Evolutionary creation and the problem of animal death and suffering before the Fall

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I. What exactly is the problem?

II. What are some different ways to approach the problem?
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   B. It is an impossible problem
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I. What exactly is the problem?
## I. What exactly is the problem?

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Modified from Lamoureux (2009)
I. What exactly is the problem?
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“Are God and Nature then at strife,  
That Nature lends such evil dreams?  
So careful of the type she seems,  
So careless of the single life;  

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law—  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed —”

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson  
from “In Memoriam A.H.H.”  
(1849)

“Whether they realize it or not, all  
old-earth proponents in the church  
have a view of death and natural  
evil that is irreconcilable with the  
Bible’s teaching about the pre-fall  
creation, the curse on the creation  
at the fall, and the future removal  
of that curse at the second coming  
of Jesus Christ (Rev 22:3).” (43-44)

— Ken Ham, Four Views on Creation,  
Evolution, and Intelligent Design  
(2017, pp. 43–44)
I. What exactly is the problem?

“Creation ... declares the tragedy of fallenness, of chaos, of painful carnivorousness ... [It] includes animals that tear each other up and animals that rape each other or kill each other for sport. Some animal parents devour their own offspring. ... Is carnivorousness a part of God’s original design? Judging by the fossil record and by the incisors [sic] of carnivores, it seems so. Judging by the scriptural prophesies of shalom and by our own hearts and minds, it seems not so. ... If carnivorousness is part of God’s original design, is God less sensitive to animal pain than we are? If not, why do we have what looks like a design for it? Could a pre-fall in the angelic world have anything to do with an answer? Or is that mere speculation? If – actually in the real world – carnivorousness is one day to cease in the coming of God’s peaceable kingdom, how will lions keep up their strength?”

I. What exactly is the problem?
II. A. Various Fall scenarios

- Classical cosmic Fall: all forms of moral and natural evil (including animal predation, death, and suffering) are due to the Fall of humanity into sin

“For it appears that all the evils of the present life, which experience proves to be innumerable, have proceeded from the same fountain. The inclemency of the air, frost, thunders, unseasonable rains, drought, hail, and whatever is disorderly in the world, are the fruits of sin. Nor is there any other primary cause of diseases.”

– Commentaries upon the first book of Moses called Genesis (1554, p. 113)

Whence comes the cruelty of brutes, which prompts the stronger to seize and rend and devour with dreadful violence the weaker animals? There would certainly have been no discord among the creatures of God, if they had remained in their first and original condition. When they exercise cruelty towards each other ... it is an evidence of the disorder (ἀταξίας) which has sprung from the sinfulness of man.”

– Commentaries on Isaiah (1559, p. 296)
II. A. Various Fall scenarios

- Classical cosmic Fall: all forms of moral and natural evil (including animal predation, death, and suffering) are due to the Fall of humanity into sin

Multiple lines of evidence that large whales were feeding on small whales during the Eocene!

Fahlke 2012; Voss et al. 2019
II. A. Various Fall scenarios

- Retroactive effects of the Fall: human sin has retroactively impacted all of creation since the very beginning

  “Why, in the economy of a world whose Creator is omnipotent, omniscient, and transtemporal, should causes always precede effects? Clearly, such a Creator could act to anticipate events that have yet to happen. Moreover, those events could be the occasion (or ‘cause’) of God’s prior anticipatory action. ... Accordingly, the Fall could take place after the natural evils for which it is responsible. Such ‘retroactivity’ has theological precedent. Take the saving effects of the Cross, which are held to act not only forward in time but also backward.”


*Why would God do this?*
To make the consequences of our sin and our need for salvation evident all around us

*Is it necessary? Is it effective? What does it say about God’s character?*

  “How is it just to make innocent prelapsarian nonhuman creatures suffer for human sin? ... How is it redemptively coherent for the punishment to precede the crime and to be meted out on other creatures than the criminals?”

II. A. Various Fall scenarios

- Effects of a pre-human angelic Fall: the Fall of Satan corrupted God’s creation and introduced natural evil into the world

  “It seems to me ... that some mighty created power had already been at work for ill on the material universe ... before ever man came on the scene ... [I]t may well have corrupted the animal creation before man appeared.”


*How can a satanically distorted creation be considered good?*

  “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’?”

  – Keith Miller, “‘And God saw that it was good’: death and pain in the created order” (2011, p. 88)

*Doesn’t this position give undue power to Satan?*

  Throughout scripture, God is described as being sovereign over wild and chaotic forces in the natural world (e.g., Job 38–40, Psalm 104, Amos 4)
II. B. It is an impossible problem

- Skeptical Theism: A generalized argument which can apply to a variety of evils. There is no world which contains both gratuitous evils and God. – Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Three approaches: Rowe, more skeptical, and less skeptical

- **Rowe skepticism**
  1. There are some evils that are such that humans can’t think of any God-justifying reason for permitting them.
  2. So probably there aren’t any God-justifying reasons for permitting those evils.
  3. If God existed, he wouldn’t permit these evils if there were no God-justifying reason for permitting them.
  4. Therefore, probably God does not exist.

- **More skeptical**
  “We are in no position to judge whether or not [the claim there is at least one gratuitous evil] is true. To reasonably think otherwise, we would have to have ... to think that we are well positioned to judge that there are no goods (a) that God aims to bring about and (b) of which we are unaware...”

- **Less skeptical**
  “... given the immensity of divine goodness and the finitude of our human cognitive and moral faculties, it seems likely that there are some, perhaps many types of good that God aims to bring about in creation with which we are not in any way acquainted...our attempts to make judgments about whether or not evils are gratuitous will be futile.”
II. B. It is an impossible problem

- Inscrutability response: we cannot see all underlying moral principles and there may be hidden goods which come from evils.

“inscrutabilism might...undercut one’s enthusiasm for engaging in the task of trying to explain evil at all... If our capacities for explaining apparently pointless evil are as meager as this reply suggests...there is not much incentive to look for connections between evils and outweighing goods ... the task of explaining evil is best ignored altogether.”


Why should we bother looking at all?

- Just because you can’t see it doesn’t mean it isn’t there. Consider the microbial world around you!
- Understanding the evils of the world may help us see the underlying goods such as Jesus’ death and suffering.
- “How much better if the theist could go beyond arguing that our ignorance makes it unreasonable to accept there are gratuitous evils, to supplying suitable reasons that might explain God’s permission of actual evils.”

II. C. There really is no problem

- Neo-Cartesianism: Animals lack the consciousness necessary to suffer.

C.S. Lewis’ requirements for sentience

1. One must have experience of passing through distinct sensations.
2. To have this experience (1) requires a continuity of perception.
3. To have this experience (1) requires consciousness of self.
4. To have a consciousness of self (3) requires ability to recognize oneself as a permanent and enduring thing.
5. To be conscious of experience one must have ability to recognize the succession of experience as one’s own.

In the face of the unknown, it is best to error on the side of caution

“In the absence of clear knowledge of the inner lives of other creatures, shouldn’t we therefore follow a precautionary approach and assume until proven otherwise that the distinction between sentience and consciousness does not exist...?”

– Ronald Osborn, *Death Before the Fall* (2014, p. 142)

Is all animal suffering acceptable?

“The strong ethical rule is this: Do not cause inordinate suffering, beyond those orders of nature from which the animals were taken.”

II. C. There really is no problem

- Neo-Cartesianism and science

**Current Standards**

“First, responses to noxious, potentially painful events should affect neurobiology, physiology and behaviour in a different manner to innocuous stimuli and subsequent behaviour should be modified including avoidance learning and protective responses. Second, animals should show a change in motivational state after experiencing a painful event such that future behavioural decision making is altered...”


**A physical reaction to stimulus?**

Argument 1. Removing your hand from a burner
Argument 2. Even bacteria do this. – Krämer, Reinhard (2010)
Argument 3. We project moral categories that properly belong to the sphere of human beings. Animals may have intelligence but not consciousness. Humans have evolved the same way as all life, but we are unique in our consciousness. – Kenneth Miller

**Animals may have higher level consciousness?**

“When an animal dies, that individual’s mate, relatives, or friends may express grief. Changes in the survivor’s patterns of social behavior, eating, sleeping, and/or of expression of affect are the key criteria for defining grief.”

II. D. Good-harm analyses

• Developmental: Suffering is essential for development of higher level goods

**Pain and Suffering**

• Pain is a necessary part of having a physical body and leads to goods
• Pain is a teacher both in physical behavior and character development
• Pain and suffering are essential for the development of higher level goods such as morality, love, altruism, etc.

**Chaos to Order**

• The world is constantly moving forward towards perfection and current evils are part of the process
II. D. Good-harm analyses

- Constitutive: Good and harm are linked constitutively; circles of life and death encompass the suffering individual, drawing the narrative of their life into a systemic whole.

The suffering and death of one necessary for the advancement of others

"worthy are all lambs, all victims of the world's carniveroisty [sic], for out of their death comes life." – Loren Wilkinson

Goods are less mechanical and more aesthetic

"there is something grand, beautiful, and artful about a universe which contains within it everything that is necessary in order for it to yield the results God intends for it." – Michael Murray
II. D. Good-harm analyses

- Property-consequence: Nomic regularity is a general principle that the world functions in accordance with some common principles and behaves “regularly”.

*How can a system which causes all natural evil be good?*

Two intrinsic goods:
1. Combination of good and evil in product yields greater goods than the pieces.
2. Creates a machine which can function without constant divine intervention.

“It would be no physical universe at all. It would not be like an animal relieved of pain by the extraction of a thorn. It would be like an animal rendered incapable of pain by the removal of its nervous system; that is to say, of its animality.” — Austin Farrer

*Is natural evil even the problem?*

“The problem instead revolves around the issues of the extreme suffering of individual creatures, particularly those multitudes of nonhuman animals whose lives are cut off in infancy before they have had any chance to flourish and whose experience of life is predominated by pain, suffering, and neglect.” — Bethany Sollereder, “Evolution, Suffering, and the Creative Love of God” (2016)
II. D. Good-harm analyses

What is missing?

Where is the redemption for the individuals who have suffered for the greater goods achieved by the nomic regularity, chaos to order, and developmental approaches?
II. E. Radical redefinition of God's attributes

- Divest God of love
- Divest God of power
- Divest God of activity
Divest God of Love

• “God is not in the caring business”
  – Wesley J Wildman

• A loving God could not create and allow suffering to remain in the world.
Divest God of Love

• “For the LORD is good; his **steadfast love** endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations” – Psalm 100:5

• “‘For the mountains my depart and the hills be removed, but my **steadfast love** shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,’ says the LORD, who has **compassion** on you” – Isaiah 54:10

• “For God **so loved** the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” – John 3:16

• “But God, being **rich in mercy**, because of the **great love** with **which he loved us**, even when we ere dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” – Ephesians 2:4-5
II. E. Radical redefinition of God's attributes

Divest God of Power – Process Theism

- God cannot direct events or unilaterally alter the world or its inhabitants in any way.
- God evolves with the humanity toward deeper understanding of the world and of self.

“My solution dissolves the problem of evil by denying the doctrine of omnipotence fundamental to it” – David Griffin
II. E. Radical redefinition of God's attributes

Divest God of Activity

- God is all powerful and all loving, but cannot use this power in the world in any way
- God’s interference would undermine nomic regularity
- “Not-even-once principle” – Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp
II. E. Radical redefinition of God's attributes

- Divest God of love (X)
- Divest God of power (X)
- Divest God of activity (X)
“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness”

– Philippians 2:5-7
II. F. Kenosis / self-limitation of God

- John Polkinghorne sets out four different types of kenosis:
  - Of omnipotence
  - Of simple eternity
  - Of omniscience
  - Of causal status
“God grants the creation the freedom of its own being” – Ronald E. Osborn
II. F. Kenosis / self-limitation of God

“It is the only way to make a world that makes itself; a world that produces novel and complex creatures” – Christopher Southgate
II. G. Value in suffering

- Suffering as means to a good end – package deal

- Divine companion in suffering
  - Southgate
  - Moltmann

“...the cougar’s fang has carved the limbs of the fleet-footed deer, and vice versa.”
II. H. Redemption approaches

• Cross of Christ

• Eschatological fulfillment for all creatures

• Human’s role in redemption
III. Where do we go from here?

- A wide variety of approaches...philosophical, theological, and otherwise!
  - Some approaches are quite compatible within a Reformed theological framework
  - Some approaches are a bit more radical

- Current thinkers (e.g., Michael Murray, Christopher Southgate, Bethany Sollereder) advocate for the development of compound theodicies
  
  “[C]ombined or compound defences are the only admissible way to deal with both the complexity of the world and the varieties of natural evil which occur.”
  

- What can a modern understanding of evolutionary biology contribute to this conversation?

  *This is what I will be exploring in the months ahead!*
III. Where do we go from here?

“A faithful Christian will assume that the conflict is only apparent – that God doesn’t contradict himself in the two books [nature and scripture] that reveal him. But she will not assume that we’ll be able to resolve the conflict any time soon. Honest, patient scholarship refuses to manage conflicts of these kinds by forcing an early resolution. Instead, the patient Christian scholar puts issues of this kind into suspension for a time while she continues to think about them.”


*Fides quaerens intellectum*
Acknowledgments

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