

Introduction

This is not a book about theodicy. Justifying God's goodness in the presence of evil has been a preoccupation of much mainstream philosophical theology of the last century, with analytic philosophers of religion like John Hick¹, Richard Swinburne² and Alvin Plantinga³ tackling it largely as an issue of timeless logic. In reaction to this, some scholars such as Kenneth Surin⁴ and Terrence Tilley⁵ complain that the whole enterprise, carried on in the tradition of Leibniz's response to the skeptical Enlightenment framing of the issue as an argument for atheism⁶, is the wrong place to start.

Tilley dismisses theodicy as a pursuit altogether, and Surin, following Jürgen Moltmann and others, approaches it from the angle of a theology of the Cross. Both point out, though, that the use made of ancient writers like Augustine, Irenaeus or Aquinas wrenches them out of the specific contexts in which they wrote about God's goodness and the existence of evil, and that criticism gets a little closer to what I am attempting here. I am interested in God's interaction in the world in history, not in theory.

The aim of this book is far more restricted than theodicy, then, although it necessarily has some cross connections to it. In the first place, the field I wish to explore is entirely what is called "natural" or "physical" evil, that is what occurs in the non-human world, and in particular with respect to its origins in the doctrine of Creation. It is significant that theodicies of natural evil were not even thought necessary for a major period of the Church's history, a point to which I shall return in due course.

In this arena I am hoping to challenge some of the underlying *assumptions* now made in the discussion of natural evil, particularly within the Evangelical Christian tradition, about what Christianity itself has taught on it, both from within its biblical foundation, and in its theological history.

I also go on to question, from a scientific viewpoint, some of the frankly hyperbolic expressions of the depravity and savagery of nature that have been with us since Darwin and tend to be taken as axiomatically valid. Surin, discussing the current pursuit of theodicy already mentioned, says rather ironically:

¹ Hick, John, *Evil and the God of Love* (Harper & Row 1966).

² Swinburne, Richard, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford 1998).

³ Plantinga, Alvin, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Eerdmans 1989).

⁴ Surin, Kenneth, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene, Wipf and Stock, 2004).

⁵ Tilley, Terrence W, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, Wipf and Stock, 2000).

⁶ Typically framed as a syllogism and attributed to the Greek philosopher Epicurus:

1. If an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent god exists, then evil does not.
2. There is evil in the world.
3. Therefore, an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God does not exist.

The tasks... are perhaps best undertaken in the tranquillity of the theodist's study (a perusal of the writings of the theodists will tend invariably to confirm the suspicion that the study is very much the theodist's domain).⁷

I suggest the same is true for many of the biologists (and theistic evolutionists) who wax most indignant against the cruelties of nature – I have observed that they tend to be lab-based molecular biologists or population geneticists (and sometimes theologians!) rather than field-based zoologists who actually work with nature “in the raw”.

All this leaves untouched the question of *why* God allows “natural evil”, for those who wish to pursue what is probably unanswerable; certainly Scripture studiously avoids attempting any such answer beyond faith in the goodness of the God who reveals himself in history. Indeed, the fact that both Judaism and Christianity are based on God's self-revelation through historical events should alert us to the need to discern God's views on what is evil, and what is not, *from* such revelation and not from abstract reasoning. But my arguments may, perhaps, clarify a little of the “*what*” of the matter – that is, what God would have to explain, if he was actually accountable to us, rather than the reverse (which is what Christianity crucially teaches)⁸.

So to specifics. After I became a Christian over half a century ago, the idea that the natural creation is fundamentally damaged because of the Fall⁹ of mankind was to me, for many years, one of those unquestioned axioms of the faith, like the Crucifixion or the existence of sin. It is usually called “the traditional view”. Creationists emphasise it as the explanation for the existence of natural disasters, carnivorous animals, parasites, disease and death.

Most Christians of course, even Creationists, most of the time don't think about origins and get on with life and faith here and now. If someone gets ill, or there is a destructive hurricane, immediate divine judgement for individual or corporate sin will usually be discounted as the cause nowadays. But the catastrophic effects of sin on the whole natural order *in general* are often taken for granted by believers. “Natural evil”, including everything from man-eating tigers to tsunamis or asteroid collisions, is seen as the outworking of the cosmic effects of the Fall of man. Charles Haddon Spurgeon expressed what is still common currency, in a sermon of 1868:

Creation glows with a thousand beauties, even in its present fallen condition; yet clearly enough it is not as when it came from the Maker's hand—the slime of the serpent is on it all—this is not the world which God pronounced to be “very good.” We hear of tornadoes, of earthquakes, of tempests, of volcanoes, of avalanches, and of the sea which devoureth its thousands: there is sorrow on the sea, and there is misery on the land; and into the highest palaces as well as the poorest cottages, death, the insatiable, is shooting his arrows, while his quiver is still full to bursting with future woes. It is a sad, sad world. The curse has fallen

⁷ Surin, *op.cit*, p.20.

⁸ I always treasure the words of one blog commenter who wrote, “Classical theology needs a theodicy like a fish needs a bicycle.” The remark depends on an appreciation of critiques like Tilley's.

⁹ “Fall” is not the biblical term, but it does at least convey the significance for human history of the events of Genesis 3. The Bible's equivalent is “the Curse” (Rev 22.3 – its scope is one of the key questions we will tackle), which differs in demonstrating God's active judgement on sin rather than a passive human decline to a lower state. One could also refer to it as “exile”, since the banishment from Eden is closely equivalent to Israel's exile from the promised land.

*on it since the fall, and thorns and thistles it bringeth forth, not from its soil alone, but from all that comes of it.*¹⁰

The existence of death before the Fall is one major reason for the rejection of evolution by Young Earth Creationists. How could Adam, in his innocence, have been in fact walking over the cruel sufferings and the shattered bodies resulting from billions of years of evil?

Such a negative view of the world has also survived in the thinking of those who espouse old earth chronology, though it poses obvious problems in that context. One of the more orthodox and intellectually rigorous theistic evolution theorists, Robert John Russell, sounds very much like Spurgeon when, after pointing out some of the wonders of creation, he adds:

*But life is also torn by the pain of cold, hunger, cold, and bodily wounds; threatened by hurricanes, drought, and earthquake; vulnerable to bacterial and genetic diseases; a fierce combat zone in the Caribbean tropics and the African savannah. Most living creatures are caught up in the endless cycles of predation that compose the food chain, and most animals are fated to an agonising death.*¹¹

Intelligent Design theorist William Dembski, who despite his doubts about Neodarwinism holds to an old earth, writes:

*The young-earth solution to reconciling the order of creation with natural history makes good exegetical and theological sense.... I myself would adopt it in a heartbeat except that nature seems to present such strong evidence against it.*¹²

To reconcile the Fall with an old, corrupted, earth he proposes a creation whose fallen nature is a retrospective “Plan B” reflecting God’s foresight of sin, an idea not completely unique in the history of theology¹³.

But many “Old Earth” Christians can’t accept the convoluted idea of the Fall’s acting retrospectively, and so cannot regard natural evil as a result of mankind’s sin. This includes in particular supporters of theistic evolution (or “evolutionary creation”), who tend simply to attach other causes to the same pessimistic view of nature, such as the randomness inherent in evolution, or the inevitability of suffering when God allows “freedom” to his Creation. R J Russell, for example, like Spurgeon and Dembski, claims that the biblical witness teaches:

¹⁰ Spurgeon, Charles Haddon, *Creation's Groans and the Saints' Sighs*, a sermon (No. 788) delivered on, January 5th, 1868, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington. <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0788.htm>, accessed 06/01/2016.

¹¹ Russell, Robert J , *Cosmology from Alpha to Omega* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2008) p.249.

¹² Dembski , William, *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (Nashville, Broadman & Holman, 2009) p.55.

¹³ St John of Damascus (c.675-749), *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Bk 2: “For He Who knew all things before they were, saw that in the future man would go forward in the strength of his own will, and would be subject to corruption, and, therefore, He created all things for his seasonable use, alike those in the firmament, and those on the earth, and those in the waters... But even now wild beasts are not without their uses, for, by the terror they cause, they bring man to the knowledge of his Creator and lead him to call upon His name.” He follows Theodoret of Cyrillus (c.393-c. 458) in this. The difference in Dembski’s approach is that he sees these things as evils: St John and Theodoret see them as *remedies* for evil.

*Suffering, disease and death are the universal consequences of an inestimably tragic and singular event, the Fall.*¹⁴

But he goes on:

*This historical/theological explanation of the two sides of life as created and only consequentially evil is severely challenged by Darwinian evolution, where natural selection and with it death and extinction, is integral to what drives evolution and thus become constitutive of life.*¹⁵

Very largely as a result of this, and partly in response to atheist critiques, theodicy (justifying God's goodness in the face of evil) is also a central concern of most theistic evolution discourse about nature. For many the detachment of the evils in creation from Adam's first sin has contributed to rejecting the idea of an historic Fall altogether. With its traditional theological origin rejected, sin may then be seen as a consequence of natural evil rather than its cause.

In this respect, then, theistic evolutionists tend to be in accord with the most hard-line of adaptationist Neodarwinians like Richard Dawkins. If selfish evolution has always been carried on by selfish genes, then who could be surprised that the end result is selfish humans?

The ramifications of this for the shape of Christian faith are profound. It becomes almost impossible not to make God the author of evil, rather than Satan or mankind, unless he is effectively banished from responsibility for his Creation. This encourages a view of a distant God presiding over a more-or-less autonomous nature, a view that has been called "semideism"¹⁶

Although as both a Christian and a professional in life-science I have been always been interested in the subject of the natural world, I started studying more seriously the interface between science (especially origins science) and Creation doctrine just a few years ago. I was rather astonished to realise, as I examined Scripture again, not so much that the effects of the Fall on the natural world had been exaggerated, but that the "traditional view" *in its entirety* lacks any solid biblical support whatsoever¹⁷. As a serious student of the Bible for half a century it made me rather ashamed to realise how much I had taken a thoroughly erroneous view for granted. Such is the hidden power of pre-existing worldviews on biblical interpretation!

A second shock came when, in correspondence with a scholar of Church History, Dr Nick Needham, we began to discover in the primary sources that the idea of a fallen creation had been almost unknown, with very few exceptions, in the early centuries of the Church. The goodness of Creation, here and now, was actually a distinctive of early Christianity's message. Further research uncovered

¹⁴ Russell 2008, *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p250.

¹⁶ Coined by science historian Reijer Hooykaas, the term is also used by Christian population geneticist David L Wilcox who writes: "[F]or those who have committed themselves by faith to nature's autonomy, the idea of intelligent direction of natural causes is simply incomprehensible (even for those who believe in God). For them, a "god" who acts in nature would be the ultimate intruder in a closed system." (David L Wilcox, *God and Evolution*, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2004, p.47).

¹⁷ This discrepancy was noted by one of the earliest theistic evolutionists, Rev Charles Kingsley, in a lecture of 1871 (<http://www.online-literature.com/charles-kingsley/scientific/7/>, accessed 06/01/2016). It seems to have escaped modern Creationists, IDists and Theistic Evolutionists alike.

the approximate period when things began to change to focus on “natural evil”, just five hundred years ago, and suggested some possible reasons for it.

When such a central doctrine of Christian faith – the Creation – is involved, it seems important to present the true position of biblical and historic Church teaching as clearly as possible, to which purpose this book has been written. This is even more important when one considers the cultural situation, particularly in America. I am going to argue that nature is not nearly as red in tooth and claw as has been supposed for several centuries, but the aggressive culture wars associated with “the nature of nature” certainly make up for any deficiency in nature’s savagery.

Evolution has become, and will remain for a little while to come, I suppose, a front-line for the pursuit of militant materialistic atheism against all forms of religion. Indeed, a surprising proportion of the apologetic for evolution is, and has always been, theological, and especially theodical¹⁸. Sadly, some particularly bad theology has been employed in combating this (on the Creationist side), or in seeking to accommodate to it (on the Theistic Evolution side) with both sides accepting the premise that Creation *is* full of evil. It has to be a worthwhile goal to take an authentic view both of what science and Christian doctrine actually reveal about the world, because long after all these local battles are forgotten, Christians will still be living in God’s Creation, and will still be taking the Bible as their authority. If either is seriously misinterpreted, many evils result.

The plan I follow in this book is as follows.

In Section 1 (Chapters 1 to 4) I survey the relevant biblical material broadly, if not exhaustively.

In Section 2 (Chapters 5 and 6) I move on to the history of the doctrine of nature, with reference to the Fall, through the last two thousand years, to show how the balance shifted from a strongly positive view of the goodness of Creation to a seriously negative one. I also look at possible reasons why the “traditional view” rose to prominence, around the sixteenth century.

In Section 3 (Chapters 7 to 10) I look at “natural evil” as evidenced within the world itself, and within the science that observes it, and why nature is now so widely *perceived* as cruel and malevolent, when once it wasn’t. This is in part a study of how ideas become plausible or implausible over time, and how evidence comes to be considered significant or to be disregarded.

Lastly, in Section 4 (Chapter 11) I sketch out the differences it makes to Christian life and hope to accept either the “traditional view” that Creation is tainted by the Fall, or the view I have presented, that it is not, and the difference it makes to be freed from false ideas about a corrupted created order, in terms of our worship, witness – and plain *enjoyment* of God’s good earth.

Lastly, I will touch on the Christian hope for the future, and how it involves not an escape from an evil creation to an uncreated heaven, but the renewing of a good creation as a better one, of the naturally-empowered (*psuchikos*) as the spiritually-empowered (*pneumatikos*), of the perishable as the imperishable – of the old order as the new heavens and the new earth.

¹⁸ Dilley, Stephen, *Charles Darwin’s use of theology in the Origin of Species* (Brit.J.Hist.Sci.2011-1-28).

The Christian gospel, like soccer, can be loosely described as game of two halves – creation and redemption. Both, at root, are Christological.¹⁹ Although the main description of creation takes up only two chapters of the Bible, and the rest is primarily about God's redemption, they are inextricably intertwined, and both teaching and assumptions about creation are woven into the whole scriptural narrative from Genesis to Revelation. That is, not least, because it is the Creation that, in the end, is the object of redemption.

But how we understand what this mean in turn depends on how we have understood the nature of God's Creation. A misunderstanding of Creation is bound to impact on our understanding of redemption, and it is my contention that the innovation of a theology of "fallen nature" over the last few centuries has seriously damaged the message of Christianity to mankind. It includes introducing a pessimistic view of the world, as it is, that has done untold harm in areas normally not considered "religious" – including science, the arts and politics. That has achieved the very opposite of Christ's instruction to be "salt and light" to the world: by denigrating the goodness of Christ's Creation, we have made him even more unwelcome on his own, good, earth.

I hope this book may, at least, persuade others not only that we have been seeing the world in a wrong way for too long, but that it matters.

¹⁹ Col. 1.15-23.