

*The Groaning of Creation: Expanding our Eschatological Imagination Through the Paschal
Mystery*

Theodicy is an attempt to wrestle with the problem posed to belief in an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God. Some theodicies deal with the problem by dismissing any or all of these attributes. For instance, process theology and forms of open theism, tend to reimagine God's knowledge. Certain theologians, working within this framework, put forward a rather radical understanding of God: God does not really "know" what the future is (it may be because the future does not exist), but more so because God has decided to limit Godself (taking the concept of *Kenosis* with the utmost seriousness).

I am of the opinion that it is more daring and even more radical for a theologian to work within certain parameters that have been part of the Christian tradition for so long. And so this paper takes these three attributes as revealed, and therefore something we cannot dismiss. How do we "justify" this kind of God? Traditionally, Christians have appealed to the fall from perfection in order to explain why evil exists in a world supposedly created "all good," by an all good Creator. Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, a rupture has occurred between Creator and creation. God was in fact all good, all powerful, all loving, and gave humanity an opportunity to live in communion with its Creator...but *human beings* decided to reject this offer. It is a story we all know well, and it is very tidy and clean. It, as one theologian at Notre Dame put it to me once, "Gets God off the hook."

However, a tiny little wrench is thrown into this tidy solution when we take seriously the claims of evolutionary theory. Evolutionary theory informs us that there have been millions of

years of pain, death, and suffering (depending on how you define suffering) prior to the advent of human beings. If we as theologians take the claims of evolution seriously, we must take a stance on this dilemma. One stance is to simply treat the pain and so-called “suffering” of nonhuman creation as *not* morally significant. A strand of Neo-Cartesians has taken up this position.¹ The pain that nonhuman animals may experience is morally neutral; and therefore does not pose a problem to our traditional conception of God.

But what would happen if we did take animal pain and suffering seriously? What if nonhuman pain and suffering did matter to God? This paper takes nonhuman pain and suffering seriously and affirms that nonhumans can and do suffer; in ways that are not identical to human suffering, but are close enough in kind and degree to warrant serious theological reflection.

If we acknowledge that there have been *millions* of years of intense pain and suffering, and we can no longer appeal to a fall, where does that leave us? Where does that leave our traditional depiction of who God is? In order to answer this question, I want to set up some parameters. In his book *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton writes, “Catholic doctrine and discipline may be walls; but they are the walls of a playground.”² I take him to mean that once we set up and acknowledge the walls that separate us from intellectual “cliffs,” we are free to play and have fun, speculate, *do theology*.

And so here are a few key theological presuppositions I put forward:

1. God’s goodness implies that God seeks and desires our happiness and flourishing. God desires all creatures to flourish to the extent of the capacities they have been given.
2. God does not desire unnecessary suffering of creatures directly.

¹ See Michael Murray’s *Nature: Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 2008.

² Chesterton, G.K., *Orthodoxy* (Snowball Classics Pub., 2015), 95.

3. God has created in such a way that pain, death, and suffering are a part of the evolutionary process.

The problems:

1. Millions of creatures undergo immense suffering and pain as a result of the evolutionary process.
2. There have been what appear to be unnecessary catastrophes, in the sense that no greater good has come about because of these catastrophes, which have resulted in the demolition of millions of creatures. Now, here someone may claim that the word “catastrophe” is a relative term. But I will simply play a “what-if” game, in response. What if we don’t dismiss the catastrophes? Just as it has somehow become a “radical” move to uphold a “traditional” understanding of God, I think it is just as radical for a theologian to uphold the suffering and natural catastrophes *as* events that cause tremendous amounts of pain.

Here is the dilemma given my presuppositions: God does not desire suffering, but has created in such a way that suffering is part of the process of creation. Contingency has allowed for the possibility of great amounts of suffering. I’d like to start wrestling with this dilemma by beginning where most Catholic theologians today tend to ignore: the Cross of Christ. How can the Paschal mystery shed light on our problem? This depends entirely upon how the Cross is understood: and here is where I think we ought to emphasize a few things about Christ’s death.

Following Thomas Aquinas, it is not necessary that God redeem humanity through the death of Christ; contingency is involved. We can further make the claim that Christ was killed because human beings rejected him. This was an entirely free act on the part of human beings, and it is one that God did not desire. God’s offer was one of love, of mercy, of forgiveness. The crucifixion of Christ is the ultimate rejection of this offer. Despite this possibility of rejection, God took a “risk,” knowing all possible contingencies, and brought about human redemption

through the *murder* of his son. This is by far one the most profound mysteries with which Christians are faced. This is a logic that transcends our categories of justice, of mercy, and of forgiveness. Through the murder of an innocent life, salvation occurs.

Let me now apply this to our dilemma. While there are in fact evolutionary biologists who argue for regularity, and direction within evolution,³ in general, many affirm the role of contingency in the process. Random mutations do occur, and new potentials are realized within the large expanse of time working with these mutations. It is not entirely random, but it has occurred in such a way that animals have developed the capacity to feel pain. With this capacity, and as beings increase in complexity, their capacity for pain increases, and, it is not an ungrounded claim to assert that certain animals have the cognitive capacities that would allow them to suffer immensely.

As theologians, we may ask the question: *where is God in this?* It is the same question that Christ may have asked himself during his walk to Calvary. Where is God in my suffering? What happens on that Cross? And why did God allow Christ to suffer? It wasn't *because* that was the only way for God to bring about our salvation. Rather, if we interpret the crucifixion as a human rejection of God's offer of love, then we can't assert that it is a necessary precondition for salvation. It *presupposes* forgiveness and salvation. We can still assert that God desires an incarnation, for it is a good thing, but did not directly will the death of Christ. When we begin to think about how to apply this divine logic to our dilemma, we can analogously affirm that the way that God has decided to create is, ultimately, *good*. Because of the role of contingency (which I would argue is a good thing in itself), pain and suffering are possible parts of the created

³ See the work of Simon Conway Morris, for one example.

order. Just like with Christ, there is a possibility of failure, failed evolutionary attempts, but it does not mean that God desires that nonhuman creatures suffer. The focus of our attention should be placed on the resurrection at this point. We can only see the Cross as salvific in the light of the resurrection; otherwise we are simply gazing upon a dead corpse; a dead creation; a failed attempt at creaturely flourishing. But if our eschatological imaginations make room for all of creation, for every single creature that has been negatively affected by this wonderful, beautiful, and complex process of evolution, then we can begin to deal with our dilemma.

For humans, our sins are forgiven, and Life is open to us. We are given the chance to accept God's offer of forgiveness (which was always already there), and have all of our sins wiped away. Because human beings are complex, it would make sense that our salvation would be complex as well. Salvation may not mean the same thing for everyone; for every generation. But salvation remains the reality. The reality of which we speak is saturated with meaning, and with each generation of people, with each person, it reaches them in their own unique way.

Given this understanding of salvation, it becomes easier for us to apply that term to nonhuman creatures; creatures that do not sin in the same ways that human beings sin (we would have to have a whole other conversation in order to talk about the possibility of animal sin, and there are some theologians like Celia Deane-Drummond who go down this route). Let's not attribute "sin" to nonhuman animals, and then ask the question: what does salvation mean for them? What does it mean for a creation that is not inherently evil, that is actually created "good," but plagued with mass extinctions, destruction, natural disasters that destroy creatures and cause immense pain and suffering? Given that God is present to and with every creature (whether it realizes it or not), this problem exists even if just *one* nonhuman animal suffers. To say that one

does not matter is to go against the God that has been revealed in Christ: this is a God who cares and loves every creature. All of creation somehow participates in the mystery of Christ; in Christ's death and resurrection.

But where does this leave us? Joyful expectation; hope. Hope that God will wipe away every tear; will be a God of redemption. We do not need to speculate as to the reasons "why" God has allowed creatures to suffer pain and death. We may trust there is a reason, but there may not be. The focus of our attention should be placed upon the Cross as seen through Resurrected eyes. Hope is not necessarily something that can be grounded on reasons. Hope is a deep trust.

In the Christian tradition, there have been many theologians who have carved a place and space for nonhuman creation in their eschatological imaginations— theologians in our tradition who have recognized that all of creation gives glory to God, and *matters* to God, for God is its Creator.