

Comments on the Collins/Dawkins Debate

By Ward Fenley

The front cover of the November 13, 2006 edition of Time Magazine reads: "God vs. Science, a spirited debate between atheist biologist Richard Dawkins and Christian geneticist Francis Collins." There are several comments I would like to make regarding this particular debate. These comments will be brief, but I couldn't help notice a few things which stood out to me as important regarding the evolution vs. creation debate.

Time asks both: "Stephen Jay Gould, a Harvard paleontologist, famously argued that religion and science can coexist, because they occupy separate, airtight boxes. You both seem to disagree." To which Collins replies: "Gould sets up an artificial wall between the two world-views that doesn't exist in my life. Because I do believe in God's creative power in having brought it all into being in the first place, I find that studying the natural world is an opportunity to observe the majesty, the elegance, the intricacy of God's creation." Dawkins responds: "I think that Gould's separate compartments was a purely political ploy to win middle-of-the-road religious people to the science camp. But it's a very empty idea. There are plenty of places where religion does not keep off the scientific tug. Any belief in miracles is flat contradictory not just to the facts of science but to the spirit of science."

Collins may be correct in his observation of Gould's view in that Gould sets forth what appears to be a merger between a somewhat traditional Deistic thought and modern science. Collins seems to be aware of that problem when he states, "Gould sets up an artificial wall between the two world views." In essence Gould's view (sort of a modern restatement of Deistic thought) takes an entirely spiritual realm and disassociates it from the material realm, in essence un-involving the Creator/God from His own creation. Since creationism (whether old-earth or new-earth) presupposes the miraculous, Gould's idea seems to initially acknowledge the miraculous (creation and the Creator/God) and then remove the miraculous from creation by refusing to acknowledge its existence subsequent to creation. If Collins holds to the omniscience of God, then he sees the glaring incompatibility of Gould's view with the nature of God. Perhaps this is why even Dawkins states that Gould's view is an "empty idea."

Since the article gives us no indication as to whether either scholar affirms an open-theistic view of God, we will assume that each one's view of the Creator/God is that God is omniscient. This has been an historical pitfall for most theologians in that they have affirmed the omniscience of God but have denied His sovereignty over certain events in time and space, such as the directing of good *as well as* evil. Atheists see the immense illogic of such a position and usually dice the partial Deists' arguments to qualitative shame. Unfortunately, later in the debate Collins makes a valid and important statement but exposes a weakness: "By being outside of nature, God is also outside of space and time. Hence, at the moment of the creation of the universe, God could also have activated evolution, with full knowledge of how it would turn out, perhaps even including our having this conversation. The idea that he could both foresee the future and also give us spirit and free will to carry out our

own desires becomes entirely acceptable.”

Noting the obvious transcendence of God is paramount to the discussion of the miraculous. Yet even though many well-meaning Christians (and even sovereign grace preterist Christians) espouse evolution from sub-species to humanity, they don't realize the implications of such a view. To argue evolution within species or even from one species to another is one thing. But if we take an extreme theistic position of the evolution from a sub-species to humanity, we expose a fundamental flaw in Collins' reasoning. Later in the debate Collins effectively argues that there is no basis for ascribing good or evil to any thought or act of humanity without the existence of a purely moral and just God. The problem is this: at which point in the evolutionary process does the moral conscience (or reasoning) appear? In other words, does the moral conscience begin to develop in a sub-species or does it just suddenly appear at the *perfect* time? That may seem redundant, but what is the *perfect* time? If it is the perfect time for the conscience to appear, then wouldn't that presuppose a perfect design? After all, how would the evolutionary process simply *decide* the point at which the conscience would appear? An equally curious position would be the suggestion that moral conscience or reasoning gradually develops. This raises enormous problems, not the least of which is, at which point does any hint of moral conscience or reasoning begin? Then arises the question: how did even that inferior moral reasoning begin? And if moral reasoning cannot be said to have been perfected by now, how can we argue the existence of absolute morals or, even as Dawkins admits, the existence of "good things that happen and bad things that happen"? The idea that good things and bad things exist seems to suggest a curiously moral presupposition. It is at this juncture that *both philosophies* of Collins and Dawkins collide, each having astonishing inconsistency.

But Collins is correct in identifying this dilemma: "If it is solely an evolutionary convenience, there is really no such thing as good or evil." This, I believe is the chief obstacle of the atheist, even more so than the creation/evolution debate. That is, if there is no God, how do we trace back the existence of morality in order to determine what is truly "good" or "bad," or "good things" or "bad things"? After all, if, as both scholars would admit, mankind is fallible, and, as Dawkins is forced to conclude, not even remotely close to the pinnacle of perfection in the evolutionary process, then how could either of them argue that any moral conscience or reasoning can be rightly described as good reasoning or bad reasoning?

Nevertheless, Collins sees the significance in the fields of *sociobiology* or *evolutionary psychology*—"relating to where we get our moral sense and why we value the idea of altruism." But even here, the idea of the existence of a truly altruistic action or thought seems to be beyond the scope of logic. The term altruism implies a thought or deed done with purely unselfish motives. Collins actually uses an example of a simple human being (not even necessarily a *believing* human being) sacrificing his own DNA "doing something selfless to help somebody in a way that might diminish his chance of reproducing." But here Collins errs. He assumes that sacrificing one's own DNA that might diminish his chance of reproducing is a totally altruistic (i.e. selfless) act. There is no way to prove that the motive of such a one is completely pure. In fact, approaching this from a biblical perspective we have these statements concerning the thoughts of man:

Psalms 94:11 The LORD knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity.

It is hard to contemplate God declaring a purely altruistic thought of man as vanity, considering the fact that He alone is said of evangelicals to have performed the ultimate act of *altruism* (if that is even a philosophical possibility for an omniscient, omnipotent being). More explicitly God describes the thoughts of man with severity:

Genesis 6:5 Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

How can a man's act of sacrificing his own DNA be described as being altruistic when his thoughts are evil continuously? Collins speaks of God being purely moral and just, themes abundantly supported in Scripture. But the Scripture also speaks of man frequently:

Isaiah 64:6 But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away.

It seems odd that God would speak of man's supposed good deeds as filthy rags if indeed the good deed of sacrificing one's own DNA were verifiably altruistic. To solidify this principle of the extreme depravity of the conscience, Paul writes:

Titus 1:15 To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.

Therefore, the discussion of morals, albeit vitally important in showing the fallacy of the atheist's approach to ethics and morality, seems to be unsolvable because of the errant positions of both scholars. According to Paul, the only way to escape the defilement of the conscience is to believe in Christ.

Dawkins at least twice refers to Collins' answers or explanations as "cop-outs," but this particular exchange in the debate seems to point the finger at Dawkins as being one guilty of the "cop-out":

Collins: "The gravitational constant, if it were of by one part in a hundred million million, then the expansion of the universe after the Big Bang would not have occurred in the fashion that was necessary for life to occur."

Dawkins replies, but to no avail and with no plausible solution: "People who believe in God conclude there must have been a divine knob twiddler who twiddled the knobs of these half-dozen constants to get them exactly right. The problem is that this says, because something is vastly improbable, we need a God to explain it. But that God himself would be even more improbable." But he never goes on to explain how God is more improbable. He makes his statement then moves on. That is a "cop-out."

I like this statement by Collins: "I object to the assumption that anything that might be outside of nature is ruled out of the conversation. That's an impoverished view of

the kinds of questions we humans can ask, such 'Why am I here?', 'What happens after we die?', 'Is there a God?' If you refuse to acknowledge their appropriateness, you end up with a zero probability of God after examining the natural world because it doesn't convince you on a proof basis. But if your mind is open about whether God might exist, you can point to aspects of the universe that are consistent with that conclusion."

Time Magazine asks: "The Book of Genesis has led many conservative Protestants to oppose evolution and some to insist that the earth is only 6,000 years old;" to which Collins responds: "There are sincere believers who interpret Genesis 1 and 2 in a very literal way that is inconsistent, frankly, with our knowledge of the universe's age or of how living organisms are related to each other. St. Augustine wrote that basically it is not possible to understand what was being described in Genesis. It was not intended as a science textbook. It was intended as a description of who God was, who we are and what our relationship is supposed to be with God. Augustine explicitly warns against a very narrow perspective that will put our faith at risk of looking ridiculous. If you step back from that one narrow interpretation, what the Bible describes is very consistent with the Big Bang."

The most striking case of illogical statements comes when the subject of morals is addressed by Dawkins: "Can I begin with an analogy? Most people understand that sexual lust has to do with propagating genes. Copulation in nature tends to lead to reproduction and so to more genetic copies. But in modern society, most copulations involve contraception, designed precisely to avoid reproduction. Altruism probably has origins like those of lust. In our prehistoric past, we would have lived in extended families, surrounded by kin whose interests we might have wanted to promote because they shared our genes. Now we live in big cities. We are not among kin nor people who will ever reciprocate our good deeds. It doesn't matter. Just as people engaged in sex with contraception are not aware of being motivated by a drive to have babies, it doesn't cross our mind that the reason for do-gooding is based in the fact that our primitive ancestors lived in small groups. But that seems to me to be a highly plausible account for where the desire for morality is, the desire for goodness comes from."

Collins replies: "For you to argue that our noblest acts are a misfiring of Darwinian behavior does not do justice to the sense we all have about the absolutes that are involved here of good and evil. Evolution may explain some features of moral law, but it can't explain why it should have any real significance...what you've said implies that outside of the human mind, tuned by evolutionary processes, good and evil have no meaning. Do you agree with that?"

Then Dawkins boldly answers: "Even the question you're asking has no meaning to me. Good and evil—I don't believe that there is hangin out there, anywhere, something called good and something called evil. I think that there are good things that happen and bad things that happen," to which Collins immediately responds: "I think that is a fundamental difference between us. I'm glad we identified it."

In my opinion, this particular area is greater than the creation/evolution issue, even though it definitely is related. For after all, if evolution is true, then the evolution of conscience and absolutes is true, and therefore if the evolutionary process is not

complete, then there is no way to defend a perfect absolute and therefore no way to argue against the atrocities of genocide and hatred, since those absolutes might simply be inferior suggestions for a peaceful society. We could take the pragmatic approach and do what works. But for the Third Reich, genocide worked. How does one dismiss such pragmatism as absolutely wrong if we are unable to pinpoint in the evolutionary process such absolutes? If it came from an imperfect stage in the evolutionary process, then it may very well be wrong. Perhaps, as Hitler believed, they were the superior race, and thus correct in his view of white supremacy.

Collins: "Do humans have a different moral significance than cows in general?"

Dawkins: "Humans have more moral responsibility perhaps, because they are capable of reasoning."

This begs the question according to evolution: At which point in the evolutionary process did reasoning begin? Was it just sudden? If so, then that in itself points to a God with moral absolutes. If not, then we have no right to affirm even "good things" or "bad things."

By the end of the article at least Dawkins concedes that his mind is not closed to the idea of a supernatural intelligence. He even goes so far as to admit that such is a "worthy idea...grand and big enough to be worthy of respect. I don't see the Olympian gods or Jesus coming down and dying on the Cross as worthy of that grandeur...If there is a God, it's going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than anything that any theologian of any religion has ever proposed."

On free will, evolution, and some occasional divine interventions, Collins falters. But overall he successfully addresses the objections of Dawkins.

Dawkins buckles to admit the possibilities, but his blatant disdain for the cross is a result of his inability to argue for the real existence of good and evil, right and wrong. Of course the cross would seem useless. Any philosophy which affirms the existence of absolutes that are good or evil is forced to also affirm that the conscience has to be defiled as a result of transgressing that absolute, and therefore in need of a remedy for such a defiled conscience. From the believer's perspective, it is hard to comprehend an event filled with such grandeur and worthiness as the Cross. But then again, the Cross is a miracle of miracles, and its Resurrection inseparable. And it takes nothing short of a miracle to even believe it.