



Keith B. Miller

“And God Saw That It Was Good”: Death and Pain in the Created Order

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In the Genesis account and elsewhere, Scripture declares God’s love and care for creation, and the glory and praise it returns to him. Yet, the creation that Scripture declares both good and an object of God’s care is a creation in which death and pain are integral, indeed vital, aspects. A number of different approaches have been used to develop a theodicy for the existence of this “natural evil” within the created order. Approaches that view death and pain in the nonhuman creation as a consequence of either a human or angelic fall are difficult to reconcile with both the testimony of Scripture and nature. More helpful are approaches that stress the “self-emptying” of God, and the cruciform character of the creation. But ultimately, we seek some explanation that has relevance at the level of the individual creature’s life. Here, something similar to the “soul-making” theodicy of John Hick seems to provide a framework for understanding the fulfillment of animal existence in a world beset by suffering and challenge.

To Mrs Professor in Defense of My Cat’s Honor and Not Only

My valiant helper, a small-sized tiger
Sleeps sweetly on my desk,
by the computer,
Unaware that you insult his tribe.

Cats play with a mouse or
with a half-dead mole.
You are wrong, though:
it’s not out of cruelty.
They simply like a thing that moves.

For, after all, we know that only
consciousness
Can for a moment move into the Other,
Empathize with the pain and panic
of a mouse.

And such as cats are, all of Nature is.
Indifferent, alas, to the good and the evil.
Quite a problem for us, I am afraid.

Natural history has its museums,
But why should our children learn
about monsters,
An earth of snakes and reptiles
for millions of years?

Nature devouring, nature devoured,
Butchery day and night
smoking with blood.
And who created it? Was it the good Lord?

Yes, undoubtedly, they are innocent,
Spiders, mantises, sharks, pythons.
We are the only ones who say: cruelty.

Our consciousness and our conscience
Alone in the pale anthill of galaxies
Put their hope in a humane God.

Who cannot but feel and think,
Who is kindred to us by his warmth and
movement,
For we are, as he told us, similar to Him.

Yet if it is so, then He takes pity
On every mauled mouse,
every wounded bird.
Then the universe for him
is like a Crucifixion.

Such is the outcome of your attack
on the cat:
A theological, Augustinian grimace,
Which makes difficult our walking
on this earth.

–Czeslaw Milosz¹
translated by the author and
Robert Hass

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The Problem

The poem above communicates in a very poignant and profound way the essence of the theological problem of death, pain, and suffering in the natural world—what has been referred to as “natural evil.” As we will see, it may also point to at least one aspect of a Christian response.

I have become convinced that one of the fundamental issues underlying much of the resistance of many Christians to an ancient, evolving creation is that of the problem of “natural evil.” “Natural evil” is also very often a primary focus of those who reject a personal and compassionate God, as it was for Darwin himself. The issue of theodicy thus seems not only to drive many people of Christian faith away from an acceptance of the conclusions of modern science, but also to drive members of the scientific community away from a serious consideration of the claims of the Christian faith. The topic is important, not because its solution is central to the validity of the Christian faith, but because it often serves as an unnecessary stumbling block to a productive engagement of both science and faith.

The tension generated by our understanding of God’s character, as revealed in the Bible, and by the reality of the natural world around us has been the focus of much theological and philosophical debate within the Christian church since the first century. This article sets out to examine critically several of the proposed solutions to this problem, viewing them from the perspective of a geologist, paleontologist, and orthodox evangelical Christian.

The theological problem of death and pain emerges from the following propositional statements. (1) Scripture consistently declares the absolute goodness of God and the very goodness of his creation. Furthermore, Scripture declares God’s love and care for creation, and the glory and praise it returns to him. (2) Scripture also confesses a transcendent God who is omnipotent in power, yet immanent in creation as well. God’s creative activity is not described as being confined to some past event at the beginning of time, but as a present and continuing reality. God upholds creation in its being from moment to moment, and is creatively active in its history. This understanding of God’s relationship to creation has been well articulated by Jürgen Moltmann.² (3) In seeming conflict with these confes-

sions of God’s character, we observe death, pain, and suffering as ubiquitous, even integral, aspects of the creation around us.

The apparent conflict between God’s goodness and the presence of pain and suffering is made especially acute when we consider the nonhuman creation.³ How can we accommodate the death and suffering of animals within a theology that declares both God’s omnipotence and goodness? C. S. Lewis forcefully puts the issue before us in his book *The Problem of Pain*.

The problem of animal suffering is appalling; not because the animals are so numerous ... but because the Christian explanation of human pain cannot be extended to animal pain. So far as we know beasts are incapable either of sin or virtue: therefore they can neither deserve pain nor be improved by it.⁴

Because the issue of animal pain so directly impacts our understanding of the goodness of creation, I will focus particularly on solutions to the problem as posed by Lewis.

How do we then reconcile the goodness of God who is immanent and active in his creation with the death, pain, and suffering we see embedded within it? There seem to be two basic alternative approaches to this dilemma.⁵ (1) Natural evil can be attributed to something independent of God and acting against his will. This position threatens to limit God’s power and freedom. (2) Natural evil can be considered a part of God’s good purpose for creation, and either directly willed or permitted by him. Such a view would seem to bring into question God’s goodness and love for his creatures. The tension between these alternatives, and efforts to avoid their negative theological consequences, surface in many of the proposed solutions to this problem.

Creation Corrupted by the Fall

Perfect Creation (Paradise) Corrupted by Human Fall

A fundamental theological commitment of those advocating a young-earth position is that all death, pain, and suffering were a direct consequence of the Fall, and were absent from the originally good creation. For example, theologian John C. Whitcomb, who co-authored the book *The Genesis Flood* with Henry Morris, argues that “there could have been

no death in the animal kingdom before the Fall and the curse” because all physical death is a consequence of Adam’s rebellion. Furthermore, he envisions the kingdom of God that is to be established by Christ at the second coming as a restoration of the pre-Fall earth. Whitcomb states,

During the Kingdom age, which our Lord taught us to pray for (Matthew 6:10), “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb ... and the lion shall eat straw like the ox ... [and] they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain [=kingdom; cf., Isaiah 2:2]: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6-9) ... These characteristics of the coming thousand-year Kingdom of Christ (cf., Revelation 20:2-7) show us clearly what the animal kingdom was like in the pre-Fall world.⁶

In this view, an original creation devoid of pain and death would have had to be radically transformed, even remade, as a consequence of human disobedience at the time of the Fall. This position is a difficult one to support from Scripture. Firstly, the consequences of the Fall described in the second chapter of Genesis involve the corruption and distortion of humans’ relationship with God, each other, and the rest of creation. Where once there was a relationship of caring stewardship and loving lordship, now there was an adversarial one of selfish exploitation and forceful subjugation. No mention is made in Genesis of any ill effects of the Fall directly to creation itself. Secondly, Scripture declares that creation as it is now, not a pre-Fall paradise, gives glory and praise to the Creator.⁷ The creation described in Scripture is our own familiar world with lions, eagles, crocodiles, and jackals. Even more significantly, God is described as caring for and feeding the lion and its cubs, and the birds of prey (see Job 38–41). A “fallen” creation undermines this scriptural understanding of God’s continuing creative and sustaining action in nature.

What is the place of natural revelation in the context of such a “fallen” creation? Since all of nature would have been so completely transformed from its original state of “perfection,” the natural world could no longer be a source of praise to God or a revelation of God’s character. It would imply that we should be repulsed by the “fallen-ness” of creation, rather than moved to worship the Creator. Yet the spirits of the prophets and psalmists were moved to wonder and praise.

Creation itself provides overwhelming testimony against a pre-Fall creation without death or pain. Death and pain are more than part of creation; they are woven into its very fabric. Reproduction, the care and protection of offspring, defense, escape from predators, and the pursuit of prey are defining forces that shape the biology and behavior of animal species. Furthermore, the long history of life on Earth clearly demonstrates the existence of death and pain before the advent of humanity. The fossil record documents that the same ecological relationships and organism interactions (e.g., carnivory, parasitism, scavenging, decomposition, disease) we observe today were fundamental aspects of biologic communities throughout Earth history. Hundreds of millions of years of Earth history saw not only the death of individuals, but also the extinction of species and whole taxonomic groups. The view that death and pain in the human creation began with the Fall simply cannot be reconciled with the preserved record of life on Earth.

Beyond its severe theological and scientific flaws, the attribution of all death and pain to the curse resulting from the Fall fails to address, in any way, the problem as set forth by Lewis. This view makes God the direct cause of animal suffering while providing no answer to the question, “Why?”

Creation Corrupted by an Angelic Fall

If natural evil did not first enter the universe with the disobedience of humanity, then the objections raised by the geological and biological records are largely avoided. A number of authors have thus concluded that creation was corrupted by an angelic fall before humans appeared. Supporters of this perspective call upon the existence of fallen angelic beings before even the material universe was brought into being. These evil forces, intent on opposing God’s will, are understood to have been at work twisting God’s creative activity from the very beginning. This preserves the view that pain and suffering were introduced into the creation through the disobedience of free moral beings while recognizing the existence of pain and suffering before Adam’s Fall.

Such a position was advocated by C. S. Lewis. After arguing for the plausibility of an angelic fall, he states,

It seems to me, therefore, a reasonable supposition, that some mighty created power had already been

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at work for ill on the material universe, or the solar system, or, at least, the planet Earth, before ever man came on the scene: and that when man fell, someone had, indeed, tempted him.⁸

Similarly, the Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, when reflecting on the devastation produced by the 2004 Indonesian tsunami, invoked free spiritual forces acting in defiance of God’s will.⁹ Michael Lloyd has further argued for the theological necessity of a cosmic angelic fall that was responsible for the corruption of the originally good creation that God intended. According to Lloyd, if the present creation is as God intended, then there would be no need for a salvation that encompasses all of creation.¹⁰

However, as pointed out by Robert Wennberg, the attribution of suffering and death in creation to an angelic fall does not in itself provide a solution to the problem of “natural evil.” Rather, it is primarily an attempt to distance God from being its direct author—to move God’s role from directly willing animal pain to permitting it in the interests of some greater good. Wennberg states,

To trace the existence of physical evil back to the destructive operations of rebellious Satanic forces is not, however, to provide anything approaching a justification of physical evil; it is only to provide a causal account, not an apologetical one. “Satan did it,” we are told, but the question that must be answered is “why did God allow Satan to do it?”¹¹

While the argument for an angelic fall is not inconsistent with the Bible, finding direct scriptural support is difficult at best. Attributing animal suffering and pain to the actions of such fallen powers is more difficult still. In fact, it runs into many of the same theological problems as the tracing of natural evil to the consequences of human disobedience. A satanic corruption and distortion of God’s creative activity is very difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with the goodness of creation proclaimed in Scripture. What does the repeated pronouncement of “And God saw that it was good” over creation mean, if that same creation also bore the corrupting imprint of rebellious spiritual powers? Such a creation could not fully represent God’s good and perfect will—so how could it be declared good, in fact, “very good”? In what way could that distorted creation give praise and glory to God?

A serious theological problem is also raised by effectively attributing all manifestations of death

and pain in the natural world to the forces of evil. Satan would be given a power over creation that Scripture places exclusively in God’s providential hands. All natural processes and events are undergirded by the creative and sustaining power of God. Rain or drought, plague or harvest, storm and earthquake are all part of God’s providential action (see Amos 4:6 ff.).¹² More than this, God is understood in Scripture as intimately and actively involved in the continual cycle of death and new life we observe in the natural world.

These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time.

When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.

When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.

When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.

(Ps. 104:27–30, NIV)

If God is thus involved in the death as well as the life of his creatures, how can this death at the same time be attributed to the spiritual forces of evil? Scripture does not seek to distance God from the ongoing death and pain present in the creation, and neither should we.

The Fall Impacts All Time—Past and Future

There are approaches that seek to preserve the view that human disobedience was the cause of natural evil, while recognizing that death, pain, and suffering in the natural world preceded the appearance of humans on the earth. One way is to argue that the consequences of the Fall extended both forward and backward in time.

One recent proponent of this position is William Dembski. Dembski takes as a beginning for his theodicy that *all* evil in the world (personal moral evil as well as physical death, human suffering, and natural disasters) traces back to human sin. This is seen as a nonnegotiable claim rooted in “traditional theology.” Dembski seems not to distinguish theologically between natural and moral evil in developing his response to the problem of evil. He states that “... sin propagates through nature and brings about natural evil, so that the disordered state of nature mirrors the disordered state of our souls.”¹³

Although Dembski's view of the consequences of human sin is similar to those holding a young-earth view, he accepts the overwhelming scientific evidence for an ancient universe and earth, and a long biological history with its concomitant suffering and death. He then asks, "Without a young earth, how can such natural evils be traced back to human sin?" His response is that the answer lies in God's foreknowledge and omnipotence. "An omniscient and omnipotent God who is able to act preemptively to anticipate human actions will certainly do so to anticipate so momentous a human action as the Fall."¹⁴ God thus preemptively acted in creation to form a world appropriate for a fallen humanity. But why must that world contain natural evil?

Dembski argues that the effect of sin must be evident in creation as a testimony to human rebellion.

For redemption to effectively deliver humanity from evil therefore requires humanity to be clear as to precisely what it has consented to in rebelling against God and embracing evil. To achieve this clarity humanity must experience the full brunt of the evil that it has set in motion, and this requires that the creation itself fully manifest the consequences of humanity's rebellion against God.¹⁵

He thus argues that God preemptively brought about natural evils in creation for the purpose of making us realize the gravity of our sin. However, no argument is given as to why natural evil is necessary, or even effective, for this task. Are not the evident multifarious consequences of moral evil sufficient?

In this theodicy, God's activity in creation is focused exclusively on providing a home for fallen humanity. Nowhere does it address the problem of natural evil from the perspective of the nonhuman creation. What benefit arises (either individually or corporately) to the innocent creatures suffering pain and death over hundreds of millions of years before the appearance of humanity? There is nothing here to answer the original challenge made by C. S. Lewis.

Natural "Evil" as God's Good Purpose

It Is the Whole of Creation That Is Good

In what way can we view the death and pain that are part of animal existence as part of God's good creation? One approach can be seen in the argu-

ments of Augustine. Influenced by Greek philosophy, Augustine viewed the eternal God as the only perfect good by virtue of absolute immutability. All of creation is transitory and subject to change, and thus of lesser goodness. However, all things God has made are good. The good of mortal creatures is to be seen in their created natures and in their places within the whole of the created order. If we fail to see the goodness of the whole, it is because we are embedded within it. Augustine argues,

It is, in fact, the very law of transitory things that, here on Earth where such things are at home, some should be born while others die, the weak should give way to the strong and the victims should nourish the life of the victors. If the beauty of this order fails to delight us, it is because we ourselves, by reason of our mortality, are so enmeshed in this corner of the cosmos that we fail to perceive the beauty of a total pattern in which the particular parts, which seem ugly to us, blend in so harmonious and beautiful a way.¹⁶

Furthermore:

All natures, then, are good simply because they exist and, therefore, have each its own measure of being, its own beauty, even, in a way, its own peace. And when each is in the place assigned by the order of nature, it best preserves the full measure of being that was given to it.¹⁷

Those beings designed to die promote the good of the whole by fulfilling their part in God's plan for governing the universe.

This view of the goodness of creation subsumes the experience of pain and suffering of the individual animal life into the goodness and beauty of the creation as a whole. Out of this Augustinian theodicy came the argument of Leibniz that God brought into existence only "the best of all possible worlds."¹⁸ However, this appeal to the goodness of the whole does not address the real core of the theodicy problem with respect to natural evil. It is the suffering of the individual creature that provokes our questions of God's goodness. As pointed out by Christopher Southgate,

the crux of the problem is not the overall system and its overall goodness but the Christian's struggle with the challenge to the goodness of God posed by specific cases of innocent suffering.¹⁹

The suffering of individual creatures is brought into even greater focus by the testimony of Scripture that

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God is not distant from creation, but immanent within it.²⁰ Augustine avoided this tension, by making God, the eternal and unchangeable good, unable to be negatively affected by his mortal creation. But if God does indeed care for the sparrow, then the suffering of the individual created life must matter to God and not just to us.

Creation Given Freedom as an Act of Divine Love

In contrast to the Augustinian view described above, the "free-process" defense for natural evil takes the immanence of God within creation very seriously. As an expression of divine love, God has given the creation freedom in its own creative process. While God actively upholds the processes of nature, the specific consequences of those processes are not dictated. The implication is that the "free-process" defense for natural evil is analogous to the "free-will" defense for moral evil. John Polkinghorne has stated this as "God accords to the processes of the world that same respect that he accords to the actions of humanity."²¹

To give such freedom requires that God has limited his own controlling power over creation and made himself vulnerable to it. The nonhuman creation can act in a manner that grieves God. As emphasized by W. H. Vanstone in his book *The Risk of Love*, authentic love is characterized by the very qualities of self-giving, vulnerability, and precariousness. This "self-emptying" love is central to God's very character—to who God is—and is fully expressed in Christ. Thus, according to Vanstone,

The activity of God in creation must be precarious. It must proceed by no assured programme. Its progress, like every progress of love, must be an angular progress—in which each step is a precarious step into the unknown; in which each triumph contains a new potential of tragedy, and each tragedy may be redeemed into a wider triumph...²²

Nature in its freedom includes pain and suffering, yet these "tragedies" are redeemed. Vanstone states,

Where the destructive potential is activated, we see the tragedy of nature: and we also see, on occasion, that endless inventiveness of nature which, out of the material of tragedy, fashions the possibility of a new kind or level of triumph.²³

The destructive processes that are part of the created order make possible new life—even biological

novelty and a richer, more diverse biosphere. The suffering and death embedded in creation provide the opportunity for new creative possibilities, and so are redeemed. This point is emphasized by Holmes Rolston III who argues that the world is a place of suffering, of "pathos," and that it is through that suffering that the creation is advanced to "something higher." Furthermore, "this pathetic element in nature is seen in faith to be at the deepest logical level the pathos in God. God is not in a simple way the Benevolent Architect, but is rather the Suffering Redeemer." Nature is "cruciform" because the Creator is the Crucified. Suffering creatures participate in the divine pathos, and "... God too suffers, not less than God's creatures, in order to gain for the creatures a more abundant life."²⁴

George Murphy has similarly argued that Christian theodicy must begin with the cross. Our understanding of God's voluntary self-limitation is grounded in the theology of the crucified. As a consequence, we recognize that God shares in the cost that is necessary to secure creation's freedom and integrity. God suffers with the world from the evil taking place within it—"The world's pains are God's stigmata."²⁵

Our world, with its seemingly inseparable qualities of astounding beauty, bursting creativity, and innocent suffering, can perhaps be made theologically intelligible by seeing it as the loving creation of a self-emptying God who has entered into that creation and shared in its suffering. As stated in the poem that began this essay, "the universe for him is like a Crucifixion." Nonetheless, we still, rightly or wrongly, desire to see some purpose to innocent suffering that has meaning at the level of the individual creature's life.²⁶ Is there not something more that can be said?

Creation as an Environment for Human "Soul-Making"

C. S. Lewis argued that a "law-governed" universe with regularity and predictability, and the possibility of suffering and death, is a logical necessity for a world of free embodied souls.²⁷ It has been further suggested that the hand of God must be largely, but not entirely, hidden for true freedom to be exercised. Robert Wennberg has pursued this line of thinking by stating that the presence of animal pain and suffering contributes to the creation of an environment

in which human free decision-making and “soul-making” can best occur. He begins with the assertion that God’s purpose in creating was to “bring into existence spiritual-moral agents capable of freely coming to know and love God.” He then argues that an environment in which God’s power and glory were overwhelmingly present, and all threat of pain and suffering eliminated, would not give adequate “space” for the exercise of fully free choices. Conversely, a world devoid of pointers to God and yet filled with pain and suffering would make commitment to a loving God “difficult beyond measure.” What is required is a middle way,

an ambiguous world, with pointers to God, yet with features, such as physical evil including animal pain, that give us pause, that make one wonder, an environment that does not dictate or coerce what one believes—an environment that makes room for an appropriate human freedom.²⁸

This “soul-making” theodicy is probably best articulated by John Hick in his book *Evil and the God of Love*. God created not only an environment for individual freedom, but also an environment for the development of our God-centered humanity. Humankind was not created in a complete state of perfection, but rather as “raw material” for God’s further work of molding us into his image and likeness. Thus, God’s purpose was not to make a hedonistic paradise but an environment for “soul-making.” Hick states,

... we have to recognize that the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain cannot be the supreme and overriding end for which the world exists. Rather, this world must be a place of soul-making. And its value is to be judged, not primarily by the quantity of pleasure and pain occurring in it at any particular moment, but by its fitness for its purpose, the purpose of soul-making.²⁹

Humankind is perfected through a life of moral choices and challenges, and the struggles and sufferings of life bring out human potentialities.

Hick further challenges us to consider the consequences of a world in which pain not only did not occur, but could not occur. His argument here is worth an extended quotation:

... one of the most striking features of such a rearranged world would be the absence of any need to comprehend nature and to learn to predict and manipulate its movements ... Again, in a painless world man would not have to earn his living by

the sweat of his brow or the ingenuity of his brain. For in banishing all pain we banish violent hunger and thirst and excessive heat or cold, and in excluding these we make needless all those activities ... by which men have staved off those painful conditions. Human existence would involve no need for exertion, no kind of challenge, no problems to be solved or difficulties to be overcome, no demand of the environment for human skill or inventiveness. There would be nothing to avoid and nothing to seek; no occasion for co-operation or mutual help; no stimulus to the development of culture or the creation of civilization.³⁰

Our human virtues and moral potentials are made manifest through our struggles in this creation. The Christ-likeness to which we are called as his image-bearers (self-sacrifice, mercy, compassion, forgiveness) is expressed in the context of the needs and suffering of others. I would suggest that even physical death itself is part of our “soul-making.”

However true, human soul-making does not seem an adequate basis for a theodicy of animal pain. It justifies animal pain only from the perspective of human good. At the same time, the idea of “soul-making” may contain the seeds of a possible approach to addressing the meaning of suffering in the nonhuman creation that has relevance to the individual animal life.

Toward a Possible Solution

The question that continues to arise and needs to be addressed is, How might death, pain, and suffering accrue to the benefit of the individual animal life? In my opinion, Austin Farrer comes closest to directly facing this issue. Farrer focuses on the experience of the individual animal life and its relationship to God. God cares for the life and activity of the individual animal—so God really does care for the sparrow. “... God does not want his creatures for any ulterior aim; he wants them to be, for their sakes, not his.” The life of each individual animal is a work of God. So how does God care for the sparrow? Farrer responds:

God loves his animal creatures by being God to them, that is, by natural providence and creative power; not by being a brother creature to them, as he does for mankind in the unique miracle of his incarnation.³¹

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What role then does pain and suffering have in the life of an animal? Farrer explains that

Animal existence is beset by goods and evils, things needing to be shunned and things asking to be embraced. But animal action is the shunning of the one, and the embracing of the other; and while the animal survives, it is successful rather than the reverse ... Living is its own justification, its own good.

Furthermore,

the God of nature gives his animal creatures pains out of love for them, to save their lives ... Again, out of love for them, God moves his creatures to shun their pains and mend their harms, so far as their sense or capacity allows.³²

God is not just interested in the future of species, but is a participant in the lives of individual creatures.

I would argue that this is not the end of the matter. The "soul-making" theodicy provides a model for considering the fulfillment of animal existence. Like Hick, we can ask—What would animal life be like in the absence of death and pain? It can be argued that it is the presence of death and pain that makes possible the fulfillment of individual animal lives. Death and pain are integral to the functioning of all ecological systems and animal lifestyles. Defense, protection, camouflage, pursuit of prey, and so forth are major forces that shape both animal biology and behavior. The drive to reproduce is one of the most fundamental features of life, yet would not be possible in the absence of death. Without the continued loss of individuals to disease, predation, or injury, the carrying capacity of the environment would be quickly reached and continued reproduction would become impossible. Consider how much of an animal's life is devoted to reproductive activities such as attracting mates, defending territory, preparing nests, caring for young, etc.

What would remain of an animal's life without the search for food, pursuit of prey, need for defense, or the drive to reproduce? In short, essentially all meaningful animal activity and interaction would be rendered meaningless or impossible if death were not a universal certainty. It can thus be reasonably argued that it is the presence of death and pain that make possible the fulfillment of individual animal lives. Natural "evil" thus seems to be a necessary component of the environment for "soul-making" in both the human and nonhuman creation.

The concept of animal fulfillment is one that Christopher Southgate also used in trying to develop a theodicy that applied at the level of the individual creature.³³ Southgate argues that animal lives can be seen as "fulfilled," "growing toward fulfillment," "frustrated," or "transcending self." He defines "fulfilled" as "a state in which the creature is utterly being itself, in an environment in which it flourishes, with access to the appropriate energy sources and reproductive opportunities." "Frustrated" animals are held back in some way from fulfillment, and animals that "transcend self" have explored new possibilities of their being. Southgate envisions God delighting in the fulfillment of creatures, and "inviting" them toward transcendence. This is similar, I think, to Farrer's view of God wanting creatures simply to be who they are. But what about those creatures whose lives are "frustrated"? Here Southgate speculates that "all that the frustrated creature suffers, and all it might have been but for frustration, is retained in the memory of the Trinity."

Finally, many authors see a final and complete answer to the problem of suffering of the nonhuman creation only in the promise of a new creation in which all creation participates. The eschatological hope of a new heaven and a new earth points us to the final redemption of all things in Christ.

Conclusions

So what does all of this mean for us? How do we respond practically to the challenge of theodicy?

I draw the following implications from this contemplation of the God-given character of the non-human creation.

1. Creation is good, and the death and pain embedded within it are part of God's will and purpose for it. Creation is not a fallen thing to be conquered and controlled, but a divine gift we are to serve and rule and enjoy as God's stewards.
2. Rather than focusing on the presumed fallenness of creation as the result of past disobedience, we need to recognize our present abuse of our creation mandate. We need to fulfill our calling to serve and care for creation as God's image bearers.³⁴
3. Since the sole task of animals on this earth is to be, and when they die they can no longer glorify God

in this manner, it is our task as stewards not to inhibit, but rather to aid them in being what they are. We are to encourage the fulfillment of animal existence.

4. Most human suffering due to natural events or processes is a consequence of our free moral choice, or our disregard for natural processes.
5. For the nonhuman creation, pain and suffering provide the context in which animal lives can be rich and fulfilled. For us, physical death, pain, and suffering are opportunities for the expression of Christ-like character. This is not to argue that we are to embrace death and suffering; rather, it is in the struggle to understand and overcome them that our most Christ-like and meaningful thoughts and actions are expressed.
6. The crucified God participates in the suffering and death of his creation. God is not distant, but with us in our life's journey toward becoming like him, and with the creature in its journey toward fulfillment.

It is this last point which I think is the most important. God is present with us, and with all creatures, as we each live out God's call in our lives. It is only in that journey of life, including especially its pain and struggle, that God's purpose for his creation (human and nonhuman) can be expressed. And most profoundly, God is a participant with us, and with the sparrow, in that struggle of life. "Then the universe for him is like a Crucifixion." ❧

Notes

- ¹This poem was included in a collection of poems that was one of two works by Czeslaw Milosz mentioned in a review article by Michael Ignatieff, "The Art of Witness," *New York Review of Books* (March 23, 1995). I thank Carol Regehr for bringing my attention to this work.
- ²Moltmann refers to this aspect of God's creative activity in history as "continuous creation." Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 206–14.
- ³I will not address here arguments concerning the degree to which animals experience pain. This issue is considered by Robert Wennberg in "Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil," *Christian Scholar's Review* 21 (1991): 120–40. It is obvious to me that, for many animals at least, pain and suffering are a very real conscious experience.
- ⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1962), 129.
- ⁵As stated by John Hick, in *Evil and the God of Love*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1977): "For every position that maintains the perfect goodness of God is

bound either to let go the absolute divine power and freedom, or else to hold that evil exists ultimately within God's good purpose" (pp. 149–50).

- ⁶This is from an essay by John C. Whitcomb published by the Institute for Creation Research on June 1, 2003 and entitled "Progressive Creationism." It is available at the ICR website at www.icr.org/article/121 (last accessed March 17, 2011).
- ⁷See chapter 8 of Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984). I have also discussed these points in K. B. Miller, "Theological Implications of an Evolving Creation," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 45, no. 3 (1993): 150–60.
- ⁸Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 134–5.
- ⁹David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005). He states,

... it is clearly the case that there is a kind of "provisional" cosmic dualism within the New Testament: not an ultimate dualism, of course, between two equal principles; but certainly a conflict between a sphere of created autonomy that strives against God on the one hand and the saving love of God in time on the other. (Pp. 62–3)
- ¹⁰Michael Lloyd, "Are Animals Fallen?" in *Animals on the Agenda: Questions about Animals for Theology and Ethics*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (London: SCM Press, 1998), 147–60.
- ¹¹Wennberg, "Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil," 134.
- ¹²I discuss "natural hazards" as part of God's renewal of the earth and life in K. B. Miller, "Natural Hazards: Challenges to the Creation Mandate of Dominion?" *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 53, no. 3 (2001): 184–7.
- ¹³From the online essay by William Dembski, "Christian Theodicy in Light of Genesis and Modern Science," (2006): 3–5. Published on the website of "Uncommon Descent" and now available at http://standfirmfortruth.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/2006.05.christian_theodicy.pdf. Dembski has expanded the arguments in this essay in his book *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (New York: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2009).
- ¹⁴Dembski, "Christian Theodicy in Light of Genesis and Modern Science," 22, 23.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 19, 29.
- ¹⁶Vernon Bourke, ed., *St. Augustine, City of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), Book XII, chapter 4, 249.
- ¹⁷*City of God*, Book XII, chapter 5, 250.
- ¹⁸Leibniz's theodicy is discussed by John Hick in *Evil and the God of Love*, 154–66. Hick quotes the following from Leibniz: "Not only does [God] derive from [evils] greater goods, but he finds them connected with the greatest goods of all those that are possible: so that it would be a fault not to permit them" (p. 158).
- ¹⁹Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 13.
- ²⁰John Polkinghorne, in his book *Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World* (Boston, MA: Shambhala New Science Library, 1989), has put it this way:

The more strongly one is able to speak of God's particular action in the world, the more firmly one asserts that world to be subject to his purposive will,

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so much the more forceful becomes the problem of the widespread existence of evil within it. (P. 59)

²¹Ibid., 67.

²²W. H. Vanstone, *The Risk of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 62–3.

²³Ibid., 85.

²⁴Holmes Rolston III, “Does Nature Need to Be Redeemed?” *Zygon* 29 (June 1994): 205–29.

²⁵George Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 87.

²⁶Christopher Southgate raises another problem with trying to apply the concept of a cruciform creation to the experience of suffering by the individual creature. In his book *The Groaning of Creation*, he states,

It is important too to see the profound differences between the Passion of Christ and the “passion play” of evolution. First, the cruciform life was *chosen* by Jesus, and from this *choice* came the saving power of

his love. The plight of the “casualties” of evolution, who have suffering *imposed* on them by God for the longer-term good of others, is very different. The suffering of the myriad casualties of evolution is not freely chosen. (P. 50)

²⁷Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 34.

²⁸Wennberg, “Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil,” 137–8.

²⁹Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 295.

³⁰Ibid., 342–3.

³¹Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1961), 91–3.

³²Ibid., 74, 92.

³³Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 64–5.

³⁴The concept of actively “imaging God” in creation is developed by Douglas John Hall in *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986).

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Steven Bouma-Prediger

is Professor of Religion and Chair of the Religion Department at Hope College, Holland, MI, and he also directs and teaches in the Environmental Studies Program. His book *For the Beauty of the Earth* (Baker Academic, 2001) won an “Award of Merit” from *Christianity Today* in the magazine’s

“2002 Book Awards” program. The second edition was released in April 2010.



Katharine Hayhoe

is a climate scientist and professor of Geosciences at Texas Tech University. As an expert reviewer for the Nobel Peace Prize-winning IPCC and author of *A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith-Based Decisions* (with Andrew Farley, Hachette/FaithWords, 2009), she is dedicated to communicating the realities of a changing climate to those who will be affected most by it.



Gareth Jones

is Professor of Anatomy and Structural Biology and Director of the Bioethics Centre at the University of Otago, in Dunedin, New Zealand. Recent books include *A Tangled Web: Medicine and Theology in Dialogue* (co-edited with John Elford; Peter Lang, 2009); and *A Glass Darkly: Medicine and Theology in Further Dialogue* (co-edited with John Elford; Peter Lang, 2010).



Dorothy Chappell

is Dean of Natural and Social Sciences at Wheaton College, Illinois. At Wheaton since 1977 in various roles, she spearheaded the building of the \$62 million science center that was awarded the Leed Gold Certification on Oct. 6, 2010.

Dorothy co-edited with E. David Cook, *Not Just Science: Questions Where Christian Faith and Natural Science Intersect* (Zondervan, 2005).



William Hurlbut

is a consulting professor in the Department of Neurology and Neurological Sciences, Stanford University Medical Center, California. He served eight years on the President’s Council on Bioethics. He came to national prominence for his advocacy of Altered Nuclear Transfer (ANT), a scientific method of obtaining pluripotent stem cells without the creation and destruction of human embryos.



Mary Schweitzer

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