

Outline Notes for a Teaching Block on natural evil in the light of science

Length: 3 contact hours Level: 5/6¹

Resources include: teaching notes, videoed interviews, assessment suggestions, reading lists.

Aim: to introduce and evaluate the concept of natural evil, and to suggest how such 'evil' might be thought compatible with a good and loving God.

Objectives: by the end of the block students will be able to:

- a) Articulate and evaluate critically the concept of natural evil
- b) Understand the range of approaches taken by theodicians to natural evil
- c) Understand and evaluate the theological rationales for natural evil, in the context of contemporary scientific descriptions of the cosmos

Source: Dr Christopher Southgate, University of Exeter

Relevant Modules:

2117 Selected Topics in Christian Doctrine; 2121 Topics in Christian Doctrine; 2131 Further Topics in Christian Doctrine.

In all of these our material could feed in under 'Study of primary theological texts and other sources'

2411 Mission and Apologetics in Contemporary Culture

Under 'intellectual, social and religious trends' and 'main approaches in contemporary apologetics'

Also 2661 Science, Ecology and Theology, or new module Issues in Science and Religion.

Level 6: 3091 Christian Doctrine in Context; 3101 Christian Doctrine in Focus

under 'theological resources to respond to contemporary culture'

3121 'Methods in Modern theology' under 'a variety of representative theologies'

3681 'Modern thought and theology'

Under 'Different responses to contemporary theological ideas...'

3131 Philosophical theology

Under 'explore one or more major areas of philosophical theology (for example, faith and reason, metaphysics, epistemology, the doctrine of God, incarnation, divine and human action, theodicy)



¹ This could be taught at L6 by an instructor with the appropriate background. Objectives and assessment would alter accordingly.

Session 1:

short pre-reading – Diogenes Allen’s *Theology for a Troubled Believer* pp72-3.

Recap of the fundamental problem of the co-existence of ‘evil’ with an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. Clarification of the term ‘evil’.

Distinction between moral evil and natural (or ‘physical’) evil.

Student buzz-groups to evaluate that distinction.

Two objections: i) natural disasters are often exacerbated by human folly or neglect. (Example – Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 – exacerbated by civil war in Banda-Ace, cutting down of mangrove swamps to open up beaches, not installing an early-warning system such as was present in the Pacific.) ii) a subtler objection, that human beings are ‘natural’ animals, and that therefore moral evil is a special case of natural evil.

But nevertheless hold that there are ‘evils’, harms that happen to creatures, that do result from the natural processes of the world, and that it is helpful to distinguish between those and harms resulting from the actions of moral agents.

Three types of good-harm analysis (from Southgate and Robinson)

i) property-consequence good-harm analyses, in which the presence of a property that may be deemed good has a likely consequence of a range of harms. The classic example is the free-will defence against moral evil. The possibility of self-conscious freely-choosing action informed by an understanding of other creatures, in a creature such as a human, is taken to be so great a good as to balance the very many harms that arise from the use of that freedom.

ii) developmental good-harm analyses, in which a process through which various types of value develop may also lead to disvalues. These may arise as a by-product of the value-generating process, or they may be instrumental in furthering the generation of value. What are usually called ‘Irenaean’ theodicies hold that encountering harms is developmental of virtues.

iii) constitutive good-harm analyses, in which the good is inseparable from the harm. This most elusive and enigmatic possibility can be glimpsed in the experience of some human sufferers that only in and through their suffering did a certain closeness to God become possible.

Student discussion to clarify these concepts. Examples can be found in the original article.

What harms are we most concerned about here? To humans from natural disasters? To non-human animals from predation, parasitism, and other disease? Best theodicy should engage both.

Noting the critique of ‘anti-theodicians’ (which may have been encountered before), such as Tilley, Phillips, Swinton, Surin.

Anti-theodicies include the challenge that to suppose that God makes some sort of calculation as to the balance of goods and harms in a world that might be created is to

reduce God to a moral agent like human beings.² It is not for us to put God on hooks, or measure God as though God were a creature. Also the yet more disturbing thought that to justify violence in the world as caused by God is to run the risk of desensitizing humans to the reality of particular acts of violence,³ or worse, justifying human violence against other creatures. Both of these are serious charges, and both stress the importance of our responding, as moral agents, to the experience of suffering creatures, rather than defaulting to armchair speculations. The charges are particularly telling, I believe, against theodicies that attempt rational demonstrations from first principles of the plausibility of the God of theism. But the person of faith who, out of that faith, seeks to explore the ways of God with the world, knowing that her answers will only ever be partial and provisional, is not judging God from an armchair, and she knows that God can never be considered as though God were a creature. I note in passing that the two types of anti-theodistic charge in a sense operate in contrary directions – the first is concerned that God might be reduced to comparison with humans, the second that humans might elevate themselves to godlike status and behaviour. So a solidly constructed theology of the distinction between God and the world should be antidote against both.

Acknowledge importance of practical responses.

But recognise that there is still a 'theoretical' question, and that the suffering of non-human animals over millions of years poses it sharply.

Post-reading: Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation* Ch.1; 'Natural Evil after Darwin' by Neil Messer (2009).

Session 2: Student feedback on the post-reading.

How might we address Messer's point that this doesn't seem to be the world declared 'very good' in Gen 1.31? Brief outline of evolution by natural selection (Johnson chapter as background).

Possibilities: a) human sin. The key problems with human-sin arguments are chronological and theological. The fossil record makes clear that animals were tearing each other apart, and suffering from chronic diseases such as arthritis, long before human beings evolved. To blame these phenomena on human sin means either rejecting this very well-established chronology and resorting to a young-earth creationism for which there is not the slightest scientific support, or invoking some contorted account of cause and effect in time⁴ or space.⁵ Not only are these contorted accounts problematic in themselves, but they do not even remotely succeed in preserving the goodness of God in the face of creaturely suffering.⁶

[The position is not even 'biblical' if it is conceded that 'the curse' of the ground in Gen. 3 is set aside in Gen. 8. Optional video-clip of Bethany Sollereder on Gen. 3 and 8.]

b) what of a 'primordial fall'? video-clip of Michael Lloyd?.

² Cf. Phillips, *Problem* 35.

³ Tilley, *Evils* 221-57; Swinton, *Raging* 27-8.

⁴ William Dembski, *The End of Christianity: finding a good God in an evil world* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2009).

⁵ Stephen Webb, *The Dome of Eden: A New Solution to the Problem of Creation and Evolution* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2010)

⁶ Dembski's God inflicts vast amounts of proleptic suffering on creatures because humans will one day sin; Webb's has seemingly abandoned the sphere of creation outside the 'dome' of Eden to the pervasive influence of Satan.

Get students to relate Lloyd's position to Messer's. They share a conviction that the God of evolutionary evil cannot be the God of Jesus Christ, and that soteriology holds the key, even if we can't quite work out how the 'problem' arises.

Alternatives: c) 'free-process' defence Type 1. Ruth Page writes:

I cannot imagine a God responsible for natural evil any more than one responsible for moral evil...To those who wish to affirm full-blooded...(divine) making and doing, (my) version will appear anaemic. But the consequences of belief in a more virile God, who has to be responsible for the removal of around 98% of all species ever, but who fails to do anything in millions of cases of acute suffering in nature and humanity, are scarcely to be borne.⁷

So a particular 'virile' understanding of divine omnipotence is set aside. Instead Page's God creates possibilities and 'lets them be', and also 'companions' them as they unfold. In particular she rejects any long-term divine purposes – God's concern is always 'teleology now'.

Student discussion – does this work as theodicy? Is God not still responsible? Can we really set aside all long-term divine aims?

But another form of 'free-process' defence, Type 2. John Polkinghorne writes:

The more science helps us to understand the world, the more clearly we see its inextricable entanglement of fertility and wastefulness. I have suggested that there is a free-process defence in relation to natural evil, parallel to the familiar free-will defence in relation to moral evil. Natural evil is not gratuitous, something that a Creator who was a bit more competent or a bit less callous could easily have eliminated. Created nature is a package deal, with the emergence of new forms of life and the shadow side of malformation and extinction necessarily intertwined.⁸

This is a *developmental* defence. The harms are inevitable in the emergence of new forms of life, including, eventually, human life.

Post-reading: Southgate, forthcoming chapter in *Theology and Evolution*.

Session 3:

Regather 'package deal' or 'only way' arguments. Clarify these suppose that this is the *only* way selves can form, and the 'best way' selves can flourish.

Limitations of only way argument – clip of Southgate in dialogue with Sollereeder. What is this constraint we posit about God?

Direct students who are really interested to the article by Wahlberg. Could God just have created the apparently evolved world at a particular moment? Or photocopied an evolved world?

⁷ Page, *God and the Web*, 104.

⁸ John Polkinghorne, "Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker" in *God and the Scientist: exploring the work of John Polkinghorne* ed. Fraser Watts and Christopher Knight (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012) 1-12, at 8-9.

Need for a compound theodicy:

Southgate's position on evolutionary suffering:

- I acknowledge the goodness of creation in giving rise to all sorts of values.
- I acknowledge the pain, suffering, death and extinction that are intrinsic to a creation evolving according to Darwinian principles. Moreover, I hold to the (unprovable) assumption that an evolving creation was the only way in which God could give rise to the sort of beauty, diversity, sentience and sophistication of creatures that the biosphere now contains. As shorthand I call this the 'only way' argument.
- I affirm God's co-suffering with every sentient being in creation - the 'co-suffering' argument.
- I take the Cross of Christ to be the epitome of this divine compassion, the moment of God's taking ultimate responsibility for the pain of creation, and - with the Resurrection - to inaugurate the transformation of creation.
- I further stress the importance of giving some account of the eschatological fulfilment of creatures that have known no flourishing in this life. A God of loving relationship could never regard any creature as a mere evolutionary expedient. Drawing on a phrase of Jay McDaniel's, I nickname this the 'pelican heaven' argument.
- If divine fellowship with creatures such as ourselves is in any sense a goal of evolutionary creation, then I advocate a very high doctrine of humanity, supposing that indeed humans are of very particular concern to God. That does not in any way exclude a sense that God delights in every creature which emerges within evolution, but it leads to the possibility that humans have a crucial and positive role, co-operating with their God in the healing of the evolutionary process - the 'co-redeemer' argument.

Note also Murray on the need for a compound approach (2008: Ch. 7).

Get students to say which of these moves they are most comfortable with and which least. Final discussion: does this compound theodicy address the problem of human suffering in natural disasters?

Return to the importance of practical theodicies – Surin on story, Swinton on lament.

Assessment ideas: Essay – Only a cosmic sadist would have used evolution to create.

Discuss this proposition in relation to two evolutionary theodicies.

Essay – both Messer and Southgate posit constraints on God in their evolutionary theodicies. Evaluate the extent of the problems each of their positions creates. What would be your own way forward.

Practical/liturgical task: choose a natural disaster that has happened in recent years that has particularly struck you. Write a lament, using the pattern advocated by John Swinton in his *Raging with Compassion*. Then write a set of intercessions for use in an English parish church. Reflect on how these might differ.

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