

What Does It Take To Change A Belief?

Some theological musing occasioned by recent interactions with unbending Darwinists

(by Craig Smith)

My recent interaction with Intelligent Design theory (and some “scientists” who oppose it on principle) got me thinking about two scientific/philosophical issues and their relationship to the ways we change (or not) our beliefs when confronted by contradictory evidence. Specifically, I’ve been thinking of Kuhn’s Law of Paradigm Shifts¹ and Occam’s Razor.

Kuhn, a historian of science, argued that science does not advance by the gradual refinement of theories but rather proceeds in radical shifts from one paradigm to another. A “paradigm” is more than just a particular belief about the way things work but is a whole approach to thinking about things. Paradigms govern the kinds of questions we ask and the kinds of evidence we are willing to consider. Kuhn’s work argues for the existence of something we might call *paradigm paralysis*: the entrenched inability to see beyond current models of thinking. Because of paradigm paralysis, any given community often struggles to pay adequate attention to discoveries or theories that do not fit within their current ways of thinking about whatever issue is at hand. Certainly the Intelligent Design theorists are experiencing this kind of roadblock right now. Their research is often ignored by the scientific mainstream because it requires thinking in ways that the current Darwinian paradigm does not allow for. However, there is hope: as Kuhn demonstrated, eventually the evidence that simply cannot be accounted for by the present scientific paradigm builds to the point that it cannot be ignored and then, practically overnight, the paradigm will shift.

A related scientific issue is the principle of Occam’s Razor. For those of you who aren’t familiar with this principle, Occam’s Razor is a kind of logical guide that says something like “when there are multiple explanations for something, the simplest explanation that accounts for all the data is usually right.” Together, Kuhn’s Law of Paradigm Shifts and Occam’s Razor provide a helpful way of thinking about beliefs and the ways they change...or don’t.

For instance, suppose that I found a series of alphabet blocks on the floor of a room in the following arrangement: LYNÆ WAS HERE. I know this arrangement was not there the last time I looked. How could I explain this arrangement? One option is that the blocks fell off the shelf in the closet when a mild earthquake (which I didn’t feel) occurred and just happened to land in this pattern. Another option is that my daughter Lynae arranged them into this pattern. Both explanations are possible, but

¹ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1st. ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1962).

everyone would agree that the second explanation is far more probable. Why? Occam's Razor. This is the simplest explanation which covers all the known data.

However, as new data comes to light, this theory might not be adequate anymore. If we discover, for instance, that Lynae was not home during the time-frame that the arrangement appeared, then our theory has a problem. Of course, we can still work it out: perhaps she made the arrangement while she was still home, but covered the blocks with a blanket so that I didn't see the blocks the first time I looked in. Then, perhaps the dog later carried off the blanket thus revealing the blocks before I looked into the room the second time. Theory saved! But what if we further realized that Lynae is only 4 months old and unable to spell anything yet? Well, maybe her sister, Rochelle, arranged the blocks and spelled out Lynae's name as a kind of joke. Ah, but Rochelle was also gone during the time the arrangement appeared too...no worries, we'll just combine the dog-carried-off-the-blanket theory with the Rochelle-was-playing-a-joke theory.

Obviously, as the complexity of the explanation increases, so too does the implausibility of that explanation. Now, what if I discover that my wife was in the room between my first and second looks? Now, Occam's Razor says that all the new data has rendered my original theory implausible and the new my-wife-did-it theory is the simplest explanation that accounts for all the data.

In effect, Occam's Razor both anchors a theory (when it still seems like the simplest explanation), then calls for the paradigm shift (when the previous explanation no longer accounts for all the data) and then anchors the new theory (which is the simplest explanation that accounts for all the data, both old and new).

To some extent, the debate over Intelligent Design vs. Darwinian Evolution is an exercise in the application of Occam's Razor. The Darwinian evolutionists continue to argue that time and chance are the simplest explanation for life on earth while the ID theorists are arguing that new data has made this explanation highly implausible. In fact, the ID theorists argue, given what we now know about the irreducible complexity of life at the molecular level, the time + chance theory simply cannot account for all the data. It's not a matter of being very unlikely; it's a matter of being impossible. As the argument goes, Darwinian evolution is not able to account for the new data and so a new theory is needed. Thus the theory of Intelligent Design (or so its architects argue) is now the theory favored by Occam's Razor. But of course, the scientific establishment, true to Kuhn's Law of Paradigm Shifts is still clinging to its old model and will do so until the model collapses suddenly under the weight of the new evidence.

According to some ID researchers like Michael Behe, the inevitable collapse of current Darwinian theory is fast approaching, but that's actually not my point here. The whole thing has gotten me thinking about other common beliefs that people cling to either by remaining ignorant of the anomalous evidence or by creating increasingly complex ways of dealing with the emerging difficulties.

For example, let's consider the Christian belief that human beings have both material and non-material components. In other words, we have physical bodies, but we also have a spiritual nature. By the way, don't worry: I'm not going to argue that this belief is untrue! On the contrary, I believe this myself quite firmly. However, there are some subsets of this general belief that I think need to be rearticulated. When it comes to the immaterial aspects of human beings, I think there are two areas where we need to fine-tune our doctrine:

1. Do we have souls AND spirits (as distinct things) or do we only have a soul, which is sometimes referred to as a spirit (i.e. "soul" and "spirit" are synonymous terms for the same thing). In other words, do humans have 3 constituent components (body, soul & spirit) or 2 constituent components (body and soul)?²
2. Where does our immaterial nature come from?

Let's apply Occam's Razor to these questions.

The first question is, to my mind, by far the easiest to address. Consider the evidence: the Bible uses the two different terms "soul" and "spirit" in referring to human beings, sometimes even within the same passage:

1 Thessalonians 5:23 May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 4:12 ¹² For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

The simplest explanation for this is that our "souls" and our "spirits" are distinctly different things. Thus Occam's Razor seems to favor the trichotomist (3 parts) view of human nature.

However, when we look a bit more carefully at the Bible, several other observations have to be made:

1. The point of the Hebrews 4:12 passage is that the word of God is able to divide that which is thought normally to be indivisible. This would suggest

² A related question involves the possible distinction between the body, the soul and the mind since Deu. 6:5 speaks of loving God with all three. This issue, while interesting, is outside the scope of this little exercise here so we will let it suffice to say that most theologians and philosophers understand the "mind" to be something which is either an aspect of the spiritual nature or something which relates to the interface between the spiritual and physical natures of humankind.

that, as the original readers of Hebrews would have thought joints and marrow to be inseparable, so too they would have thought that soul and spirit were indivisible. That being the case, this verse suggests that soul and spirit should be thought of as, at the very least, quite similar things. This is not a very strong argument for soul and spirit being different kinds of things.

2. While both the terms for “soul” and “spirit” do occur throughout the Bible, there is no clear distinction between the way they are used. For instance, in the following verses, both the “soul” and the “spirit” refer to the part of the Psalmist who is depressed over his sufferings; that is, both terms refer to that part of the human being which is capable of being distressed.

Psalm 6:3-4 ³ And my soul is greatly dismayed; But You, O LORD-- how long?

Psalm 142:3 ³ When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, You knew my path. In the way where I walk they have hidden a trap for me.

3. Both “soul” and “spirit” are used as counterparts for the “heart”

Deuteronomy 4:29 ²⁹ "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul.

Psalm 143:4 ⁴ Therefore my spirit is overwhelmed within me; My heart is appalled within me.

4. Typically, when “soul” and “spirit” occur in the same passage, they are clearly synonyms of one another. For instance, consider Job 7:11b: *I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.* While it is possible that the author intends “spirit” and “soul” here to identify two distinct parts of the human constitution (thus arguing for a trichotomist anthropology), it is also possible that he is using the two terms as synonyms of each other. But which is it? Here is where the identification of the structure of the passage is useful. This verse is built upon a clear ABCABC pattern:

A	B	C
<i>[I will speak out]</i>	<i>[in the anguish]</i>	<i>[of my spirit]</i>
A'	B'	C'
<i>[I will complain]</i>	<i>[in the bitterness]</i>	<i>[of my soul]</i>

Recognizing this pattern and the ways that the various elements of the passage correspond to one another, the interpretive ambiguity of spirit/soul disappears.

Since A/A' and B/B' are clearly synonymous,³ there is no reason to think that C/C' are anything but synonymous.

With these observations in mind, we ought to reconsider our initial understanding of the distinction between “soul” and “spirit”. On the whole, the theory that “soul” and “spirit” are not distinct things but instead are simply two different words which refer to the same thing becomes the simpler explanation that accounts for the data.⁴ Thus the dichotomist (2 parts) view seems to account for the data better than the trichotomist (3 parts) view.⁵ Therefore Occam’s Razor strongly favors the dichotomist view of human nature: we have two parts, a physical part (the body) and a spiritual part (the soul, a.k.a. the spirit).

However, it has been my experience that most Christians believe that we have both a soul and a spirit, as separate things (though most Christian could not articulate the difference between them). Why does this theory dominate? Probably because the kinds of observations which call the trichotomist view into question emerge only after a careful study of God’s Word that goes beyond what many believers are willing to engage in. Others hold fast to the trichotomist view because they refuse to consider any alternative.⁶

Now regarding the second question, that of the origins of our souls/spirits: at first glance, the simplest explanation would seem to be that God creates our souls. The soul is a supernatural thing, after all, so it must have a supernatural origin and in Gen. 2:7 we find a description of precisely such a supernatural origin for Adam’s soul. However, as with the dichotomist/trichotomist debate, this view has several difficulties which emerge upon more careful reflection:

1. If we need both a body and a soul to be human, and God must specially create each human soul, then when does He implant that soul into a baby? Unless it is at the very instant of physical conception, then one would have to argue that for some time, however short a period it might be, an embryo is not human. Of course, this difficulty is erased if one argues that God does, in fact, implant the soul into the embryo at the very instant of conception, but this is purely speculative and, moreover, leads to another difficulty:

³ It is true that A' amplifies A, elaborating on what kind of “speaking out” is in view, but this observation does not negate the fundamentally synonymous relationship of the two elements.

⁴ So why are there two different words? There are probably several reasons. First, some authors used both words for the sake of stylistic variation. Second, some authors simply liked one word more than the other. Third, some authors used one word rather than the other to avoid confusion, such as to keep readers from confusing the human spirit from the Holy Spirit.

⁵ 1Th. 5:23 is still problematic for the dichotomist view but we can account for this with far less complexity than is required to account for the observations above and still hold to a trichotomist view.

⁶ There are, of course, exceptions to this. I know several trichotomists who have carefully considered the evidence and reject the dichotomist arguments on rational grounds. I have great respect for them even though I disagree with their conclusions. Unfortunately, as I said: they are the exception.

2. When a man and a woman conceive a child, is God forced at that point to create a soul for the child? In other words, is God doing our bidding? Worse still, if a child is conceived because of a sinful sexual act and God is then forced to create a soul for the child, doesn't this force God to participate in human sin?
3. Since the Bible clearly teaches that human beings are born sinful, we must ask some difficult questions about where this "sin nature" resides. We cannot say that the physical body itself is the root of sin. While the physical world has been corrupted by sin and does, therefore, contribute to sinfulness in various ways, we should not forget that the physical world is not inherently evil. On the contrary, God declared the physical world He had made "good". Furthermore, Adam and Eve's sin led to the corruption of creation. Their sin did not flow from a corrupted creation. We sin because our wills are sinful and our wills reside not in our bodies but in our souls. Thus, the sin nature resides primarily in our souls, not in our bodies (though the lusts of the body may exert considerable influence over our already sin-inclined souls). That being the case, we must ask: why do I have a sinful soul? Did it become sinful when God implanted it in my body? No, again, that would make the physical world the root of all evil and this is not what the Bible teaches at all. So, did God make my soul sinful before He put it in my body and, if so, wouldn't that make Him directly responsible for my sin? If I knowingly create a faulty defibrillator and then it kills a patient, who is responsible for their death? Yet Scripture is clear we are the only ones responsible for our sin.
4. Many evangelical theologians believe that the statement about God "ceasing" or "resting" from his creative work on the seventh day (Gen 2:2) indicates that God stopped creating *ex nihilo*. This Latin phrase means "from nothing" and refers to the fact that the previous six days of creation involved God speaking things into existence that had not existed in any form before. In other words, He didn't just re-mold or re-shape something He had previously created (*ex quispiam* – "from something"). Rather, He called things into existence without the use of pre-existing materials.⁷ However, this *ex nihilo* kind of creation seems to have ceased on the seventh day and there is no clear indication in the Bible that God has created anything *ex nihilo* since that time. But, if God is specially creating each human soul, then this would require Him to be continuing to engage in *ex nihilo* creation even though the larger witness of Scripture seems to argue against this.

These observations create considerable difficulty for the view that God makes each and every human soul as a special act of creation. But what is the alternative?

⁷ This doesn't mean that the first six days of creation didn't also involve some re-molding. For instance, God created Adam by re-molding the clay He had previously created. The first six days of creation involved both *ex nihilo* and *ex quispiam* creation. However, from the seventh day forward God seems to have only created things *ex quispiam*.

The alternative is to understand that human spiritual nature is created in a manner similar to the way that human physical nature is created; that is, there is a spiritual analogue to the process that God put in place by which human parents conceive their children. When a man and a woman conceive a child, as he/she inherits his/her parents' physical natures, he/she also inherits his/her parents' spiritual nature as well. And, as sin has broken our physical natures in ways that children inherit (genetic birth defects), so it has broken our spiritual nature in ways that children inherit (sin nature).

It is worth noting that God breathed a spirit/soul into Adam but when Eve was fashioned from Adam's rib, there was no mention of Him breathing a soul into her. There seem to be three possible explanations for this:

1. She didn't have a soul (unlikely!)
2. God did breathe a soul into her but it isn't mentioned in Scripture. This is possible, but difficult to understand, given that Gen. 1:27 seems to go out of its way to make women and men co-equal in terms of their essence.⁸
3. With the physical nature borrowed from Adam came a spiritual nature as well.

Again, Occam's Razor forces us to reconsider the viability of a popular theological belief. Given the problems that arise from the idea that God specially creates each human soul, another option seems called for. Fortunately, another option is available and it is one that appears to be consistent with both the biblical evidence and the philosophical/theological considerations. We don't think that God specifically and directly causes each physical birth defect...why shouldn't it also be the case that he does not specifically and directly cause each spiritual birth defect?

So What?

So there you have it, an interesting little theological excursion occasioned by some decidedly non-theological maxims: Occam's Razor and Kuhn's Laws of Paradigm Shifts. At the end of the day, I don't much mind whether you agree or not with the solutions I have proposed to these theological issues. Far more important to me is the question of whether or not we as believers are examining our doctrine to make sure it actually fits what God has told us and what we know to be true in other ways. Holding on to doctrine simply because it is what we've always heard is a recipe for legalism and, in the end, false teaching.

¹⁰ The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the

⁸ **Genesis 1:27:** God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Jews. ¹¹ Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so.

Acts 17:10-11

Happy Theologizing!