evolution is the attacks of evolutionists on the God of the Bible using evolutionary principles. In his chapter on natural selection, professor Johnson provides an example from evolutionist Douglas Futuyma. Futuyma states that a Creator would never create a bird such as the peacock, whose six feet of bulky feathers make it easy prey for leopards. (Johnson turns the tables, however, by asking why natural selection would favor a peahen that lusts after males with life-threatening decorations.) It has always amazed me that people who claim that there is no God sure seem to have an intimate

knowledge of what He would be like if He did exist. At any rate, if evolution can be used to discredit certain notions about the character of God, then evolution is indeed making religious statements. A third indication of the religious nature of evolution is the knee-jerk reaction of the evolutionary establishment against any statement that even hints that evolution is a tentative theory. In 1984, a group of scientists who are Christians but who do not identify themselves with creation scientists published a booklet entitled *Teaching Science in a Climate of Controversy* and mailed it to thousands of school teachers. The general idea of the booklet was to encourage open-mindedness on certain issues and controversies regarding evolution. Evolutionists quickly chided the publication as a clever disguise of creationism. To quote Johnson, "The pervasive message was that the ASA [American Scientific Affiliation] is a deceitful creationist front which disguises its Biblical literalist agenda under a pretense of scientific objectivity." In other words, anything that smells of God must be creationist and must be stamped out.

## Darwinist Education

In the later chapters of Johnson's book, he analyzes the reaction of evolutionists to the challenges that have been leveled against them. It is here that he perhaps makes his greatest contribution. One of these reactions has been to wage what is essentially an evolutionary filibuster in educating the public about evolution. Johnson cites the experience of the British Museum of Natural History when it opened an exhibit on evolution in 1981. The exhibit presented Darwinian evolution as **one** idea and **one** possible explanation. Creation was cited as another view. This tentativeness was too much for some scientists to bear. A firestorm of criticism appeared in the British science journal *Nature*. Many were furious that the museum would actually go public with doubts about evolution, doubts that had previously been reserved for discussion among

evolutionary scientists alone. The criticism was so severe that the museum eventually removed the exhibit and replaced it with a more "traditional" evolution exhibit. One of the Museum's top scientists, Colin Patterson, made a similar reversal concerning his view that he required faith in order to accept evolution. The criticism eventually convinced him to discontinue making these statements public.

In the United States, the Science Framework adopted by the state of California in 1989, which has a significant effect on the content of science textbooks, contained this statement concerning evolution: "[Evolution] is an accepted scientific explanation and therefore no more controversial in scientific circles than the theories of gravitation and electron flow." This assertion is nothing more than an appeal to authority and has nothing to do with legitimate scientific evidence. As a result of this statement, evolution is being included in science textbooks at increasingly lower grade levels. The purpose is clear: if students can be indoctrinated in evolution early enough and often enough, perhaps all this controversy can be avoided.

## Conclusion

In summary, I have pointed out that many critical predictions of Darwinian evolution have not been fulfilled. As a result, naturalistic atheism, the underlying philosophy of much of the evolutionary establishment, has been threatened. The response of many evolutionists has been to issue increasingly dogmatic statements that appeal to authority, not to evidence, play semantic word games where evolution is called both a fact and a theory, and wage an educational filibuster aimed at squelching all dissent. The evolutionists are not likely to abandon these tactics anytime soon, but until they do, they can expect even more criticism from scholars such as Professor Philip Johnson.

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