



As a priest-scientist who supervises an NIH-funded research laboratory investigating the molecular regulation of cell death, I get a lot of science and religion questions from believers and non-believers alike. The second most common question I get—after the most common truth question: Do you believe in evolution?—is the purpose question: Why did God choose to work via an evolutionary process rather than create complex living species directly via special creation?

Many answers to this purpose question are possible, of course, but I have found that the most illuminating, and often the most surprising, response that I can give, is an argument based on the thought of the great medieval and scholastic thinker, St. Thomas Aquinas. It is a theological argument for the fittingness of evolutionary creation.

In his project of faith seeking understanding, St. Thomas frequently uses theological arguments of fittingness to reveal the meaning, beauty, and wisdom of God's actions in the world. Arguing from fittingness involves understanding why an end is attained better and more conveniently with the choice of one particular means rather than another. In this sense, and as St. Thomas himself explains, choosing to ride a horse is more fitting than walking if one seeks to quickly reach one's destination on a journey (see *Summa theologiae*, III.1.2). Theological arguments from fittingness try to explain how God's choice of a particular means allowed him to most appropriately attain the end of his actions.

Returning to our purpose-of-creation question in light of the Christian theological tradition, we can reword it as follows: Why was it fitting for God to work via evolution rather than will a special creation.

To answer this question, let us recall that for St. Thomas, theological arguments from fittingness attempt to explain how God's choice of a particular means allowed him to most appropriately attain the end of his actions. Therefore, to grasp

the argument for the fittingness of God's creating via evolution, we need to begin by identifying the end of creation. Why did God create?

For the Catholic theological tradition, the answer to the purpose-of-creation question is clear: God chose to create because He wanted to manifest and to communicate His glory. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the authoritative summary of Catholic doctrine, proclaims that "Scripture and Tradition never cease to teach and celebrate this

## The Fittingness of Evolutionary Creation

**Rev. Nicanor Austriaco, O.P.**

fundamental truth: 'The world was made for the glory of God'" (no. 293).

How does God communicate His glory to His creatures? According to St. Thomas, God communicates His glory to His creatures by giving them a participation in His existence. Creatures exist because God, whose essence is existence itself, gives them a share in His existence. This is the fundamental metaphysical distinction separating the Creator from His creatures: He is existence by nature, while they have existence by participation.

However, St. Thomas also explains that God shares His perfections with His creatures by inviting them to participate in His causality, which in the world manifests itself in His governance of His creation:

*Now, it is a greater perfection for a thing to be good in itself and also the cause of goodness in others, than only to be good in itself. Therefore God so governs things, that He makes some of them to be causes of others in government, like a master, who not only imparts knowledge to his pupils, but gives also the faculty of teaching others* (*Summa theologiae*, I.103.6).

To put it another way, according to St. Thomas, it is a greater perfection, and therefore, more fitting, for God to share His causality with His creatures,

making them authentic causes that can cause by their own natures, than for God to remain the sole cause acting within the universe.

Building upon this Thomistic theological account, I propose that it was fitting for God to have worked via evolution rather than to have created all species at the beginning because in doing so, He was able to give His creation—the material universe and the individual creatures within it—a share in His causality. In this way, He more fully communicates His perfection to His creation more clearly manifesting His glory. As St. Thomas points out: “If God governed alone, things would be deprived of the perfection of causality” (*Summa theologiae*, I.103.6, ad 2).

In my view, at least three further points follow from this theological argument for the fittingness of evolutionary creation. First, I propose that given that God chose to prepare fitting matter for the human body through His creatures, it was fitting that He should use evolution to achieve this end rather than another means, because evolution is a most efficient way for divine providence to use non-personal causes to generate novel and adaptive life forms on a dynamic and ever changing planet.

Take, for example, the Chicxulub asteroid that impacted what is now the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico approximately 66 million years ago. There is significant evidence that suggests that this asteroid strike, which left a 110-mile wide crater now buried nearly a mile underground, triggered the mass extinction of dinosaurs at the Cretaceous-Paleogene boundary. This mass extinction emptied ecological niches throughout the planet that could now be filled with novel plant and animal life.

Next, because of the fittingness of evolution, I also maintain that God did not “waste” life in the evolutionary process. This is a charge often levied against theistic evolution by creationists.

However, no one thinks that Michelangelo “wasted” marble because there were leftover marble pieces after he had completed sculpting his masterpiece David. There is no waste when the agent fittingly attains his end. Furthermore, I propose that extinct species are not pointless waste. Rather, in addition to revealing God’s glory while they existed, they were also the necessary “leftovers” from the creative evolutionary process that God used to generate the novel and diverse

forms of life visible today in a manner most fitting to reveal His glory.

Finally, according to St. Thomas, God created the diversity of creatures because no single creature can adequately reflect the perfection of God:

*Because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, [God] produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever (Summa theologiae, I.47.1).*

Therefore, in my view, it is also fitting that God worked via evolution rather than will a special creation because in doing so He was able to produce more species to reflect His glory: Four billion species created over a three billion year period is far more than the eight million extant species today. In fact, it would have been ecologically impossible for all four billion species to co-exist on our planet, because there are only a limited number of ecological niches on the planet at a given moment in time.

To put it another way, there is a limit to the number of species and individual organisms that can be sustained by the planet at any one moment in time. Some of them are even mutually exclusive: If they had been created together, the large carnivorous dinosaur, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, would have wiped out the Asian elephant, *Elephas maximus*. However, with evolutionary development—and not with special creation—these species were able to exist at separate moments in history to uniquely manifest the glory of their Creator. Again, they were not wasted.

To sum up, why did God choose to work via an evolutionary process rather than will a special creation? Because it better reveals His glory and His power. Because it reveals better that He is God. 

---

**FIND THIS (AND MORE) ON THE WEB:**

<http://www.thomisticevolution.org/disputed-questions/the-fittingness-of-evolutionary-creation/>