

A Time-Dependent God?

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Human beings experience time sequentially. Things happen *before* or *after* other happenings. We have no other experience, no other way to speak about our lives, no other way to *think*. Probably the most fundamental notion of all is that you can't change time around in any way. Even in the science-fiction category of *time travel*, it is impossible to avoid the sequential occurrence of events, expressed by words like *before* and *after*.

On the other hand, we are generally in agreement with the statement that God is *omnipresent*, that is, cognizant of all times at once. But no one really attends to what that means. We imagine God in a way that has Him acting sequentially in time, just as we ourselves must do. Because we have no experience other than this, our understanding of God is necessarily distorted with regard to the way God handles *time*.

It is the purpose of this essay to explore this topic.

Evolution has become a very contentious issue between theists and atheists. Those who assert that God is irrelevant to the universe look at the march of evolution over billions of years and derisively ask, "Well, if God is so powerful, why did he have to *wait so long* for everything to evolve?" Most religious thinkers have no answer to this question, because they implicitly accept the underlying premise, namely that God experiences the passage of time, and therefore is in the business of *waiting*, just like us. A great deal of the literature of *Process Theology* has God Himself evolving over time. Statements of the form that God is self-limiting, vulnerable and participating in human history are all rooted in this assumption about God.

To see where this unfortunate belief leads, it is useful to enter into it on a cosmic scale, in a fanciful way:

Imagine, if you will, the experiences of this time-dependent god. We'll call Him Jehovah, the Lord of all *our* universe. But perhaps there are other universes, utterly unknown and unknowable to us, and they would each have their own god. Perhaps every billion years or so, they all meet at a convention of gods. What would they talk about?

One such convention took place only 7,000 years ago. During a coffee break, Jehovah ran into his old buddy and fellow god, Chartillion. The conversation went like this:

Charlie! I haven't seen you in ages! How are you?

Just fine, Jerry! Everything's going well over in my universe. How you doin'?

Not bad, Charlie; not bad at all ... Just a little slow these days.

Why, Jerry, what's going on?

Well, I don't know *why* I ever let you talk me into trying that *evolution* stuff! Man, what a drag.

Gee, what's wrong? Didn't it work out for you?

Not really, not very well... Look, I did everything you told me -- super-dense energy, intense radiation, condensing into particles, all that. The whole thing got off to quite a spectacular start, and I was really impressed, really looking forward to some fast action. But then it slowed down a *lot*...

Well, Jerry, I told you you'd have to wait through one full generation of stars before things got interesting.

Sure, and I was prepared for that, so I didn't mind those first 8 billion years. I did other stuff for a while. But then when *real* evolution got under way, I was expecting something big.

And ...?

Well, I looked all over the place, galaxy after galaxy, countless big gooey gas-giant planets, the whole nine light-years. Finally I found this one cute little planet, fairly close to a pretty average star, with a nice mixture of various elements combining into chemicals, and I really got my hopes up. I thought up something I call *thermodynamics*, and figured we were really starting to move! There was even *weather* on this planet, with

water and gases going back and forth in cycles. I was on a roll.

Then what, Jerry?

Well, evolution started to produce *life*, and I was really excited. But then (yawning) ... Holy cow, Charlie, have you got *any* idea how *boring* it is to watch slime grow on a rock for a billion years?

Well, you just have to be patient for a while ...

For a while?!? Charlie, you didn't tell me what the *final* stage of evolution is! Sheesh, what a waste of time!

What final stage?

Teeth, Charlie, teeth! That's all you ever get! I sat through the amoebas, the trilobites, the plants, and so forth. Finally some little critters crawled up on dry land and I got my hope up again. I can show you the record books -- I've got 4 billion years worth of fossils to prove it. Then the critters started growing bigger and bigger ... but all I wound up with was *teeth*.

What do you mean, Jerry?

I'm talkin' *dinosaurs*, Charlie! Those great big dinosaurs are nothing but teeth! Once they're in place, you can't get rid of them. Half of them eat all the plants, and the other half eat all the smaller critters. They've completely cut off evolution. They're a dead-end.

But, Jerry, maybe you're being too hasty...

Hasty?! I'm going on a cumulative 14 billion years and you call that hasty? Look, Charlie, I had some really neat things starting to climb the "ladder of evolution" as you called it. These little furry guys -- arachnids, with eight legs -- were really cute and playful. They were about one meter long, with mass of about 40 kilograms, and they were showing signs of real talent - stretching "webs" from tree to tree, clever things I hadn't seen before. I thought maybe they would develop some intelligence or something.

So, how did that work out?

It didn't! The %#\$@&*! dinosaurs ate them all! When the Big Teeth got done chowing down, the only arachnids left were the ones too small to find. Every critter that evolved over a few centimeters long got scarfed up by the dinosaurs. I sat there and watched it all happen for another quarter of a billion years, and I couldn't figure a way to get rid of them.

Gee, I'm sorry, Jerry ... where do things stand now?

I have no idea! I got totally disgusted with the whole project, and went to look for other stars and more planets to start over again. As I left that solar system, the last thing I did was pick up a pebble from their asteroid belt and wing it at that planet. I haven't looked back since.

Look, Jerry, I think you should give evolution another chance. Why don't you go back and check the place out again?

Not me, Charlie. I'm moving on. Next time I find a planet with weather, maybe I'll just enjoy tossing thunderbolts around. Forget it!

Well, then, why not send a representative back to have a look? How about your son? Is he busy these days?

I dunno, Charlie. That is an idea, though. I'll give it some thought.

Okay. Well, it sure was nice seeing you again, Jerry.

You too, Charlie. I'll catch you again, next convention. Take it easy.

Hopefully, this imaginative scenario illustrates what a day would be like in the life of a god who is subject to time. Seen this way, such a god isn't all that powerful.

Unfortunately, nearly everyone thinks, talks and acts as though God were limited in this way. That's just a projection of a human limitation onto God. The atheists who are leading spokesmen for "neo-Darwinism" say "Look at evolution, and then don't believe in god"; but they are basically telling us not to believe in a god *who is subject to the rules of evolution, the slow passage of time*. Okay, I can buy that. However, it is terribly important to *distinguish* between the kind of god that fits within our limited frame of thought, and the God that *really exists*.

The Process Theology school of thought asks us to believe in a god who is subject to time, just as humans are; and then to adapt our understanding of that god to fit this constraint. Without paying attention to the point, they have denied God's fundamental property of omnipresence. Big mistake.

The well-known quip "Man made god in his own image and likeness" isn't just a smart remark by atheists. It contains a warning about the danger inherent in our very limited human way of thinking and understanding, particularly on so fundamental a point as the *sequential* nature of our lives. We need to go back and look once again at the ways in which we have distorted our understanding of God by artificially limiting Him to our human mode of thinking.