

The first face: The miracle of *Phacops rana*

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

It's Dad's birthday next week, I tell the boys. What shall we get him? Without hesitation, they chime in: the *Phacops rana* at A2Z. A2Z is a science and nature store in town, where our youngest is taking weekly yo-yo lessons. His father has been admiring this particular trilobite for months. And why not? No one could fail to be charmed by a creature that, after 400 million years sunk in sediment, has emerged looking like the Venus of Willendorf. Curled up for protection, the *Phacops* sits snugly in the palm of the hand and gazes at us through big, round eyes composed of dozens of miniature calcite lenses. Here is the miracle of a face, very nearly the first face in the fossil record, compounded by the prodigy of mineral vision.

In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin admits that the wonderful complexity of the face—more so, of the eye—makes it difficult to conceive of it evolving by chance variations. But “if numerous gradations from a perfect and complex eye to one very imperfect and simple, each grade being useful to its possessor, can be shown to exist,” Darwin maintains, then we should not be deterred by the imaginative difficulty of the idea. Moreover, now that the evolution of the eye has been successfully modeled on computers, the imaginative difficulty seems almost overcome. Statistical randomness is an accepted feature of biological science and, for Christians, a telling indicator of the contingency of created nature.

The reason this makes many Christians uncomfortable is that there are biologists and philosophers advancing metaphysical claims—about the blind watchmaker, for instance—that outrun their actual competence. A famous statement by the American paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson sounds less like a biology lesson than a rehash of “Why I Am Not a Christian”:

Although many details remain to be worked out, it is already evident that all the objective phenomena of the history of life can be explained by

purely naturalistic or, in a proper sense of the sometimes abused word, materialistic factors. They are readily explicable on the basis of differential reproduction in populations (the main factor in the modern conception of natural selection) and of the mainly random interplay of the known processes of heredity. . . . Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind.

I would like our children to learn mainstream biology without being indoctrinated into a scientific naturalism that will one day seem as quaint as Victorian tractates on the “ethics of belief.” I would like them to believe that “the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made” (Rom. 1:20), without relegating them to the margins of scientific practice. “Intelligent design” protects us from the speculative excesses of some neo-Darwinians, but at the risk of making belief in creation hang upon the success of its research agenda. Theistic evolutionism honors the integrity, freedom of growth, and “fine-tuning” of the cosmos, but is less robust in its defense of traditional theism.

There are other possible approaches, however. Our older son, John, a Chesterton fan, thinks that what Chesterton called our most cheerful doctrine—original sin—should have something to say on the matter. Original sin provides a narrative and philosophical way of accounting for defects not only in the human mind and heart, but also in nature. The diversity of life forms pouring forth from the plenitude of God’s imagination reaches our fallen world by way of death, by means of competition “red in tooth and claw,” and by the exploiting of random mutations, at a staggering cost of suffering and waste. The “things that are made” render their praise to the Creator in an imperfect language, fully intelligible only to those prepared by grace. The object (our fallen, though not utterly ruined, biosphere) is well suited to its instrument (our fallen, though not totally depraved, scientific reason). Not until the work of reclamation is completed will object and instrument be raised to perfection in Christ. Until then we can expect science and religion to be at odds.

The little *Phacops* may have something to add to this reflection. His winsome face can be studied as the working of natural selection upon minute genetic variations; but it can also be contemplated as a preliminary sketch of that face, prepared before the foundation of the world, which we are born seeking—an “echo of the beatific vision,” as John put it. Because rationality and love have found their living medium in the human face, because in historic times God took to himself a human face,

because there are icons of Christ which disclose that face, the face of the trilobite means more than paleobiology can express. No biologist can grant us and no biologist can take away from us the privilege of seeing God's handiwork in creation.

The first face that Ezekiel saw on the divine chariot was a cherub's. He can be forgiven for failing to notice a small trilobite. Perhaps when the gates of Jerusalem open and the blessed behold the woman clothed with the sun, they will see at her feet a *Phacops rana*, curled up in a beatific ball.