

# Some Thoughts on Causation

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# Some Puzzling Questions

- Among the many objections sometimes made against the truth of the Bible are alleged contradictions regarding causation. For example:
  - Who caused David to take a census of Israel?
    - Was it Satan or was it God?
  - Who hardened Pharoah's heart when Moses was seeking to lead Israel out of slavery?
    - Was it God or was it Pharoah himself?

# David's Census

2 Sam 24:1 (NIV) Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah." 2 So the king said to Joab and the army commanders with him, "Go throughout the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and enroll the fighting men, so that I may know how many there are."

# David's Census

1 Chron 21:1 (NIV) Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel. 2 So David said to Joab and the commanders of the troops, "Go and count the Israelites from Beersheba to Dan. Then report back to me so that I may know how many there are."

# Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

Exod 8:30 (NIV) Then Moses left Pharaoh and prayed to the LORD, 31 and the LORD did what Moses asked: The flies left Pharaoh and his officials and his people; not a fly remained. 32 But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.

# Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

Exod 9:11 (NIV) The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians.

12 But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses.

13 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me...'"

# My Suggestion

- So, who caused David to take a census of Israel?
  - God or Satan?
  - Both of them!
- Who hardened Pharoah's heart so that he would not let Israel go?
  - God or Pharoah?
  - Both of them!

# Layered Causation

- I suggest that both of these are examples of what we may call “layered causation.”
- Consider first the census.
- Who actually took the census?
  - David?
  - Joab?
  - His commanders?
  - Some subordinates?



# David's Census

- Obviously, it depends on what you mean by “who took the census?”
- David ordered Joab to do so.
- Joab presumably ordered the commanders.
- The commanders ordered various subordinates.
- Down at the bottom of the chain of command, certain subordinates actually took the count.

# David's Census

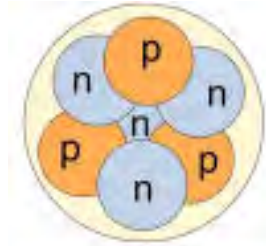
- So we can say that each of these took the census in the sense of causing it to happen.
- The cause of the census was layered, something like an onion.
- Similarly, who caused David to take the census is layered, with both God and Satan being causes at different levels.

# Causation in Nature



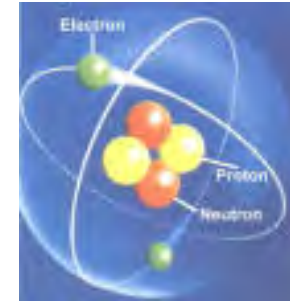
- At the levels we humans have investigated so far, natural phenomena appear to be layered also, with various levels of causation.
- At the lowest levels of which we have knowledge, groups of particles we call “quarks” combine to form neutrons, protons and some other sub-atomic particles.

# The Sub-Atomic Level



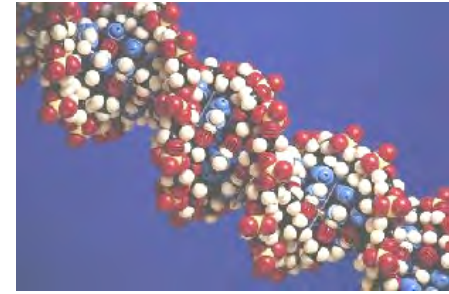
- Protons and neutrons combine to form the nuclei of the various atomic elements.
- The competing forces at this level (e.g., the attraction of the strong nuclear force and the repulsion of the proton charges) determine the stability of the various elements, whether they are stable or subject to radioactive decay.

# The Atomic Level



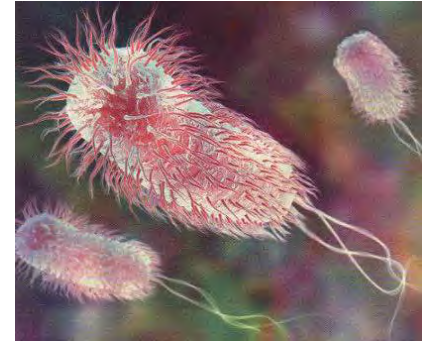
- The positive electrical charges of the protons in the nucleus interact with the negative charges of electrons outside the nucleus to form a sort of miniature planetary system which we call an atom.
- The chemical nature of the various sorts of atoms (hydrogen, oxygen, fluorine, argon) depends on the number of electrons in orbit around the nucleus, and on the way in which quantum phenomena produce closed shells of electrons.

# The Molecular Level



- Atoms may combine in multiples of the same or different atoms to form what we call molecules. These contain from two to thousands of atoms.
- The properties of these molecules are the result of the combined properties of their atoms, the nature of the interatomic forces holding the molecules together, and even the shapes of the molecules themselves.

# The Cellular Level



- In living things, we find that large aggregations of molecules are combined to form very complex machines that we call cells.
- The (eukaryotic) cells are composed of a nucleus, cell fluid, cell membrane, and various organelles that carry out particular functions for the cell.

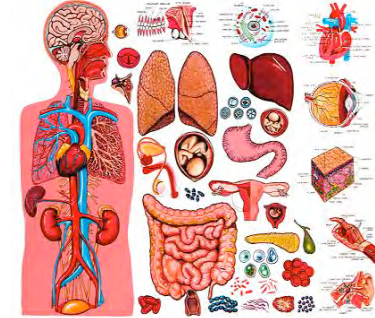
# The Systemic Level



- In multi-cell organisms, the cells are connected in various ways to form systems or organs.
- Nerve cells are joined to form the nervous system.
- Bone cells form bones, muscle cells form muscles, etc.



# The Organism Level



- In multicellular plants and animals of the more complex sort, a whole set of systems are organized so as to function as an individual living being.
- These systems provide means of getting food, eliminating waste, reproducing, growing, movement, protection from predators, etc.

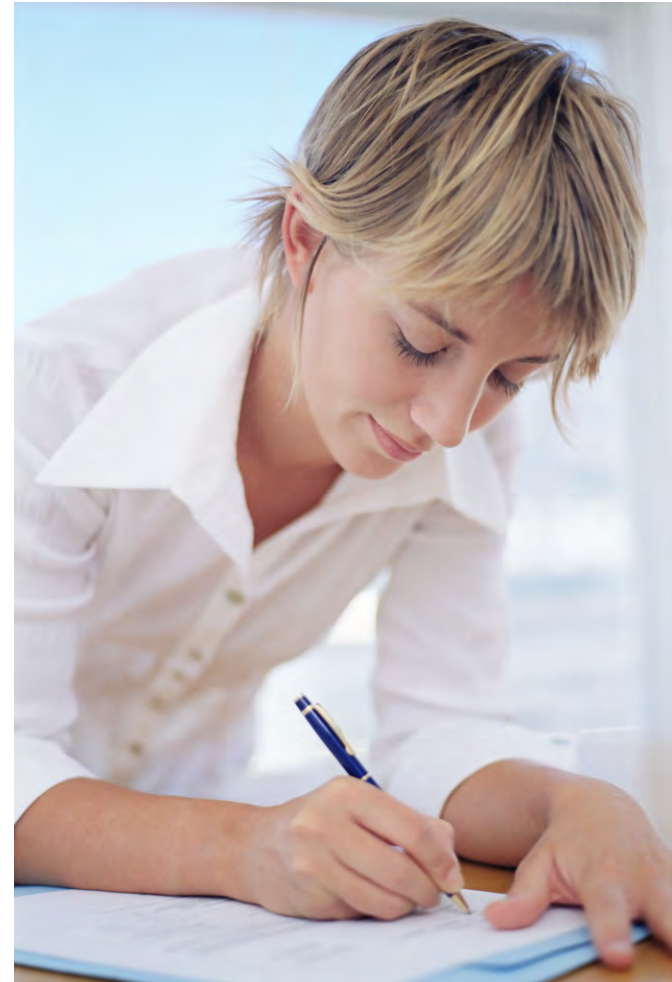
# The Social Level



- For animals and humans in particular, the individual organisms often function together in groups:
  - Families
  - Societies
- These groups work together to provide nurture and protection for the young, mutual aid, etc.

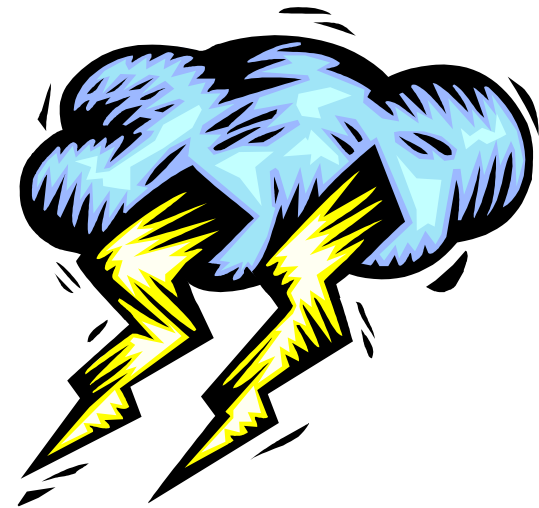
# Causation in Nature

- At each of these levels, there are distinct forms of causation as well as distinct forms of structure.
- Thus we can say of a person writing her name:
  - Her mind caused it.
  - Her fingers caused it.
  - Her muscles caused it.
  - ... and so forth.



# Causation in Nature

- Even if we stick to the non-living part of nature, we find similar layers of causation.
- For example, what caused a particular storm to happen?
  - A low-pressure system...
  - Guided by the jet-stream...
  - Powered by the sun...
  - ... and so forth.



# Causation in a Novel



- Consider how causes operate in a work of fictional literature, such as a novel.
- Inside the novel, we have the sort of causation sketched above in nature, to the extent the novelist wishes to represent it.
- But we have an additional level (we might say outside or above the novel): the creativity of the novelist in selecting plots, creating events, developing characters, etc.

# Causation in the Real World

- As a theist and a Christian, I believe that our real world is somewhat parallel to that of a novel.
- Our world has an author, God, who (like a novelist) may interact at any level, providing causes in addition to those which he has created to operate naturally in our world.

# Another (Invisible) Level

- In addition to the levels that we know about from science, there is an invisible level of causation above that of humans, but not so ultimate as that of God.
- This is the level at which Satan and the angels operate.
- It is seen most clearly in Bible passages such as Job chapters 1-2, and Daniel chapters 3, 5, 6, 10 and 12.

# Insight into Some Problem Areas

- This sort of model seems to me to provide help in understanding some matters that Christians have debated for centuries.
- For instance, it seems to help with the matter of God's sovereignty and human responsibility:
  - God has “written the novel” so whatever happens is ordained by Him.
  - But “inside the novel” each actor is morally responsible for his/her thoughts & actions.



# Insight into Some Problem Areas

- Similarly, it gives some insight into the problem of God and evil:
  - God's relation to evil is like that of a good novelist to his/her evil characters.
  - JRR Tolkien is not to be thought of as approving of the character & deeds of the evil characters in his *Lord of the Rings*:
    - Sauron
    - Gollum
    - Saruman



# Insight into Some Problem Areas

- So God has written history to include evil to show us what evil is like, and the consequences of choosing evil instead of good.
- God is not the “author of evil” in the sense that theologians use this phrase, but he is the author of the story of salvation history, which includes the thoughts & actions of evil beings.

# Some Applications

- We should not try to use the truths of God's ordination or of Satan's devices to relieve ourselves of our responsibility for our thoughts & actions.
- We can trust God that he is indeed "working all things together for good" for those who love him.
- We should labor diligently to do the tasks God has set before us, trusting him with the results.

