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THEISTIC EVOLUTION: DEISM REVISITED?

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The current creation-evolution debate is much more complex than a mere religion-science issue, although it is often simplified into an either-or conflict between right-wing Christian fundamentalists and science.[1] This simplification probably occurs because the classic evolutionist position is both naturalistic and atheistic. It is naturalistic because it argues that the entire universe is a product of natural processes that are currently being observed through science and that may be extrapolated back for an extremely long period of time. It is atheistic because a universe of natural causes seems to lead logically into a position that there is no God. The antithesis of this position is creationism, normally formulated in terms of a literal understanding of the first two chapters of Genesis and usually associated with what is called a young earth.

While often characterized as a religion-science debate, both sides claim to be based on scientific data.[2] Both sides are also often characterized as religious.[3] Moreover many people who hold to an evolutionary model also claim to hold to the traditional beliefs of Christianity.

Phillip Johnson argues that the basic struggle is really between two worldview paradigms: "Is God the true creator of everything that exists, or is God a product of the human imagination, real only in the minds of those who believe?"[4] According to Johnson the basic issue is not the question of the data but how the data are interpreted—whether one views the data through a theistic grid or through a naturalistic grid.

The question that arises immediately is whether this polarization is correct. Are these the only alternatives? Could not one view the data from a theistic grid and yet accept the evolutionary hypothesis? Ever since Darwin published his watershed book a number of scholars have indeed proposed such a third alternative, arguing that evolution is the physical process that God initiated and sustained to create the universe.[5] This mediating position has been termed "theistic evolution."

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[1] S. J. Gould, "Darwinism Defined: The Difference Between Fact and Theory," *Discover* (January 1967) 64–70. Ironically W. R. Bird (*The Origin of Species Revisited* [Nashville: Regency, 1991] 2.331) argues that "most supporters of the theory of creation are non-Fundamentalists."

[2] Bird, *Origin* 1.39–526.

[3] Bird, *Origin* 2.179–310.

[4] P. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995) 12–15.

[5] Bird, *Origin* 2.251–317.

Theistic evolution, however, has not proven to be the mediating position once hoped for.[6] On the one hand, many naturalistic scientists have attacked theistic evolution because God, a supernatural Being, has been incorporated into an otherwise totally naturalistic process.[7] On the other hand, some conservative scholars have attacked theistic evolution for a variety of reasons. A number of scientists have argued that the entire evolutionary concept is false, including theistic evolution.[8] Many Biblical scholars have raised objections in terms of the problem of reconciling a theistic evolution position with a literal hermeneutic of Scripture, most specifically in the early chapters of Genesis.[9] Furthermore some scholars have expressed the fear that the position tends toward a view of God that is more deistic than theistic.[10]

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate this last criticism—namely, that theistic evolution tends toward deism. Specifically I propose to look at sample positions of theistic evolutionists to evaluate this aspect of their integration of faith and science. Because of the copious material written in this area, this study is necessarily very preliminary.

In the process of our evaluation we must expressly define several terms. The first is the word "creationist." In the strictest sense of the term a creationist is one who views the universe as a created entity and asserts that there is a Creator behind it, normally referred to as God.[11] In this sense many theistic evolutionists (at least of the conservative camp) would view themselves as creationists.[12] In the debate that has ensued over the past few decades, however, the term "creationist" has come to take on the narrower connotation of what may be better described as a "special creationist"—that is, one who argues for a direct creation of the universe, the world, and the life on it. As noted by Del Ratzsch, this includes "young-earth creationists, old-earth creationists and progressive creationists, but would not include theistic

[6] Cf. D. Ratzsch, *The Battle of Beginnings* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 180–195.

[7] W. Provine, "Scientists, Face It! Science and Religion are Incompatible," *The Scientist* 2 (September 5, 1988).

[8] E.g. J. F. Coppedge, *Evolution: Possible or Impossible?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 169–181.

[9] D. H. Lane, "Theological Problems with Theistic Evolution," *Vital Apologetic Issues* (ed. R. B. Zuck; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995) 140–157. Lane presents problems that derive from Genesis 1–4. In actuality the issues involved carry all the way into chap. 11.

[10] D. H. Lane, "Special Creation or Evolution: No Middle Ground," *Vital* (ed. Zuck) 134. Interestingly Provine, an atheist, also declares that such a view is deistic.

[11] P. E. Johnson, "Foreword," *The Creation Hypothesis* (ed. J. P. Moreland; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 8.

[12] E.g. H. J. Van Till, "The Scientific Investigation of Cosmic History," *Portraits of Creation* (ed. Van Till; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 120. There would be some question regarding how scholars from the more liberal areas of Biblical studies would label themselves, since the term "creationist" tends to be used in a somewhat pejorative sense against those who are more conservative in their understanding of Scripture. Since the Genesis accounts are normally deemed by liberal scholars as myths produced relatively late in the national history (cf. B. W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966] 172–179), it appears that these scholars subscribe to a cosmic-evolution perspective of the world, rendering the Genesis accounts of no relevance to the issue.

evolutionists."[13] For our purposes this definition is sufficient although, as Ratzsch notes, most of the current debate focuses around a young-earth creation scenario.

Our second term is "theistic evolution." We should note that theistic evolutionists disagree in several areas. For this reason we need to state up front that it is wrong to classify theistic evolution as one homogeneous grouping as is done by D. H. Lane.[14]

But as we look at theistic evolutionists we might note that several positions are held in common. First, theistic evolutionists view God as the Creator of the universe. Second, by definition all theistic evolutionists accept the evolutionary hypothesis as a scientifically demonstrated process. But what do we mean by the term "evolution"? The concept of evolution as used today includes a number of different aspects, each of which carries different scientific, theological and philosophical connotations. The term, however, is often used very haphazardly, creating much confusion. In fact many writers commit the logical fallacy of equivocation by arguing for or against one aspect of evolution and then making a conclusion regarding another aspect. For our purposes we may distinguish five aspects.

(1) Evolution is used popularly simply to denote change or, more often, a series of changes. For example, someone studying the American automobile after World War II might read of the evolution of the tail fin. This is a very general usage that has no specific significance either theologically or scientifically and will not be used further.[15]

(2) The term is used to reflect observed biological changes or variations, primarily within species. This aspect is more technical and reflects a scientifically observed reality. It was this process that Darwin observed during his voyage with the *H. M. S. Beagle*. This aspect is often termed microevolution.[16] A prime example might be that of the dog. Dogs have demonstrated sufficient plasticity of genetic structure to produce a plethora of varieties that are very distinctive and yet are still considered members of the same species. Moreover if we let dogs interbreed indiscriminately, in future generations these distinctive varieties would blur back into a nondescript "mutt." Today virtually all scholars accept the concept of microevolution.

(3) Akin to microevolution is what Lane calls the "special theory of evolution."[17] Some scholars merge this aspect with microevolution.[18] But the

[13] Ratzsch, *Battle* 12.

[14] Lane, "Theological" 140–157.

[15] As I was discussing this concept with a student he made the observation that given the changes in the field of special creation during the past half-century we could talk of the "evolution of creationism" in this sense.

[16] The limits of microevolution are still being debated. Some would limit the concept to a species, but many even in special-creationist circles would expand the concept to as broad as a family (Ratzsch, *Battle* 87–90). As developed here, this larger aspect would be better included under "special creation."

[17] Lane, "Special" 124.

[18] M. Denton, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (Bethesda: Adler and Adler, 1986) 86–88.

scope of special evolution transcends variety by producing speciation, a point where a variety no longer interbreeds with related varieties. This aspect of evolution is what many evolutionary biologists observe in the field and understand to be the foundation of a more encompassing view of evolution.[19] Even many special creationists subscribe to a concept of evolution that would be subsumed under this subcategory. The place where these creationists would draw the line is at "kind," a limit that is unclear and debated.[20]

(4) Another use of the term evolution is what may be called the "general theory of evolution."[21] General evolution is defined as the theory that all the living forms in the world have arisen from a single source that itself came from an inorganic form. The key characteristics of general evolution are a common inorganic source for all life and a development process that is driven by time, energy and chance.

(5) Evolution is also often used to describe the development of the universe.[22] This aspect may be called "cosmological evolution." The key issue of the cosmological aspect is that stars and galaxies evolved over a multibillion-year period, setting the stage for general evolution here on earth. Many adherents of cosmological evolution currently use the "big bang" theory as an explanatory model.

It is critical that these distinctions be made for several reasons. For our purposes two will be noted. (1) As will be demonstrated, different scholars address and incorporate different aspects of the broader term as they express what is called theistic evolution. (2) Without understanding these distinctions, scholars often end up talking past each other.[23]

As I began to look into the concept of theistic evolution, I discovered that it is somewhat nebulous. In essence most theistic evolutionists seem to have accepted the developmental or evolutionary (all senses) model as a result of their scientific training without consciously evaluating either the issue of aspects of evolution (whether cosmic, general or special) or God's role in the development process. In essence they have assumed general, cosmic or special evolution and incorporated God's creative role without any real effort to integrate the two. For example, Donald M. MacKay states:

> This idea, that (as a Christian would put it) God's way of working has been slow and gradual (the bodies of higher animals coming into being through

[19] C. H. Waddington, "Evolutionary Adaptation," *Evolution After Darwin* (ed. S. Tax; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960) 381–382.

[20] Ratzsch, *Battle* 88–89. Cf. J. Woodmorappe's precis of his recently released book *Noah's Ark: A Feasibility Study* (*Impact* [March 1996] iv) where he states that "creationists have previously noted that not every *species* need have been on the Ark, as many new species could easily have arisen after the flood." The limits of the Hebrew term translated "kind" are problematic but certainly allow for such a broad understanding.

[21] Lane, "Special" 124; cf. Denton, *Evolution* 88–90.

[22] Van Till, "Scientific" 115.

[23] I noted this problem of talking past other scholars in personal correspondence with a biologist where I thought it clear that I was primarily addressing cosmological evolution. His response focused on the issue of special evolution. It is probably safe to say that most scholars are guilty of some confusion, even within their own thinking, on this issue. I suspect that this confusion may contribute in part to the sometimes vehement nature of the debate.

> descent with modification from earlier species), is all that should be meant by the term "evolution" as used in science. In this technical, scientific sense the idea is theologically neutral, and is widely accepted by biologists who are also biblical Christians.[24]

In this context MacKay seems to imply that he uses the term evolution solely in the sense of general evolution. In another context he slips in the concept of cosmological evolution as a necessary prerequisite of general evolution.[25] Nowhere, however, does MacKay clarify the way God would work. He seems to assume that the naturalistic explanation provides the methodology while the metaphysical provides the ontological rationale. How God used this method (i.e. exactly where and how God intervened in an otherwise totally natural process) appears irrelevant, although this is the critical element that separates a theistic evolutionist from a naturalistic evolutionist.[26]

Like many theistic evolutionists, MacKay adopts what is termed a complementarian model, which argues that "science and theology are complementary, noninteracting, noncompeting descriptions of the world."[27] As Raymond Grizzle describes this model, the two fields seem to be asking alternative questions. Science asks how, and theology asks why. The problem is this: If God is involved, science should be asking how. While Grizzle argues that his complementarian model should not isolate the two fields, it does. Further, it is not clear that God necessarily functions as Creator in his model.[28]

Theistic evolution faces a triple burden. (1) It must confront, along with naturalistic evolution, the weaknesses of the naturalistic evolutionary model.[29] (2) It must address key theological issues, including not only creation but also the fall of man (the issue of sin requiring a redeemer) and the nature of major judgments such as occurred in the time of Noah. (3) It must explain the role God plays in an otherwise totally natural process as well as how this process, which necessarily incorporates death and violence, correlates with God's appraisal of a world that was deemed good initially.[30]

[24] D. M. MacKay, *The Clockwork Image* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974) 51. MacKay's premise that the term is theologically neutral is one that ignores the role that philosophical presuppositions play in our worldviews.

[25] Ibid. 62.

[26] MacKay later argues that God, "and God's activity, come in not only as extras here and there, but everywhere. If God is active in any part of the physical world, he is in all. If the divine activity means anything, then *all* the events of what we call the physical world are dependent on that activity" (ibid. 57).

[27] J. P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 12. While MacKay argues for a hierarchical complementarity model ("that the religious account of reality is logically 'higher' than the scientific" [*Clockwork* 91]), R. E. Grizzle argues for a parity complementarity model ("A Conceptual Model Relating Theology and Science: The Creation/Evolution Controversy as an Example of How They Should *Not* Interact," *Pespectives on Science and Christian Faith* 45/4 [December 1993] 224).

[28] Grizzle, "Conceptual" 224. To be fair, Grizzle's article is not designed to address that issue. He argues that under his model scholars cannot cross categories, so that while creationists (in the broad sense of the word) cannot argue scientifically that God created, neither can atheists argue scientifically that there is no God. The real weakness of this model is that while Grizzle argues for natural-cause explanations he can never arrive at an initial first cause since by definition it lies outside the realm of science.

Historically the burden of the weaknesses of evolution has been deferred to the consensus of the scientific community. The burden of theological issues has been addressed by suggesting that Genesis 1 was either mythical, polemical or poetical—in essence forcing the interpretation of the text to meet the demands of the consensus of the scientific community.[31] The burden of God's role has been essentially ignored.

More recently several scholars have begun to pursue the issue more deeply and to evaluate God's role not only in the creation process but also in the subsequent role of sustainer. These efforts have begun to demonstrate the magnitude of the problem. Since all of these positions are raised as distinctives to the special-creationist view, we will begin with that which seems closest to special creationism.

The first methodological position we will examine is that hinted at by Ratzsch. This position argues for the validity of general evolution but does not address the issue of the origin of the cosmos. Ratzsch claims it is a logical fallacy to argue that since cosmological evolution necessarily incorporates general (or biological) evolution, one who adheres to general evolution necessarily adheres to cosmological evolution.[32]

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(1) the gaps in the paleographic record, (2) the inability to explain the origin of major systems such as sight, (3) the normally detrimental effect of mutation, and (4) the fact that natural selection fails to explain a methodology of change but only at best explains how change spreads throughout a population group. Naturalistic scientists are recognizing the scientific problems of the model, which are developed in great technical detail elsewhere (cf. Denton, *Evolution*; Bird, *Origin*). Philosophers

science are raising issue with the assumptions (cf. *Creation Hypothesis* [ed. Moreland]; Ratzsch, *Battle*). Finally, an increasing number of scientists are reevaluating the data through an entirely different grid and developing an alternative model that incorporates historical events recorded in the Biblical record (cf. S. A. Austin, *Grand Canyon: Monument to Catastrophe* [Santee: Institute for Creation Research, 1994]).

[30] When we address the issue of Genesis all of Gen 1:1–11:27 must be incorporated into any discussion since it is presented as an historical overview of the period between the creation and Abraham. To argue that Genesis 1 is poetic or mythical literature or is merely a prologue ignores not only the nature of the language but also the greater problem of addressing Gen 2:4–11:27 as a unit that incorporates the data of 1:1–2:3 as a foundation. These later sections provide problems as great as or greater than the issue as does Genesis 1. As Ratzsch observes, the issue of the fall is especially sticky since this event is viewed as changing the good world God created into the world we view presently, and theistic evolution does not have an answer to this since by its model it must assume violence, death and evil as part of the good world God created (*Battle* 189).

[31] J. H. Stek, "What Says the Scripture," *Portraits* (ed. Van Till) 240–242. Stek argues that any acceptance of the Genesis 1 data as historigraphy would "suppose an unbroken transmission of tradition that can no longer be assumed." This ignores the possibility of divine revelation, necessarily forcing Genesis 1 into a totally human work. Across the spectrum, theistic evolutionists have looked askance at scholars who have suggested that Genesis 1 be viewed in a more straightforward manner. They have especially considered scientists who have approached the data through a different interpretative grid than the standard naturalistic one as less than scientific—and one must admit that some of these scientists have shot themselves in the foot in their efforts to defend against what they saw as an overwhelming flood of contrary thinking (cf. Van Till, "The Character of Contemporary Natural Science," *Portraits* 131). There is evidence, however, that this extreme bias is changing (cf. R. E. Snow, "A Critique of the Creation Science Movement," *Portraits* 202).

As such, theoretically one could argue for an instantaneously created old universe and earth followed by a God-directed general evolutionary process producing all life. And in fact Ratzsch only addresses in his discussion biological or general evolution, leaving the issue of cosmological evolution open. Given the existence of life, Ratzsch draws on issues of nuclear physics, quantum mechanics and probability theory to explain how God could direct this process and not violate any naturalistic cause-and-effect guidelines. His argument is that while nuclear physics recognizes that in any given period of time a specific number of molecules of a radioactive substance will decay, quantum mechanics and probability theory indicate that an observer never can determine in advance when a specific molecule will decay. Thus the decay of a specific molecule is subject to chance.

Given our understanding of the nature of God (e.g. omniscience and omnipotence), Ratzsch then argues that God could intervene at the molecular level and instigate the decay of a specific molecule at any given time and not violate either the laws of physics or the naturalistic cause-and-effect assumptions of science. With such an intervention God could cause a given DNA change of a specific organism at a given time, thus producing a genetic change or mutation (i.e. a step in the process of general evolution) employing only what appears from a human observer's perspective as natural methodology.[33]

This explanation is certainly one that demonstrates a manner in which God could intervene regularly in space-time history as a Creator-Sustainer God and yet whose efforts were essentially transparent to human observers. As presented by Ratzsch, however, it leaves open the question of initial creation. It would seem that cosmological evolution is a more natural corollary since one is assuming an old cosmos and, as a result of a general evolutionary perspective, viewing the early chapters of Genesis through a nonliteral hermeneutic.

Even so, this position appears to be closest to a special-creationist perspective. While he presents this as a theoretical position, Ratzsch does not cite any adherents. Grizzle seems to come close to Ratzsch's suggested position, but he never addresses any specific methodologies. Like Ratzsch he only addresses the issue of general evolution, leaving the issue of cosmology as an unstated, undefined process of creation by God.[34]

[32] Ratzsch, *Battle* 182–183.

[33] Ibid. 186–187. This point raises some very interesting possibilities in the discussion, since various fields apply very similar principles to nonnuclear fields. For example, from my own experience for several decades the United States Navy has applied probability theory to a variety of issues including mechanical failure in aircraft, recognizing that while on the whole a maintenance officer could expect a certain number of mechanical failures of a given part during a specific time frame he could never know when a given part would fail.

[34] Grizzle uses the term "biological evolution," which he carefully defines in a note ("Conceptual" 227 n. 1) very similarly to the above definition of general evolution. In that note he continues on to state that "in all cases herein, I use 'evolution' in the sense stated above." Further, he is clear that he accepts "the antiquity of the earth" (ibid. 223). He also uses the term biological evolution in an earlier article ("Some Comments on the 'Godless' Nature of Darwinian Evolution, and a Plea to the Philosophers Among Us," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 44/3 [September 1992] 175–177).

A second methodology recently proposed is that of Gordon C. Mills. In two articles[35] he proposes a theory for general evolution that requires "a continuing provision of new genetic information by an intelligent cause."[36] Like Ratzsch and Grizzle, Mills does not really address the issue of cosmological evolution but concentrates on general evolution after the origin of the first life. He does briefly address the issue of life, arguing that the evidence requires an intelligent cause. But he does not address the issue of methodology.[37]

Rather, Mills addresses the issue of how the genetic information for more complex forms of life originated. His basic premise is that God introduced new genetic information within "DNA coding sequences and DNA control regions for all types of proteins and the various types of RNA" at key points in the process of macroevolution.[38] After declaring this, however, Mills becomes very ambiguous:

> At this point I would not wish to make the manner of introduction of new genetic information a component of the theory, nor would I wish to speculate how the Creator might have supplied the genetic information, the structures, and metabolic processes necessary for the first living cells.[39]

What Mills seems to argue is that when the general evolutionary process as viewed historically makes a quantum leap, such as in the introduction of organ systems (e.g. sight or hearing) or in the development of new taxonomic distinctions (e.g. phyla or classes), it is because new genetic coding has been introduced by God.

How this material is introduced is left open and, in fact, deemed of relative unimportance. It may be introduced through special intervention. It may be through naturalistic causes. It may even be through a dormant coding that provides a long-term template that may not become active for millions of years.[40]

Mills attempts to mediate between the cosmological/general-evolutionary position of Howard J. Van Till and the special-creation position argued by Johnson. As such he leaves open the possibility of special creation in the sense that he argues that his premise does not require common ancestry of all life forms.[41] He also points out that his premise would support the concept of punctuated equilibrium as argued by Eldredge and Gould.[42]

Despite the possibility of God's specific insertion of new genetic coding, Mills' position seems further from a special-creation viewpoint than the position of Ratzsch. This is because Mills, as he argues for complex initial life

[35] G. C. Mills, "A Theory of Theistic Evolution as an Alternative to the Naturalistic Theory," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 47/2 (June 1995) 112–122; "Theistic Evolution: A Design Theory at the Level of Genetic Information," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24/4 (May 1995) 444–458.

[36] Mills, "Alternative" 114.

[37] Ibid. 115.

[38] Ibid. 114.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Mills, "Design Theory" 455–456.

[41] Mills, "Alternative" 118–119.

[42] Mills, "Design Theory" 456–457.

forms, seems to take the view that the coding was introduced in the original life forms with provisions for future expansion and differentiation.

The third position that will be briefly addressed is that of Van Till. He obviously has given a lot of thought to a methodology of evolution as demonstrated by his several works. In fact, he has even proposed a name (evolutionary creation) to demonstrate both process and source.[43]

According to Van Till evolutionary creation is an all-encompassing process that envelops both cosmological and general evolution. What is unique is that Van Till postulates that God has endowed every physical particle with inherent capacities at the point of creation that permit the naturalistic development of the present universe and all of life as we know it. For example, he states that

> we may rightfully presume that the array of structures and lifeforms now present was not yet present at the beginning, but became actualized in the course of time as the created substances, *employing the capacities thoughtfully given to them by God at the beginning*, functioned in a gapless creational economy to bring about what the Creator called for and intended from the outset.[44]

Later he expands on this:

> Do material processes have to create? No, the possibility space of viable and historically achievable lifeforms is an *integral aspect* of the world that God created at the beginning. Material systems need only employ their *God-given functional capacities* to discover some of the possibilities thoughtfully prepared for them.[45]

Elsewhere Van Till defines evolutionary creation in a series of propositions, the second of which is the following:

> That from the beginning, when the creation was brought into being from nothing, God has generously gifted the basic entities (for example, physical and biological systems) of that creation with all of the capacities that they would need to actualize, in time, all of the physical structures and living creatures that have ever existed.[46]

It is clear from Van Till's writings that he views the present complexity of the universe as the result of natural processes. He is careful to add, however, that the processes were initiated and are sustained by God.

An important term that Van Till uses regularly is "functional integrity," which refers to "the idea that the functional and developmental economies of the creation are gapless."[47] Van Till is adamant that any cosmological system must have functional integrity, which requires not only a cosmological

[43] H. J. Van Till, "Is Special Creation a Heresy?", *Christian Scholar's Review* 22/4 (June 1993) 391.

[44] H. J. Van Till, "God and Evolution: An Exchange," *First Things* 34 (June/July 1993) 38 (italics mine). Van Till claims to base this perspective on his reading of the early Church writers Basil and Augustine. But I do not come to the same conclusions regarding their positions.

[45] Ibid. (italics mine).

[46] H. J. Van Till, "Special Creationism in Designer Clothing: A Response to *The Creation Hypothesis*," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 47/2 (June 1995) 124.

[47] Ibid. 127.

evolutionary presupposition with the universe developing over the currently projected fifteen billion years but also a restraint on the part of God from any direct primary-agent causation after the initial creative act (which he somewhat judiciously associates with the big bang).[48]

Van Till follows his second proposition quoted above with a third proposition: "The formative history of the creation does not occur independently of God's action, but is continuously dependent on God's action of sustaining and blessing."[49] This is definitely a strong theistic proposition, but how God sustains and blesses within his model is never clarified. This definitely presents a problem, given the nature of his second proposition. If this sustaining and blessing is part of the inherent capacities of the material universe when created, there is no real distinction between his view and that of naturalism except for the fact that God was the initiator of the process.[50]

It is possible that Van Till perceives God as much more closely involved in the sustaining/blessing process—for example, on a regular, moment-by-moment basis. If that is the case, by his own definition this not only is nonscientific but also produces a universe where the physical cause-and-effect process is problematic at best.[51] Such direct involvement, while theologically sound, vitiates Van Till's concern regarding special ceationism and its need to find specific cases where God intervened in space-time history.[52] Conse-

[48] Van Till seems leery of using the term "big bang" both as a metaphor with the connotations of explosion and in contradistinction to the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*. He is especially careful to make the latter distinction, arguing that the big-bang model and the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* answer two separate questions ("Scientific" 111–117).

[49] Van Till, "Special Creationism" 124.

[50] This is the point that P. Johnson makes in his criticisms of Van Till's work ("God and Evolution: An Exchange II," *First Things* 34 [June/July 1993] 38–41). Van Till is adamant that Johnson has mislabeled him ("God and Evolution" 33) and tries to demonstrate this by drawing a fine distinction between narrow and broad naturalism, which really comes down to whether the initial step was initiated by God. His argument is that since he views God as the initiator (and sustainer) he does not fall into the category of what Johnson calls naturalistic. But since the fact that only the question of whether God initiated the process distinguishes between the two naturalisms, Johnson's term "methodological naturalist" is probably apropos. An additional problem is that Van Till desires to incorporate both cosmological and general evolution under the concept of narrow naturalism, while creationists such as Johnson view it as part of the broad concept of naturalism. When Johnson then attacks naturalism (broad) including the evolutionary concepts subsumed within it, Van Till comprehends that as an attack on naturalism (narrow).

[51] Van Till, "Character" 126–136.

[52] Van Till, "Special Creationism" 125. With respect to miracles, Van Till is adamant that his model leaves room for miracles and even enhances the value of miracles (e.g. "God and Evolution" 37; "Heresy" 393). He is equally adamant, however, that when there are gaps in our scientific understanding of the world we do not postulate God's intervention but do further research ("Special Creationism" 127). While there is a valid point to be made regarding excessive quickness to look to "an act of God," we are left with several questions. How do we determine what is a miracle? Van Till correctly observes that by definition miracles are "voluntary acts of God freely performed for their special revelatory or redemptive value" ("Heresy" 393). But they are also by definition gaps in our scientific understanding of the universe since they transcend normal cause-and-effect relationships. How then do we determine when such a gap is a miracle and when it is a lack of understanding? Apparently this would be when indicated by special revelation, which Genesis 1–11 claims to be. Further, once we grant such gaps as miracles our gapless economy no longer exists. Moreover, the gapless economy Van Till argues for is one that already assumes cosmological evolution, and thus the numerous miraculous divine interventions he balks at are based solely on his model and not on the model of the special creationists.

quently it is assumed that Van Till views the concept of sustaining and blessing in the former sense.

Before we continue with our evaluation of the various theistic evolutionary positions we need to define one more term: deism. Norman Geisler gives the following succinct definition:

> Deism holds with theism that God created the world but denies his supernatural intervention in it on the grounds that the world operates by natural and self-sustaining laws of the Creator.[53]

John Orr expands on this in several respects. After noting commonalities deism and theism have in contrast to atheism and pantheism, Orr states:

> But the theist taught that God remained actively interested in and operative in the world which he had made, whereas the deist maintained that God endowed the world at creation with self-sustaining and self-acting powers and then abandoned it to the operation of these powers acting as second causes.[54]

Within these brief definitions of classic deism two contrasting poles stand out: (1) Does the individual see God as operative in the world he has made (theistic pole)? (2) Does the individual see God as utilizing second causes or self-sustaining and self-acting powers to run the world he has made (deistic pole)? This polarity presents problems since all theists would agree that natural laws (self-sustaining and self-acting powers) are operative in the world.[55]

As an aside, this issue of natural law is an area where theists have not carefully evaluated the role of God. This is perhaps especially true of special creationists who object to the evolutionary hypothesis as a divine process and yet accept natural law. Theistic evolutionists who view either general evolution or cosmological evolution as valid object to the distinction made between what they see as a natural process analogous to physical laws. This criticism, however, is also true of theistic evolutionists who talk of God's sustaining role and yet do not discuss how this differs from natural law.

In terms of the evolutionary hypothesis, the key would seem to be the nature of the process. Both general and cosmological evolution are inductive constructs built upon a specific interpretation of empirical data of a process that is not currently being observed.[56] Special creationism, likewise, is an inductive construct built on a specific interpretation of empirical data.[57] By contrast, natural laws are generalizations of observed ongoing processes.[58] Still, the role of God's sustaining the universe needs clarification.

When we evaluate the various theistic-evolution positions cited above, we note that there is indeed a spectrum. The position suggested by Ratzsch approaches most closely the theistic pole, since he suggests a methodology

[53] N. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 151.

[54] J. Orr, *English Deism: Its Roots and Its Fruits* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1934) 13.

[55] It is perhaps for this reason that Geisler notes that the movement is more of a continuum ranging from qualified theists to outright skeptics (*Apologetics* 166).

[56] The point that general and cosmological evolution are not currently being observed is acknowledged by all. The argument is that the process is primarily an historical one because of the pace, and the present aspect of it is too slow to observe in the amount of time for which we have historical and scientific records.

whereby God is constantly superintending a process of development and thus is operative in the world. The position of Mills is also close since he postulates specific times where God intervenes to insert new genetic material. Again, both of these positions address general evolution only, leaving the question of cosmology open. Finally, if I understand Van Till correctly, his presentation of both cosmological and general evolution approaches the deistic pole very closely, since he argues that both processes are not only a result of second causes but also of a continuous cause-and-effect process that stands by itself.

But we must quickly add that there are other issues involved in deism. As noted above, the two definitions cited are brief and face a tremendous tension regarding the role of natural law. In addition, classic deism incorporated several derived tenets stemming from the primary premise of God's role. These included antisupernaturalism and unitarianism.[59] Antisupernaturalism, which is at the heart of Enlightenment thought, derives from the deistic understanding of the relation between God and the universe. If God operates totally through secondary causes, then there is no place for miracles. But Van Till, as noted, is adamant regarding the possibility of miracles (I prefer the term "supernormal events"), although he does specifically deny such events in terms of the creation.[60] Furthermore, given this secondary operation and the impossibility of miraculous intervention, deists deny the divine nature of Jesus Christ. This of course results in a unitarian view.

[57] The nature of these constructs is often obscured by the failure to distinguish between special evolution and general evolution. Special evolution has been observed. General evolution is the in-

[58] Moreland, *Christianity* 26–27.

[59] Geisler, *Apologetics* 167.

[60] Van Till's position seems to be that since the role of miracle is for special revelatory or redemptive value and since no human was around to observe creation there was no need for God to go to that trouble of special creation since there was now a "gapless economy" (a universe developing naturally over fifteen billion years; cf. "Heresy" 393). We might ask several questions at this point. (1) Why do we assume that there is no revelatory content to creation? The Bible seems to assume that creation revealed much about God. (2) Do we really sense that vital a distinction in methodology, or are we attempting to maintain the integrity of a scientific worldview based on naturalistic processes? (3) When we require a gapless economy, are we not restricting God? (4) Since the historic portion of time accounts for no more than approximately five thousand years by anyone's account, why would God go to all the trouble of fifteen billion years spent in creating? Of course the issue of time with God is essentially a moot point, which might also be said of the trouble of direct intervention as in special creation.

While this issue is not addressed by Van Till there is no reason to assume that he denies the deity of Christ.

But Van Till does find himself in somewhat of a predicament here. If there are indeed miracles, they necessarily place gaps in his gapless economy.[61] And if we recognize gaps for some miracles, why not for others? But if we maintain our gapless economy, then have we not ruled out miracles and thus planted ourselves firmly in a deistic position? Specifically, how can one accept the miracle of the virgin birth, the resurrection and other Biblical nature miracles and yet deny the possibility of such miracles (even if we note the significant difference in scale) at the time of creation?

This is the quandary of theistic evolution in general. Attempting to maintain the integrity of the scientific model it begins with it is forced to retreat theologically, restricting God to secondary actions or, at best, to primary actions that are transparent to scientific observers. This creates tremendous problems with any historical account of a supernormal event, which by definition is nonreplicable. Moreover, theistic evolution finds itself in the awkward position of defending a scientific model that is coming under increasing attack, even by its own adherents.[62] While we do not conclude that theistic evolution per se is deistic, we do note that when one extrapolates the

[61] Van Till, like many theistic evolutionists, is adamant about the need to maintain a gapless economy as a reaction against the charge that Christians appeal to God to bail them out when they reach a point where our current understanding is deficient. The derogatory term that has been applied to this appeal is "God of the gaps" (Van Till, "Special Creationism" 124–127; "God and Evolution" 34). But a serious deficiency in this reaction is the point that science can always hold out the hope that—given enough time and enough research—it can provide a naturalistic explanation for everything. Consequently in reaction the theistic-evolution position tends to retreat to an essentially deistic position where God is behind the scenes and his actions are totally opaque to the scientific observer except through the eyes of faith.

evolution process back to origins the desire to maintain a gapless economy certainly sets one up for that accusation.

[62] Cf. Denton: "Ultimately the Darwinian theory of evolution is no more nor less than the great cosmogonic myth of the twentieth century. . . . In the final analysis we still know very little about how new forms of life arise. The 'mysteries of mysteries'—the origin of new beings on earth—is still largely as enigmatic as when Darwin set sail on the *Beagle*" (*Evolution* 358–359). Still, as Denton pointed out in a recent interview ("Focus on Darwinism: An Interview with Dr. Michael J. Denton" [Colorado Springs: Access Research Network] 1993), he remains an evolutionist because he does not see a viable alternative.