

# Occam's Razor and Evolution

by Warren Krug

Occam's razor (or Ockham's razor) has nothing to do with a shaving instrument. However, it deserves some attention because from time to time it comes up in the creation-evolution debate. Creationists will sometimes use the Occam's razor principle to point out the unreasonableness of some evolutionist arguments, although in itself the principle cannot be used to prove a specific position is incorrect. Atheists have also on occasion invoked Occam's razor.

The term comes from a medieval English philosopher and Franciscan monk named William of Ockham who held to the principle that "plurality should not be posited without necessity."<sup>1</sup> In other words, one should avoid adding additional steps or parts to an explanation when fewer steps or parts would suffice as well or better. Occam's razor is sometimes called the law of parsimony, which means "the simpler the assumption, the more likely it is correct." This principle was often used in medieval philosophy, and neither the name nor the idea originated with William, but he often made use of it in his work.

In January of this year, the *LSI Blog* covered a story which seemed to call loudly for the invocation of the Occam's razor principle. A team of researchers led by Guang-Hui Xu of China found some fish fossils which they believed could help explain how flying fish (actually gliding fish) had "evolved." Xu's explanation for this process required four distinct steps. First, according to Xu, non-flying fish had to evolve appropriate skulls to help them survive in surface waters. Next, they had to evolve tails to allow them to launch themselves out of water. Thirdly, they needed to evolve wing-like fins so they could glide. Finally, the fish needed to lose body scales so they would become more aerodynamic.

Thus, if Xu's explanation is correct, the fish would have had to go through at least four complicated steps in order to become flying or gliding fish. Many people would consider this scenario to be quite unlikely. The more logical and much simpler explanation is that non-flying fish and gliding fish were created as individual species, and that no complicated evolution process took place because none was needed. This creationist scenario would be an example of Occam's razor, the simpler assumption — though secular scientists would, of course, reject it.

The "tree of evolution" is covered with numerous other lineages that would each require a large number of complicated steps. Think of dinosaur-to-bird evolution, land mammal-to-whale evolution, fish-to-amphibian evolution, etc. — all of which, by the way, are lacking much support in the fossil record. In every case, the simpler explanation would be that God created them just as they are. Of course, secularists would laugh at these explanations as being too simplistic; but for many people, they are the more reasonable explanations and, of course, are in line with the Bible's description of how God created living things "according to their kinds" (Genesis 1).

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<sup>1</sup>"*Pluralitas non est ponenda sine neccesitate.*"

To be sure, Occam's razor may not always arrive at the correct answer to a problem. For instance, if one were to enter a house and find a man lying on the floor dead with a bullet hole in his skull, a gun in his hand, and a suicide note lying nearby, the most obvious and simplest explanation would be that a suicide took place. Yet, it could really have been an elaborately planned murder, made to look like a suicide, even to the point of forging the man's handwriting in composing a fake suicide note. The Occam's razor test would fail in such a situation.

The Occam's razor principle can also be misapplied. As mentioned above, atheists sometime invoke the principle, such as to explain away God — whom they consider to be an unnecessary hypothesis. Or they might say that the universe is too complicated to have been designed by a Creator who would have favored a simpler creation. But why is God an unnecessary hypothesis? Why would God be limited to creating a simple universe?

Still, whenever faced with a question, Occam's razor means that we should first consider the simplest answer to see whether or not all the facts fit. It would be up to those who suggest more complicated solutions to show that their explanations are really needed. While Occam's razor cannot be used to prove that God created the universe and the ancestors of all living things in six days, the Bible does provide this evidence. That should be good enough for any Christian. Yet it seems that we creationists have William of Ockham and his razor on our side.

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