

Original Sin & Atonement

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Moral Awareness, Original Sin and the Atonement

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I will explore how evolution impacts the Christian notion of The Fall of man, and, ultimately, the atonement. Various theories of atonement in the Christian tradition generally assume universal and individual sinfulness in humanity. In some cases, this sinfulness is thought to be the result of a distinct moment of rebellion against God, and is transmitted to all of the descendants of Adam. Here, atonement involves Christ's sacrifice as the means liberate humanity from the bondage of our sinful nature. Evolution collides with these traditional models. Instead of a creation originally void of death and later corrupted by sin, evolution suggests that the very development of all life is attributed to a process driven by death and struggle for survival. By contradicting traditional views of The Fall, evolution has a secondary effect on the nature of the atonement: by asserting that humans are derived from previous species, rather than an individual special creation, evolution casts a shadow on the traditional mechanism used to explain how humanity became morally aware and responsible and calls into question what is meant by being created in the image and likeness of God. Despite these apparent contradictions, many have proposed models that attempt to reconcile evolution and theology. This paper will explore several of these proposals and will end by asserting that humans possess a unique, God-given capacity to discern morality, and therefore have a unique need for the atoning work of Christ.

Mainstream Christians have historically held to the belief that original sin, human depravity, and Christ's atoning work on the cross are among the most important doctrines of the faith. Many Biblical scholars argue that all of Scripture points to Christ and his redemptive work on the cross. Isaiah 53 is a passage that is widely believed to be a prophesy of the coming of Christ. In it the prophet describes the atonement almost 500 years prior to the birth of Christ. He writes, "But he was pierced through for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon him, and by his scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us to fall on him" (NASB). This well-known passage makes

the important claim that all humans are in need of a Savior. Because we have "gone astray," we need to be returned to the right path. This claim is the basis for most of the theories of atonement that have been accepted by Christians throughout the history of the Church. When thinking about this assumption in light of evolutionary biology, however, problems arise. The mechanism for humanity's attainment of morality, and our fall into depravity, must be carefully re-examined to potentially reconcile the differences between evolutionary biology and the atonement in a meaningful way.

Atonement Theories

Various theories for how the atonement actually works have been proposed throughout the history of the

Church. I will only mention three. The *ransom theory* asserts that the souls of humanity, because of sin, were held captive to either Satan or God. The blood of Christ then served as a ransom that freed these captive souls from bondage (Hosea 13:14; Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Tim. 2:6). The *satisfaction theory* of atonement claims that the sin of humanity invoked the vengeful wrath of God, and must be punished. By dying on the cross, Christ exhausted God's wrath against sin so that none is left over for humans who place their faith in Christ. This theory finds support in Scripture from Romans 5:9. The *penal substitution* theory, otherwise known as substitutionary atonement, has been one of the most widely accepted theories of atonement in the Church. Because the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and all of humanity has sinned (Rom. 3:23), all humans are deserving of death. In order to save us from this death, Christ died as our substitute. To support this view, proponents often cite 2 Corinthians 5:21. "[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (NASB). Penal substitution has been one of the more commonly-accepted views, at least by the Western church.

Human Morality

The above theories of atonement differ to varying degrees, but they all make the important assumption that humans are morally aware and culpable. In fact, without the moral responsibility of humans, any sort of atonement resembling the above theories would be unnecessary. All of these theories state that man must be saved from the wages of sin, thus implying that humans have the moral awareness and responsibility that would give us the opportunity to sin. This is the first point of tension between evolution

and Scripture. It is evident in Scripture that God created man with the unique ability to discern morality. God commands them not to eat from a certain tree, and holds them responsible when they disobey. Evolution, however, asserts that man is a continuation of previous species. Indeed, some evolutionists claim that humans, along with animals, lack a true objective sense of morality.¹ In this case, human morality is a subjective, adventitious evolutionary development for living in a structured society. For example, Wilson and Ruse claim that our moral behavior and awareness can be fully explained as a product of evolution, and not the result of divine action:

Morality, or more strictly our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends... Ethics is a shared illusion of the human race. If it were not so it would not work... Ethical codes work because they drive us to go against our selfish day-to-day impulses in favor of a long term survival and harmony and thus, over our lifetimes, the multiplication of our genes many times. Furthermore, the way our biology enforces its ends is by making us think that there is an objective higher moral code, to which we are all subject.²

While this is a plausible claim, it is certainly not without problems. The primary goal of organisms, according to evolution, is to survive and reproduce. An organism will therefore act in such a way to improve its reproductive fitness in hopes of proliferating its genes. Proponents of this view would have to claim that crimes such as murder, theft, and adultery are wrong merely because they are not evolutionarily favorable. There are times, however, when

¹ Ruse and Wilson, 1993, p. 310-311

² Ibid.

these crimes could result in an increased evolutionary fitness. In these instances, Wilson and Ruse could not claim them to be wrong using their criteria. Since we would not evolve to view evolutionarily favorable behavior as “evil,” there must be some other explanation for our sense of morality. Garte writes, “We must, as previous generations of enlightened thinkers have done, admit that the issues of morality, beauty, thought, love, art, and culture are not approachable by scientific methodology or tools, or we risk losing a huge part of our human endowment of special (if not divine) genius.”³

Based on the assumption that human moral awareness and responsibility may have some other origin than evolutionary development, our inclination is to look to a supernatural source. Many Christians hold that the Genesis stories indicate that morality was supernaturally imparted to the first two humans upon their creation. Other Christians have proposed ways to account for origin of human morality naturalistically while taking the Scriptural witness and church tradition seriously. In this case, moral awareness would have developed during the process of evolution. Allister McGrath explains this dilemma by saying “How do we understand that phrase ‘the image of God’ if we accept a narrative of biological evolution? We have to say that at some point humanity became sufficiently distinguished from the rest of the natural world to be able to have this relationship with God.”⁴ Since it is impossible to precisely locate the point at which this occurred, some scholars simply claim that the “first hominids” gained this moral awareness.⁵

Robin Collins attempts to reconcile the differences regarding the mechanism for the human attainment of morality while staying true to science, the biblical witness, and reason. In his “Historical/Ideal view,”

he rejects that there ever existed a historical Adam and Eve who lived in a paradise garden. Instead, Adam and Eve represent both all of humanity and, more specifically, the first hominids that had the capacity for self-consciousness and moral awareness. Along with this self-consciousness, Collins claims, came an understanding of God and his will for them.⁶

Collins’ Historical/Ideal view is attractive to many because it stays true to modern science while also respecting a critical exegesis of the Genesis account. It acknowledges that morality was obtained supernaturally (e.g., God makes himself aware to these hominids), but the explanation does not sacrifice evolutionary biology in explaining how this could have occurred. Furthermore, Collins’ view sheds light on another point of tension between traditional Christianity and modern evolutionary biology, the Fall of man. This paper has thus far touched on the mechanism by which man attained morality because moral awareness is a prerequisite for a fall into sin. Assuming now that man supernaturally received morality and became morally responsible, we can discuss what the Fall might have looked like. Thinking about the Fall is crucial in understanding the atonement because Christ’s death, at least according to the most traditional views of atonement, was a response to the Fall.

The Fall

Various theories for the Fall have been presented in an effort to try to maintain a traditional meaning of the atonement while staying true to evolution. The notion of a creation without death prior to the Fall, as traditionally understood in Genesis, has several problems when considered in light of evolutionary theory. Ronald Osborn highlights one such problem. The study of

³ Garte, 2013

⁴ McGrath and Polkinghorne, n.d.

⁵ Collins, 2003, 470

⁶ Ibid.

animals reveals that some are reliant on predation for survival. Osborn writes, “The natural world is filled with creatures that are anatomically ‘designed’—in their internal organs, their instincts, and practically every fiber of their physical structures—to exist by consuming other creatures. Some of these animals would have to be classified as *irreducibly predatory*.”⁷ How then could creatures “built” for predation survive in a world in which there was no death? Some have tried to answer this question by saying that after the Fall of Adam; God gave over the animal kingdom to natural laws. As a result, behaviors and structures necessary for predation evolved over time to form the creatures we see today. Another option is that God supernaturally modified certain animals after the Fall of humanity to create predators.⁸ Unlike the first, this option invokes supernatural manipulation, and is the furthest removed from science.

Despite these attempts to explain how predation developed after a Fall from a paradisiacal state, most scientists and many theologians have opted to trust observation and concede that there must have been death in the world prior to the formation of man (and therefore prior to a Fall). This forces the question: what actually changed after the Fall of man? The idea of a *spiritual* death resulting from the Fall is a popular option. This permits an affirmation of evolution by conceding that physical death (even of humans) could have existed prior to the Fall. Spiritual death, on the other hand, was brought about by man’s rebellion against God. It is clear that in order to accept both evolutionary biology and retain a meaningful atonement in the traditional sense, a Fall resulting in spiritual death is necessary. In order for Christ’s substitutionary atonement to accomplish

something objective, the Fall would have had to destroy something objective.

Other ideas suggest that God chose two *Homo sapiens* once they had become morally aware and placed them in a garden. Once they were in the garden they disobeyed God’s command and ate of the forbidden fruit. Since these *Homo sapiens* represented all others, the entire human race fell under a curse as a result of their sin. This idea could be taken even further by claiming these specially chosen *Homo sapiens* (e.g. Adam and Eve), were uniquely created without direct biological relationship to the other *Homo sapiens*. They alone represented the rest of humanity and thus humanity shares in the curse resulting from Adam’s Fall.⁹ These theories are appealing to some because they affirm both the evolutionary idea of physical death prior to man’s rebellion, and the historicity of the biblical account of the Fall.¹⁰ They are not without their faults in attempting to maintain a somewhat literal interpretation of Genesis while acknowledging modern science.

Another prominent view of the fall is the idea of a “fall upward.” This is the view held by Charles Birch and John Cobb and described by Denis Edwards.¹¹ Birch and Cobb suggest a link between evolution and the fall by saying the Fall is the unfortunate result of evolutionary development. Evolution has resulted in the advancement of humanity, but this advancement must be accompanied by suffering. “Animal life, human life, cultural evolution, Neolithic culture, urban civilization, the industrial revolution may all have opened up new possibilities and brought new freedoms. But each liberation brings new sufferings and new possibilities of enslavement.”¹² Gabriel Daly, like Birch and Cobb, views the Fall as an advancement of one stage of evolution to

⁷ Osborn, 2014, 134

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Stump, 2015

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Edwards, 1999, 61

¹² Ibid.

another. He views this advancement as humanity sacrificing one level of peace in order to attain a higher level. In this sense, he asserts, humanity moved forward through evolution while weighed down by the instincts and desires of its evolutionary past.¹³

The question then becomes whether or not these primal instincts should be considered sin when they reassert themselves and gain momentary dominance over a person. Should humans be punished for actions that are necessary and right for the survival of nonhuman species? Some have suggested that sin is no more than the uprising of previous primal instincts. Daly, however, rejects this by claiming that these behaviors are not sinful because they come from divine creation. He says, rather, that they can eventually lead to sin if they are not “healed by grace.”¹⁴ Daly therefore maintains some room for the atonement of Christ in his theory. Polkinghorne also accepts a version of a “fall upward,” and uses Scripture as evidence. It was after Adam and Eve ate of the tree that they *gained* the knowledge of good and evil. In other words, the Fall gave them a new capacity of understanding that they previously did not have.¹⁵ Polkinghorne says, “The cost of development is a degree of precariousness.”¹⁶

One problem with the idea of a fall upward is that it comes close to the view (discussed previously) held by Wilson and Ruse that human morality can be explained solely on the basis of evolutionary development. The idea that the Fall is the unfortunate bi-product of evolutionary development eliminates objective morality and therefore impacts the atonement of Christ. Instead of human moral responsibility coming about from supernatural

expectations for conduct, the fall upward idea leaves room for a subjective morality arising as the indirect result of evolution.

One of the best attempts to explain the Fall in light of evolution without abandoning an objective atonement is Collin’s Historical/Ideal view. We have already discussed how Collin’s theory explains the human attainment of moral awareness, but Collin’s goes further into describing the Fall. After the first hominids gained self-consciousness, God supernaturally revealed his will and purpose to them. Since these hominids lived in a world that had not yet been polluted by sin and engulfed in spiritual darkness, they had a clearer understanding of God’s will for them than other humans. In this sense, they were in an original state of holiness, and the stage for the Fall was set. Since God’s revealed will for them was at odds with their instincts, they often times disobeyed. This disobedience can be viewed as the Fall.¹⁷

Collins Historical/Ideal view of the Fall is attractive for several reasons. First, it acknowledges evolutionary biology by replacing a literal Adam and Eve with a society of the first hominids. Second, it claims that human morality arose from a supernatural work of God, rather than a mere evolutionary development. Thus, Collin’s acknowledges both the scientific idea of humans and animals have a physical continuity, and the religious idea that they have a spiritual discontinuity. This also intensifies and objectifies the Fall of man as a deliberate disobedience against the revealed will of God rather than an unfortunate, indirect result of evolution. By doing this, Collin’s model points to the need for an atonement similar to what has been accepted through the centuries of the Church.

¹³ Edwards, 1999, 62

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Op.cit. ref. 4

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Op.cit. ref. 5

The Atonement

As Darwin's theory gained prominence during the 20th century, its implications towards the atonement became an important topic. The traditional views of atonement are predicated on the Fall of man resulting in some sort of death. In addition, the occurrence of a human Fall is dependent on the reality of human moral awareness. By suggesting that humans are a continuation of the animals, evolution casts a shadow on both human morality and the Fall. In order to ease this tension some have redefined the atonement to fit in with modern science.

Joseph Bankard questions the validity of a substitutionary atonement on several grounds. First, Bankard asserts that substitutionary atonement paints a picture of a God who is either lacking in power or unnecessarily cruel. If God could only redeem humanity and reconcile sinners back to him by killing his own son, it seems as if he is not truly omnipotent. On the other hand, if God is omnipotent and could have atoned for the sins of humanity in some other way, he could be considered cruel for unnecessarily putting his son through a miserable death.¹⁸ Another reason Bankard questions substitutionary atonement is because of the evil nature of the crucifixion. How could the atonement be both the will of God and the result of human sin? This would imply that God willed sin to occur and would be inconsistent with his character as presented by Scripture.¹⁹ Bankard also critiques this theory of atonement from another perspective:

Sin created a divide between God and creation. Jesus death was a necessary sacrifice to bridge this gap. However, if denying the historical fall calls into question the doctrine of original sin, then it also calls into question the role of the cross of

Christ within substitutionary atonement. If Jesus didn't die in order to overcome humanity's original sin, then why did Jesus die? What is Jesus, the second Adam, attempting to restore with the cross, if not the sin of the first Adam? Substitutionary atonement sees original sin as a major reason for Christ's death. But macroevolution calls the doctrine of the fall and original sin into question. Thus evolution poses a significant challenge to substitutionary atonement.²⁰

Bankard's issues with substitutionary atonement have driven him to adopt a model that resembles the "moral influence theory of atonement." Bankard, in alignment with this model, redefines the primary purpose of the incarnation. Christians who hold to a substitutionary atonement (as well as the other traditional views) believe that the primary reason for the Christ's incarnation was to die to atone for sin. Bankard, on the other hand, argues that we should rethink the purpose of the incarnation. He writes, "Jesus doesn't become human to die. Jesus takes on flesh and bone to show us how to live, how to be fully human."²¹ This view, held by others throughout history, closely resembles the moral influence theory. This view is convenient because it does not contradict evolution in any way. By saying that Christ came into the world not to die, but to show us how to live, the moral influence theory eliminates the tension between evolution and Scripture. There is no longer any need to think about original sin in light of evolution because Christ did not come to atone for sin.

Bankard certainly has a good point that the teachings of Christ are absolutely crucial for Christian life, but his view of the

¹⁸ Bankard, 2015, part 1

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bankard, 2015, part 2

purpose of the incarnation is at odds with some understandings of 1 John 4:10 which claims “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins” (NASB). It is evident that Christ was incarnated to reverse the curse brought about by the sin of the first Adam by dying on the cross as the second Adam. The moral influence theory is convenient in avoiding complications between evolution and Scripture, but it fails to recognize the vital importance of the atonement (traditionally held by the Church and some interpretations of Scripture).

Conclusion

Evolution has serious implications on atonement doctrine because it calls into question the reality and uniqueness of human morality, as well as original sin. If human beings are a continuation of the animals, morality would have had to be either evolved or divinely imparted during some point of evolutionary development. Since evolution cannot account for all aspects of moral living, supernatural causation is likely. To accept both evolution and divinely given morality, one must accept a narrative in which the first hominids were somehow made aware of

God’s will for them following the evolution of self-consciousness. The Fall of man is another doctrine crucial to substitutionary atonement but impacted by evolution. If the Fall is merely an unfortunate product of evolutionary development, Christ’s work on the cross does not accomplish the objective task of restoring a depraved humanity back to God. In order to maintain a meaningful atonement, the Fall must be thought of as a willful rebellion against God’s revealed standards that leads to the depravity of man. Substitutionary atonement, despite its tension with modern science, seems to be the most clearly supported in the traditional interpretation of Scripture. Verses such as 2 Cor. 5:21, Titus 2:14, Gal. 2:20 and others all point to an atonement that resembles substitution.

It is important to acknowledge natural revelation and take science seriously in an attempt to better understand the work of God. A scientific narrative that destroys the atonement cannot be accepted by one who relies on the atonement for salvation. If evolution is to line up with a substitutionary atonement, it must leave room for a God-given morality unique to humans, and a Fall that resulted from disobedience.

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