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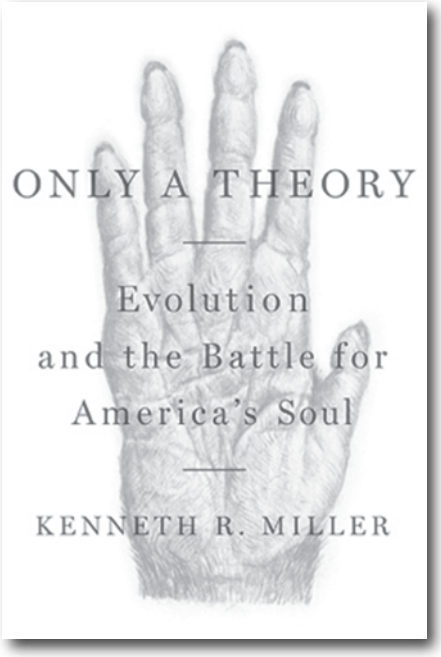
Miller's meanderings: only the same bogus contentions

A review of
Only a Theory: Evolution and the Battle for America's Soul
by Kenneth Miller Viking Penguin, New York, 2008



John Woodmorappe

On the outer jacket of this book, Miller is praised as a brilliant and original thinker. To the contrary: Miller is simply dusting off and repackaging the same old straw-man arguments against creationists of decades ago and reusing them against ID.[1]

Even the title is a straw man: creationists have long advised against saying that evolution is 'only a theory', since the evidence is far too weak to dignify it with the term 'theory'. Rather, it is just a conjecture or hypothesis.[2]

Throughout this book, the reader is constantly treated to the 'only naturalism is science' hubris. There are so many absurdities and *non sequiturs* in Miller's book that it is hard to decide what to write about in this brief review. The technicalities of Miller's contentions (e.g. regarding Behe, irreducible complexity, the immune system, etc.) have already been refuted by ID proponents, and will not be repeated here.

Disguising the atheism of evolution

In an obvious attempt to mollify the usually-theistic reader, Francis Collins, on the outer jacket, says that Miller's book is no atheistic screed, and that Miller is a devout believer. This is a smokescreen. Miller's views on the origins of the universe and of life are, theological rhetoric aside, indistinguishable from those of the hardcore atheist.[3] But Collins has long been shown to be just as confused as Miller is,[4] just not as obsessively and viciously anticreationist.

Interestingly, Miller provides a table of nations and their rates of popular acceptance of evolution (p. 214). Besides secular Japan, the nations with the highest rates of the acceptance of evolution are the highly-secularized western European ones. Obviously, the enlightened secularists, no less than those big, bad, dumb American fundamentalists, reject the sugar-coated fluff, coming from the clergy of most religious bodies, which insist that God and evolution are compatible, or even apologize to Darwin.[5]

Irrelevant evolutionary considerations

Miller's comments on the horse series, transitional forms, convergence

of living things, human evolution, shared human-simian similarities, etc, even if correct, are relevant to creation-vs-evolution questions, but are completely irrelevant to ID. The issue is not why there are different horses at different stratigraphic levels, but why there were/are horses or any kind at all in existence. Pointedly, ID, unlike creationism, allows for geologic periods, the possibility of a considerable amount of common descent, etc. Is Miller so abysmally ignorant of ID that he doesn't know this, or is he intentionally misrepresenting the ID movement? Miller also commits the fallacy of composition by insinuating that, since some ID members are creationists, therefore all of ID is nothing more than re-labelled creationism.

The example of the Antarctic fish with its antifreeze is misrepresented as some kind of example of a modern complex feature arising by non-teleological processes. Yet antifreeze protein is not complex, unlike the machinery of living organisms. All an antifreeze protein has to do is stick to tiny ice crystals to prevent them growing. So, if machinery can be compared to the manmade Hoover Dam, the antifreeze protein can be compared with random pieces of debris that might block a stream or drain.[6]

Humans have 46 chromosomes and chimps have 48. Miller cites this as an example of the elegance of the predictive powers of evolution, which anticipated the (inferred) fusion of chromosomes in humans. But what if the missing chromosomes had not been accounted for? Would evolution have been abandoned? I rather doubt it. Some other explanation would have been concocted.

Besides, the whole issue begs the question whether the fusing of the chromosomes occurred as a result of an unplanned mutation during the course of the non-teleological evolutionary process, or if it happened intentionally according to the will of a Designer. The arrangement is unique to humans, but fusion of pre-existing chromosomes would have reduced fertility. Some evolutionary researchers pointed out:

> 'Because the fused chromosome is unique to humans and is fixed, the fusion must have occurred *after* the human–chimpanzee split, but before modern humans spread around the world, that is, between 6 and 1 million years ago. … This gross karyotypic change may have helped to reinforce reproductive barriers between early *Homo sapiens* and other species, as the F1 offspring would have had reduced fertility because of the risk of unbalanced segregation of chromosomes during meiosis [emphasis added].'[7]

Naturalism applied and misapplied

Miller discusses the non-starting of his car, and how he would try to find an explanation in terms of a frozen gas line, empty gas tank, etc., not a supernatural explanation. Unbelievable! How can a well-understood process like the function of a car be equated with the decidedly not-understood mysteries of the origin of living things, and of the universe? Also, his reasoning begs the question in that it assumes that processes by which the universe functions are identical to the processes which brought it into being! He may as well look for naturalistic causes of his car coming into existence without any intelligent maker.

When it comes to the fine-tuning of the universe, Miller brings up the old saw about us not being here to discuss it were it not so. But this only repeats the fact; it doesn't explain it. It's like handling a piece of dynamite, not getting blown up, and noting that one would not be here to realize this fact had it in fact exploded. This simply restates the fact—it doesn't explain why it didn't explode in the first place! Also, explanations involving infinite universes are vacuous. They're like saying that, since there are innumerable numbers of beaches on innumerable numbers of planets within an innumerable number of universes, a non-designed watch on one of them is inevitable. And, had we not in fact encountered it, we wouldn't be talking about it.

Miller resurrects the tired argument that teleological thinking discourages scientific curiosity and thereby delays scientific discoveries. Just the opposite: dysteleological thinking does. How much has our understanding of physiology (not to mention medicine) been delayed by the evolutionistic belief in vestigial organs, and, in more recent times, how much has our understanding of the genome been delayed by the evolutionistic belief in junk DNA? Geneticist John Mattick, although an evolutionist, said:

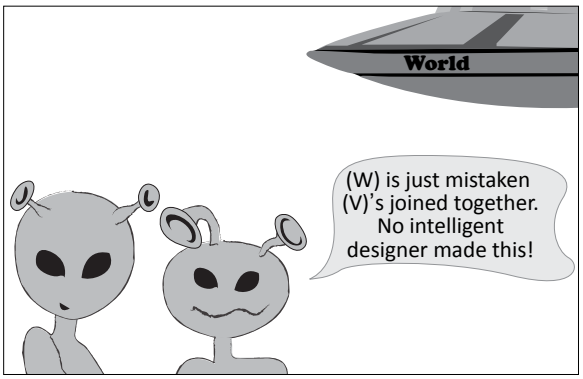
> '… the failure to recognise the implications of the non-coding DNA will go down as the biggest mistake in the history of molecular biology.'[8]

The familiar argument about no designer being necessary for the origin of the eye, owing to the fact that the eye occurs at different levels of sophistication in nature, is repeated. That's like saying that, since airplanes (from the paper airplane to the Wright Brothers' biplane through the Boeing 747) occur at different levels of sophistication, therefore no intelligent designer is needed to account for the existence of airplanes.

Not surprisingly, Miller is forced to argue out of both corners of his mouth. In common with so many other evolutionists, he simultaneously complains that ID contentions are unscientific because they are not falsifiable, and then turns around and says that they have been in fact falsified (e.g. allegedly Behe on the immune system).

Miller complains that a design explanation is not a good one, because the design process is finished and therefore unable to be studied. But this begs the question about origins, as it tacitly supposes that any valid explanation *must* involve an ongoing process—that is, a non-design one.

We also hear the same old 'design explanations are too sweeping' argument. But exactly the same can be said about evolutionary theory. It simultaneously purports to explain the long neck of the giraffe and the short neck of the rhino; the existence of selfishness in nature and the existence



of altruism in nature. A few relatively trivial counter-examples (e.g. the immune system) do not change this basic picture. Most evolutionary explanations are clearly *post hoc* and *ad hoc*.

The value of design-based explanations

We hear the old rhetoric that only evolution explains things, makes predictions and is testable. Oh really? How many times has evolutionary theory been modified *ad hoc* in the face of contrary evidence, and then continued on as if nothing had happened? Anyone with even a cursory familiarity with ID knows that it makes testable predictions. Let's make a simple example. A fragment of a spacecraft, with English-language alphanumeric printing on it, is found by extraterrestrials. One of them suggests that the markings are the products of intelligent design, and makes the prediction that they cannot ever be satisfactorily explained by ordinary cosmic processes. The other one suggests the absence of design, and makes the opposite prediction.

Science is supposed to be a disinterested search for truth. What kind of science is this that determines, in advance, which explanations are acceptable and which are not? If the extraterrestrials, in the example above, decided *a priori* that design explanations are off limits, how would they ever discover the fact that the markings were made by intelligent beings? Ditto for the study of the origins of life, and of living things, by scientists.

Miller also contends that, since the designer putatively can make anything, ID has no explanatory power. This is completely bogus. The fact that humans can make so many different things in no way disqualifies them as originators of the markings. More fundamentally, Miller's 'designer can make anything' contention, whether putatively true or false, is totally irrelevant to the question whether the markings on the spacecraft originated from design or non-design processes.

Then we hear the old 'design explanations are lazy and ignorant ones, invoked only because we don't understand the process that formed something' argument. This begs the question about origins, as it tacitly assumes that only non-design explanations are ultimately the correct ones. Were the extraterrestrials in the example above, after conducting many futile experiments to recreate the markings by cosmic processes, to give up on non-teleological explanations in favour of a teleological one, should we conclude that they have grown lazy, and become satisfied with their ignorance? Only if we already assume that the non-design explanation is in fact the correct one!

'Bad design' vs no design

In bringing up pseudogenes, and besides not being up-to-date, Miller drags out the old chestnut that makes 'poor design' synonymous with no design. This *non sequitur* confuses the issue, which is not whether the design is 'poor' or not (according to someone's opinion) but whether or not it exists at all. (Certainly IDer's must explain the origins of pseudogenes in terms of their paradigm, but that is a separate issue. Proven functions of many have undermined the evolutionary case.[9])

Consider the extraterrestrial who, in the earlier example, says:

> 'The markings, while deployed in interesting patterns in terms of sequence, grouping, spacing, etc., are also conspicuously full of senseless features. Some of them, such as (e), appear frequently, while others, such as (q), hardly appear at all. Some (C, c; X, x; Z, z) come in two sizes, most (A, a, B, b, etc.) are each one size only. The symmetries are inconsistent: (O) is radial, (X) is four-fold, (B) is bilateral-horizonal, (M) is bilateral-vertical, and (L) has none at all. Close examination reveals that the markings lack consistency in terms of the surface area they cover. They also differ from each other in terms of centre-to-centre distances in their deployment, even within strings of markings, and are indented to measurably-unequal depths.'

He continues:

> 'The markings themselves bear the hallmarks of some kind of unintelligent, improvisatory, minimal-solution process, and are frankly a horrible mess. They are full of errors. (f)s are overdeveloped (t)s. (F)s are (E)s with the bottom missing. (W)s are shared-mistake co-deployments of (V)s side-by-side, and this shared-mistake combination often forms upside-down as (M). In like manner, (u)s form as duplicates next to each other and deploy upside-down as (m). Each (C) is obviously a partly-closed (O), and sometimes this closing process goes too far, producing a (Q) instead of (O). (V) is (A) with its middle unformed, and the entire marking deployed upside-down. (Y) is a malformed (X), while (H) is an (A) that failed to close during deployment. (0) is a malformed, compressed (o), while (l) is an overdeveloped (i) that ran together vertically. (L)s are malformed (l)'s that somehow developed in two mutually-perpendicular directions.'

This extraterrestrial's dys-teleological pile-on continues:

> '(B)'s are notably prone to produce malformed variants. Whenever the two bulges run into each other, we see (D) instead of (B). Whenever the bottom bulge fails to close on itself, (R) forms instead of (B). With the bottom bulge missing

entirely, (P) forms instead of (B). Each (p), in turn, is a malformed, stunted, slightly-translocated (P), while (b) is a malformed, stunted (B) with its top missing. When the distortion during formation is even greater, (6) appears instead of (b). Worse yet, the (6) often deploys erroneously upside-down as (9). The list is almost endless. Any designer who made these markings would have to be a "bungling creator" [Miller's term, p. 86], and it is self-evident that the markings are not the products of intelligent design.'

What are we to make of this fictional discourse? The extraterrestrial, like Miller, is allowing his preconceptions, even if hypothetically valid, to confuse the actual issue: do the markings require a designer for explanation, or not? Also, why is Miller's proposed 'God who used evolution' any less a 'bungling creator' for using such a wasteful, inefficient and cruel process as evolution?

Is ID discredited?

We hear the old saw that Darwin discredited Paley. He did no such thing. Proposing non-teleological explanations for complex systems is not the same as explaining their origin without a designer. Furthermore, Miller commits the fallacy of hasty generalization, and makes yet another *non sequitur*, when he contends that, since some intelligent-design theories (e.g. Behe on the immune system) have (supposedly) been discredited, therefore *all* intelligent-design contentions are discredited.

To illustrate: imagine the extraterrestrial, from the previous examples, who conducted research on the markings engraved by dust-sized meteoroids on solid surfaces. He finds that these markings often resemble (l) and sometimes (X) and (x). 'Aha!', he triumphantly tells his teleologically-inclined extraterrestrial colleague.

'You thought that (l), (X), and (x) were the products of intelligent design, and this has now been decisively proved wrong. Therefore, intelligent design as an explanation for all the other markings has also been discredited, and meteoroid-induced scratches can account for all the other markings.'

Rationalist thought police to the rescue!

Decades ago, we were warned that creationism was a grave danger to science and reason. Modern creationism has now been around for nearly 50 years, yet science and reason are doing just fine. Now Miller is repeating the same sky-is-falling warning concerning ID.

Is science really so fragile that it would collapse with the admission of a Designer? If acceptance of design is so toxic to science, why did modern science originate, and make so many important discoveries, in the centuries before the Darwinian revolution, when design and a Designer were not only tolerated but actively welcomed in science, and were in fact the ruling paradigm/worldview? Nor did pre-Darwinian scientists merely hold their teleological beliefs at arms length from their scientific activities: the two were intertwined. For example, Linnaeus built his system of taxonomy, still used by biologists to this day, explicitly guided by his belief that living things had been specially created, and that the biological limits of these creations could be discovered in nature.

Miller engages in silly alarmism as he elaborates on his warning about the dangers of ID. He alleges that rejection of evolution means that we are likely to ignore such things as environmental concerns, the emergence of new strains of pathogenic bacteria, etc. What nonsense! None of these concerns has anything to do with molecules-to-man evolution, much less whether things originated by design or not.

Biblical literalism, though irrelevant to the fundamental design/non-design issue, is briefly brought up. Indeed, it is a straw man even with creationists, who accept the *grammatical-historical approach*, not a 'literalistic' one, i.e. interpret history as history, poetry as poetry etc.[10] We get the same old song-and-dance about Genesis having been written in a prescientific age, and intended to lead us to God but not tell us how the universe came to be, etc. Says who?

Miller dwells on how the general American public considers evolution repugnant, and rejects it for this reason. How about rejecting evolution because it is repugnant *and*, especially, because it is also unconvincing? After all, most people are reasonable, and will accept a repugnant truth if it is truly well-supported (I would). But, repugnant or not, this issue, once again, is totally irrelevant to the fundamental question of whether living things originated from design or non-design processes.

What about randomness? Miller tries to mollify concerns about our ostensible origin by non-design processes by alleging that our lives are already governed by many random (actually, unpredictable) events. One obvious example is our parents meeting each other, and which particular sperm combined with which particular egg to form us. This is disingenuous. For the Christian theist, at least, nothing is random or unplanned in God's eyes—not even the falling of a sparrow to the ground. Ditto for contingent events.

Miller suggests that, despite the ostensible fact of non-design evolutionary origins, we can frame our own meaning of life, and enjoy the wonders of nature. So can the atheist.

Science or politics?

Decades ago, creationists were accused of bypassing the scientific process in favour of pushing their agenda through legislation and direct appeals to the uninformed public. Now Miller is dusting off this old chestnut and accusing ID of the same, focusing on a few local cases like Dover. Indeed, there are glaring double standards here: quite a number of evolutionists have appealed to the ruling of judges about whether ID is science, although the judges lack any qualifications in science.

Whatever merit these arguments had long ago, they have been superseded by

the considerable amount of research done by creationists and ID proponents—considering their limited resources (i.e. they must persuade people to support them, while evolutionists often make use of money coerced from taxpayers). Miller is also protesting too much, in view of the ways that evolutionists have gone far beyond the evidence to make slick presentations to the public—something which has been included under the rubrics of 'junk science' and 'The Carl Saganization of science.'

In conclusion, Miller's book is nothing new. It tells us more about his rationalistic preconceptions than about ID.

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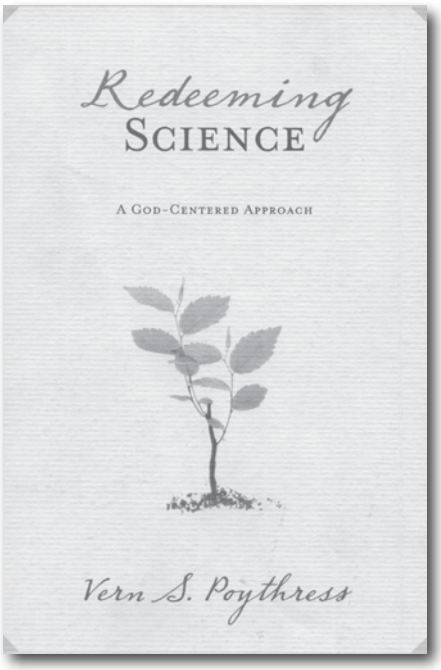
God-centred or man-centred?

A review of
Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach:
by Vern Poythress
Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2006



Mark Murata

Vern Poythress has a reputation as a conservative Bible scholar who has written previous influential works on hermeneutics (the interpretation of the Bible), including *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. So when this book came out, readers expected an important work on interpreting the early chapters of Genesis. Unfortunately, it contains highly questionable interpretations and ends up opposing the creationist view.

Divinizing nature?

Redeeming Science becomes disturbing early on, with its peculiar view of scientific law. Under the section heading 'Divine Attributes of Law', Poythress makes it clear he is describing 'scientific laws' (p. 17). He then writes, 'the law is omnipotent' (p. 18). He goes further, stating that scientific law is 'transcendent and imminent' (p. 19) and freely acknowledging these are 'characteristics of God' (p. 19).

To all appearances, Poythress is divinizing nature. Aware of this possible accusation, he denies it, saying he is discussing 'real laws' (p. 21). He gives his definition by stating, 'So-called "law" is simply God speaking, God acting, God manifesting himself in time and space' (p. 21).

Even granting that Poythress is describing laws as known to God, he does not seem to realize the scientific laws he is so concerned with in this book are formulated by man, not God. At one point he acknowledges that scientific laws are a 'human approximation' (p. 45), but that does not make him retract all his previous statements.

Having laid down his general beliefs about science, Poythress goes on to interpret specific parts of the Bible, in particular the Creation and the Flood.

Dismissing creation

For the creation account, Poythress announces he will discuss four views: 24-hour day, mature creation, analogical day, and framework (p. 111). But he lumps the 24-hour day view and the mature creation view into one chapter, chapter 9. And he does not really cover the 24-hour day view. He dismisses the subject by stating, 'But besides the issue of the Sabbath, what else do we gain from thinking that God created the world in the space of 144 hours, instead of 24 hours, or one hour, or 48 hours, or