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# **How Does Science Address the Question of “Divinity of Humans”?**

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## **Introduction—Where Did the Idea of “Divinity of Humans” Come From?**

For long, humans have dominated the world. Despite the enormous number of species in existence, only humans, rather peculiarly, have learnt how to make tools, build houses and start civilizations. Our ancestors have pondered: What makes us different? Is it a blessing given by God?

Among the various theories of human origin, creationism suggests that our ancestors were divinely created by God. The Bible also granted humans superiority over other living and non-living things, empowering us to “rule over” them. (Gen. 1:26) The ability of our mind in moral judgments and rigorous reasoning also, according to the Bible, traces back to “the Tree of Knowledge” and God. (Gen. 3:5)

These beliefs of the “divinity of humans” prevailed in the medieval times when the Roman Catholic Church had a widespread influence in the society. As we advance into the modern era of science and technology, how do scientists address this complex issue?

## Body 1: Science and Creationism

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule . . . over all the creatures that move along the ground.  
(Gen. 1:26)

Following the scientific revolution, new discoveries started to blossom, and scientists began to ponder about human origin and question the long-established creationistic point of view.

In the 19th century, Charles Darwin proposed the theory of evolution based on natural selection, pointing out that the vast number of species are in fact descendants of a common ancestor. (Darwin 93) This becomes a very strong rebuttal against the superiority of humans. Firstly, it stands as a direct conflict with the story of creationism described in the Bible, where it is explicitly stated that each species was being separately created by God<sup>1</sup> (Gen. 1:20–25). Besides, the advantages that humans possess over other species can now be explained scientifically by the “preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations”. (Darwin 74) Since all species originate from a common ancestor, nothing sets us apart from other species which we regard as more inferior. Our dominance in the world might not be a result of God’s commandment. Instead, it might be because we have accumulated traits that enable technological advancements, for instance higher-order thinking skills, whereas other species have preserved other body features to survive in their living conditions. Darwin’s theory

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1 “And God said, ‘Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.’” (Gen. 1:24)

is widely accepted in the scientific community due to an abundance of evidence such as fossil records. With the emergence of such an alternative explanation, the authority of creationism is significantly weakened.

However, the theory of evolution is never free from criticism. Some creationists challenge its validity by claiming that circular reasoning is used to establish the theory, and that fossil records are being interpreted based on the assumption of evolution. (Morris) Even if we accept the theory, there are still plenty of unaddressed questions behind evolution. For example, how did the common ancestor come into existence? How did organic species originate from a world of inorganic substances? Biologists have tried to work out several explanations regarding the origin of life, such as the RNA World Hypothesis (Orgel). Yet, there is insufficient evidence supporting any of these theories.<sup>2</sup> Is it possible that divine power is involved in the emergence of our common ancestor? Since we cannot confirm the evolutionary theory beyond reasonable doubt, we still could not eliminate the possibility of a divine human origin.

## **Body 2: Science and the Human Mind**

For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. (Gen. 3:5)

Why can humans differentiate between good and evil? Why can we learn, remember and reflect? Where is the origin of our consciousness? According to the Bible, we acquire these powers from a sacred origin,

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2 "It is not possible to decide which is correct. It is also unclear whether the RNA world was the first biological world or whether some simpler world preceded it." (Orgel 491)

which is the fruit of the “Tree of Knowledge” (Gen. 3:5). The mystery of the human mind is often linked to divinity. How do scientists evaluate this point of view?

As neuroscientist Eric Kandel has put forward in his writing *In Search of Memory*, “[u]nderstanding consciousness is by far the most challenging task confronting science.” (183) Although we now know that the brain is responsible for these actions, it is still one of the least understood organs in the human body. However, neuroscience empowers us with a reductionist approach of tackling the problem, by studying neurons, the building blocks of the brain, “one cell at a time”<sup>3</sup> (181). Scientists are most curious about recurring facts, which often happen to give us the most useful information.<sup>4</sup> (Poincare 162–163)

We begin to realize that the architect behind our outstanding intelligence might not necessarily be God. We just possess more neurons wired in a more sophisticated manner (Roth and Dicke), as simple as that. Researchers can even make use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to find out specific structures in our brain responsible for a particular action. For instance, the orbital and ventromedial prefrontal cortices are shown to be associated with emotionally-driven moral decisions. (Pascual *et al.*)

As I read through literature about how neuroscience has revolutionized people’s mindset about our mind, I recall James Watson’s slightly arrogant comment in his writing *DNA: The Secret of Life*, “[l]ife was just a matter of physics and chemistry.”<sup>5</sup> (141) Indeed, the more I understand about the human mind, the more it looks like an exquisitely organized biological

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3 “Rather, he told me, to understand mind we needed to look at the brain one cell at a time.” (181)

4 “The most interesting facts are those which can be used several times, those which have a chance of recurring.” (Poincare 162)

5 “Life was just a matter of physics and chemistry, albeit exquisitely organized physics and chemistry.” (Watson 141)

machine to me, and the less inclined I become to believe that the human mind is "sacred". Divinity is somehow mysterious and unreachable. If we are to decipher the mechanics of the human brain to its most precise detail, it is no longer something divine.

Nevertheless, the more we know, the more we do not. The complete understanding of the human mind suggested in the previous paragraph might be too ideal. In reality, neuroscientists have to confront the "hard problem", which is the subjectivity of human consciousness. (Kandel 186) Consciousness, as opposed to other topics of scientific research, is rather subjective and personal. We can never study another person's moods or thoughts directly, as we can only obtain this information indirectly by asking that person to report.<sup>6</sup> (185) It is practically impossible to perfectly align the research target's subjective perception, his or her reported sensations and the message received by the researcher. Kandel also pointed out that biological science and consciousness are inherently different. Unlike the neuron doctrine which states that neurons are the basic components of our brain, we have no concept of anything that could be regarded as the "building block of consciousness". Although we can use a reductionist approach to study neurons, we cannot follow suit in addressing consciousness, which is "irreducibly subjective". (186) These two challenges make it very difficult for the human brain to fully understand itself. This inherent improbability leads some people to believe that there are limits to which science can reach, and it is necessary to bring divinity on stage to account for human consciousness. (Leap) We could not comprehend the complexity of human mind because it is meticulously created by God, who possesses divine power beyond the limits of our imagination.

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6 "We experience our own ideas, moods, and sensations directly, whereas we can only appreciate another person's experience indirectly, by observing or hearing about it." (185)

## Reflection: Science vs Religion

Belief in evolution is a faith that blinds human minds to truth that only God can reveal. . . . , science will never come to understand the human mind, because it will not recognize God as Creator. (Leap)

In the above sections, we are amazed by the power of science, but yet we come to admit that there are areas beyond the reach of science. In this case, should we use religion to account for phenomena that cannot be explained by science?

Personally, I am more inclined towards a no. This approach is counterproductive to scientific progress. When we encounter a question that cannot be solved by science, describing it using a religious framework is essentially equivalent to closing the case file. Religion is a matter that cannot be verified or falsified, and all we can do is to have faith in it. Associating an unaddressed issue with religion would hinder scientists from exercising their intelligence and striving for a better solution. It is like surrendering and declaring that a mission is impossible whatsoever.

However, I acknowledge that I am holding this viewpoint largely because I have been educated since young to address inquiries in a scientific approach. It is understandable that people with strong religious beliefs tend to trust that human origin and consciousness are linked to divinity. Even in the hypothetical situation that all doubts regarding evolution are meticulously tackled, and there remains no question of its validity, it is likely that there would still be people firmly believing in creationism. Like science, religion also builds upon a coherent and interconnected system of beliefs, with creationism as one of the fundamental blocks.

Accepting evolution could mean to some people a disastrous destruction of their faith.

## Conclusion

From the previous discussion, we can see how science attempts to address the questions of “divinity of humans”—whether human origin and human consciousness are related to God and divine power. Science is undoubtedly a powerful tool, and scientists are apt to trust that both problems can ultimately be resolved into “a matter of physics and chemistry” (Watson 141), in claiming so completely denying the possibility of divinity in humans. However, every scientific theory has its limitations, and supporters of religious beliefs make use of the shortcomings of scientific theories to advocate their own beliefs. We come to appreciate that there is a constant struggle between science and religion, as well as logic and faith. In the end, this is never a simple clear-cut issue, and it all depends on perspective.

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**Teacher's comment:**

The writer argues, in a convincing manner, how science can refute the divinity of humans and why the scientific explanations are preferred over the religious ones. This essay concludes with a critical reflection on the constant and unresolved tension between science and religion. (Szeto Wai Man)

