



What's a cat got to do with it?

Recently at a teachers' convention, I heard a discussion of Psalm 19. In the context of the theme "The heavens declare the glory of God" this speaker referred to a poem by an obscure eighteenth century eccentric called Christopher Smart. This poem is a particular favorite of mine, so I paid special attention. The poem, entitled *My Cat Jeoffry* begins thus:

*For I will consider my cat Jeoffry
For he is the servant of the Living God,
duly and daily serving him.*

This little piece of literature then continues to describe the characteristics and habits of any cat. The idea is that in simply being a cat, this creature praises God. What may at first appearance seem like a banal little poem, actually conveys a profound theme. All creation testifies to the glory of God. This includes not only each and every living creature, but also our environment, the Earth, the solar system and indeed the whole universe.

Let's look at Psalm 19 more closely.

*The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the end of the world.*

This small piece of Scripture conveys an incredibly rich message. The heavens (and by implication all nature) declare the glory of God. But, one might ask, what is the connection between God and nature? There has to be a relationship or the heavens would testify only to their own glory. Either the heavens are part of God (an idea called pantheism), or they are the workmanship of God. Of course the second half of the first sentence tells us that the latter is the case: "*the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*" Other passages in the Bible also refer to God's work as creator. For example "*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*" (Genesis 1:1) and "*By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth... for he spoke and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm*" (Psalm 33:6, 9). The apostle Paul also identifies God as the creator of heaven and earth (Acts 14:15). In his sermon in Athens, Paul points out that nature turns our attention toward God. Thus the apostle continues:

"Yet he (God) has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons..."

(Acts 14:17)

We are therefore invited in many passages in Scripture to turn our attention to nature, the work of God's hands. Thus we ask why nature is the way it is, and not some other way. The answer of course is that God chose to make it that way. It is evident that we are invited to study nature with the objective of discerning something of God's work and character. In this regard Psalm 19 tells us that nature provides information: "*Day after day they (the skies) pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.*" The information that we acquire in studying nature is knowledge concerning the creative work of our Lord. When we study nature with the expectation and objective of seeing God's handiwork, we will see exactly that. Alternatively, people who insist that God will never be revealed in nature have excluded the truth from nature before they even begin their research programs.

Richness and variety

When we study nature in the light of Scripture, we do obtain some interesting insights. One aspect of God which is readily apparent is His amazing attention to detail. We can summarize this concept under the theme "richness and variety of the creation." Some secular scientists, for their part, claim that such diversity casts doubt on the work of God as creator. For example, J.B.S. Haldane, a prominent geneticist of the past (1892-1964) is famously reputed to have remarked that God must have an "*inordinate fondness of beetles.*" (e.g. see S. J. Gould, 1995, *Dinosaurs in a Haystack* pp. 377-387). Haldane meant this as a put-down for the idea of any kind of creator. His remark was in reference to the 400,000 or more species of beetle which are estimated to exist. Even compared to insects in general (possibly one million species), beetles represent a very large group. Some friends of Dr. Haldane have elaborated in blasphemous tones on the original remark: "*Haldane was making a theological point: God is most likely to take trouble over reproducing his own image, and his 400,000 attempts at the perfect beetle contrast with his slipshod creation of man. When we meet the Almighty face to face he will resemble a beetle (or a star) and not Dr. Carey (the Archbishop of Canterbury)*" (Gould pp. 381-2).

It might be claimed that these unbelieving and jesting remarks illustrate that we should not draw conclusions from nature. That however is not the point. Nature does indeed proclaim God's pleasure in beetles as in all the myriad details of His creation. We see an indication of this in Matthew 10 where Christ declares that not even (plain ordinary) sparrows die without the knowledge of God. Moreover all the hairs on our heads are known to God (Matthew 10:29, 30). Our God, who pays such close attention to these small aspects of His creation, obviously also displays great interest in the diversity of beetles. Some beetles are huge by insect standards; some are tiny. Some have weird projections; others do not. The shapes also vary and the colors range from iridescent hues to drab and dull. Of course beetles are just one small aspect of the whole creation. For example, the variety of shapes and sizes of creatures without backbones (invertebrates) is also absolutely awesome. There are jellyfish, corals, octopus, worms, sea squirts, starfish and many, many other weird and wonderful organisms. Even among plants, there is wild diversity. There are non-flowering plants like ferns (everything from tree size to tiny specimens) and flowering plants in wide array. The most spectacular, of course, are the orchids, which boast about 10,000 species.

Not only do we see astonishing detail among living creatures, but also among celestial objects. Astronomers continue to be astonished at the diversity that we see in the solar system and beyond. Close by, no two moons or planets are alike. Indeed, in their details, many are extremely different. Their compositions and surface appearances all differ and some spin one way, others in the opposite direction. Some are tilted slightly, others steeply. Moreover in deep space, the highly varied nature of the galaxies and other objects will keep astronomers happily collecting images for many generations to come. It is interesting that this diversity is not readily explainable by the operation of natural processes. Ad hoc explanations are needed for each situation. Of course, when we understand that God, with personal attention, made each and every object simply by commanding it, the diversity all makes sense. So yes, God does have a fondness for beetles and for all other aspects of His creation. The Bible and the creation both tell us this.

Irreducible complexity

In former times, before the publication of Michael Behe's book *Darwin's Black Box* (in 1996), we used to talk about "design" or "all-or-nothing" systems. Basically these terms refer to the same phenomenon. We take it for granted that human designs (be they technological, architectural or artistic) reveal the plan and purposes of the individual involved. Some of these designs, like artwork, may not be that practical but at the very least they are all clearly the result of human activity. Machines are a more functional example since the component parts are fashioned to work together. It is a feature of machines (and inventions in general) that special component parts are needed and not just any old artifact that happens to be available. When we see machines, buildings, or even artwork, we invariably recognize that a designer was required.

Man-made designs are a weak imitation of the finesse in construction and functions of living organisms. Each kind of organism leaves a new generation of offspring because their behavior patterns and the structure and function of their bodies enable them to be successful. Even in their obvious anatomy, organisms reveal the cooperation of interdependent parts. Bird wings, for example, are precisely curved for lift. The bones are hollow and light with air pumped into them from the lungs, and feathers are intricately designed to contribute to the lift effect. These feathers are also anchored into the bone so that they do not fall out during take-off! When we see man-made machines even remotely as effective, we compliment the designer. When it comes to living organisms, we forget to express appreciation and gratitude for the excellence of their designs.

Within recent decades, most attention in biology has switched from overall (gross) anatomy and physiology of organisms to biochemical and micro anatomical features of cells. If we thought things were complicated and precise on the level of gross anatomy, then on the microscopic level we are totally overwhelmed. It is this level that Michael Behe has addressed and which changed the terminology from "*design*" to "*irreducible complexity*." Dr. Behe's point is that living cells are made up of extremely precise molecular machines. All component parts must be present and functioning for life to proceed. Not only must very precise large molecules (not found apart from life) be present, but they must be present in very particular patterns or they cannot cooperate. It is Dr. Behe's point that just as we readily detect the work of human designers, so too the work of God, the supernatural designer, is apparent in all aspects of living creatures. In this context we read Romans 1:20 that all men readily perceive the wonder of the creation. As the apostle Paul writes

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

People actually need only to observe the wonderful design of their own bodies to perceive the work and character of God, the Creator.

Information

Who among us does not make use either directly or indirectly, of computers? These machines, however, no matter how well built, are useless without software to process information. For software we need skilled programmers. Everyone knows after all, that messages and programs do not appear spontaneously in nature. No computer, without programming, will ever achieve anything. Moreover, in order to impart information, a computer needs a sender (someone to develop a message), a receiver (someone who can understand the message) and a language (based on a common code) that will convey the information. This issue is so obvious that it scarcely needs stating. Nevertheless it does need to be pointed out since the control center of every living cell resembles a computer far more powerful than any of our current designs.

Not only do living cells contain the hardware to read and carry out detailed instructions, but also the information is incredibly densely packaged. For example, a two-page spread covered with various sequences of the letters CGT and A was published in the *National Post* on June 27, 2000. The 32,767 letters or bits of information, represent the content of a small part of chromosome 17 in each human cell. In order to include all the information found in every human cell however, the newspaper would have required a total of 91,555 double pages. When we consider that this information is compressed into the microscopic nucleus or control center of each cell, we see how efficiently our cells have been designed.

Not only is information efficiently stored in living cells, but it is stored in a code (language) such that other relevant parts of the cell can read it, leading to the manufacture of the chemical machines required in the functioning cell. The code itself, obviously, has no chemical similarity to the machines whose manufacture it mandates. This is a well-known feature of language. Printed or spoken words bear no similarity to the concepts represented. The spoken or written word "water" for example does not resemble any liquid. It is a convention (mutual understanding) which allows

us to communicate with each other. Similarly language and information and codes do not appear spontaneously in nature. Rather they are the products of intelligence.

Thus the information systems in living cells reveal to us something of the beneficent and awe-inspiring creator who designed them, calling them into existence by the power of His Word.

Back to the cat

Reflections on Psalm 19 and on nature have carried us far from the poem about Jeffry, the cat. There is however more to be garnered from that poem. Reference is made to the cruel treatment cats mete out to potential prey. Is this too part of God's "very good creation"? Of course it is not. The Bible tells us about that too. As a result of Adam's fall, God cursed nature on man's account. Now there would be thorns, thistles — and by extension — disease, disaster, predation and death. As a result, the apostle Paul wrote

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

(Romans 8:22)

There are therefore two aspects of nature which we can discern today. These are firstly the wise providence which allows the creation to continue and secondly the effects of death in the form of predators, or agents of disease or of decay. Even those organisms however, are wonderfully designed for their roles in the ecosystem. Some aspects of nature are sad, but all are very interesting. We can indeed thank God for the opportunity to study His fascinating creation in order to learn more about His glory, namely His character and work.

Margaret Helder

© 2015
www.christianstudylibrary.org