

Pale Blue Dot III Essay Winner

The Power of Our Myth

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SINCE BEFORE THE DAWN OF HISTORY, people have used myth to provide a context and meaning for their place in the world. Myths of creation, purpose, and inevitability sometimes carry religious overtones, but in the true sense of the word, a myth need not be religious in nature. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a myth as a story “which embodies and provides an explanation, etiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.” Myth is distinguished from allegory, although the two are sometimes taken as synonyms in general use. With this definition in mind, a scientific narrative of the world is as much a myth as a tale from a religious text: both present a story to explain a phenomenon or event. The categorization of these stories as myth says nothing about the historicity, accuracy, plausibility, predictability, or reality of the story. Myth is a vehicle for communicating a story. Sometimes myths come into conflict with one another, as is the case with the movement to teach creationism and intelligent design.

Religious myths often place humanity as the focus of creation, the *masters of the world*, in a sense. The discussion surrounding creationism and intelligent design often assumes a Judeo-Christian framework, but many of the assumptions of a religious creation myth are common to other religions as well. In this view, the Universe and the Earth were created especially for people. Humans are not just another animal but have achieved a greater status than animals. Developments such as cognition, civilization, and tech-

nology indicate this superiority and attest to the design (and Designer) that placed humans in such an arena. This myth has many forms, but all share a similar expression: the Creator designed the Universe and set everything in place. After making the Sun, Moon, Earth, and stars, the Creator made the land, sea, and air, and then turned to plants, fish, birds, and animals. Finally, the Creator made humans and gave them dominion over all creation.

Science has also developed its own creation myth, although it rarely is called by this name. In particular, theories such as the big bang and evolution provide scientific explanations for some of the most profound questions about origins. The Universe came into existence at the moment of the big bang. Over billions of years, stars and galaxies formed, one of these being the Milky Way. In this galaxy, the Solar System began to take shape as the Sun and planets formed—including Earth. Around four billion years ago, conditions were favorable on Earth to allow the emergence of simple life. Over time this life developed multicellular complexity and eventually moved from the sea onto land as amphibians, followed by reptiles and mammals. As life evolved into more complex forms, a certain group of primates developed larger brains than the rest. This superior intelligence allowed humans to invent agriculture, writing, domestication, and other tools requisite for civilization—a testament to human supremacy over all other animals.

The issue in contrasting these two myths has nothing to do with the theory of evolution itself; rather, the stories often come into conflict because

of *the way in which the stories are told*. Religious myths may portray humanity as the apex of creation, but often the evolutionary narrative does the exact same thing. Certainly the development of life into more complex forms is a fundamental theme of evolutionary theory, but the evolutionary myth often narrows its focus on humanity as the end product of a long process. The context of humanity in the community of life is diminished in favor of humanity's dominion over the world. These themes are often necessary in religious myth, but in a scientific framework they are a distraction and sometimes lead to unnecessary conflict.

The movement to include the teaching of creationism and intelligent design in public schools is more than a reaction to perceived deficiencies in evolutionary theory. Rather, the theory of evolution is problematic for some people because it requires the acceptance of two distinct myths that provide similar meaning. For many communities, questions about the nature and meaning of life—specifically the role of humanity in the Universe—are religious in nature. When these com-

munities are presented the scientific creation myth, the clash of competing myths leads to repulsion, anger, and sometimes action. This is not entirely the fault of evolutionary theory, but it is a side effect of the way the evolutionary myth is often presented. Whether or not people should base their worldviews on religious doctrine is beside the point; these philosophical issues are important, but they are unnecessary in the presentation of evolutionary theory. Humanity is not the apex of evolution, but this notion continues to reach the public both explicitly and implicitly. If this evolutionary myth continues to be assumed with evolutionary theory, then it will always conflict with certain philosophical viewpoints. But if the traces of this anthropocentrism can be removed, then the conflict between competing worldviews will no longer be an issue, and the dialogue between science and the public will relax. Scientists are interested in advancing knowledge and producing results, but communication of science is also important. In addition to how we present our science, we must also be mindful of how we tell our story.