

Immortality and Christian Anthropology

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Abstract

The gradual evolution of *Homo sapiens* from earlier hominid species raises for Christians several interrelated challenges. I focus here on the issue of the first emergence of creatures who could enjoy eternal life. In the first several sections I highlight what I take to be the outstanding difficulties facing a Christian anthropology when it comes to positing an historical boundary separating those creatures that can have eternal life from those that cannot. In the final section, I consider whether Christians can concede an element of arbitrariness in God's choice about where to draw that boundary.

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1. Inheritors

Among the several challenges that biological evolution has been thought to raise for Christian theists, there exists a relatively neglected cluster of difficulties all of which arise from the fact that a variety of species from *Australopithecus afarensis* to the later *Homo heidelbergensis* came between our distant ancestors and the first *Homo sapiens*. The apparent gradualness of this process makes it difficult to identify any particular point in history as the moment when those who would be stewards of the Earth and the recipients of God's revelation first came to exist. Some of the questions in this neighborhood implicate doctrines of fundamental importance, including the following:

- (1) At what point in hominid evolution did a species emerge that can be said to be in the *imago Dei*, and what change—through natural forces, divine intervention, or a combination of both—made the transition possible?
- (2) How (if at all) is the doctrine of original sin to be reconciled with the phenomenon of gradual hominid evolution?
- (3) At what point in hominid evolution did the first individuals become eligible for eternal life, and what change or set of changes made this transition possible?

It's (3) on which I want to focus here. Depending on one's view, creatures might exist in the image of God, bear moral responsibility for their actions, and be stewards of the Earth and the recipients of divine revelation all in varying degrees. But either a creature will have eternal life or it won't; in this particular case it's all or nothing, and the stark contrast between this state of affairs and the gradualness of human evolution is what makes the issue in (3) a particularly thorny one. In the literature thus far, most attention has been focused on the *imago Dei* and on explaining what is distinctive about man among all the Earth's creatures, despite his sharing an evolutionary history with all other life on this planet.² Question (3), by contrast, has so far been treated almost as a doctrinal third rail; few authors seem eager to engage with a topic that requires positing the existence of a boundary to one side of which are creatures that can aspire to eternal bliss, while on the other side are creatures that on a gradualist view must have been very similar to the former group—and in some cases they will have been the very *parents* of the first generation to become eligible for eternal life—but that have no more place in Heaven than the single-celled organisms from which all life evolved.

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² See, for example Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz (2014); J. Wentzel van Huysteen (2006).

To draw such a line (more accurately, to formulate a theory about where God draws that line, and why) is rather a daunting project, but certainly an important one for anyone who believes that the existence of creatures that can enjoy eternal life represents the (or at least a) purpose for which God created this world.

Let us use the term *inheritors* for those creatures that can enjoy eternal life, either by being made immune to bodily death or by being raised to eternal life after death, and the term *non-inheritors* for everything else. In what follows, I'll describe what I take to be the most significant challenges confronted by the Christian anthropologist when it comes to formulating a theory about the first appearance of inheritors at some point in evolutionary history.

A few preliminary points are in order before we proceed.

- That humans did evolve from an ancestor we share with apes by way of various intermediate species is something I'm going to take for granted in this paper as being beyond any serious dispute, even if the contributory role (if any) played by God in the evolutionary process leading to human beings is still a legitimate subject of debate.
- The details of the evolutionary story are not settled, and there is no single picture of the phylogenetic tree—even that specific portion of it that links *Homo sapiens* to earlier hominids—that is accepted by every paleoanthropologist. But what is important for our purposes is that any finished picture of our evolutionary history will connect us to our tree-dwelling ancestors via several intermediate species.
- Not all of the hominid species whose former existence raises a challenge for Christian theists were ancestors of *Homo sapiens* according to current theory, and some non-ancestral *Homo* species, such as the Neanderthals, existed contemporaneously with *H. sapiens* for thousands of years before becoming extinct. It's not their place on the phylogenetic tree, but rather their intrinsic characteristics (e.g., their capacity for abstract thinking and free choice), that raise the challenges to be explored here.

2. The Inheritor Boundary

Given that inheritors exist now, either

- (a) At some point in evolutionary history a boundary was crossed that separated non-inheritors from inheritors, or
- (b) Every living thing, from bacteria to dandelions, fruit flies, sharks, and humans, can live forever.

The scenario described in (b) raises a host of difficult conceptual puzzles. It's not clear what eternal life would be like for a fruit fly, what the world to come would *have* to be like in order that every fruit fly have a place in it, or even why, apart from a wish to avoid drawing a line between inheritors and non-inheritors among living things, God would be interested in resurrecting every fruit fly—as opposed, for example, to populating Heaven with exemplars of each non-human species, which would not make them into inheritors in the sense we're interested in here. It turns out, however, that one need not dismiss the possibility of (b) in order to generate the problem in which we're interested. For even if it were true that every living thing is an inheritor, it surely would be true as well that not everything can aspire to the *kind* of afterlife for which Christians believe humans are destined: the kind, for example, that involves enjoyment of the Beatific Vision. Surely, as well, not every living thing is a candidate for eternal *damnation*, which presumably is possible only for moral agents. The upshot is that even if (b) were correct, we could still ask about the point at which creatures first came to exist that were candidates for the afterlife destinies of which present-day humans are capable.

For simplicity, I'll take (a) for granted and assume as well that the typical Christian will place the boundary between non-inheritors and inheritors somewhere in the period of hominid evolution, such that the boundary had been crossed by the time modern humans had come into existence around 200,000 years ago, and not before the earliest hominids had evolved a few million years earlier. No one can reasonably expect the Christian anthropologist to date the event precisely or to pinpoint its exact location on the globe, but it is reasonable to ask for an account of what made it *possible*.

Any tenable account will describe the transition in a way that is (i) consistent with the empirical evidence we have; (ii) theologically acceptable, and consistent with Christian views about related matters ranging from original sin to the point at which, during the embryonic development of a modern human, an inheritor first comes to exist; and (iii) philosophically plausible where it implicates issues such as free will, moral responsibility, and the nature of consciousness.

3. The Prerequisites of Inheritance

Partly what motivates the intuition that gradual hominid evolution poses a challenge for the Christian in the present context is that, given the apparent futility of trying to identify any specific moment in evolutionary history as the one at which distinctively *human* beings first came into existence, there must have been a corresponding arbitrariness in God's decision to draw the boundary between inheritors and non-inheritors at the particular point where he did draw it *rather than drawing it even one generation earlier*—an arbitrariness that might seem incongruous with the stakes involved for the creatures on either side.

One might thus feel compelled to posit the existence of an evolutionary watershed—a great leap forward in hominid evolution, achieved naturally or via divine intervention—at which the first inheritors came to exist, the evolutionary chasm separating these first inheritors from their non-inheriting predecessors serving to diminish the appearance of arbitrariness in the boundary separating the two. But, in proportion to how dramatic and abrupt the hypothesized transformation was, the threat of empirical disconfirmation by the pale anthropological record increases. Hence, the Christian anthropologist confronts a dilemma: without a radical transformation at the boundary between inheritors and non-inheritors, the boundary appears quite arbitrary. However, positing a radical break threatens to render one's account inconsistent with the empirical evidence for gradual hominid evolution. Suppose for argument's sake that we grasp the second horn of the dilemma and posit a fairly dramatic transformation in the characteristics of our ancestors at the point in hominid evolution at which the first creatures became inheritors. Then we confront two questions:

- (1) What particular change or set of changes to the characteristics of our hominid ancestors was it that made God willing and able for the first time to treat some creatures as inheritors?
- (2) What enabled these changes to occur? Did it happen naturally, or was divine intervention involved?

Many Christians will suggest, in answer to (1), that the important transformation was the first acquisition of *souls* by hominids—or, if plants and the lower animals also have souls, the right kind of soul (a *rational* soul) to make them capable of enjoying a life after bodily death. Many will envision here some causally potent Cartesian entity created by God and infused into a body, perhaps preserved through an intermediate period of disembodied existence after death, and ultimately conjoined with an imperishable body at the general resurrection. The fact that there are alternative ways in which to conceive of a soul, and that some people reject the notion of an immaterial soul entirely, can be expected to complicate matters. But in respect to the issue of timing—i.e., the issue of why creatures with rational souls, the first inheritors, came to exist just when they did and not earlier—one encounters with remarkable consistency the suggestion that *the right physical substratum first had to evolve* before the soul, whatever it is and whether it is something God has to specially add to a body or not, could come to exist and make possible the inheritance of a life after death.

If a rational soul is just a particular configuration of matter, then there is an obvious reason why the first inheritors could not come to exist until a certain point in evolutionary history. But even those who believe in an immaterial soul that God conjoins with a body, or that somehow emerges from a body, have claimed that the right configuration of matter (or at least one of indefinitely many possible configurations all having the required degree of multiply-realizable complexity) had to evolve before the infused or emergent soul could make its first appearance.

The alternative is to disconnect the first appearance of the soul from any facts about the material characteristics of the body with which it comes to be associated—i.e., to assume that there simply are no physically necessary or sufficient conditions when it comes to the acquisition of a rational soul by embodied beings—or to disconnect the first appearance of inheritors from the first appearance of beings with rational souls, either of which courses would render inexplicable the fact (assuming it is a fact) that God waited over four billion years before bestowing on any creatures the greatest gift he can bestow on them, and despite all the suffering that went on during that time.

For illustration, consider Swinburne's claim that while an immaterial soul can *exist* apart from a properly organized and functioning body, nevertheless "without a functioning brain, the soul will not function (i.e. have conscious episodes),"³ and also that God does not endow a developing embryo with a rational soul until it is "able to receive it."⁴ (Swinburne references Aquinas's view that gestating embryos first have "nutritive" and then "animating" souls—the kind possessed by plants and animals, respectively—before they have rational souls, apropos their changing physical structure.⁵) Karl Rahner, as well, expresses the idea that when it comes to the emolument of a developing human embryo, ontogeny may recapitulate phylogeny:

[I]t is quite possible to say that...ontogeny...corresponds to human phylogeny as present-day evolutionary theory sees it. In both cases a not yet human biological organism develops towards a condition in which the coming into existence of a spiritual soul has its sufficient biological substratum.⁶

In addition, Eleonore Stump, in explicating Aquinas's view of the soul and distinguishing it from a specifically Cartesian form of substance dualism, also suggests that the soul, which is a form on the Thomistic view, comes into existence when the right configuration of matter exists:

[A]lthough accounts of emergent's are typically couched in terms of emergent properties, on Aquinas's way of thinking about material objects what can emerge when form is imposed on matter is not just properties but substances. When material components are combined into something higher-level with a particular configuration, a substance [a soul in this case] will come into being.⁷

We should note that even if one concedes that there are certain necessary biological conditions that need to be satisfied before the soul can make its first appearance and before a creature can become an inheritor, it might be that these conditions alone are not sufficient. Perhaps there also were social and cultural conditions that had to prevail among our hunter-gatherer ancestors before God would endow them with souls and treat them as inheritors.

What is important for our purposes, however, is the idea that the right anatomy and physiology had to evolve before God could begin to treat any creatures as inheritors: the creatures left on the non-inheritor side of the boundary were left there at least partly because they lacked the requisite psychophysical characteristics. However, it will emerge that matters are not as simple as they might now seem.

³Swinburne (1986), 176.

⁴Swinburne (1986), 199.

⁵Swinburne (1986), 179-180, note 2.

⁶Karl Rahner, *Hominisation* (1965): <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=3367>.

⁷Stump (1995), 510-511. The view Stump describes in her (1995) is more complex than this single passage suggests. She also states, for example, that on Aquinas's view "the human soul is different from all other forms that configure matter. It is created directly by God and infused into matter."

4. The Emergence of Inheritors

When at least some of the prerequisites for becoming an inheritor are physical characteristics conferred on a creature by the right genetic endowment, and when these characteristics are left to emerge at their own pace and partly as a result of all the various chance events that play a role in evolution, it becomes not merely possible but extremely likely that the emergence of a generation all the members of which are candidates for immortality will take place gradually, since even adaptive characteristics can take many generations to spread through an entire population, aided in some cases by phenomena such as population bottlenecks. The chances that these characteristics would show up in every member of the first generation to have them, all at once, are vanishingly small, even for a modest-sized population. Given this fact, there are three scenarios worth considering:

- (a) The requisite characteristics appeared gradually—and without any divine intervention—over generations, either within one interbreeding population or perhaps in several geographically and reproductively-isolated groups. The result was that there were generations within which some adult individuals were inheritors and some were not, until finally a generation came to exist that contained only inheritors.
- (b) The requisite characteristics appeared gradually—and without any divine intervention—over generations, as in (a), but God did not begin to treat any members of the species as inheritors until a generation appeared in which everyone had the requisite characteristics, and of which it was true that every member of every subsequent generation had the right characteristics as well. Hence, there never was a generation of the relevant species in which some were inheritors and some were not.
- (c) There came a point at which God made every member of the relevant species into inheritors by physically transforming them, where previously no one had lived and died with the requisite characteristics who was not an inheritor. Perhaps God waited until the first creature evolved the requisite traits and then endowed everyone else with them, or he transformed a group none of whose members already possessed these traits. In this scenario (as in (b)), there never was a generation of the relevant species in which some members were inheritors and some were not.

Suppose that (a) is the case and that only a few members of the first generation of hominids to contain inheritors actually were inheritors, with the proportion of the population that were inheritors increasing—smoothly or not, owing to the vagaries of inheritance and selection—as the generations went by until finally, at some point, every extant member of the species was an inheritor. Then consider the following:

- It's possible that the first inheritors, or their offspring, did not manage to reproduce. If not, then the emergence of inheritors may have proceeded in fits and starts (a few inheritors exist in this generation, none in the next, and then a few in the generation after that), in which case there is no unbroken line of descent connecting today's humans with the very first inheritors, with whatever implications that may have for one's views about original sin.⁸
- The male and female of a childbearing couple could in some cases have been inheritor and non-inheritor—a kind of spiritual *mésalliance* that could produce children who were themselves inheritors or not depending on a roll of the genetic dice, with the result that a single immediate family could be made up of a mix of inheritors and non-inheritors (say, one parent and one of two offspring). This is so unless one assumes that inheritors unerringly distinguished other inheritors from non-inheritors and invariably avoided forming pair-bonds with the latter that issued in children, or that God always intervened to keep them apart, or always acted to ensure that the children of inheritors ended up with the right characteristics for inheritor status despite their spiritually mixed parentage.⁹

⁸See, for example, Martin Lembke (2014), in which the author attempts to reconcile the doctrine of original sin with the theory that there is no primordial couple from which all humans descend.

⁹The possibility of breeding between inheritors and non-inheritors arises also in connection with the widely accepted theory that *Homo sapiens* interbred with Neanderthals in southern Europe before the latter species became extinct.

The important point is that if inheritors emerged only gradually in the species then there are some potentially awkward consequences that can be avoided only by making fairly ad hoc assumptions about the powers and proclivities of the earliest hominid inheritors, or by assuming that God intervened in a way to prevent these consequences, in which case it's not clear why God would not prefer what seems like the simpler course of raising everyone to inheritor status at once.

Scenario (b) avoids the possibility of inheritors interbreeding with non-inheritors by suggesting that God did not begin to treat anyone as an inheritor until the entire species had evolved the requisite characteristics without any divine intervention. Then it must be supposed that there were earlier creatures indistinguishable from the first inheritors in every relevant respect, but that God did not treat as inheritors merely because they had the misfortune of being born into a generation some of the members of which did not possess the same important traits. That seems like rather a flimsy basis on which to deny eternal life to a creature that is fit for it in every relevant way, or at least no less fit for it than others who receive this gift.

Perhaps, however, the term *gift* is key here. After all, if no creature has any moral claim on eternal life then it becomes difficult to make the case that God treats some of them unfairly by denying them inheritor status. This observation is crucial when addressing the general problem of arbitrariness in God's choice about the point at which to draw the line between inheritors and non-inheritors. We'll return to this issue in the final section, after examining scenario (c).

If (a) and (b) have anything to recommend them, then it might be the notion that a deity who has good reasons to create inheritors by means of a long process of evolution may for the same reasons want to refrain from accelerating the process for some creatures even after the first few have reached the appropriate stage. But anyone who believes that God had a hand in guiding evolution in the direction of hominids to begin with should not find it too difficult to believe that at a certain point, when the species was near to evolving the relevant characteristics, God intervened to bring about the existence of a population composed entirely of inheritors, if only to avoid some of the awkward consequences of (a) and (b). This is the situation described in scenario (c), to which we now turn.

5. Divine Intervention

Suppose that at some point in the past every extant member of a certain group of hominids became inheritors at once or at least within a single generation. Since, as we observed in the preceding section, this is very unlikely to occur by chance when some of the requisite conditions for inheritor status depend on having the right genetic endowment, this almost certainly would have required divine intervention.

In his *The Problem of Evil*, Peter van Inwagen presents a story, which he claims is true for all we know, that explains both the origin of moral evil and our vulnerability to the world's natural evils. Although it is not offered specifically to account for the first appearance of inheritors, it commits anyone who accepts it to a scenario like the one (c) we're now considering. Van Inwagen's description of how it all happened begins with the following passage:

For millions of years, perhaps for thousands of millions of years, God guided the course of evolution so as eventually to produce very clever primates, the immediate predecessors of *Homo sapiens*. At some time in the last few hundred thousand years, the whole population of our pre-human ancestors formed a small breeding community—a few thousand or a few hundred or even a few score. That is to say, there was a time when every ancestor of modern human beings who was then alive was a member of this tiny, geographically tightly knit group of primates. In the fullness of time, God took the members of this breeding group and miraculously raised them to rationality. That is, he gave them the gifts of language, abstract thought, and disinterested love—and, of course, the gift of free will. (van Inwagen (2006), 85)

Key for our purposes here is to notice that on van Inwagen's story (a story that he offers with a certain amount of diffidence; it is deployed merely as a defense against the argument from evil, but he claims that it, or something close to it, may very well turn out to be true) the transition from the non-existence of any inheritors to the existence of a group of hominids all of whom were inheritors was brought about in a single generation, and with God's help. It represented an abrupt and fairly dramatic leap forward in the cognitive abilities of these individuals over their immediate predecessors. How did God bring about this great leap forward? van Inwagen suggests that it may have involved a "miraculous genetic and physiological transformation of the human organism," and that the amount of intervention required on God's part may have been quite small: "[T]he raising of our primate ancestors to rationality could have taken place in a world that contained very little in the way of miraculous irregularity. It would, in fact, require nothing more than a genotypic and phenotypic transformation of a few score or a few hundred, or, at most, a few thousand organisms. (van Inwagen (2006), 128) Why does van Inwagen reject any gradualist, naturalistic account of the transition? He gives two reasons, the first of which is explained in the passage below.

First, human beings and beasts are, as I have noted, radically different. Between us and the highest primates there is a vast gulf. I have a hard time believing that this gulf was bridged by the ordinary mechanisms of evolution in the actual time in which it was bridged. Whenever the first rational primates existed, it is clear that our ancestors of one million years ago were mere animals; no more rational than present-day chimpanzees or gorillas, and a million years is not much time for the evolutionary development of radical novelty. (van Inwagen (2006), 128)

Doubtless many paleoanthropologists would take exception to the claim that our hominid ancestors of a million years ago—by which time species such as *Homo ergaster* were already making sophisticated stone tools and joining together into hunter-gatherer societies—were "mere animals" with no more rationality in van Inwagen's sense than present-day chimps. However, van Inwagen does not place heavy emphasis on this argument, and he concedes that he might be wrong about whether nature could evolve a rational creature in the time available without God's intervention. He places greater emphasis on the fact that if the evolution of rationality were gradual then the Christian would be placed in the awkward position of specifying the status of creatures that were not humans and not inheritors, but that may have differed only slightly from the first rational humans:

If the genesis of rationality was a vague event, there would have to have been a long, a very long, period during which our ancestors were neither fully rational nor simply beasts. [A hypothetical atheist] will certainly ask what part these "intermediate" creatures played in God's plan for humanity. (van Inwagen (2006), 130)

The advantage to positing a dramatic break, as opposed to a smooth transition, between our immediate predecessors (clever but non-rational primates, as van Inwagen characterizes them) and the first rational humans is that it obviates uncomfortable questions about the role of those nearly identical creatures that just missed the cut, so to speak, and thereby ended up with a very different destiny. As well, one could add, it helps diminish the appearance of arbitrariness in the boundary separating non-inheritors from inheritors. Of course, we still end up with the consequence that the parents of the first inheritors could not inherit the kingdom with their own children. However, this result is inevitable no matter where the boundary gets drawn, and the existence of a significant and divinely-imposed gulf between the generations may help to diminish the awkwardness of this state of affairs.

The remainder of van Inwagen's speculative account of the origin of evil, both moral and natural, contains the following elements:

- 1) The creatures raised to rationality enjoyed a direct awareness of God's presence that, for a time, enabled them to resist the selfish and destructive urges they inherited (and retained even after their transformation) from their animal ancestors—which suggests that God did not go beyond the alterations needed to make them free and rational when he changed them.¹⁰

¹⁰On the subject of whether God could and should have altered our genes in ways that would have made us less prone to wicked behavior, see Evan Fales (1992).

- 2) These people were endowed with powers that enabled them to anticipate and avoid natural evils and miraculously heal injuries, with the result that before the fall people were not being harmed by floods, earthquakes, and the like, even though such events did occur. In this prelapsarian period, the length of which van Inwagen does not specify, humans did not die. Hence, they had become inheritors not in the sense of becoming candidates for resurrection, but by being made immune to bodily death.
- 3) At some point, despite their communion with God, humans became wicked and lost their immediate awareness of God along with their ability to avoid injury, so that they once again were vulnerable to nature's perils and once again began dying.¹¹ At this point, van Inwagen states, "A certain [selfish and destructive] frame of mind had become dominant among them, a frame of mind latent in the genes they had inherited from a million or more generations of ancestors." (van Inwagen (2006), 86) Subsequent generations inherited from these first sinners the genetic predisposition to selfish behavior, but were not granted the immediate awareness of God their ancestors had. Rather than consign them all to oblivion or Hell as they deserved, however, God put into action a rescue plan the outlines of which are already familiar to us. They and their progeny now had become inheritors in the sense of being candidates for resurrection.

For argument's sake, let us grant to van Inwagen the empirical claims he makes about the size and geographical distribution of our ancestors of 200,000 years ago, and set aside any worries that might arise from the coexistence with *H. sapiens* of other, non-human hominid species such as *Homo erectus*. The details could be important—especially since, among other things, van Inwagen suggests that the first appearance of language coincided with the first appearance of inheritors, while others estimate that language and its physiological prerequisites did not evolve until much later. (van Inwagen does not elaborate on just what sort of language or capacity for language was conferred on these first rational creatures, so it's difficult to be sure whether his story is consistent with the available evidence.) van Inwagen and others who posit the sort of boundary we're now considering can always adjust their estimate of its timing to bring it into line with what we know from the relevant sciences.

But there are other issues that arise for such a view, some of which apply specifically to the story van Inwagen presents, and some of which apply more generally to any scenario in which God intervenes to raise everyone to inheritor status at once. The two points below apply specifically to van Inwagen's account.

- Presumably, at the moment when the first creatures were raised to rationality there were individuals of various ages, along with a few gestating embryos in wombs. If there was a particular point at which God raised them all to rationality and at which they all became immortal, then did the wizened creatures remain wizened and the infants remain infants, or were they all transformed into robust individuals with youthful bodies, or were the young allowed to age normally up to a certain point at which they stopped aging, or something else? Of course, assuming that the boundary marked a point at which creatures were made immune to natural evil and the ravages of aging is not something to which every advocate of scenario (c) must commit himself, but those who believe that the boundary did not bring about any change in man's vulnerability to injury, aging, and death will need to bring their view into line with any other commitments they do have in respect to the origin of sin and God's long-term plans for creation. Was it God's intention that the first inheritors should suffer, age, and die like their non-inheriting predecessors?
- There are some other interesting philosophical issues that arise for a view such as van Inwagen's that incorporates a fall from grace following the first appearance of inheritors. For example, he must believe that despite their immediate awareness of God *every one* of the first inheritors—who he concedes might have numbered in the thousands—fell into sin and lost the gifts God had bestowed on him.

¹¹The suffering of non-human animals, van Inwagen suggests, is a consequence of the need to avoid creating a world that is massively irregular, as it would have to be if miraculous divine intervention in nature were always used to prevent animal suffering.

Either this indicates the surprising ineffectiveness of a direct awareness of God when it comes to keeping people on the straight and narrow, or the extreme difficulty of resisting the impulses we inherited as a result of the very evolutionary process God orchestrated to bring about the existence of human beings, or both. And if some fell before others, then one wonders whether for some time there were immortals mating with those who had already fallen and lost their undying nature, having children that were either immortal or not.¹²

The following points apply more generally to scenarios like (c), on which God raises the entire species to inheritor status at once. First, anyone who believes that God miraculously accelerated the required genetic and physiological changes needed to create the first inheritors, and who posits a dramatic change in hominids resulting from these changes, must walk the fine line of portraying the changes as dramatic enough clearly to separate the first inheritors from their brute predecessors while not committing themselves to changes dramatic enough that they ought to stand out clearly in the pale anthropological record, but don't. A sudden jump in cranial capacity and brain size, for example, and perhaps in technological sophistication, is something evidence could confirm or disconfirm, and so far, there is no evidence of any such dramatic change that took place in the space of a single generation.

The dilemma is this: as the psycho physiological transformations that were needed get smaller, the problem of close relatives who just missed the cut reappears and the appearance of arbitrariness along with it.¹³ On the other hand, as the transformations involved are more dramatic, the appearance of arbitrariness is diminished, but the vulnerability of one's account to disconfirmation by an archaeological record that increasingly reveals the continuous nature of hominid evolution increases.¹⁴

Second, if the physiological substrate needed for a rational soul along with a predisposition to selfish and destructive behavior are genetically passed on to future generations, then we again confront some of the problems that arise from the vagaries of genetic inheritance, unless we assume that God continues to intervene as needed in subsequent generations to ensure that all of the children of inheritors are themselves inheritors, which raises issues that I'll set aside here about those born with severe physical and cognitive disabilities. It raises as well the peculiar possibility that we might prevent some human embryos from ever becoming inheritors by disabling the relevant genes in them, or in the gametes from which they came.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, although it might seem as if positing an act of God that significantly transformed certain of our hominid ancestors—making them markedly different from even their immediate predecessors—helps to remove any appearance of arbitrariness when it comes to which creatures can aspire to everlasting life and which ones cannot, a moment's reflection shows that this is not really the case. For presumably there was no very significant difference between the first inheritors and their immediate predecessors *before* God's intervention, which means that God might have started transforming creatures a generation earlier and thereby have extended to a slightly larger group of individuals the greatest gift he can bestow on any creature.

Confronted with the last point above, the Christian has two options. He might claim that there is a limit to how early God can start transforming creatures into inheritors: perhaps there is a point at which the kind of miraculous transformation that would be required to turn the most evolved creatures then in existence into free and rational human beings would involve intervention on a scale larger than what God finds acceptable.

¹²Cf. John Hick's (1966) view about man's evolving nature, which does not posit a singular fall at some point in human history.

¹³van Inwagen suggests that even if nature could evolve rational creatures without God's help, there would have to be miraculous intervention involved in God's taking these creatures into communion with himself and bestowing any supernatural abilities upon them.

¹⁴Some have posited a kind of intellectual and cultural "Big Bang" that took place around forty to fifty thousand years ago, around the time of the earliest known cave art. But the term "Big Bang" when applied to geological time scales can be something that actually took centuries or millennia to unfold. On the controversy surrounding this hypothesis and its religious significance, see Joshua M. Moritz (2012). Moritz argues that no such anthropological Big Bang ever occurred.

Indeed, perhaps there is a point at which God simply cannot bring about the transformation and simultaneously have it be the case that the resulting creature is in any meaningful sense the same creature he started with. The alternative is to concede that God might have begun transforming creatures at least one generation earlier and that his choice of where to begin had an element of arbitrariness to it, but deny that the arbitrariness is problematic.

The first suggestion looks promising at first, but the problem is that if there is some minimal degree of development creatures must reach on their own before God can raise them up the rest of the way, then since not every member of the population will attain to the minimum at once, in a single generation, we end up again with the gradualist scenario in (a), or with the view (b) on which God waits until everyone in the population has attained the minimum development needed before he brings anyone along the rest of the way, with the result that some will have lived and died already possessing the requisite characteristics, but who were not treated as inheritors. If one is to avoid the problems that beset (a) and (b), then it seems that one will have to embrace the all-at-once scenario described in option (c) and confront head-on the issue of arbitrariness in God's decision to work the miraculous transformation of creatures to inheritor status at just the point in hominid evolution at which he did. It's to this issue that we now turn.

6. Conclusion

Suppose that both of the following are true:

- (1) There was a particular point in hominid evolution—say, around 200,000 years ago—when God miraculously transformed the members of a particular population of hominids in such a way as to endow them with the characteristics needed to make them inheritors.
- (2) God could have started transforming hominids into inheritors at least one generation earlier (or later) than he did. To that extent, God's choice to draw the line between inheritors and non-inheritors just where he did draw it was an arbitrary choice.

The issue now to be addressed is whether and to what extent (2) is problematic for the Christian. We earlier suggested a reason why it might not be a problem at all: if no creature is morally entitled to a life after death and if God's act of making anyone an inheritor is an act of supererogation, then there is nothing morally troubling in God's leaving on the non-inheritor side of the boundary some creatures he might have made into inheritors. Indeed, if he was to make anyone an inheritor, then he had to draw the line *somewhere*—just as, in creating a world, he has to pick some world or other (from among those that are on-balance good worlds), even if for every world he can create there are infinitely many better worlds he could choose instead.

Now we confront two questions, the first of which I'll mention only to set it aside:

- (i) Is it possible for a being with God's nature to make choices that are genuinely arbitrary—i.e., such that the choices he makes have literally nothing to recommend them over at least one equally-good alternative?
- (ii) If the answer to (i) is yes, then does this remove any moral difficulties in the scenario described by (1) and (2), above?

For argument's sake I'll take for granted an affirmative answer to (i). Some writers have suggested that in cases where God confronts multiple options none of which is more appealing than another (if such cases there are) he would be hamstrung by the fact that, unlike humans, he cannot leave the choice to mere passing fancy or to unconscious motives, and by the fact that even the construction of a randomizing device may force him to make still more arbitrary choices, leading to a debilitating infinite regress. (To use a simple illustration, even the tossing of a coin as a randomizing technique requires one to assign heads and tails to particular choices.

In addition, what reasons would favor one assignment of outcomes to choices over the alternative? However, we'll put this issue aside and assume that, by some means or other, and in a way that doubtless implicates the mysteries of libertarian free will, God can make arbitrary choices.¹⁵

We come then to question (ii). Does the assumption that God can make arbitrary choices mean that there is nothing problematic in God's drawing the boundary between inheritors and non-inheritors later than he might have drawn it? Not necessarily. For even if we accept that no creature has a moral claim on eternal life, most of us have the intuition that even gifts should be bestowed in ways that are not patently arbitrary. Few would think much of a father who bestows gratuitous gifts on just two of his three children and who justifies the single omission by pointing out that *none* of them had a present coming today anyway. Nor would we think much of a judge who opts for leniency in one case while denying it to defendants in relevantly similar cases. Indeed, if the fact that no one is entitled to live forever means that there is nothing morally problematic in God's leaving some people behind who are, relatively speaking, no less deserving than some who are saved, then we should not find it problematic (but most of us would) if God saves some who are relatively *less* deserving than others who are saved. To be fair, the strength of the intuition that even gifts ought not to be given out in ways that are completely arbitrary can vary depending on the particular circumstances (the relation, for example, between the giver and the receiver) and on what is at stake in receiving the gift or being denied it. But the stakes could not be higher in the present context.

Of course, in each of the examples used above those who came out on the disadvantaged side of an arbitrary choice were *persons*, and that may be key here. If, prior to God's intervention, every existing creature was a mere brute, then the problem we're considering might simply fail to arise, as no person would have been left on the disadvantaged side of the line God drew in evolutionary history. To borrow a thought-experiment used by Michael Tooley in another context, if we have a serum that can turn ordinary cats into sentient creatures with human-like intelligence, then few would claim that we're obliged to use it on every cat if we use it on any of them.¹⁶

What is the upshot of all this? If the Christian is reluctant to imagine that God leaves on the non-inheritor side of the boundary creatures that are persons or that are at least very person-like when he raises to inheritor status others who were indistinguishable from them in every relevant respect, then he will have to assume that God began to transform creatures before any of them had become remotely person-like, assuming that the relevant characteristics can be possessed in varying degrees. But then, if the result of the transformation was a fully rational, morally aware creature, then the physiological, social, and perhaps technological leap forward would have been dramatic, and here again the view becomes vulnerable to empirical disconfirmation.¹⁷ So, the Christian anthropologist must walk the fine line mentioned earlier of claiming that the abrupt transformation wrought by God to create the first inheritors took creatures who were not yet persons to any appreciable degree to full personhood while claiming as well that the changes involved were not so dramatic as to be inconsistent with anything we know from the pale anthropological record—a record that, so far at least, has revealed a very gradual evolution of the earliest hominids into modern humans. The tenability of the resulting view will thus depend crucially on the still-emerging empirical evidence.

¹⁵ For more on this issue, see Klaas J. Kray (2009); Peter van Inwagen (1995).

¹⁶See Michael Tooley (2009); note that in the evolutionary case we still confront here a question about whether, when God first raised creatures to rationality, he made them fully rational, as van Inwagen suggests. If not, then we must provide an account of how God went about judging the first inheritors before they were fully rational, morally aware, and free creatures, and about when the first fully rational and morally responsible inheritors first came to exist—creatures that, among other things, could be damned.

¹⁷I ignore here any suggestion that God somehow tampered with the historical evidence in ways that concealed the abruptness of any changes he brought about to create the first inheritors. To believe that God deliberately tampers with the very evidence we use to reconstruct the past is to start down a dangerous road. van Inwagen implicitly disavows such maneuvers when he rejects Creationism for its inconsistency with what we know from the relevant sciences.

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