

■ 'God of the Gaps':
A Valid Objection?



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The danger of the 'god-of-the-gaps' fallacy is a defining dogma for theistic evolutionists¹. If you want to make sure an idea is rejected by a theistic evolutionist all you need to do is demonstrate that it would mark a return to 'god-of-the-gaps'². Nelson and Reynolds (1999) capture well the impact that this concept has.

'The God-of-the-gaps fallacy has become so terrifying a monster that, at the mere mention of its name, otherwise stalwart scientists and philosophers scurry for the safety and cover of such philosophical doctrines as methodological naturalism. "You won't catch us committing a God-of-the-gaps blunder!" they call from their coverts.'

It is pervasive as an objection to both young earth creationism and intelligent design in the writings of theistic evolutionists. Whether it is persuasive is another matter.

What is god-of-the-gaps?

In essence 'god-of-the-gaps' refers to the practice of using God as an explanation for what we do not presently understand (A non-scientific example of the god-of-the-gaps fallacy can be found in the tale *Robinson Crusoe* as cited by W. A. Dembski (1999a). So, for example, when there is no scientific explanation for some phenomenon or historical event Christians then say "God does it", or "God did it." When scientific advance later provides

an explanation God is no longer needed as an explanatory agent and is left with increasingly less to do. By being placed in the gaps of our current scientific knowledge God becomes redundant as science advances. Theistic evolutionists object to the whole approach of trying to find evidence of God's activity, usually for apologetic purposes, in this way. As Dennis Alexander puts it (Alexander 1998), "Christians have no hidden theological investments in ignorance." The argument is equally cogent for intelligent design theories as for Biblical creationists since both share a belief in the inadequacy of the conventional evolutionary explanations. For example in a review of Behe's *Darwin's Black Box* by Michael

Notes

1. Theistic evolution is a label that can cover a wide variety of positions. In this article I use it to refer to its strongest and most self-consistent form in which the conventional evolutionary account of earth history is seen as broadly correct with no need for divine 'intervention' at any point i.e. they would not dispute the adequacy of, for example, Richard Dawkin's account of the history of life on earth on scientific grounds, only the atheistic conclusions he draws from it. Weaker forms of theistic evolution that include some divine intervention at key points (e.g. creation of single celled life) combined with the conventional evolutionary development would be critiqued with the 'god-of-the-gaps' objection by those that hold to the stronger form of theistic evolution.

2. The phrase is often written with hyphens, presumably to identify it as a single concept. The lack of 'gaps' in the label contrasts with the gaps in that to which it refers!



Notes

3. I am limiting the discussion here to earth history but similar arguments are also made concerning the history of the universe and the extent to which the design of a deity is discernable in, for example, the 'fine tuning' of fundamental physical constants. In general theistic evolutionists seem to be more comfortable with seeing evidence for God's design there, perhaps because the arguments for design have often come from non-religious scientists. But even here I detect a fear of god-of-the-gaps that makes theistic evolutionists reluctant to press the design required by current cosmological models as evidence for God.

4. The position is similar to that adopted by well meaning Christians in the 19th century who tried to safeguard the faith in the face of the attacks of critical scholarship on the reliability of the Bible. They did this by marginalising the importance of the history contained in the Bible since, they argued, it was the theology rather than the history that is important. Such an approach does neutralise the attacks of the critics but at the cost of a major distortion of the Christian message whose theology is inextricably linked to history as is seen most clearly, but not exclusively, in the resurrection. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile" (1 Corinthians 15v17)

Roberts his principal objection is that Behe has fallen into a god-of-the-gaps mistake (Roberts 1997):

"For all Behe's lucidity *Darwin's Black Box* is highly unsatisfactory as it is basically the God-of-the-gaps argument covered in amino acids. It is unconvincing and, more seriously, if or when disproved will make Christianity less credible"

Theistic evolutionists have a laudable motive: they are concerned at the propaganda victories that atheism has gained from Christians who have adopted a god-of-the-gaps argument and been proved wrong. Thus theistic evolutionists objection to god-of-the-gaps arguments is partly historical – when Christians have used this in the past they got their 'fingers burnt.'

But the theistic evolutionists' argument is not purely negative in seeking to avoid a particular apologetic trap. They argue on a positive theological basis that we should not expect any 'gaps' in the created world in the first place. Van Till (1996) uses the phrase the 'functional integrity' of creation. Creation is 'fully gifted'. It is sufficient on its own, by its own natural processes, to make everything we find today. There are no 'gaps' that divine intervention would be required to fill. This is portrayed as taking a strong view of God's providence – the concept of God *upholding* creation is often emphasised. Thus God is involved in creation at all times, not just when a 'miracle' is needed. Van Till emphasises that the greatness of God is magnified by this understanding. God's wisdom is all the greater since He has devised something as intricate as the evolutionary process to create mankind.

So how should we respond to this fear of 'god-of-the-gaps'?

Lessons from history

Is the problem as serious as is alleged? Moreland and Reynolds (1999) state that:

"On closer examination, the gaps argument turns out not to be an actual argument. It is more a bit of apologetic advice. Few contemporary philosophers have risen to defend this worry as being legitimate. Despite claims of worried Christian scientists, the God-of-the-gaps strategy has limited historical applicability, at least in the contemporary setting. There are few, if any, cases of serious Christian thinkers actually falling into gap thinking."

One example that is often cited is that of Newton who postulated God's intervention to explain the apparent instability in the orbits of some of the planets that were not accounted for by his own theory. One of the interesting things about this example is that his contemporaries actually questioned Newton's idea, partly on theological grounds! (Meyer 2000a) The god-of-the-gaps warning has more force if it is understood more loosely as referring to the

way a general cultural mysticism was swept away by the explanations of science. So, for example, the popular ideas that comets were special signs from God lost its force when their path was explained by Newton's laws of gravitation (Brooke 1991a). Similarly, lightning conductors were initially opposed on the grounds that they interfered with the sovereignty of God (Brooke 1991b), although prominent Christians such as Wesley did not share this understanding (Brooke 1991c). But modern debates, for example on origins, share little similarity to these historical examples. The mystical thinking about the world challenged the very nature of scientific investigation and is not shared by modern creationists or intelligent design theorists.

Moreland (1994a) argues that the god-of-the-gaps fallacy has occurred when God's action has been appealed to as an explanation in *empirical* science (dealing with repeatable, regularly occurring events or patterns in nature). The example of the planetary orbits mentioned above would be a good example. However in historical science, which seeks to understand the origin of a past, often unique event, God's action can be a legitimate part of a scientific explanation. (See also Meyer 1994a and Meyer 2000b)

It is historical science, however, that is principally on theistic evolutionists' minds when they warn of god-of-the-gaps, and in particular the evolutionary account of earth history³. Here there does seem to be a clear example of where design in nature was used as evidence for God by apologists such as Paley, but then the evolutionary explanation proposed by Darwin refuted their argument. But we need to ask whether Darwin would have won the argument today. If they had known then all we know today of genetics and biochemistry would Darwin's theory have become established? Here is an example of where scientific advance has enlarged the 'gaps'. Far from diminishing the need for God to act beyond natural processes to create life modern science provides far more reason to insist that an outside designer was essential. (Dembski (2002) in *No free lunch* provides the most rigorous scientific argument available today for the need of an intelligent agent to create life.) The advance of science has secured the need for a non-naturalistic explanation. For example, Darwin recognised the intricacy of the human eye as a difficulty for his theory. Yet what we now know of the biochemistry involved in vision makes it even harder to postulate an evolutionary origin (see for example Baker, 2004).

Begging the question

The god-of-the-gaps objection *assumes* the gaps will be filled. But the issue at stake is whether the gaps are real or only apparent due to our current level of understanding. The assumption that there are no gaps demonstrates a prior commitment to methodological naturalism i.e. that it is possible to explain the existence of life by a purely naturalistic process that creates a seamless link between single-celled life and man. An atheist like Dawkins *has* to assume a process like this occurred for he has no alternative. The only debate for him is the details of the mechanism of that naturalistic process. Thus he is bound to accept even a poor naturalistic theory rather than one involving an intelligent agent even if the evidence supports the latter better. The mere existence of a naturalistic theory does not in itself make a theory invoking God's action false. The question is whether the naturalistic theory explains the data better than the theistic one.

The 'god-of-the-gaps' accusation is really a statement that, axiomatically, there are no gaps, rather than an *argument* against there being any gaps. The fact that some gaps may have been wrongly identified in the past does not mean there are no real gaps to be identified today.

Van Till's doctrine of the 'functional integrity' of creation is another example of question begging. It is hardly a self-evident doctrine and it lacks justification from scripture. (With respect to its application to evolution, all the Biblical arguments against a Darwinian model of origins, such as the need for suffering before the fall, are also relevant.) Where are we told that this is the principle by which God made the world? We cannot know except by looking at the world (See the discussion of Van Till's argument in Dembski (2002)) and the evidence overwhelmingly points to the inability of natural processes to account for the intricate designed structures we find. Miracles in the Bible (for all their limitations in inducing faith) are portrayed as signs of divine *intervention* (see discussion in Dembski 1999b) in a way that counts against the sort of doctrine Van Till proposes.

God's involvement in creation

Theistic evolutionists make much of their doctrine of God's sovereignty – that He is involved in all events 'upholding' creation (e.g. Col. 1v17), not just the 'miraculous'. But they have no monopoly on doctrine of God's sovereignty. I fail to see the relevance of this argument against creationists in particular, because I have *never* seen a creationist ever deny or question that God is involved in all that happens in the world. (The issue for Dembski is not whether God interacts with the world the *immanence of God*, but whether he does so in an empirically detectable way.) Our interest focuses on the miraculous because that is the point at issue but it in no sense denies the divine upholding of the regular. The problem for theistic evolutionists is that their concept of divine action in the world is entirely undetectable i.e. the world looks exactly the same as if there was no God since they do not question the scientific validity of the Darwinian model of origins. Not surprisingly atheists such as Dawkins are not impressed (Dawkins, 1995).

"If, on the other hand, there are no traces of God's involvement in the universe; if God did indeed set things up so that life would evolve, but covered His tracks so brilliantly that no clues remain; if He made the universe look *exactly as it would be expected to look* if He did not exist, then what we have is not an argument from design at all. There can be no argument from design if the universe is expertly designed to look undesigned. All we are left with, in this case, is the feeble, though strictly valid, argument that just because we don't find any evidence for a God, this doesn't prove that there isn't one. Of course we can't prove there isn't one but, as has been said sufficiently often before, exactly that same can be said of fairies and Father Christmas."

Conceding to naturalism

Theistic evolutionists avoid god-of-the-gaps by selling out to naturalism (almost) completely. Ironically their position is equivalent to someone who was a creationist who decides that science has filled all the gaps he had originally identified and admitted defeat. They have created an undetectable God and as such have a belief that is (conveniently) unchallengeable, but for that very reason it does not impress an atheist like Dawkins. The position is safe, but irrelevant to someone outside.⁴

The area where evangelical theistic evolutionists do not concede to naturalism is with central supernatural events such as the resurrection. But one wonders why this itself could not be seen as a god-of-the-gaps mistake. Maybe science will one day explain how a crucified man can rise from the dead by purely natural processes. Carson (1999) argues as follows:

"Would they [theistic evolutionists] want to propose that all the forces that brought Jesus back from the dead with a resurrection body can be explained on purely 'natural' terms? Or would they say in this case God dramatically intervened, setting aside the structures of normal physical forces to introduce a stunning miracle? And if God did so in this case, why should it be so difficult to imagine that he did so in connection with the creation – *especially* when the evidence for design, evidence *from the physical order*, is multiplying."

Reynolds (2001) also questions the consistency of some theistic evolutionists.

"Many of the Old Testament portions of salvation history do not fit contemporary natural science. Not surprisingly, these parts are often reinterpreted as non-historical. The happy result for the theistic naturalist is that exactly those stories most open to modern verification are declared purely theological and off limits. And stories, like the story of the resurrection, that are no longer likely to be challenged on scientific grounds are allowed historical content. Put another way, God uses "primary causation" when no scientists are looking."

To quote Warfield, Christians are 'unembarrassed supernaturalists' and one wonders why that could not also apply to creation. Similarly, I question the motivation behind Humphreys recent book on the Exodus (Humphreys, 2003), whatever the validity of the particular explanations he proposes for the Exodus miracles. Why should we feel compelled to provide a naturalistic account of an apparent miracle as somehow superior to a supernatural one? As Meyer (1994b) notes, why shouldn't a theistic explanation be seen as an advance of science – unless you are committed to naturalism.

Finally, I would note the cutting assessment Dembski makes of the cost of the position adopted by theistic evolutionists as actually undercutting any apologetic impact (Dembski, 1999c)

"If theistic evolution finds no solace from intelligent design, neither does it find solace from the Darwinian establishment. For the Darwinian establishment the "theism" in theistic evolution is superfluous. For the hard-core naturalist, theistic evolution at best includes God as an unnecessary rider on an otherwise purely naturalistic account of life. Thus by Occam's razor, since God is an unnecessary rider in our understanding of the physical world, theistic evolution ought to dispense with all talk of God outright and get rid of the useless adjective *theistic*. This, at any rate, is the received view within the Darwinian establishment.

"It's for failing to take Occam's razor seriously that the Darwinian establishment despises theistic evolution. Not to put too fine a point on it, the Darwinian establishment views theistic evolution as a weak-kneed sycophant that desperately wants the respectability of being a full-blooded Darwinist but refuses to follow the logic of Darwinism through to the end. It takes courage to give up the comforting belief that life on earth has a purpose. It takes courage to live without the consolation of an afterlife. Theistic evolutionists lack the stomach to face the ultimate meaninglessness of life, and it is this failure of courage that makes them contemptible in the eyes of full-blooded Darwinists. (Richard Dawkins is a case in point.)"

Not an argument from ignorance

It is a misunderstanding to think that the argument for intelligent design rests on ignorance (Meyer 2000c; Moreland 1994b). Rather is the logical deduction from known scientific laws. For example Dembski's explanatory filter (Dembski, 1998) detects design in a rigorous mathematical way. Evolutionists adopt similar reasoning themselves. The search for extra-terrestrial life involves the search for coded messages in radio waves which would be counted as positive evidence for alien intelligence. No one suggests such messages could be explained by an as yet undiscovered naturalistic process and that an 'alien-of-the-gaps' has been invented by the SETI scientists. Similarly, cave paintings are not explained by natural forces but as the creations of intelligent people. Such an explanation is not seen as an appeal to ignorance: the 'gap' is real and a scientific deduction from the evidence.

In this context the search for a naturalistic mechanism for the origin of life is as ridiculous in the light of what we know of the laws of science as funding a research program to find heat spontaneously flowing from a cold body to a hot one. Our current knowledge of thermodynamics says that is impossible, but maybe that is just present ignorance? Maybe alchemy has been too hastily dismissed as impossible due our limited current knowledge and should also receive funding? (Demski, 1999d)

Some lessons for intelligent design and creationism

There are some things for creationists to learn from the god-of-the-gaps argument. Notwithstanding the comments above, intelligent design objections to evolution are vulnerable to the god-of-the-gaps objection to the extent that they are negative theories saying in effect, "I bet you can't explain X". Biblical creationists have an advantage in that we are not first and foremost critiquing Darwinian evolution but presenting a positive model of earth history that we believe can explain the data better. Creationists are saying, "We can explain this data better," rather than, "You can't explain this". There are risks in building a positive model. Creationist theories are open to disproof by scientific investigation, but that is what ultimately will give them impact with a relevance to atheistic scientists that theistic evolutionists can never achieve.

It is important that we see creationist theories as part of an overall Biblical model of earth history. Disproof of one part of a model does not necessarily invalidate the whole, just as in the evolutionary model, hence God need not

be 'squeezed out' even where certain creationist theories are rightly abandoned. God will ultimately be sidelined if He is merely an 'add-on' to an essentially naturalistic worldview. The lesson of god-of-the-gaps is not to build an apologetic on an assumed naturalistic foundation. For theistic evolutionists to persistently cry 'god-of-the-gaps' is clever rhetoric, but like many 'sound bites' it is a charge that lacks substance. ■

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