

What role could God have in evolution?



Introduction

Divine Action is defined as God’s interaction with creation. Due to the understanding that evolution accounts for the diversity of present life forms, it might appear God played no role in the process of evolution. Clearly this contradicts the central doctrine of creation for many faiths. Christianity, for example, professes a God actively involved in creation. Many faiths share the concept of an interactive God, or theism. The opposing belief — the belief in an uninvolved, disinterested God — is deism.

Divine action figured prominently in early discussions of Darwin’s theory in the late 19th century. For some theologians, evolution was compatible with theism only if God acted supernaturally at points in the evolutionary process.¹ For example, maybe God created Adam and Eve supernaturally rather than through a more gradual, natural development. However, other theologians saw the uninterrupted process of evolution as being compatible with Christian doctrine. They understood evolution to be “the silent and regular working of him who, in the fullness of time, utters his voice in Christ and the cross.”² But while most theologians were comfortable with evolution, most of them supplemented Darwin’s theory of natural selection with other processes

like divine intervention or built-in teleological trajectories.

We still seek to understand God's involvement in the world. BioLogos readily affirms that the creator can act outside the created physical laws. However, we must not say that miraculous events outside the laws of nature are the only instances of God's involvement. For this reason, BioLogos requires no miraculous events in its account of God's creative process, except for the origins of the natural laws guiding the process. Instead, BioLogos states that "once life arose, the process of evolution and natural selection permitted the development of biological diversity and complexity," and "humans are part of this process." Moreover, "once evolution got under way, no special supernatural intervention was required."³

So how is BioLogos reconciled with a theistic, interactive God instead of the disinterested God of deism? Is it rational to believe that God had any involvement in the Darwinian history of the world?

Creation's Freedom

Before considering what room exists for divine action in nature, it should be made clear how far this idea should be taken. In searching for an understanding of God's involvement in the unfolding course of events, BioLogos does not suggest that God is directly responsible for every single event in cosmic history. If that were the case, then God would be responsible for every human thought, every event and even every natural disaster. Such a concept of God challenges the reality of free will. Instead, a proper understanding of theism implies God has endowed nature with a certain degree of freedom. In much the same way that humans can act freely in the world, nature itself has an inherent liberty. This is not to say that nature has a mind of its own, but only that nature is not restricted to a machine-like, predetermined evolution. The Rev. John Polkinghorne explains:

"[There] is no doubt that part of God's interaction with the world must be that of letting agents or circumstances take their course. Without that there would be no true freedom, and the gift of love in creation must be the gift of freedom, both to humankind and also to the Universe itself, as it explores its own inherent potential through its evolving process."⁴

BioLogos does not seek a concept of a God who is involved at certain times and who only observes at other times. In harmony with theism, BioLogos affirms a God who is at all times involved, yet who still allows a degree of freedom to the creation.

Laws of Nature

Even before Darwin's contribution to biology, the scientific revolution in physics marked a tremendous advance in our understanding of the world. Scientists discovered that the world's behavior could be explained and predicted with great accuracy on the basis of physical laws. Nature, as understood at the time, appeared to reliably follow a set of fundamental rules. For example, the motion of planets could be explained as a necessary result of their obedience to the force of gravity. This understanding of the world lent itself to the belief in a rational, consistent creator.

But, as Polkinghorne puts it, these laws might also come across as "a gift from the Greeks."⁵ Given a second look, they challenge basic theism. For as much as these laws signify a rational creator, their trustworthiness could also imply God's absence. After all, if the laws of nature can explain almost any phenomenon, how is God involved? In order to understand how God could take an active role, or how the world could have any inherent freedom, the laws of nature must be somehow open or flexible. The world's future cannot be entirely determined or predictable from any given moment.

The mechanical worldview of the scientific revolution is now a relic. Modern physics has replaced it with a very different picture of the world. With quantum mechanical uncertainty and the chaotic unpredictability of complex systems, the world is now understood to have a certain freedom in its future development. Of course, the question remains whether this openness is a result of nature's true intrinsic chanciness or the inevitable limit to humans' understanding. Either way, one thing is clear: a complete and detailed explanation or prediction for nature's behavior cannot be provided. This was already a problem for Newtonian mechanics; however, it was assumed that in principle, science might eventually provide a complete explanation of any natural event. Now, though, we see that the laws of nature are such that scientific prediction and explanation are ultimately limited.

It is thus perfectly possible that God might influence the creation in subtle ways that are unrecognizable to scientific observation. In this way, modern science opens the door to divine action without the need for law breaking miracles. Given the impossibility of absolute prediction or explanation, the laws of nature no longer preclude God's action in the world. Our perception of the world opens once again to the possibility of divine interaction.

Despite the uncertainty and unpredictability of the world, we are not forced to reject the earlier understanding of God's creation as consistent and reliable. After all, the world still exhibits the same orderly behavior that inspired so many faithful scientists of earlier centuries. Regardless of the irregularity of tiny, quantum mechanical, or complex, chaos theoretical, systems, the sun stills rises and sets, the tides ebb and flow, and objects fall to the ground. Nature is reliable enough to reflect God's faithfulness yet flexible enough to permit God's involvement.

God's Relationship to Time

An important assumption undergirds this discussion: God's action can be compared to our own. In locating space for divine interaction, we tend to assume that God would need the same sort of opening in nature's mechanistic laws that humans would need were they to influence the unfolding course of events. However, there are plenty of ways in which God's action is necessarily different from human action. For example, God's relationship to time, a deep and enduring theological consideration, would greatly affect divine action. If God is creator of the universe as a whole — and if time is a part of this universe — then God's relationship to time is not restricted to only the present moment as is the case with human action. Then, in the same way that God's perception of time differs from our own, God's action in time could differ from ours. Because we cannot understand God's existence outside of time, we are obviously limited in our understanding of God's action.

Conclusion

Our modern understanding of physical laws combined with a proper understanding of God's relationship to time can be synthesized into a robust theistic worldview. Darrel Falk provides the following perspective:

“The Bible tells us that God created, but it does not tell us how, and we need to be careful that we do not force the God of the Universe into one of our human molds. [...] What do we learn about the nature of God's activity from studying the Bible? One thing we learn is that God builds freedom into His creation. [...] Just as God builds freedom into our lives today, so freedom may well be a central component of God's biological world as well. This is not to say that God is not playing a supervisory role in creation in a manner resembling the role God plays in my life and yours. But there is no a priori scriptural reason to assume that the biological world was created one species at a time by the God of the Universe “pushing creation buttons” each time he wanted a new species. [...] God's spirit guides the progression of life. His presence is never far from creation, just as it is never far from the events of my life. Nonetheless God respects my freedom and (I suspect) values freedom in the rest of creation as well.”⁶

Consulted Experts:

The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Owen Gingerich](#) in drafting this response.

Notes

1. David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1987), 118.
2. A.H. Strong, as quoted in Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders*, 129.
3. Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 200.
4. John C. Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World* (Philadelphia and London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2005), 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. Darrel R. Falk, *Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds between Faith and Biology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 101-03.

Further Reading

Websites

- The Faraday Institute on Science and Religion. "[Multimedia: Lectures on Divine Action.](#)"

Articles

- Counterbalance Foundation. "[Science and Divine Action.](#)" Counterbalance: New Views on Complex Issues.
- Polkinghorne, John. "[The Science and Religion Debate,](#)" *Faraday Papers*.

Books

- Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences. *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action Series*. Edited by [Robert John Russell](#), et al. 5 vols. Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Foundation, 1997-2002.
- Falk, Darrel. *Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds between Faith and Biology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
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