

Out of Nothing

Two weeks ago, the 44th annual Nobel Conference was held at Gustavus Adolphus College. This year, experts in fields from molecular biology to theology brought their perspectives to the topic of “Who Were the First Humans?”

As children, we learned that Adam and Eve were the first humans, and we learned that God created them. But the theory that all life, including human life, evolved from a common source has in many minds displaced special creation as the theory of our origins.

Evolution assumes that there was a time when there was no life. In fact, if you go back far enough, there was nothing at all. When something appeared, perhaps at the Big Bang, we have “the beginning”. Whether the beginning was a big bang or the word spoken by God, we have this situation: there was nothing, and then there was something.

Evolutionary biologists point to similarities in DNA to show how the species evolved, and to which family they belong. For example, the Nobel Conference preview booklet points out that some “DNA sequences of humans and chimpanzees differ by only 1.2 percent.” Elsewhere, it has been said that 3 percent, or 4 percent, or 5 percent of our DNA differs from that of the apes. Even without DNA, it isn’t hard to see some similarities. Does this imply a family relationship?

Humans love to sort things. This is really just another way of saying that we love to analyze. We sort our collections of coins, stamps, rocks, baseball cards or antique glass based on their similarities: by size, country, geographic locale, team, color, or any of numerous other criteria.

Probably since humans existed, we have tried to categorize the things we see. Among the most famous of those who went on record with their classification systems are Aristotle, who sorted things by their method of reproduction, and Carolus Linneaus, who contributed his detailed system of naming things. In between, methods used morphology, or similarity of appearance, and in the 16th – 17th centuries when dissection was carried out and carefully documented, anatomical similarities bore more weight. More recently, the discovery of DNA has led us again to modify our classification system. As we gain more knowledge, we become ever more sophisticated at finding similarities and differences in things.

Unity in diversity is an underlying principle of great art. That a few sequences of DNA could produce the kaleidoscopic diversity we see in this world teeming with life is awesome. It is also to be expected. If the great artist could make something out of nothing, no doubt he could make many things out of a few.

Analyzing something, whether a work of art or our human origins, means seeing what things are alike and what things are different. You might do an analysis based on color, or on the light-dark values of colors used. You could analyze line, space, or texture. Each analysis would look

different from the others, yet all would be useful. All would give us a basis for comparing one work with another, and perhaps for finding common elements among them.

Does the work have meaning? Our universe does: “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1).

Is it beautiful? God’s own handiwork, as well as his instructions to human workmen, were “for glory and for beauty” (Exodus 28:2).

Is it useful? God’s own word is “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Each analysis of a work may reveal something about its purpose. But do any of them show the artist’s process of creating it?

In the end, the only way to know for sure is to ask the artist.

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