

Material-Naturalism: Five Theories of Origins

Often depicted as a struggle between science and religion, the origins controversy is actually between scientists who are material-naturalists and those who are not. Though there are five distinct views, popular media and public educational institutions encourage us to believe there are only two options – material-naturalistic evolution and six 24-hour day creation (only one of which is ever presented as scientific and reasonable). The term creationist has suffered so much derision in the media, using it makes it easy to dismiss the rigor and distinctiveness of the other three views. Mary Poplin continues examination of the *material naturalism* worldview applied to the origins of life debate.

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by Mary Poplin

The five distinct views of origins include (1) naturalistic evolution, (2) theistic evolution, (3) intelligent design, (4) old-earth special creation and (5) young-earth special creation. Christians in science and theology may advocate any of the last four non-naturalistic views; all of these believe that God or some superior intelligence is the agent behind the creation of all life. All but the young-earth-special-creationists agree the age of the earth is approximately 4.5 billion years and the universe approximately 13.7 billion years.

Proponents of all five views on human origins also agree on *microevolution* – that *within* a species, genetic material changes in response to environmental conditions to make survival more likely. White moths turn dark during industrialization; beaks of finches on the Galapagos Islands become harder during droughts; bacteria become drug resistant. Whatever the changes, these bacteria, finches and moths remain the same bacteria, finches and moths; they do not become substantially different organisms.

Though no species has ever been observed to evolve into another (using the broad as opposed to narrow definitions of species), two of the five positions (naturalistic and theistic evolution) believe there is enough deductive and inductive evidence to propose *macroevolution* across species (and the common ancestry of all species – common descent).

Material naturalists maintain that humans evolved from lower animals, which began as single-cell organisms that had emerged from nonliving matter through an unknown process. This evolution is accomplished through undirected (in some cases, random) processes, such as mutation, natural selection, gene exchange and genetic drift, without any supernatural intervention, forethought or purpose. More advanced genes are "selected" simply because of their utility in helping the organism better survive and reproduce.

Theistic evolutionists, generally congregating around the work of the *BioLogos Forum* agree with most of the neo-Darwinian evolutionary hypotheses but add "that all

life on earth came about by the God ordained process of evolution with common descent [which] . . . is the means by which God providentially achieves his purposes in creation." Several prominent scientists and mathematicians who are not material-naturalists count themselves among this group. These include Francis Collins, the prestigious head of the human genome project and now of the National Institutes of Health and others such as Jeff Schloss, David Vosburg, Ard Louis, Jennifer Wiseman, and Jeff Hardin.

There are **four major challenges** to the two theories of evolution across species. First, Darwin noted that for his theory to be true, scientists would have to find many remains of transitional beings; these have not been found. Second, the Cambrian explosion (estimated 543 million years ago) reveals that complex organisms appeared rapidly, not gradually, as evolution theory would predict. Third, is the claim that species evolve through natural selection via mutation; yet, overwhelmingly, science demonstrates that mutations are predominantly neutral or detrimental to the organism, and rarely ever beneficial to life. Finally, observations of the similarities of living organisms are not necessarily a sign of *common descent* but rather of *common design*, the notion that God uses the same design features to create different organisms, just like human engineers do.

Intelligent design advocates form a large group of scientists and theoreticians drawn together by the work of Berkeley law professor, Phillip Johnson who boldly challenged Darwinian evolution for its lack of evidence. Their work is centered at *The Discovery Institute*, with scholars such as William Dembski, Stephen Meyers, Stephen Behe, Jonathan Wells, David Berlinski, and Guillermo Gonzalez.

ID proponents scientifically analyze systems in astronomy, biology, physics and chemistry to determine whether their structures are most likely products of unguided natural selection, intelligent design or some combination. Like other scientists, they advance their propositions by inference to the best explanation and conduct experiments arising from these hypotheses. Essentially they are proposing that while for centuries scientists have considered material as the *causa prima* of the universe, *information* is the first cause and that information is generated from and communicated by *intelligence*. Thus, certain features of the universe are best explained by an intelligent cause and not by undirected processes.

Intelligent design advocates also hold prestigious degrees but are often marginalized and sometimes even excluded from the scientific establishment in elite universities. For example, in August 2013 a university president announced that the theory of intelligent design could not be taught in science classrooms. Thus proponents who remain in universities work largely under the radar and keep their metaphysical commitments hidden. Ben Stein's popular film *Expelled*, though hotly criticized, did reveal the reality that ID proponents face.

Old-earth special creation proponents look at the seven-day story more in terms of geological epochs or as a narrative framework for interpreting origins, as did many of the early church fathers. They accept the traditional dating of the universe and earth but do not accept materialist evolution as an adequate explanation for life. Founder, astrophysicist Hugh Ross and scholars, such as, Fazale Rana, Ken Samples, and Jeff Zweerink work together at the *Reasons to Believe Ministry*. RTB scholars work together to articulate the latest scientific discoveries to a well-educated audience who may or may not be scientists. Their mission is to equip Christians "by demonstrating that sound reason and scientific research—including the very latest discoveries—consistently support, rather than erode, confidence in the truth of the Bible and faith in the personal, transcendent God revealed in both Scripture and nature."

Young-earth creationists tend to argue from the Bible to science, interpreting

scientific discoveries and knowledge through biblical texts, particularly the book of Genesis. Much of the general public's understanding of this form of creationism comes from the movie *Inherit the Wind*, in which the "creationists" are intentionally depicted as bumbling simpletons. Unlike the film's end, the actual trial upheld the teaching of creation.

Young-earth creationists believe that God created the earth in six twenty-four-hour days and thus the universe is only about ten thousand years old and that many fossils are primarily artifacts from the flood that Noah's family survived. One of their major challenges is the lack of clarity in the Bible regarding what a day constituted in the beginning given its multiple Hebraic definitions. Advocates of young-earth creationism include Henry Morris, who developed the *Institute for Creation Research*, Carl Baugh, Duane Gish, and Ken Ham, who founded *Answers in Genesis*.

What's a Pastor or Teacher to Do?

Outside of naturalistic evolution, all of these are theistically compatible. Despite popular media, none of these theistically compatible views discourage scientific discovery; they all encourage it. A team of five scientists studying a particular DNA sequence or astronomical formation could each believe a different explanation of origins. The actual daily practice of "doing science" on existing material does not differ based on one's a priori theoretical commitment to a particular position. Scientists who believe in six 24-hour days or naturalistic evolution have the same potential for scientific discovery. What if the church taught them all? Then the church would be the only place where one could learn the whole range of options and Christian students would go to college better prepared than any of their peers and be even more eager to study the infinitely complex and irresistible designs in God's universe.

Theistic Evolution – Organization: Biologos

The BioLogos website contains many fantastic resources, but we know they're not always easy for the casual web surfer to find. We recognized that there needs to be an easier way to wade into the sometimes, treacherous waters, especially for people new to the Christianity and evolution discussion.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/biologosfoundation>

Intelligent design advocate, William Dembski and atheist Michael Ruse

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMT5Tv2Ez5c>

Fazale Rana on the Question of Evil in Nature

Reasons to Believe is a ministry devoted to integrating science and faith and to demonstrating how the latest science affirms our faith in the God of the Bible.

<http://www.reasons.org/videos/a-response-to-the-thinking-atheists-video-intelligent-design>

Evolutionary biologist Michael Ruse admits the naturalist's Darwinian evolutionary bias has political intent:

"Evolution is promoted by its practitioners as more than mere science. Evolution is promulgated as an ideology, a secular religion—a full-fledged alternative to

Christianity, with meaning and morality. I am an ardent evolutionist and an ex-Christian, but I must admit that in this one complaint the literalists are absolutely right. Evolution is a religion. This was true of evolution in the beginning, and it is true of evolution still today.... Evolution therefore came into being as a kind of secular ideology, an explicit substitute for Christianity."

Inner Life of the Cell (Full Version - Narrated) by MoreThinking

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzcTgrxMzZk>

Some of the more contemporary and able critics of the material-naturalist evolution theory are atheists. For example, atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel's new book *Mind and Cosmos* bears this subtitle: *Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. Nagel finds evolutionary theory unable to explain human consciousness, for example.

Molecular Visualizations of DNA

Amazing CGI visualization of molecular biology's central dogma. It shows animations of DNA coiling, replication, transcription and translation. It was created by Drew Berry of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PKjF7OumYo>

Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the western arm of the galaxy lies a small, unregarded yellow sun. Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-two million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea. Many were increasingly of the opinion that they'd all made a big mistake in coming down from the trees in the first place. And some said that even the trees had been a bad move, and that no one should ever have left the oceans.

Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

Mary Poplin's recently released book examines four major worldviews—naturalism, humanism, pantheism, and Judeo-Christian theism—and explores their implications for human behavior and the evidence for their truth.

What is the nature of reality? At the root of our society's deepest political and cultural divisions are the conflicting principles of four global worldviews. While each of us holds to some version of one of these worldviews, we are often unconscious of their differences as well as their underlying assumptions.

Mary Poplin argues that the ultimate test of a worldview, philosophy or ideology is whether it corresponds with reality. Since different perspectives conflict with each other, how do we make sense of the differences? And if a worldview system accurately reflects reality, what implications does that have for our thinking and living?

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0830844066/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0830844066&linkCode=as2&tag=conemedi-20&linkId=PIESHHEBICSCRA2B

Four minutes of what happened when NASA telescope focused on what was presumed to be blank space in the universe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFAZOH65qI0>

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Mary Poplin

Mary Poplin is professor at Claremont Graduate University and the author of a new book published by InterVarsity Press - *Is Reality Secular? Testing the Assumptions of Four Global Worldviews* (interVarsity Press). Professor Poplin earned her PhD from the University of Texas and is a professor in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. Her work spans K-12 to higher education. Professor Poplin, who began her career as a public school teacher, conducts research largely on the inside of schools and classrooms, and more recently on highly effective teachers in urban poor schools. Her work in higher education has included administration; at various times, she served as dean and as director of teacher education. Academically, she explores the contemporary intellectual trends dominant in the various academic disciplines—the sciences, humanities, and social sciences. She is a frequent speaker in Veritas Forums throughout the country.

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