

An atheist rubs shoulders with creationists

***Among the Creationists:
Dispatches from the Anti-
Evolutionist Front Line***

Jason Rosenhouse

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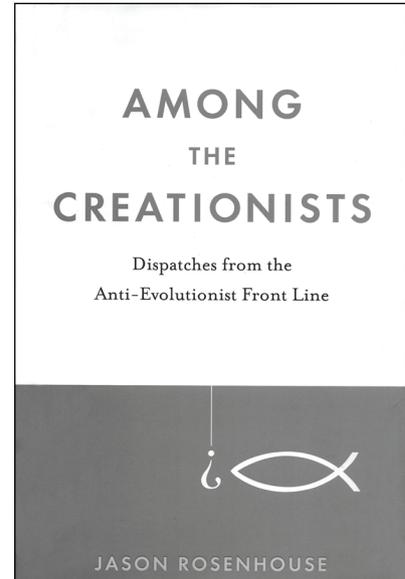
Jason Rosenhouse is Associate Professor of Mathematics at James Madison University in Virginia, USA. His book differs from other anti-creationism tomes in that the author spent a lot of time in conversation with creationists and other Christian believers. His book is experience-oriented more than issue-oriented.

A major shortcoming of this book is the tendency of the author to bring up some matter, and variously express a series of gratuitous opinions, or repeat the arguments of some cited evolutionist work, without analyzing them in any way. He also seems to follow a double standard, as discussed later.

The author's anti-theism

Rosenhouse seems to go out of his way to keep reminding the reader that he does not believe in God (e.g. pp. 8, 14, 20, 181, 210). He expresses this in the light of his Jewishness:

“I love that for all my mordant atheism I am not even one whit less Jewish than the most orthodox rabbi ... Do I believe that God made a covenant with my ancestors in which we agreed to live by certain implausible laws in return for the land of Israel? Of course not. That idea is *ridiculous* [emphasis in original]” (pp. 181–182).



This is not to say that the author would necessarily like to see the end of religion. Rather, he would like it divested of all supernaturalism, and transformed into a purely cultural practice. As an example, he cites the Scandinavian nations, where many people profess to be Christians and get baptized, but very few actually believe it. As a further example, he delights in the experience he had, soon after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York, during a discussion session at his synagogue: “At no point did *anyone* bring up God, or implore people to pray, or raise theological questions about evil, or suggest that the victims of the attacks had, at least, gone to a better place. It made me proud to be a Jew [emphasis in original]” (p. 181).

Does Scandinavia prove the irrelevance of God?

In common with many atheistic authors that I have recently read, Rosenhouse brings up the Scandinavian nations as models. They are

the ones where religion is minimal, and yet the people are prosperous, content, and largely free of crime and other obvious maladies. This, to him and other atheists, proves, at very least, that belief in God is not necessary for happiness, public order, and morality.

To begin with, what can we infer from a people that are prosperous, content, and generally free of grotesque moral flaws? It is entirely possible to be that way while being inwardly wretched, poor, and miserable (Revelation 3:17). In fact, a spirit of indifference to God is perhaps the greatest sin of all. Besides, prosperity and outward morality in this life, by itself, tells us little about the state of one's soul. Finally, the moral character of a people is not fully disclosed when things are going well: The character of a people is demonstrated when there is adversity.

Permit a few iconoclastic comments. There is evidence that the Scandinavian nations are not quite the secularist cradle-to-grave socialist paradises they are made out to be. For instance, in Denmark, the rate of alcoholism among young people is very high.¹ In addition, researchers Jepsen *et al.*² comment: "Denmark has one of the highest alcohol consumption rates in Northern Europe."

The Scandinavian countries, perhaps in large part because they are welfare states (which itself may be a form of immorality), have some of the highest divorce rates in the world.³ Still other notable problems can be identified in the atheistic Scandinavian model societies.⁴

Furthermore, it seems that the Scandinavians are still living on the 'interest' of Christian 'capital', including strong family cohesion and a 'Protestant work ethic'. This has carried over to Americans descended from Scandinavians generations ago, who today earn an average income 20% higher than the American norm. Historically, the rise of the Scandinavian economies occurred in the few decades before WW2; e.g. Sweden

had the fastest economic growth in the developed world between 1870 and 1936. Conversely, the economy has stagnated since secularist welfarism was introduced—Sweden sank to 13th out of 28 industrialized nations between 1936 and 2008.^{5,6}

An evangelistic rally

Rosenhouse attended a preaching event by famous evangelist Luis Palau (pp. 16–17). He complained that Palau did not give any evidences for the factuality of his message (as if he was supposed to). Rosenhouse said he felt completely unstirred by Palau's message and could not understand why people were so visibly moved. He fully expected Palau to get no response to the altar call and expressed amazement that people did come forward. In reflecting upon Rosenhouse's attitude, I could not help but think of 1 Corinthians 2:14, where we are told that the natural man does not receive the things of God, because they are foolishness to him.

Philosophy of religion

The author delves into the philosophy of religion. He cites, and briefly discusses, the works of some philosophers.

As an example, Rosenhouse brings up the so-called problem of suffering and evil, and God's existence. He says that the "We cannot understand God's ways" suggestion is an admission that there is no answer to the problem of suffering and evil. He is engaging in special pleading with a vengeance! Time and time again, he refers to the fact that scientists often say: "We just don't know." Now, if scientists can suspend judgment about things that they do not understand, and hold out faith that there *is* an answer, which may or may not become manifest sometime in the future, then why cannot theists do the same?

Rosenhouse also entertains the premise that no explanation or compensation could ever reconcile God with the magnitude of suffering and evil that exists. However, that is someone's *opinion*, and nothing more. What if, for example, one second in heaven erases 100 years of miserable life on earth? But don't expect atheists to be familiar with answers already in the Bible, e.g.: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

Compromising evangelicals repudiated

It is not only modern creationists who reject the "God worked through evolution" notion as inconsistent with God's character, if only because it would make God the Author of suffering and evil. Similar views were held by evolutionists such as Francisco Ayala (p. 151) and philosophers such as Bertrand Russell (p. 152).

Now consider the Bible itself. The author sagely quips:

"Suppose that science had discovered that the Earth was roughly ten thousand years old. Suppose further that the fossil record confirmed the creation of all animals, and that biologists found a variety of genetic codes in nature, distributed in a manner consistent with a reasonable notion of 'created kind'. Would anyone consider that an embarrassment for the Bible? Would anyone today be arguing that Genesis *obviously* was not meant to be taken literally or to instruct us in science? [emphasis in original]" (p. 164).

Rosenhouse adds the following: "If you want to redefine original sin, or summon forth strained interpretations of Genesis to reconcile evolution with Adam and Eve, then go right ahead. But please do not pretend that this represents some convergence of ancient wisdom with modern understandings. This is not science and religion in con-

version. This is science telling it like it is, and religion desperately trying to catch up” (p. 177).

A seeming openness to creationism

Unlike other ardent evolutionists, Rosenhouse generally avoids an automatically dismissive or automatically condescending attitude towards creationist contentions. He rejects the portrayal of creationists as yahoos or ignorant backwoodsmen.

Rosenhouse has a positive opinion of the quality of the Creation Museum in Kentucky:

“Have no illusions about the level of professionalism involved at the Creation Museum. This is not a fly-by-night operation or an amateurish set-up run out of someone’s basement. You would never mistake it for the Smithsonian, but the exhibits look good and the environment is generally pleasant” (p. 137).

Here is how the author assesses the impetus behind creationism:

“My conclusions will not be to everyone’s liking. In particular, I do not agree that evolution and Christianity can easily coexist. My claim is not that there is flat-out contradiction between the two, but simply that evolution provides enough to disquiet a traditional Christian that it is unsurprising that so many believe that they must choose one or the other. Moreover, it is a mistake in my view to think that anti-evolutionism is primarily about an idiosyncratic interpretation of the Bible clung to by a handful of extremists. Of far greater concern are the implications of evolution for human significance, the cruelty of the evolutionary process, and the demise of the traditional design argument. In my conversations with creationists, these are the points, far more than concerns about the age of the Earth or an understanding of

Genesis 1, that seem endlessly to recur” (p. xiii).

Rosenhouse claims to have initially found many creationist arguments persuasive. That was, he says, until he read the works of Philip Kitcher, Niles Eldredge, and Douglas Futuyma (p. 19). The informed reader may do a double-take, as I did, and question the credibility of Rosenhouse’s overall reasoning, especially the credibility of his understanding of creationism. If Rosenhouse is a seeker and thinker, how could he be impressed by those authors from so long ago? Fact is, Kitcher, Eldredge, and Futuyma had written nothing more than superficial hatched-jobs on creationism, and had been soundly debunked long ago.⁷ Rosenhouse should know better.



Figure 1. The original partial skeleton of the australopithecine Lucy.

A few of the author’s double standards

The author complains that creationist speakers often speak on matters that are outside of their expertise. Yet Rosenhouse has no problem dwelling on biology, philosophy, and Christian theology—all of which are decidedly removed from his area of expertise, which is mathematics.

Rosenhouse one-sidedly complains about creationists who had indicated that no amount of evidence could ever convince them that the Bible is wrong. How many evolutionists could never become convinced that evolution is wrong?

The author complains that many home schoolers and attendees of Bible colleges live an insular life in which they are never exposed to non-Christian points of view. This seems laughable in view of the ways that such Christians are taught evolution—often to a greater depth than the counterparts in a secular school. And the state education system is not the only way that children are indoctrinated into evolution; the media and entertainment industries also ram evolution down our throats. In addition, how many secularists, notably in media and academia, know absolutely nothing about biblical fundamentalists apart from the lurid mischaracterizations and stereotypes of them?

In fact, Rosenhouse finally admits this double standard: “Insularity is a two-way street. It is not for nothing that academics have a reputation for living in ivory towers” (p. 15).

A false equivalency on Darwinian racism

The author is quite indignant at suggestions that Darwinism was behind various social evils, notably racism. He tries to confuse the issue by citing some early 20th century American southerners who had objected to evolution because it seemed to favour the equality of blacks and whites.

Rosenhouse's false equivalence, of Christian racism and Darwinian racism, is just that. A fringe element should not be conflated with the mainstream. Mainstream Christianity has always accepted the fact that blacks are fully human—as evidenced, for example, by sending missionaries to them. This activity implied recognition of the fact that non-whites have souls, and that non-whites are capable of understanding morality and living according to this morality. Racist ideas were never found in the Bible; rather, existing racist ideas from society were read into the Bible, with Scripture-twisting not found in non-racist areas. Ironically, long-agers demand that Christians do the same thing in principle: read the current fad of uniformitarianism into Scripture.

On the other hand, racism had been no add-on to, or fringe element of, Darwinism. For the longest time, Darwinism *was* racism—scientific racism, but nevertheless racism. In fact, racism was part of the everyday vocabulary of mainstream Darwinists, whose ideas revolved around the presumed and self-evident innate inferiority of non-whites to whites. Finally, such attitudes permeated Darwinian thinking for decades after 1859.⁸

The australopithecine 'Lucy' and human evolution

Rosenhouse cites Senter,⁹ who compared 36 skeletal traits shared between modern humans (*Homo sapiens*), the australopithecine 'Lucy' (*Australopithecus afarensis*; AL-288-1) (figure 1) and the modern chimp (*Pan troglodytes*). Senter concluded that, of the 36 traits, 14 were like those in the chimp and the remaining 22 were like those in the human, and this proved that 'Lucy' was transitional between ape and human, and not simply an ape. Of the 22 human-like traits, 12 were related to bipedalism and 10 were not.

An obvious problem with Senter's study is that there is no way to verify the developmental independence of the morphological characters he 'atomized' into discrete traits. Hence, how many independent traits there are is not known, but most likely it is less than the 36 considered above. However, a more serious flaw with Senter's argument is that "it would be wrong to simply consider Lucy as half-ape, half-human, since she bears characteristics that are not present in apes or humans".¹⁰ As such, it makes much more sense to consider the australopithecines as unique types of primates. This would be consistent with the conclusion of evolutionist Charles Oxnard's extensive analysis of these creatures. According to Oxnard:

"In each case although initial studies suggest that the fossils are similar to humans, or at worst intermediate between humans and African apes, study of the complete evidence readily shows that the reality is otherwise. These fossils clearly differ more from humans and African apes, than do these two living groups from each other. The australopithecines are unique."¹¹

On a related subject, Senter repeats the argument that creationist disagreements about whether a given taxon is a human or ape proves the transitional state of these fossils. This is a *non sequitur*. It, first of all, assumes that all creationist studies are equally detailed and are therefore legitimately juxtaposed with each other. The argument also ignores the fact that evolutionists themselves disagree as to the extent and significance of the "humanness" of the fossils. Finally, disagreement on the fossils may show nothing more than the ambiguity that is inherent in the interpretation of paleo-anthropological evidence. If so, then this ambiguity *by itself* undermines the certitude of the premise that humans evolved from 'Lucy' or from any other extinct 'ape-man'.

Methodological naturalism and ID (Intelligent Design)

Rosenhouse defends methodological naturalism in science as something that stems from the fact that there is no evidence for the supernatural, and not because scientists have decided *a priori* that supernatural events do not exist or otherwise cannot be part of science. However, not surprisingly, he does not tell us what he, or scientists, would consider adequate evidence for the supernatural. Would any evidence be good enough?

The author repeats the argument that a scientist would not consider God a valid explanation for an event any more than a plumber would consider God an explanation for a clog in a pipe. His argument is based on at least two sets of fallacies.

One fallacy is theological, and related to the attributes of God. Pointedly, one of the main attributes of God is that of Creator. On the other hand, involvement in plumbing is not an attribute of God. Consequently, rejection of God in creation is a repudiation of an attribute of God, and therefore atheistic. On the other hand, rejection of God in plumbing is not a repudiation of any attribute of God, and is therefore not atheistic.

A second fallacy is scientific and related to both singularities (miracles) and normative (non-miraculous) events. Both can coexist, and the reality of one does not negate the reality of the other. Let us, for the sake of argument, stretch the definition of plumbing to include static water-bearing vessels. Consider the miracle of water changed to wine (John 2:9). It was a singularity. On the other hand, the everyday behaviour of water in containers and pipes is normative.

What does all this mean? The admission of the fact of Jesus Christ changing water into wine does not require the plumber to contemplate divine intervention in the clogging of a pipe. Conversely, the acceptance of

only a naturalistic explanation for a clogged pipe does not require the plumber to assume that water could never be changed into wine by divine fiat.

Irreducible complexity in living things

The author brings up the Krebs cycle, the vertebrate immune system, blood-clotting cascade, wings of birds, and bacterial flagellum. He brushes off contentions about their irreducible complexity, pointing to the (alleged) ability of evolution to transform pre-existing structures, and the ability of transitional structures to have dual functions.

This is a *non sequitur*. Even if evolution takes place, and does so by modification of pre-existing structures, it, by itself, tells us nothing about how irreducibly complex structures themselves supposedly came about. More fundamentally, the “modification of pre-existing structures” is a form of ‘evolspeak’—a rhetorical device that presupposes the factuality of evolution. For instance, one could note the similarities between the head of the sledge hammer and the head of the pickaxe, and argue that the pickaxe is an evolutionarily modified sledge hammer. What’s more, the evolutionist could speculate that the transitional tool survived the natural selection process because it served as both an adequate hammer and an adequate pickaxe. However, such reasoning would only be potentially valid if one first assumed that evolution of tools takes place, and that one tool can evolve into another tool.

The author brings up the arch as a mystery-solved example of irreducible complexity. The arch would fall down if you removed any part of it. But it was not always so. When the arch was being built, scaffolding was used to hold the parts in place, and when the arch was finished, the scaffolding was removed, only then introducing the irreducible complexity. By analogy,

evolutionists would have us believe that currently irreducibly complex structures were once not irreducibly complex. It sounds nice but it has no substantive evidence for it. In fact, Rosenhouse tacitly admits as much. He revealingly says: “By applying similar principles, biologists have uncovered plausible evolutionary scenarios for a variety of complex adaptations” (p. 127). Priceless! Rosenhouse would actually have us believe that “plausible evolutionary scenarios” are strong enough to overturn the fatal objection, to evolution, posed by irreducibly complex structures.

Elsewhere (p. 53), Rosenhouse defends evolutionary scenarios as starting points for research and not as ends in themselves. However, “starting points for research” are hardly synonymous with facts, much less solved problems. In fact, evolutionists, in their chronic discounting of the supernatural, always say that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence”. Very well, then, let the same standards apply to them. So-called “starting points of research” are hardly synonymous with evidence, let alone extraordinary evidence.

Conclusions

The reader may, at first, think of this book as the work of someone who is searching for answers and attempting to fairly understand the creationist and ID movements. Such an attitude is encouraged by the author’s tone being quite free of stridency. In addition, it is clear that the author has spent much time with creationists in order to understand first hand how they think.

Upon close examination, however, Rosenhouse’s book turns out to be a typical anti-creationist one. The absolute factuality of evolution is treated as an axiom (actually, the mantra is of being supported by ‘overwhelming evidence’). Challenges to evolution are dismissed, belittled, or explained away, often in very superficial manner, and

the contentions of the evolutionists are accepted with little if any question.

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