

Macky Goldman

To: Robert Harper-Mangels [r-mangels@nwu.edu]
Subject: May I ask a question or two...?

Bs"D
11 Elul 5759
23 Aug '99

Dr. Robert Harper-Mangels,
Shalom from sunny downtown Be'er-Sheva in the Holy Land,

Like you, I also have no desire to engage in a long, drawn-out debate on these issues, certainly not via a list which does not have this as the focus of its discussions. Therefore, I am writing you off-list, first of all to thank you for your insightful comments (and your style, which I like), and also because your approach was to-the-point, and not *ad hominem*. You raised a number of points which have given me cause for thinking, and I would like to request your permission to 'return the favour'.

31 years ago this past weekend, the Soviet juggernaut tried to impose its 'truth' on another nation which was trying to find its own way, in what was dubbed 'the Dubcek spring'. I mention this by way of warming-up, because it was, for me, a seminal event in my growing up. I worked then with a man who had made it to Montreal after escaping the clutches of the Soviets in Hungary 12 years earlier. He kept warning me that the Russians were simply buying time, and I, of course, did not believe him. I used to get a ride to work with him every day, and I still remember getting into the car with him that fateful morning, and I was in shock. What impressed me, and remained with me, even more is that he did not say anything to me. Sure, he was angry, but not surprised. He explained to me later that sometimes there is no need to say anything. Ultimately, the truth does out. You can pretend for only so long, you can use force of arms to hide things, or ram your truth down someone's throat, but it is a terrible waste of time. As John Milton expressed it in "Aereopagitica", he cannot 'praise a cloistered virtue' that is not willing to go out in the market-place and get itself sullied...

In that spirit, I have a question or two with the purpose in mind being to activate our gray matter on what might otherwise be an ordinary Monday morning...

1) Acting on my firm belief that G-d is alive and well (and not just here in Israel!), is He limited in what He can do? This question is prompted, in part, by what you wrote:

=If you believe God created all life, then you should be able to accept the possibility that God started with single-celled life and used evolution to 'guide' us to the point we're at now.=

Quite a number of years ago, a colleague of mine, who was a close follower and confidante of the Lubavitcher Rabbi, and who, as an epidemiologist, was often consulted by NASA with regard to possible repercussions (unknown communicable diseases, etc.) of bringing back objects from outer space, approached the Rabbi out of concern that he was 'dabbling' in forbidden territory for a believing Jew. Do we not believe that there is no extra-terrestrial life, he asked.

The answer the Rabbi gave him provides an insight into what makes us tick...: He informed my friend that we do not know whether there is life "out there" or not. But to believe that G-d can't create life elsewhere or do anything else He wants to do, is to not believe in an omnipotent and omniscient G-d. We, as partners in the creation of the world, are required to investigate His ways and His deeds to the utmost of our abilities.

So yes, He can start with a single-cell and use evolution as His means "to guide us to the point we're at now".

But why should He have to?

You probably remember better than I who it was who said something to the effect that if there are several ways for 'Nature' to do something, she will choose the simplest way.

One may well contend that creation is not simple.

But why is it more simple for a single, living cell than for a more complex species?

Life, in an organism where it did not exist a moment ago, is still a miracle, and not a natural occurrence.

Unfortunately, the opposite does not seem to be the case, as witnessed in Turkey these last few days, to name but one example.

2) You wrote:

=And there are some things about the universe that will never be understood. That's where religion and philosophy come in, and they play an important role, but they should not be confused with science.=

What weight would you give to the following 'modest' contention?

G-d was not invented by man to answer questions which he has no other way of answering.

G-d preceded man, as shown by G-d creating man, and not vice-versa.

What man invented (when he wasn't being productive by getting on with the business of developing this world both physically and otherwise...) was not G-d, but gods.

And these were designed, not to answer questions, but to allow man to do what he wants to do.

If there is no One higher authority to answer to, even if these 'beings' are, as it were, stronger than me, I only have to play off one against the other to get what I want.

Further than that, multiple-choice ultimately leads to no choice at all.

If there is more than one god, there is more than one Truth. More than one truth leads to what is termed 'moral equivalence'. Each truth is good for the person who believes it. That may or may not be OK for one who is already into some mind-set.

But what about the inquiring mind?

What about someone who is examining different philosophies, ideologies, regimes...?

How does he weigh the pros and cons?

There is no one truth, he may ask himself? Fine, so there isn't. I'll do what's good for me.

Even though we have never met, Dr. Harper-Mangels, I don't think you would like such a world to live in.

For without that One Truth, there is no truth. No truth means no choice, for there is no reason

to choose one path over another.

Ultimately, each of us, in such a world, submits to those forces which are at work inside us, because there is no motivation to try to overcome them.

The first man was called Adam. The reason is understood to be 2-fold:

one, because he was created from the ground (in Hebrew, adama=ground); and,

two, because he was created in the likeness of G-d (in Hebrew, adameh=I will be like)

We (at least those of us who believe) know that this cannot refer to an external, physical likeness, since G-d is not corporeal. Therefore, it refers to something about man's inner nature, and that is the quality of free choice.

Just as G-d has free choice to do what is right, so does man. He can never claim that something inside makes him do something (I know that statement is attackable. I'm prepared to defend it, although I believe I already have, in part, by the foregoing).

G-d has given us a world to understand and develop. He expects us to do so. But it is a maze, and not everything is revealed. Enough is, however, for us to find our way.

It seems to me that evolution is one of the quandaries He has given us to cope with.

He expects us also to develop ourselves, to move beyond the primitive state we are in at birth.

He gives us, each of us, the tools we need to achieve the goals that we are capable of achieving.

He expects us to use them.

And finally (at least for now),

I agree with you when you say that

In the absence of absolute proof, we must make our best possible guesses based on the evidence available to us. For example, radioisotope dating suggests the earth is several billion years old. Rates of decay could have been faster in the past, or they could have been slower, but there is no credible evidence to suggest this is the case. The evidence could be wrong, but it is the best evidence we have...

We must go on the basis of the evidence we have.

My contention in my previous letter was simply that there is more evidence than is being considered.

You may choose to not answer this letter.

However, no matter whether you do or don't, I owe you a debt of gratitude for "letting"/stimulating me to write it - the thoughts that I have expressed here have been running around in my head for a long time, but this is the first time that I am putting them down on paper.

For that I thank you.

Mordechai

Dr. Mordechai (Macky) Goldman

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Im Ashkochech Yeroushalayim, Tishkach Yemini.
[Psalms 137:5]


Macky Goldman

From: Robert Harper-Mangels [r-mangels@nwu.edu]
Sent:
To: Macky Goldman
Subject: Re: Another word, perhaps the last...


יום שלישי אוגוסט 24 19:29 1999

A brief reply, a few questions and comments.

>It is my contention that there is irrefutable objective evidence that G-d
>exists and that He created the world, in a state which we may agree or not
>as to how developed it was.

Here is where we disagree. I do not believe that there is such evidence. A nation may have heard the voice of God 5000 years ago, but there is no evidence. We have oral traditions, we have the Bible, but stories change over time and somebody wrote the Bible. How do we really know who heard what? You may accept this as an article of faith, but I do not accept the assertion that there is objective evidence. I would be interested to know what else you consider as evidence in this matter. 

>You prefer not to state your position on this point, saying only:

Only because I consider my personal beliefs irrelevant in this matter. I *believe* the Theory of Evolution is true, because I have been shown a great deal of evidence that supports it, and because nobody has proposed an alternative explanation which seems to fit the facts so well. I also *believe* that there is no God, that we are the result of a cosmic accident. But this I cannot prove. This is outside the realm of science, it is just a personal belief. If somebody shows me strong, near-irrefutable evidence that God must exist, I will have to reconsider my position. But I have not seen such evidence. You evidently believe that God does exist. I cannot tell you you are wrong, I have no basis for making such an assertion. You might be right. Therefore, while I might feel free to argue with you regarding the existence of God, I would never do so as a scientist. I do not believe his presence or absence can be demonstrated scientifically, and it should not (in my mind) be argued scientifically. 

>And yes, many of the clues do fit the theory of evolution, although I am
>convinced that there are still many unanswered questions. Perhaps with time
>more answers will be found.

→ Should it be presented in a classroom as an alternative explanation, or not?

There are a phenomenal number of unanswered questions, which is what makes this field so exciting! And this is one of my points. By throwing evolution on the table to explain species development, we scientists (most of us, anyway) are not pretending to have answered all the questions. Of course many exist, and some (for example, evolution may work, but this doesn't explain where the *first* cell came from) may never be answered by science. What makes my nuts sometimes is when I hear things like "therefore is no fossil record, therefore evolution must be wrong". Theories are like a work-in-progress, adjustments need to be made as new evidence is revealed or alternative explanations proposed. But unless you have radical new evidence, you don't throw out the whole theory and start from scratch.

>What disturbs me, and always has, is that most people are not as
>clear-headed and open to other possibilities, as you appear to be. It has
>become an "article of faith" that since the evidence is 'overwhelmingly'
>supportive of evolution, therefore there is no Creator.

This is probably the first time I've been accused of being clear-headed and open! *grin* This

statement disturbs me, though, because while I am familiar with the argument, I do not usually hear scientists saying it. More often, it is coming from the mouths of religious leaders who are afraid that science is trying to destroy God. As I've said, I do not personally have faith, but I know many scientists who do. Most do not accept a literal interpretation of the Bible (they believe God exists and created life, but not that he did so in 6 days), but they believe. As I've said, I don't think evolution or any other scientific theories contradict the existence of God. The Universe as we know it seems to follow a very complex but consistent set of rules (gravity, speed of light, etc...). Whether these rules are cosmic accident or part of a plan, who's to say? I just don't see why evolution couldn't be part of God's plan, and I do not know very many scientists who wouldn't concede that point. I fear that things like what happened in Kansas are part of a knee-jerk reaction from a minority of religious zealots who are afraid and defensive for all the wrong reasons. Scientists, as a group, are not the enemy. } who is?

I too have enjoyed this. It has allowed me to express some of the ideas I've had on this topic to someone other than my wife, who is amused by some of my rantings but has heard it all before.

- Rob

I am not afraid - This I explained at the very start of ~~my~~ ^{our} discourse.

I think that very different conclusions can be and have to be drawn about the nature of the world & what we are doing here from the 2 diff. approaches.

As a scientist, I am with you in trying to explain the laws & behaviour of matter/nature as we see it.

As a human being, I feel that we have to look at where these explanations are leading us.

As Tom Lehrer once said about WWB - "Once the rockets go up, who cares where they come down, that's not my dept. Says WWB -"

I look at the world as not a cosmic accident/episode - - we were put here. We have obligations. One of them is to understand the world - }|B2C|
(V'Kivshuko)

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