

THE PROBLEM OF PRE-HUMAN SUFFERING

Pierre Le Morvan



Wisely, in my judgment, the ELCA does not have an official position on evolution or creationism, for this allows us to pitch a broad tent open to adherents of both sides. We do as a church, however, subscribe to the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation according to which our understanding of Scripture should be informed by the cultural context of the times during which it was written.¹ So though we hold that God created the universe and all that is within it, we need not also hold that God did so in six twenty-four hour days, and we may also hold that God used evolution in the process of creation.²

You will not find here yet another defense of evolution against creationism of the fundamentalist kind. Though many others may disagree, I think the case for evolution is strong enough that, as Pope John Paul II once said, it is more than merely a hypothesis.³ Instead of rehashing the case for evolution, what I want to argue for here is that Christians who do accept evolution in broad outlines, as do I, need to rethink how to respond to one of the oldest and most difficult issues in the philosophy of religion, namely, the problem of suffering.⁴ Let me explain.

There would be no problem of suffering if our God were malicious, or weak, or ignorant. But that is not how we conceive of Him. We conceive of our creator as perfectly good, as almighty, and as all-knowing (among other divine attributes). Why then does our God allow for so much suffering to occur? Think about the past and present horrors of our world: slavery, the Holocaust, AIDS, cancer, child abuse, famine. We're all too cognizant of how the list goes dreadfully on. No matter how fortunate we may be, each of us has suffered, and will suffer; each of us has witnessed suffering, and will witness it. There's no escaping it. The problem of suffering is how to reconcile the horrific extent of suffering in our world with God's goodness, omniscience, and omnipotence.

Of course, in considering this problem we need to be mindful of our cognitive limitations. As the book of Job teaches us, we cannot as finite creatures presume to know

all of God's reasons, and He no doubt has reasons for allowing suffering that surpass our capacity to understand. As Isaiah teaches us, God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways. And as Luther's theology of the cross reminds us, God reverses many of the assumptions we humans are liable to make about who He is and how He acts: our Lord on the cross reveals divine omnipotence as gloriously triumphant weakness, divine omniscience as infinitely wise foolishness, divine goodness as perfect holiness derided.

But even mindful of these limitations, there is at least one important reason for us to consider, as best and as humbly as we can, the problem of suffering and to see what answers we can come up with, however dark the glass of this world may be. This reason is that the problem has been repeatedly advanced as a challenge to the very coherence of our belief in God, with numerous atheists advancing it as a key rationale for rejecting the faith.⁵ In defending the faith, we cannot simply ignore the problem.

So what then does evolution have to do with all of this? Well, to accept evolution today is to accept, among other things, that myriad animals lived and perished for hundreds

of millions of years prior to the advent of the first human beings. Given the overwhelming physiological evidence that mammals, reptiles, and many other vertebrates are capable of experiencing pain, there's a pretty strong case to be made for thinking that there were countless creatures who experienced it before the first human beings emerged,

and given predation and injury, experienced it to the level of suffering.

Now some may object that "soulless" nonhuman creatures are not capable of suffering. They may say I'm conflating pain with suffering. They may say that while many nonhuman animals experience pain, they don't have the cognitive sophistication to experience suffering. Only humans can experience that. While I accept that there may be some forms of suffering that perhaps only humans can experience and some forms of suffering that only humans in

*Traditional theodicies are
hard-pressed to deal
with the problem of
pre-human suffering.*

their wickedness can inflict, I think this objection is largely bunk. A proper refutation, however, would distract from the central thread of my argument. I think intense pain counts as a form of suffering. By my lights, a gazelle torn to shreds by a pack of hyenas suffers, as does a bear severely burned in a forest fire. But “feels intense or excruciating pain” can be substituted for “suffers” instead. That’s enough for my purposes.

If there were indeed innumerable animals who suffered prior to the advent of human beings, then the problem of suffering proves starkly more immense than it would be if the world were only five to ten thousand years old, as some would have it. In fact, the problem of suffering now divides into what we might call the “human era problem of suffering” (why has God allowed suffering *since* the advent of human beings?) and the “pre-human era problem of suffering” (why did God allow suffering *prior* to the advent of human beings?). While Christian (and Jewish and Muslim) thinkers have been pondering the problem of suffering for a very long time, the traditional focus of theodicies has been squarely on the human era problem of suffering. This was completely understandable prior to the rise of evolutionary theory and along with it the accumulation of overwhelming evidence that uncounted animals lived and died for eons prior to the first human beings. In fact, some biblical passages could reasonably be read as establishing that the suffering and death of humans *and* animals first occurred after, and as a result of, the disobedience of the first humans.⁶ Since the rise of evolutionary theory, however, the pre-human problem of suffering has come to the fore, and traditional theodicies are hard-pressed to deal with it adequately.

Let me illustrate what I mean by briefly delineating five prominent traditional theodicies: the punishment theodicy, the free will theodicy, the soul-making theodicy, the natural consequences theodicy, and the natural law theodicy. Each of these has

been criticized for good reason independently of the central criticism I will advance here; the latter, however, brings to light a common inadequacy in all of them worthy of serious reflection.⁷ While these theodicies are not the only ones out there, they are a fairly representative lot, and there is some overlap between them.

The punishment theodicy. The suffering in the world is God’s punishment for evil-doing, and this punishment brings about a greater good such as a balancing of the scales of justice.

The free will theodicy. God desires that we have free will, and in order for us to have it we must have the capacity not only to do good of our own volition but also to do harm to ourselves and to others. Therefore God allows suffering to occur to leave room for the higher good of our free will.

The soul-making theodicy. God allows suffering to occur so that we can live in an environment that allows for real challenges, problems, and dangers. We need these for “soul-making,” namely, for our making genuine moral choices, and for our moral, spiritual, and intellectual growth and development.

The natural consequences theodicy. God created our human ancestors so He might love them and so they might love Him. In order that this relationship not be coercive, God gave them the capacity to withhold their love, which they did. By doing so, they separated themselves from Him, ruining themselves and their progeny and bringing suffering and death into the world.

The natural law theodicy. In order for us to choose freely, we must live in a world governed by regular and orderly laws of nature. For if there were no such regularity and orderliness to the natural world, we could not predict the effects of our choices, and without being able to predict these effects, we could not be genuinely free in making these choices insofar as true freedom of choice is incompatible with random effects. However, the very laws of nature that allow me to walk across the room and hug you, or that allow

you to pick up your crying daughter, are the outworkings of a natural order that also results in such causes of suffering as earthquakes, hurricanes, disease, and the like.

What then can we make of such theodicies? Each one of them strikes me as having an important grain of truth concerning why God allows suffering to occur to us humans. Notice, however, how keenly anthropocentric each of them is. This anthropocentricity proves all the more glaring when we take humans out of the picture and turn our attention to the pre-human problem of suffering. Consider again each of the theodicies in turn.

How can the suffering of pre-human animals be a punishment deservedly wrought by God? What did they do to deserve it? Perhaps in a Hindu or Buddhist metaphysical system we could try to make sense of this in terms of karma and reincarnation, but we Christians reject such notions. It’s very hard to see how pre-human animals did anything to deserve punishment, let alone the punishment of suffering.

How can appealing to free will explain the suffering of pre-human animals? Here we face a dilemma. If we deny that they had free will, then this theodicy has no purchase. If we accept that they did, then we are faced with enormous implausibilities. Take a saber-toothed tiger hunting a mammoth. Did either of them have the kind of free will that would allow them to make a choice between doing what is good and what is not?

Does soul-making explain the suffering of pre-human animals? True, they lived in an environment with real dangers, challenges, and problems. But were these needed for their making genuine moral choices, and for their moral, spiritual, and intellectual growth and development? Intellectual perhaps in some cases, but moral and spiritual?

Did non-human animals suffer as a result of their turning away from their creator and ruining themselves and their progeny? In what way sense

could they have done so?

As for pre-human animals living in a world governed by regular and orderly laws of nature, it's hard to deny that they did, and this presumably allowed them to predict in at least some basic way the outcomes of their actions. They like us were subject to the outworkings of the natural order that result in suffering. But unless we are willing to attribute free will to them, we cannot explain God's allowing them to suffer as necessary for such a greater good.

My purpose in raising these critical questions is not destructive. Yes, it's typically easier to point out problems than to come up with solutions. But before we can come up with solutions, we must recognize that there are problems to begin with. Christians who take evolutionary theory and the impressive evidence for it seriously have a grave problem to contend with in the pre-human problem of suffering. In fact, the naturalist philosopher Philip Kitcher has recently posed it quite starkly in his criticism of what he calls "providential religion." As Kitcher puts it:

When you consider the millions of years in which sentient creatures have suffered, the uncounted number of extended and agonizing deaths, it simply rings hollow to suppose that all this is needed so that, at the very tail end of history, our species can manifest the allegedly transcendent good of free and virtuous action. There is every reason to think that alternative processes for unfolding the history of life could have eliminated much of the agony, that the goal could have been achieved without so long and bloody a prelude.⁸

Christians need not capitulate in the face of such challenges, nor take refuge in an anti-scientific creationism. But we need to move beyond our understandable preoccupation with human suffering in our theodical thinking if we are to make head-

way in responding to the problem of pre-human suffering. To be sure, the full extent of God's reasons for allowing human and non-human suffering undoubtedly surpasses our comprehension. But this does not absolve us from acknowledging and trying to grapple with the problem posed by either. However limited, theologians and philosophers have developed genuine insights into why God allows human suffering. Particularly in the age of Darwin, though, we have much work to do developing insights into why God allows non-human suffering.⁹ I strongly doubt that the God Who knew all too well the agony of the cross is indifferent to the agony of any of His creatures. Our indifference is not His.

How nice it would be to end this essay leaving you with a neat solution to the problem of pre-human suffering. Not surprisingly, I cannot do so. I suspect, however, that the best answer (or at least *an* answer) we finite creatures may be able to come up with in grappling with this problem will have to do with what would be *lost* without the capacity for pain and suffering. In this regard, a disorder known as congenital pain insensitivity may provide us with a useful clue. Those with this disorder feel no bodily pain at all, and so cannot experience it to the level of physical suffering. While this may seem a boon, it turns out to be no blessing at all: lacking the signal pain affords, those with this disorder typically undergo all kinds of bodily damage (such as wounds, scaldings, fractures, and the like) that normal subjects are able to avoid by virtue of the warning pain provides. Because pain hurts, and can make us suffer, those who experience it seek to avoid what causes it. So too presumably with non-human animals. Think of what they would lack had they no capacity for pain: a warning system without which they would most likely be worse off.

I'm well aware that this suggestion raises all kinds of questions. Couldn't God have come up with a warning system that didn't resort to something

as awful as pain? How can this suggestion be extended to emotional pain and suffering? Did the natural world prior to the advent of humans really have to be so terribly red in tooth and claw as it is today? Such troubling questions are indeed worth asking, and I cannot answer them here. I do, however, think that they are precisely the kinds of questions that future theodical thinking would serve us well in addressing. LF

PIERRE LE MORVAN is Associate Professor of Philosophy at The College of New Jersey.

Notes

1. www.faithstreams.com/me2/Sites/dirmod.asp?sid=5F4E345683D8492B9B56CBC49802F459&nm=Get+the+News&type=news&mod=News&mid=9A02E3B96F2A415ABC72CB5F516B4C10&SiteID=8A8B745B654443C3B4ACFDBED3DCFB07&tier=3&nid=B8FD107FF2244AB796B89B18842A20C0, accessed August 11, 2008.

2. *Ibid.*

3. www.newadvent.org/library/docs_jp02tc.htm, accessed August 11, 2008.

4. The expression "problem of evil" is often used in these discussions, but I prefer "problem of suffering" because the latter is broader in scope and less liable to connote only suffering brought about deliberately or by neglect by moral agents.

5. For a classic case against the coherence of believing that God is all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful, see J. L. Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (254): 200–212. For a compendium of atheist readings addressing this issue, see Christopher Hitchens's *The Portable Atheist* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2007).

6. See, for instance, Genesis 3 and Romans 5:12.

7. For an excellent and brief overview, see Daniel Howard-Snyder's "Theodicy" in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Kelly Clark, 2nd ed. (Peterborough, Ontario & Buffalo, New York: Broadview, 2006).

8. Philip Kitcher, *Living with Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford, 2007), 127.

9. For an interesting discussion in this regard and an attempt to defend a version of the natural law theodicy, see Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford, 2006).