

Two Modes of Divine Action in History

I invested quite a bit of time in writing the **abstract** for this talk, to make it describe what I want to say. So now I'll just go through the abstract, one point at a time, expanding it and adding comments and examples.

During history in the Bible, divine action is **usually natural-appearing** and **occasionally miraculous-appearing**.

This is a **fact**, and we can all agree.

But it's followed by my **claim**, and some of you may not agree:

It seems reasonable to expect -- unless there is strong counter-evidence -- that **both modes of action** are still used now, and **were used during the formative history of nature**.

So here is my claim: by analogy, We should expect that **both modes of action** -- natural and miraculous -- were used during the formative history of nature. This "argument by analogy" certainly isn't conclusive, but I think it does provide theological support for a theory of progressive creation.

I'll come back to this later.

First, let's look at natural process. What do we mean when we say that something occurred **naturally**? There's a common answer that's wrong, and it's next in the abstract:

In a theistic worldview, "natural" does **not** mean "without God".

Why? because God **designed** nature, **created** nature, and constantly **sustains** nature; and natural does not mean "without control" Why? because God can **guide** nature so one natural result occurs instead of another natural result.

So God is actively involved in natural process in four ways: **design, creation, sustaining, and guidance**.

One point I want to emphasize is that for theism, a SUSTAINING of the universe is **necessary**, but is **not sufficient**.

Let's compare theism with deism; in DEISM, in the beginning God actively designs and creates the universe, but then God is passive, taking a hands-off approach by just "**letting it run**".

But THEISM emphasizes the active control by God;

Earlier I said that God **can** guide nature; that's a principle of faith, and we can all agree.

But when we ask "**does** God control nature?", we'll have disagreements; and I'm not even sure what **I** think about this: Does God control always, usually, seldom, or never? And at a particular instant, is there control of some events in the universe, or all events, or none? And when there is control, is it total (as in determinism) or partial.

We know that God **can** guide, but we wonder whether God **does** guide, and in what ways.

And the fact that God **can** control everything leads to a difficult question: Why is there evil and suffering, if God is **loving** (so he should **want** to prevent the suffering) and is **powerful** (so he **could** prevent it)?

Like all of you, I don't have a good answer. / But I think the absence of answers that **we** consider satisfactory is due to our own limited perspective: we find it difficult to understand the **time-dimension** of God's perspective (which includes life after death) and the **generality** of God's perspective (which includes everyone, not just me and my small circle of family and friends). / Then there's the **educational value**. I don't think we fully appreciate the educational value of living by faith in a world filled with **drama** and **danger**, while trusting that everything God **wants** to control **really is** under his control.

back to the abstract:

Applying these principles leads to interesting perspectives on important questions.

One practical question is,

If natural does not mean without God, how should this affect our actions? At the end of the talk is the most important action, but here's an easy one:

Of course, we should avoid **saying** that "natural" means "without God".

But this isn't enough;

We **also** shouldn't **imply** it, and we shouldn't **allow** it.

For example, Allan Harvey describes a scorekeeping system that's common, even though it's wrong: In this way of scoring, If it's a **miracle**, we give credit to God; if it's **natural**, it counts against God, as "something that God did not do" since it would happen anyway even if God didn't exist or wasn't active.

The difficulty is that people tend to assume this scorekeeping system, which makes sense for **non-Christians**;

But it also occurs for Christians, even though it's un-Biblical.

Therefore, we have to **explicitly deny this**, call attention to it, and do whatever we can to be **educationally effective**, to change the way people think about natural process.

Another application; in the abstract I say,

theistic evolution can be an authentically theistic creation theory.

But many in the Christian community, especially those who are most vocal in the origins debates, disagree with this in their **declarations** and their **implications**; and that's unfortunate.

But I do have a tough question:

Even though theistic evolution can be authentically theistic, we should ask, "To make it **theistic** rather than **deistic**, what views of natural process are required?" Is a **sustaining** of nature sufficient, or is a divine **control** of natural process also necessary? Earlier I talked about the characteristics of control and reached the conclusion that --- [[shrug shoulders]] I don't know.

But I do think the level of control is somewhere above zero, and I'm wondering if advocates of theistic evolution will agree, and will emphasize this when describing their own views.

When we look at a theory of evolutionary creation, we can ask two questions: one is **scientific**, the other is **theological**; **scientifically**, Can natural process **produce complexity**? and **theologically**, Can natural process **achieve the goals of God**?

First, there's a scientific question about about Howard Van Till's RFEP [[use sign]], his **Robust Formational Economy** Principle,

It seems that God designed nature to operate smoothly without miraculous intervention, so it would be **self-operating**. But did he also design nature to be **self-assembling**?

After the initial design and creation, will the universe naturally self-assemble into complex physical and biological structures? Van Till says yes, and we can study this claim using science.

In astronomy, we see the wonderful ways that natural process leads to the formation of stars (as described by Debbie Haarsma and other speakers). For ASTRONOMICAL EVOLUTION, natural process does seem to produce self-assembly.

But when we examine the origin of life by CHEMICAL EVOLUTION, the scientific conclusion might be different. Why? When we look at the simplest life, we see that it's **not simple**; there is a high degree of complexity, and it's the right kind of complexity. But if we compare what's needed for life [[show]] and what's available from natural process [[show]], a self-assembly of life doesn't seem very probable.

Is the universe designed so total self-assembly is **possible**? -- maybe, maybe not.

But as Christians we can certainly say, with confidence, that a totally natural self-assembly isn't **necessary** -- because God can do miracles.

And maybe there's an essential tension between assembly and operation -- maybe it isn't possible to design a universe for optimal operation and also self-assembly.

Walter Bradley illustrates this by asking us to imagine a car that's designed so it can change its own spark plugs.

Of course, we respond by saying, why bother? this isn't needed because **we** can change the plugs,

And designing a car for self-maintenance might reduce its performance in other ways that are more important, and it would not lead to an optimal car.

In a similar way, maybe designing for **partial** self-assembly, not **total** self-assembly, is the best way to get an optimal universe.

Self-assembly is a scientific question, with a little theology thrown in, but we can also ask a question that's mainly theological:

In a theory of theistic evolution, what makes it **theistic** instead of **deistic**?

In a **totally deistic** evolution, if the level of theistic guidance is zero, will this **unguided** natural process achieve the **goals** of God?

When thinking about this question, we need two sub-questions:

First, How precise were the goals of God? Did God want humans with the **exact** characteristics we have -- physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual -- or would it be enough for natural evolution to produce "any creatures that are complex and interesting"?

Second, how predictable are the results of unguided evolution? What would be the results of different evolutionary histories. If we "run the tape" a hundred times, would the results be **identical**, fairly **similar** (due to convergence), or very **different** (due to divergence)?

Now, back to the abstract and **the two modes of action** and **my own view of origins**:

Is a theory of creation by **miraculous-appearing genetic modification**, analogous to the healing in Acts 3, a theologically and scientifically plausible theory?

When we consider theology and science, YES, this is a plausible theory; I think it's most likely to be correct, and it's where I would place my bets.

First, let's consider theology. When we study the Bible, we should look at **details** and also **the big picture**.

At the level of details, we can look at specific passages, for example by trying to determine the meaning of "creation words" in Genesis 1: Do these words describe creation by natural process, or miraculous action, or some of each, or is the meaning unclear?

We can also look at the big picture, the overall flow of action in the Bible, and we see two modes of action: usually natural and occasionally miraculous. By analogy we can say: Since there are two modes of action in the Biblical history of humans, maybe we should expect two modes of action in the formative history of nature.

Let's look at a **timeline** for the lame man in Acts 3.

born ---- natural life ---- MIRACULOUS (**big change, and fast**) ---- natural life ---- dies

Maybe this timeline for the lame man (in salvation history)

was also used for some organisms (in formative history).

born ---- natural ---- MIRACULOUS **genetic** change, big and fast ---- natural ---- dies

The "miraculous genetic change" might be a set of systematic macromutations that would produce major new features (like birds that can fly) or structures that are irreducibly complex.

I won't go into the details here, but a theory of "creation by genetic modification" is very different, scientifically, than a theory of old-earth **independent creation** in which a new species is produced "from scratch" so it would not necessarily have any continuity with its ancestors. With

genetic modification there is some genetic continuity, so evidence for **common descent** would be expected, in agreement with evolutionary theory, and the main challenges to theories of natural evolution would be questions about **rates of change** or **irreducible complexity**.

At this point I'll briefly depart from the abstract, for a comment about **flexible open science**.

If we want to find truth about the history of nature, we should abandon a **rigid** methodological naturalism. We should **begin** by assuming that "natural process did it", but we should be flexible, willing to change this conclusion if it doesn't seem justified when we look at the scientific evidence and logic.

In some of my web-pages I look at open science, and my goal is to encourage careful thinking. Based on my own experience in careful thinking, it seems that -- when we study the option of adopting open science by rejecting methodological naturalism -- "the **closer** we look, the **better** it looks."

back to the abstract:

Why isn't divine action more obvious more often?

If God created using miraculous action, why is there any appearance of an all-natural process of gradual evolution? Why aren't the miracles more obvious? This is a good question.

And we can ask similar questions about events in the Bible:

After the resurrection of Jesus, why didn't he appear in downtown Jerusalem?

And why doesn't God give **everyone** a Damascus Road Experience? It worked with Paul, so why not for the rest of us?

The outline of what seems to be a good answer comes from C.S. Lewis, in Chapter 8 of Screwtape Letters -- the explanation from Lewis is that, in order to educate us, to help us learn to live by faith, God doesn't want to **overpower us** by making his action too obvious; Instead he produces a **balance**

of evidence (with some reasons to believe, but also reasons to not believe) -- so we're not overpowered, so we're free to develop a **desire** for God, so we'll **want** to build a relationship with God.

The abstract makes several suggestions about terminology:

To avoid a reinforcement of the unfortunate assumption that natural process occurs without God, should we avoid a "natural versus supernatural" dichotomy, and avoid the use of "naturalism" to mean "a universe without God"? again, the question implies a YES.

Let's look at four terms that can lead to wrong thinking:

First) when we contrast NATURAL with SUPERNATURAL, as an EITHER-OR dichotomy,

Here is what happens: If supernatural means "God **is** involved",

The contrasting term -- natural -- must mean "God **is not** involved".

And we have wrong thinking.

Second) a similar difficulty occurs when we use NATURALISM to mean "a universe without God"

because if **naturalism** means a universe without God, maybe **natural** means an event without God.

But if we don't use the term NATURALISM, what are the alternatives?

Another common term "for a universe without God" is MATERIALISM; this is better, since it tends to produce fewer wrong ideas about divine action. But materialism has another common meaning -- an excessive focus on earthly pleasures, especially by acquiring wealth and material possessions. / Christians should also oppose this type of materialism, so when we criticize "materialism" there are two possible meanings, and a potential for confusion.

Another term is **PHYSICALISM** -- but it can be used in context of mind-body duality, with some extra metaphysical baggage attached to it.

So here is what I suggest: If naturalism means that "only nature exists", why don't we call it **NATURISM**? If "the only thing that exists is nature", it's **naturism**, not **naturalism**.

Why should we add an extra syllable that isn't needed, especially when the extra syllable leads to wrong thinking?

Third) I don't like the term NATURAL HISTORY.

Again, the difficulty is the two meanings:

First, natural can mean pertaining to nature -- and in this sense "natural history" is OK.

But the most common meaning of "natural" is "normal-appearing and non-miraculous" so the most common meaning of "natural history" is "a history with only normal-appearing process" and this is **not OK** because it's a **conclusion** that closes minds, when we should be asking **questions** with an open mind.

To avoid this implication, instead of NATURAL HISTORY we should say THE HISTORY OF NATURE.

Fourth) we have GOD OF THE GAPS.

What's wrong with this term? It's OVERPOPULATED WITH MEANINGS, and the **inevitable result** is CONFUSION.

So, if we want to AVOID CONFUSION, we should AVOID THIS TERM.

For details about this claim -- for my explanation of why "God of the gaps" should be eliminated from our vocabulary -- and for more details about everything else in this talk, you can go to

www.asa3.org/ASA/education/origins/rusbult.htm -- near the middle of the page, there is a link for this talk, "Two Modes of Divine Action".

Finally, we arrive at **the most important application:**

What important practical implications does a supernatural control of natural process have in daily life?

If God is actively involved in natural process, then God is involved in every aspect of our lives, every day, even when it isn't obvious.

Therefore, we should make this understanding a part of the way we live, and we should pray for God's control in all of the natural, normal-appearing events that fill our lives. And we should expect these prayers to be answered.