

Evolution, design, and genomic suboptimality: Does science “save theology”?

In a recent issue of PNAS, Avise (1) presents a helpful survey of suboptimal features of the human genome that are best understood as products of evolution, but in venturing to offer theological commentary on intelligent design (ID) and religious belief in general, he errs on three counts. First, the central claims of ID have been abundantly critiqued on strict empirical grounds (2), leaving no need for recourse to his theological objection that imperfections are unworthy of deity. Laplace’s dictum about the role of God in explanations of nature—“I have no need of that hypothesis”—has become the guiding principle for science. Arguing that the presence of “genetic evil” undercuts appeals to divine agency is superfluous and detracts from rather than advances scientific discussion.

Second, the line of argument made against ID is, in addition to being superfluous, actually unsound. ID contends (wrongly, it turns out) that irreducibly complex structures require intelligent intervention in their causal ancestry and not that structures caused by intelligent agency are optimal. Anyone stumbling on the Tacoma Narrows suspension bridge would immediately conclude that it was a designed artifact, despite the equally apparent evidence of poor design that ultimately caused its collapse. Natural imperfections may (or may not) be irreconcilable with a divine designer, but this is an entirely theological issue and not a scientific one suitable for PNAS.

Third, contrary to Avise’s culminating exhortation (1), evolution does not “emancipate religion from the shackles of theodicy.” We no longer need to agonize over God’s responsibility for massive suffering, he opines, because the blame now rests on natural evolutionary causes. However, positing that God delegated the task of generating life to insentient evolution merely ushers in an explanatory regress that serves to illuminate rather than ease the problem of the evils resulting from the operation of nature. I am no less morally culpable in killing my child if I hire a drunken chauffeur to drive her home than I would be if I crashed the car myself while driving drunk.

Finally, Avise (1) concludes that evolution constitutes “salvation for theology.” Whether this is or even could be true of any scientific theory is highly debatable. Less debatable is that rather than being made in a journal of scientific research, such a claim ought to be vetted in a venue appropriate to rigorous assessment in light of relevant philosophical and theological literature.

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2. Young M, Edis T, eds (2006) *Why Intelligent Design Fails: A Scientific Critique of the New Creationism* (Rutgers Univ Press, Piscataway, NJ).

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