The Effect of Origins on Society

Why Is the Subject of Origins Important?

Every worldview addresses the question, “Where did we come from?” The Christian worldview says that we are a special part of creation made in the image of God. A materialistic worldview says that we are the product of natural selection and random mutations acting on organisms. The Christian view of origins is called Creation; the materialistic view of origins is called Darwinism. The Christian worldview is based on faith in the creative work of God of the Bible. The materialistic worldview is based on faith in the creative power of natural selection acting on mutations.

There are evidences for and against these worldviews from scientific research being conducted in the areas of intelligent design, evolutionary biology, genetics, mathematics, astronomy, and many other fields. However, people will often confuse the worldview with the scientific evidence. Worldviews are a way of explaining the evidence. For example, we see that during a drought birds with longer beaks are selected over birds with shorter beaks. This is an observation. Saying that this is evidence for natural selection’s creative ability to make totally new types of creatures is an extrapolation based on a worldview. Just as there is a right and a wrong interpretation for observations, there are right and wrong worldviews. And one way to test for a worldview is whether or not it is livable.

So does your view of origins affect other areas of life than just science? Yes, these two views of origins have a profound effect on how we value people and how we view personhood and personal responsibility. Using John West’s book *Darwin Day in*

America as a resource, we will look at how the materialistic worldview has trickled down into areas of society that affect us every day.

West argues in his book that the logical end materialistic worldview leaves nothing for an ethical standard other than to survive. The materialistic worldview says that non-living chemicals came together to make genetic material which then made an organism and that organism evolved until we got human beings. This view claims that man is made from chemicals and is no more valuable than any other animal. The logical end to this perspective is that everything a man does is a result of his genes and his environment. He therefore has no choices or free will of his own. His actions are the result of natural selection acting on him. This has important consequences for how we deal with crime, personhood, the embryo, the infirmed, and education.

West says, "Darwin helped spark an intellectual revolution that sought to apply materialism to nearly every area of human endeavor. This new, thoroughly 'scientific' materialism affected the entire span of culture, from economics and politics to education and the arts".{1} Darwin published *Origin of Species* one hundred fifty years ago, but it is in the mid-twentieth century that we begin to see how his theory has trickled down into society.

Crime and Responsibility

How does a materialistic worldview affect society? For one thing, a Darwinian view of man has changed our criminal justice system.

How are the courts and science related? In our culture, the scientists are the holders of truth and the courts are the arbiters of law. And while the idea that law coincides with truth is good and even biblical, the idea that scientists, and

only scientists, are the ones who dictate truth is a dangerous position. If the pervading worldview in science is materialism, then a materialistic view of man is reflected in the courts.

According to a materialistic worldview, man is the product of his genes and his environment with no real ability to act differently than what his genes and environment would have him do. If this is the case, then how can he be held responsible for his crimes? Why not just blame bad genes or a bad home life? Often this is what is argued in the courts.

West describes the crux of the problem. In order to provide protection and have an orderly society, the criminal justice system needs to punish wrong behavior. But from a materialistic worldview, there is no moral foundation for individual responsibility. A materialist perspective does not blame the individual but their genes or the way that they were raised (their environment). West outlines a history of criminals getting off in the name of very loose definitions of insanity, and other criminals undergoing treatment instead of punishment.{2} And the treatment, at times, amounts to something closer to coercion or torture.{3} Whether we are talking about being overly lenient by giving criminals excuses or coercing them to treatment, both diminish the value and dignity of the individual as a person.

The Christian view of man is that, although differences in our genetics or our environment may mean that we have different struggles or temptations than others, we are made in God's image. Therefore, just as God treats us with dignity by exacting punishment for our actions, so, too, do we treat people with inherent dignity by exacting punishment and allowing for atonement. The Darwinian view says that we are not responsible because we are a product of our genes, but it also says that we are not redeemable because we will remain flawed.

Our entire criminal justice system is based on the idea that man can be held accountable for his crimes, that he has a choice in what he does. Furthermore, it is based on the inherent dignity that every individual has, so that a wrong done to one individual must result in the wrong-doer being punished. This maintains equal dignity and value in both individuals.{4} However, this system crumbles under a materialistic worldview.

So man is a product of his genes and his environment, a view which, taken to its logical end, has conflicting and dangerous results for exacting justice in society. Now we turn to how this view of man affects how we treat others that are different from us and how we define "normal."

Personhood

At the beginning of the twentieth century, during the rise of the scientific revolution, the idea of atonement for a guilty crime changed to an idea of fixing a broken machine. Criminals were treated as if they were machines with broken parts, instead of individuals with value and free will, because scientists had supposedly found a materialistic cause for crime. Something in their genetic code went wrong, so many were subjected to some kind of institutionalization or treatment. As John West points out in *Darwin Day in America,* the idea is if science can explain the problem, then science can fix it.{5} One way that scientists attempted to fix this problem was to try to breed out the bad traits. Scientists in the '30s, '40s and '50s reasoned that bad behavior, stupidity, and emotional instability were passed down from parent to child just like physical traits, and the only way to cleanse our society of these ailments was to sterilize those who carry these traits.

It began with criminals being sterilized; then it turned to those who were mentally handicapped; then those who were

deemed less intelligent, poor, or unproductive in society were sterilized. In hindsight it is easy to see how this slippery slope happened. One group changes the standards by which we value other groups. No longer is the foundation in the Judeo-Christian concept that all individuals have inherent value, but in the Darwinian concept that some are less valuable than others and deemed less worthy of life than the more "fit" in society. This was the breeding ground for what would become the eugenics movement. [Editor's note: Eugenics is the idea that the human race can be improved by careful selection of those who mate and produce offspring. The word comes from the Greek word *eugenes*, "well-born, of good stock," from *eu*– "good" + *genos* "birth."]

We saw the logical end of the eugenics movement in Nazi Germany. Darwinism was not necessarily the cause for Nazi Germany, but eugenics was justified with a Darwinian view of man. This is an important picture of how one can promote one's worldview (and one's prejudices) in the name of science. Darwinism allows for race discrimination and even genocide. As West points out, "Historically speaking, the eugenics movement is important because it was one of the first—and most powerful—efforts to use science to expand the power of the state over social matters. Eugenists claimed that their superior scientific knowledge trumped the beliefs of nonscientists, and so they should be allowed to design a truly scientific welfare policy."{6}

Today this attitude is still seen when doctors, lawyers, and family members evaluate individuals based on their physical abilities and their cost to society. Oftentimes individuals are assessed based on their perceived "quality of life." Unfortunately, this usually reflects what the doctor, lawyer, or family member would hate to have happen to themselves than the actual desires of the individual in question. Judging others unworthy of life based on physical features or capabilities ignores the inherent value and dignity God has

given man as being made in His image.

The Beginning and End of Life

We have looked at how a society that promotes a materialistic worldview results in a degraded view of personhood. This degraded view includes basing a person's value on how well they physically function and how much they cost society. However, from a Christian view, humans were created with a purpose and in the image of God. They have inherent value beyond their physical bodies.

How does a Darwinian view of man's origin affect the way we look at the most vulnerable in society—the embryo and the aged or infirmed?

West traces a historical record of the legalization of abortion and demonstrates why we have the debate about embryonic stem cell research today.{7} Darwinism is not the cause of the legalization of abortion and destruction of embryos, but it provided an ideology that allowed people to justify it. It began with a scientist named Haeckel who influenced Darwin. Haeckel discussed how all embryos go through stages of development and how the earliest stages look very similar to each other. In his famous drawings, he shows how a human embryo goes from a small fish-like creature that looks similar to other animal embryos, to a human-looking embryo. He said that the fetus goes through a mini version of evolutionary development.{8}

What conclusions were drawn from this? If the fetus is no more than a fish, then it is as ethical to discard it as it would be to discard a fish. The only problem with this idea is that it is now well-documented that Haeckel's drawings were faked, and the similarities were more contrived than real. Despite this finding, people still latched on to the concept and refused to accept that the fetus does not go through

evolutionary stages. It is from this concept that many justify early stage abortion and embryonic stem cell research; the clump of cells or the mass does not look human.{9} This is an example of basing a person's value on their physical appearance and function.

Today we not only see this idea played out in the unborn, but also in the elderly and the infirmed. Many family members and doctors elect to end someone's life because they have deemed them less valuable. Again, the basis of this is on how well they physically function. One group is putting value on another group.

Both of these examples demonstrate how our culture has bought into a materialistic worldview which devalues the person that does not have certain physical characteristics. As Christians we value human life and believe that the embryo, the aged, and the infirmed have inherent dignity despite how they might function or appear.

Education

We have been looking at how a Darwinian view of man led to a slow and steady dehumanization of man. Our view of origins affects other areas of life as well. In this section, we will address how a Darwinian view of man has influenced how we educate our children. A Darwinian view says that there is no absolute authority; there is merely survival of the fittest. In academics that means teaching based on what works, not on what is right.

One of the biggest influences on our educational system, both in public and private schools, has been John Dewey. As Nancy Pearcey points out in her book *Total Truth*, Dewey thought education should be like biological evolution where students construct their own answers based on what works best. Pearcey calls this "a kind of mental adaptation to the

environment."{10} It is easy to see how this leads to moral relativism. Students are not taught character or values. Instead, they learn that an idea or a concept is deemed valuable if it works, not if it is right. Teachers are taught in certification classes to guide students along and help them to come up with their own moral code. Teachers are not allowed to punish students for wrongdoing, because they have no moral basis to do so, but are still expected to have an orderly classroom. In some cases teachers are not permitted to give a failing grade to a student who is genuinely failing. Also they are not permitted to give A's to good students for fear that they may not continue putting forth effort. Students are stripped of the concept of an objective standard or absolute morals, and by the time they are high school seniors, they are more educated in how to play the system than in reading, writing, or arithmetic. This is the very fruit of Dewey's pragmatism, and it continues through the university level. When students are stripped of any set of beliefs and a moral foundation, they are left empty and ready to be filled with the pervading worldview of academia. What we end up with is a fully indoctrinated student with a materialistic worldview.{11}

Contemporary materialism's view of origins, known as Darwinism, has profound effects on our society. As Christians we need to be a light unto the world by showing that human beings are more than their genes and environment, that they have inherent value, and that there are moral foundations beyond survival of the fittest.

Notes

1. John West, *Darwin Day in America* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), 41-42.
2. Ibid., 73.
3. Ibid., 79-101
4. For a good article on capital punishment and human dignity see Kerby Anderson, "Capital Punishment," Probe, 1992,

www.probe.org/capital-punishment/.
5. West, *Darwin Day*, 80.
6. Ibid., 162.
7 . Ibid., 325-335.
8. See Jonathan Wells, *Icons of Evolution* (Washington, DC: Regency Publishing, 2000), chap. 5.
9. Ibid., 330.
10. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 239.
11. See Don Closson, "Humanist Psychology and Education" Probe, 1991, www.probe.org/humanistic-psychology-and-education/; Closson, "Grading America's Schools," Probe, 2002, www.probe.org/grading-americas-schools/; and Kerby Anderson, "Cultural Relativism," Probe, 2004, www.probe.org/cultural-relativism/.

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