

Evolution, Theistic Evolution, and Intelligent Design

By William Dembski

In 1993, well-known apologist William Lane Craig debated professional atheist Frank Zindler concerning the existence of the Christian God. The debate was published as a video by Zondervan in 1996 and is readily available at YouTube. The consensus among theists and atheists is that Craig won the debate. Still, Zindler presented there a challenge worth revisiting:

The most devastating thing, though, that biology did to Christianity was the discovery of biological evolution. Now that we know that Adam and Eve never were real people, the central myth of Christianity is destroyed. If there never was an Adam and Eve, there never was an original sin. If there never was an original sin, there is no need of salvation. If there is no need of salvation, there is no need of a savior. And I submit that puts Jesus, historical or otherwise, into the ranks of the unemployed. I think that evolution is absolutely the death knell of Christianity.

Zindler's objection to Original Sin and the Fall is the subject of my just-published book *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (see www.godornot.com, which includes a \$5,000 video contest connected with the book). What interests me here, however, is the logic that is supposed to take one from evolution to the death of Christianity—and presumably to the death of God generally.

By evolution Zindler means a Darwinian, materialistic form of it, one that gives no evidence of God and thus is compatible with atheism (this is, in fact, what is meant by evolution and how I'll use the term in the sequel). But Zindler is not arguing for the mere compatibility of evolution with atheism; he is also claiming that evolution implies, as in rationally compels, atheism. This implication is widely touted by atheists. Richard Dawkins pushes it. Cornell historian of biology and atheist Will Provine will even call evolution "the greatest engine for atheism" ever devised.

To claim that evolution implies atheism is, however, logically unsound (even though sociological data supports the loss of faith as a result of teaching evolution). Theistic evolutionists such as Francis Collins, Denis Alexander, and Kenneth Miller provide a clear counterexample, showing that at least some well-established biologists think it's possible for the two to be compatible. Moreover, there's no evident contradiction between an evolutionary process bringing about the complexity and diversity of life and a god of some sort (deistic, Stoic, etc.?) providing the physical backdrop for evolution to operate.

The reverse implication, however, does seem to hold: atheism implies evolution (a gradualist, materialist form of evolution, the prime example being Darwinian). Indeed, the atheist has no other *rational* options in explaining the diversity and complexity of life. The atheist may, in the face of reason, invoke pure chance to explain the emergence of life. Thus the atheist might want to say that organisms simply materialized as the result of

vastly improbable thermodynamic accidents. But such appeals to chance are no better than empty appeals to divine action. “Chance did it” and “God did it” without further elaboration are equally empty. “Getting lucky” is not a scientific hypothesis.

If atheism is to offer a comprehensive worldview, it must supply a creation story, and the only such story that has any hope of being rationally compelling is a gradualist, materialist one. This may rightly be called Darwinian evolution (the adjective “Darwinian” here looks to Darwin’s original inspiration but also factors in how his ideas have been extended since). Accordingly, atheism implies Darwinian evolution. This (reverse) implication explains why intelligent design (ID) is so vehemently opposed by atheists. ID claims to find scientific evidence of intelligent agency in the emergence of biological systems. By thus challenging Darwinian evolution, ID challenges atheism.

The rationale here is a simple application of the logical rules *modus ponens* (If A, then B; A; therefore B) and *modus tollens* (If A, then B; not B; therefore not A). Thus,

Premise 1: If atheism is true, then so is Darwinian evolution.

Premise 2: But if ID is true, then Darwinian evolution is false.

Premise 3: ID is true (the controversial premise).

Conclus 1: Therefore Darwinian evolution is false (modus ponens applied to Premises 2 and 3)

Conclus 2: Therefore atheism is false (modus tollens applied to Premise 1 and Conclus 1)

Evolution is the mainstay of an atheistic worldview—is it any coincidence that the day-job of the world’s leading atheist (Richard Dawkins) is evolutionary biology? ID, by challenging this mainstay, fundamentally undermines an atheistic worldview. It’s therefore ironic that theistic evolutionists are not just hardening their support of evolution but even actively turning against ID, arguing that Darwinian evolution is more compatible with Christian theism than ID.

When I got into this business 20 years ago, I thought that any Christian (and indeed any theist), given solid evidence against Darwinian evolution (as ID is now increasingly providing—see my book *The Design of Life* and Stephen Meyer’s *Signature in the Cell*) would be happy to trash it and move to some form of intelligent design (whether discrete creations or gradual guidance or information front-loading or whatever). But that has not happened. Theistic evolutionists have now baptized Darwinism. Thus, in the 2001 PBS evolution series, Brown University biologist Kenneth Miller referred to himself as an orthodox Catholic and an orthodox Darwinian. Francis Collins and his associates at www.biologos.org follow Miller here in trying to convince religious believers that Darwinian evolution provides the best fit with their faith.

Ironically, theistic evolutionists now make common cause with atheistic evolutionists—specifically against ID. ID has become public enemy number one for both atheistic and theistic evolutionists (the recent spate of books by both sides confirms this point—atheist Jerry Coyne’s *Why Evolution Is True* as well as theist Kenneth Miller’s *Only a Theory*). Consequently, not just the mainstream academy but the mainstream Christian academy (Wheaton College, Calvin College, Seattle Pacific University, etc. — most schools in the CCCU) have now closed their doors to ID and to hiring faculty that explicitly support it

Shocked alumni are welcome to prove me wrong. Christians in general need to consider this: The only thing theistic evolutionists have to say to a Richard Dawkins who uses evolution as a club to beat believers is that he’s making a category mistake, trying to get science to do the work of theology (to which Dawkins would respond “so much the worse for theology”). By contrast, ID takes the club out of Dawkins’ hands and breaks it, showing that the theory of evolution on which he relies is all washed up.

As my colleague Noel Rude has rightly pointed out, “New knowledge is always destabilizing, and the instinct for stability and the preservation of prestige and power always preclude the quest for truth.” The Christian academy is as guilty here as the non-Christian. Thus, we find theistic evolutionists not just criticizing ID but denying it any legitimacy whatsoever. How convenient, since adopting the party line grants theistic evolutionists acceptance in the secular culture denied to ID proponents. Notwithstanding, being public enemy number one among the intelligentsia (atheist, and now increasingly theist) has this advantage: we can pursue the quest for truth without a conflict of interest.