



One of the reasons why many Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of human evolution is that it seems to suggest that the fact that we are here is a mere accident, and that there is nothing stopping us from evolving into something else down the road. There are many ways to address the question of why the human species evolved, but I want to focus on the end of evolution. Specifically, I want to ask: Is there some stopping point for evolution? Is there a goal for evolution?

In looking for an end of evolution, we must first ask whether evolution has actually stopped at any point in the past. For species we find in nature the answer is, in part, yes. Evolution has contributed to the production of stable populations of organisms that are, for the most part, adapted to their environment. Of course, this assumes that the environment is stable, which brings us to the “no” part of the answer. Any stable population of organisms that finds itself in a new environment will begin to adapt to the new surroundings. Similarly, like so many natural processes, where the evolution of a particular species is headed depends on where it began and what is around it. Arguing for an absolute endpoint intrinsic to evolution would seem to require that all evolution be pushing life to the same state of rest which, if the diversity of life is any indication, seems unlikely.

If there is no absolute endpoint for evolution, we can still ask about the specific states of rest we find. In particular is the human species still evolving? This is a complicated question. It is clear that evolution is always at work on small scales, adapting the human species to better survive in particular environments. Many traits like skin color, lactose intolerance, and the ability to breathe at higher altitudes have been traced to particular populations of humans settling in particular geographic locations with their unique environmental pressures. There is also evidence

of human adaptations that provided resistance to diseases. Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that any one sub-group of the human population is diverging from the other individuals on the planet such that they would become a new post-human species.

Some argue that humanity’s ability to adapt the environment, for example with agriculture, and the fact that humans are no longer geographically isolated have slowed the evolutionary forces that could have led to any post-human species. While we could conceive of a situation

## *Evolution’s End: The Beatific Vision*

**Br. Thomas Davenport, O.P.**

where evolution diversifies the human population but they seem more in the realm of science fiction.

What about the second question, the goal towards which evolution tends? Naturally speaking, since there is no absolute endpoint for evolution there cannot be an absolute goal for this process of adaptation. There are only relative endpoints and relative goals involving the adaptation of this population in this environment at this time. And one of the relative endpoints for evolution, an endpoint that appears very stable, is the evolution of our species, a species that is able to radically control and alter the environment for its own survival.

But the scientific answer to the question of evolution’s end is not the only answer available to faith and reason. Evolution, like all natural processes, is an instrument of God, caused and maintained in all of its working by His divine providence. Like all other instruments, the mechanism of evolution can be ordered to some end other than the one that it could attain.

Wood is not ordered on its own to the production of music but in the hands of a master craftsman it can become a beautiful violin. Indeed, from the perspective of the violin maker, the true “end” of this spruce tree is the masterful performance of a Beethoven symphony, though this end for the tree is not something that could have been discovered by the scientific method.

In the same way from the theological perspective, we can affirm that biological evolution was a 3.5 billion year process, directed by God, to advance living matter until it was apt to receive a human soul. By its nature, evolution is not ordered to the appearance of an animal materially capable of being informed by an immaterial soul, but this is, in fact, what it has achieved through the ordering and providential hand of God.

Given that God has used evolution for the production of the human body, we can ask whether this particular goal of the divine plan is absolute, or whether it is a mere a stepping-stone to something else. Once again, our answer must be both yes and no.

In the Incarnation, Jesus Christ took to Himself our human nature in order to save us. Indeed, our nature has been redeemed, because it was assumed. In a letter, St. Gregory of Nazianzus (4th century A.D.), explained this Catholic intuition this way: “For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved.”<sup>1</sup> If some sub-group of the human population evolved into a post-human species with a different nature, it is unclear how these individuals could and would share in the salvation merited for us by the Savior.

Thus, it seems unlikely that God would allow evolution to produce a post-human creature incapable of attaining beatitude because of his natural separation from the humanity of Christ. It suggests that in the divine plan, the appearance of the human creature is the goal of evolution. While St. Thomas knew nothing of biological evolution, he does speculate on the end of other natural processes, including the seemingly everlasting motion of the heavenly bodies. There he is perfectly willing to state, “We hold then that the movement of the heavens is for the completion of the number of the elect. ... It is a definite number of souls that is the end of the heavenly



movement: and when this is reached the movement will cease.”<sup>2</sup>

With St. Thomas, we can view biological evolution as ordered not only to the population of man in this world, but also to the population of man in the “the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” This new life, begun in the sharing of the inner life of the Triune God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit—the beatific vision—and completed when our bodies are resurrected to a new heavens and a new earth, will not be achieved by evolution or by any natural process, but by the salvation won for us by Jesus Christ who is true God and true man. T&E

<sup>1</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzen, *Epistle 101*.

<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, Q.5 A.5.

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

<http://www.thomisticevolution.org/disputed-questions/evolutions-end-the-beatific-vision/>