

The Evolutionary Theodicy Problem

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Evolutionary theodicies attempt to explain how innocent suffering, death, and extinction seen throughout the evolutionary process of evolution can coincide with believing in a loving God. Since Darwin, scholars have questioned the importance of studying natural selection at such an intricate level. With the knowledge of natural selection, the fact that great suffering is witnessed across nature permits doubts in discussions regarding a benevolent God that created the universe. In this paper, I begin with background information about evolution, theodicy, and how they are related. I look at two major perspectives: the belief that evolution ameliorates the theodicy problem or that evolution exacerbates the theodicy problem. After comparing these two opposing views, I critique the position that evolution is a gift to theology. At the conclusion of this paper, evolution will be seen as an aid to explain the innocent suffering witnessed in the world.

Grief, in the context of Christianity, causes one to begin questioning God and the characteristics of His being. These questions vary from shallow, surface level questions, to deep, philosophical questions that experts have been trying to answer for years. One of those deep philosophical mysteries is the question of evolutionary theodicy. The question of evolutionary theodicy presents many different angles, and it invites a variety of perspectives to speculate on the issue. The premise of the theodicy question is that if the presence of evil, death, and suffering has existed since the formation of the earth, how does God remain good? The problem of evil is that it inherits the ability to counter the omni-benevolence and omnipotence of God. Evil has the ability to challenge God's goodness and bring doubt. It is then posed that either God can control evil, but since He chooses not to, He is not all-good; or He is unable to control evil, therefore rendering Him incapable of being an all-powerful God. The crux of the theodicy problem is the intersection of God being good but allowing suffering in the world. This question challenges not just the

Christians with a basic knowledge of God, but also those that spend a vast majority of their lives searching to explain the goodness of God.

A further dimension to the theodicy problem introduced is seen in light of evolution. Evolution, at its core, is the proliferation of favorable genotypic and phenotypic characteristics that stem from many life and death cycles. If evolution is believed to have persisted since life began, it would indicate that suffering, death, and sin have always existed. Evolution can attempt to explain the theodicy problem, but it is also the cause of confusion and misunderstanding. Whether evolution helps us to understand the theodicy problem or not, opinions can vary, especially when confronting God's goodness. Including two opposite points of view allows a critical analysis of the theodicy problem with an evolutionary basis, but with biblical implications. Evolution helps to explain the theodicy problem of God remaining good while the presence of innocent suffering and the inherent viciousness of nature and death is observable throughout time.

Evolution and the Problem of Innocent Suffering

The theodicy problem poses the contradiction that God is good but allows the manifestation of evil in the world. This is prevalent in discussions between theists and atheists; due to the difficulty of grasping the thought of an all-powerful, loving God that allows suffering and death to enter the world, these discussions rarely promote a change of thinking. One side of the argument questions why God has allowed four billion years of suffering among species, only to give a purpose to already dead organisms. God has put in place a plan for Creation in which He oversees personally and is involved in. He is intimately involved in every person's life. The question of whether God allows evil to manifest in the world is another aspect of the theodicy problem that must be addressed when discussing the benevolence of God in a broken world. Southgate states that "the crux of the problem is not the overall system and its overall goodness but the Christian's struggle with the challenge to the goodness of God posed by specific cases of innocent suffering."¹ This statement comes in response to the argument of theodicy in Christian practices. He explains that Christians do not struggle with believing that the world is broken, but that a broken world can challenge God's power that accompanies his ability to maintain goodness. Innocent suffering has rivaled the existence of God since the formation of the theodicy question. In light of evolution, innocent suffering is what perpetuates the succession of certain species.

The possibility that God may not be all-powerful is something that would cause chaos in many Protestant circles. This is an unfavorable aspect that the theodicy problem presents. God may not be all-powerful, but He would still be all-loving.

The evidence that God exhibits those characteristics of love is observable through Jesus and His resurrection. The atonement of Jesus' death on the cross can be separated into two types: objective and subjective. The objective perspective contains the idea that Christ's death on the cross transforms creation, regardless of whether it was necessary. The cross plays a major role when trying to understand the possibility of suffering in light of a good God because it hints at the fact that God suffers, too. With this idea of God being able to experience suffering, the first time this could be seen is through the event with as much magnitude as the cross. Realizing that God co-suffers along with humanity, grants evolutionary theodicy a way to explain such a possibility that God allows us to suffer because He loves us. It is a challenge to justify the death of organisms, even if it is for a better future. The subjective view of suffering is that when Christ is innocently put to death, His love for the world transforms creation. It transforms because Jesus was able to choose the cross, but other organisms have had suffering imposed on them by God for the betterment of the whole species. With this statement, death, which has been categorized as sin, is permissible because it is beneficial for others. Unfortunately, some organisms have to act as a stepping-stone for the betterment and survival of the offspring. While this ideology may seem cruel, it is how these situations must be viewed when looking through the lens of evolution.

An Evolutionary Explanation Exacerbates the Theodicy Problem

Darwin's ideas about natural selection tend to hint at the exacerbation of the theodicy problem by looking at how vicious nature can be in regards to the survival of the slightly better. Considering the timeline that Darwin was following, it is

¹ Southgate, 2008, 13

understood that millions of years of death and suffering had already occurred. John Haught states: “to anyone aware of the Holocaust, widespread warfare, genocides, political purges, and the prospect of ecological catastrophe, evolutionary science is hardly going to add much to what is already the most pestilent of all human and religious concerns, the problem of innocent suffering. However, even if it fails to deepen the wound, evolution clearly seems to widen it.”² Haught blatantly states that evolution is entirely detrimental to dealing with the problem of theodicy. It is clear where Haught stands on the issue, which provides an insight about the ongoing repercussions of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. With this assumption of the observed viciousness in nature, it implies that Darwin abandoned any form of morality among nature. This absence of morality challenged Darwin’s view of God because of the many imperfections seen in organisms, plants, and even his personal life. This led to the idea that creation was irrational and chaotic, hinting that God lacks benevolence. Darwin did not set out to denounce the goodness of God. However, nature continually pushed him to doubt. Darwin’s fault was that he looked to natural processes and the interactions between organisms to prove the existence of a good God: nature cannot prove this. This evolutionary idea further separates the ability of God to maintain goodness in the presence of suffering witnessed in nature. Evolution works because of the lack of reconciliation between God and nature, instead of one species noticeably evolving from another.

The religious community is still very hesitant to discuss the idea of evolution because it proposes that a supreme being does not guide the universe. The effect of Darwinian thought spreading to a large number of people in the mid-to-late

Nineteenth Century would demolish the religious power that the Catholic Church had established. Once the idea of evolution was presented to the people, people would turn from the church. This would result in the church falling from prominence.

Theologians refer to Darwinian evolution as “his dangerous idea.” Based on this phrase, it can be concluded that the religious institution was staunchly against introducing evolution to the people. With this new scientific information, religious institutions would struggle regaining a foothold in society as an authoritative voice in each community. Hunter states that “Darwin’s solution [to theodicy] distanced God from creation to the point that God was unnecessary. One could still believe in God, but not in God’s Providence. Separating God from creation and its evils meant that God could have no direct influence or control over the world. God may have created the world, but ever since that point it has run according to impersonal natural laws that may now and then produce natural evil.”³ With the distancing of God, it can create a bigger theodicy problem because then it portrays God as a watchmaker or cosmic architect that set the universe into motion, and has stepped away from any interaction. This argument further pushes the questions of theodicy to be directed at God’s power, but if He is so far removed, how can he maintain that power from a distance? This thought creates a wider gap between God’s goodness and the manifestation of evil because God is so distant from creation that His power is irrelevant.

An Evolutionary Explanation Ameliorates the Theodicy Problem

While evolution can impede the progress of solving the theodicy problem, it also contains the uncanny ability to answer challenging contradictions. Proponents of

² Haught, 2008, 23

³ Hunter, 2001, 16

the idea that evolution does not aid in better answering the theodicy problem would struggle with the concept of a mother seeing her child and wondering if her suffering was worth giving life to the child. Evolution works because the recurrent deaths of weak individuals promote the more adept, but it can also provide means for another unrelated species to increase its survival chances. It is easy to observe this suffering as unnecessary or redundant, but in order for an ecosystem to develop, suffering is required. If God requires the evolutionary process to bring about creation, then unfortunately organisms will have to die to accomplish this method of development. Domning concludes that “many have pointed to the inconceivable numbers of organisms that have had to live and die throughout the ages in order for the present world to evolve... there is no such thing as waste. Everything is somehow recycled, as thoroughly as the laws of thermodynamics permit.”⁴ Daryl Domning uses the word “waste” here to indicate something not achieving the purpose in which it was intended. For example, the ultimate purpose of nature seems to still be unfulfilled, so creation appears to ache for God to bring it to fulfillment. If nature is not able to fill this potential, some of the beauty that God has revealed through nature is lost. Domning intends for the word to have two meanings. The second meaning is a reference to fecal matter. This is significant because organisms known as detritivores rely on fecal matter as a source of energy. He hints at an underlying analogy that proves nature promotes adaptation, even if it requires one organism to excrete the product, and the other to consume the product, survival is accomplished. It is important to remember that situations rely on the perspective, not always the outcome. When Darwin’s ideas are presented in this light, it doesn’t seem that death and

suffering is as detrimental for nature to experience.

Without death, nature would not have the ability to evolve and transform into the observable world that gave rise to human descent. Domning presents the idea that “what God *has* done is put us in a position where we must and can choose: between the selfish way of natural selection, and the selfless way of Christ, which alone can liberate us from this world’s futility.”⁵ Domning concludes his argument regarding Darwinian evolution by giving a poignant reminder of the innocent suffering Jesus endured. Domning states that there is a clear choice between the inherent selfishness found in nature and the altruistic life Jesus lived. Christianity is entirely based on the example that Jesus left. Jesus’ life was in complete opposition to the self-centered nature of the world. The only explanation for someone to be able to accomplish an act like this is through the divine ability that was instilled in Him. It is evident that Jesus was anything but “natural” due to the fact that any natural way of living would have led Him to be entirely selfish.

Evolution as a Gift to Theology

Open and Process theologians welcome the idea that evolution is a gift to theology, but other theologians are resistant to accept the same view. Haught points out that “Darwin’s challenge turns out to be a great gift to theology. It spreads out before us a panorama of life that can pilot us away from cheap and easy representations of the sacred such as that implied in a one-sided commitment to the notion of intelligent design ... but we shall see that Darwin’s portrayal of the way the universe works actually invites us to think about God, once again, in a meaningful and truly inspiring

⁴ Domning & Hellwig, 2006, 51-52.

⁵ Domning & Hellwig, 2006, 158

way.”⁶ Haught continues to break down some of the mental barriers that are formed when trying to fuse conversations regarding both God and evolution. He encourages future discussions. An important aspect of the Christian faith is to evangelize. By having difficult conversations about suffering, God, and evolution, it allows for this aspect to be seen. This then puts evolution in a category that would be considered a gift to theology. It is vital to remember that a gift is something that is given without the expectation of anything in return. The dichotomy between theology and evolution can work as a mutualistic relationship. Theology can benefit from answers observed in nature, and nature could benefit from insights given through theology. If evolution is viewed as a gift to theology, it insinuates that theology needs evolution in order to progress forward. This is not inherently detrimental to theology, but it could lead to later complications if evolution is treated as complete truth.

Evolution can help better explain the presence of evil in the world. Some individuals believe that evil arose from God giving creation independence. Within this belief, God must have implemented laws that would separate Him from nature, thus resulting in the eventual presence of evil. This is inaccurate because as mentioned previously, God distanced Himself from creation, which released the control He maintained on creation. Haught again indicates that “reflection on the Darwinian world can lead us to contemplate more explicitly the mystery of God as it is made manifestation the story of life’s suffering, the epitome of which lies for Christians in the crucifixion of Jesus.”⁷ The reflection made by Haught gives insight to how evolution can be beneficial to theology. He takes a position that without the explanation of evolutionary processes and suffering,

Jesus’ act of sacrifice would not have carried much meaning. By having a theology that reflects evolutionary thought the impact of the innocent death of Jesus has astronomical implications. Darwinism has even been stated to be innately more Christian than any form of supernatural design because it shows God’s presence in nature and His creative power. But what is known is that God continually loves Man, all while Man proceeds to fall into the same repetitive cycle of sin. Out of God’s immense love for Man, He gives the gift of grace. The grace given to Man is undeserved, inappropriate, and faultless. It is out of this grace that Man has the opportunity to draw nearer to God. Universal laws, theories of evolution, or world religions cannot provide the same experience as receiving unwarranted grace.

Conclusion

The question of evolutionary theodicy is very intricate and contains many layers. It includes thoughts on science, religion, and suffering, which accompanies expert opinions all over the spectrum. It can fascinate humans that possess the most elementary mind, all the way up to experts in the field of biology and theology. The most interesting aspect of this contradiction is that there is not an answer that could possibly attempt to cover, in detail, the vastness of the theodicy problem. But that will never hinder humans from trying to uncover the answer to one of life’s most intriguing and mentally exhausting questions. The exacerbation or amelioration of the theodicy problem hinges more on the perspective of the person attempting to resolve the question. If one were to bring in a perspective that favors creationism, the person would be much more inclined to believe that evolution widens the gap between the goodness of God and the

⁶ Haught, 2008, 24

⁷ Haught, 2008, 50

viciousness of nature. If another person were trying to denounce the existence of God, that person would focus on innocent suffering and death in the presence of a loving and powerful God. Both of these people bring a valuable ideology into the discussion that must not be dismissed. Evolution is a theory that has caused pain within many religious establishments, schools, and homes, but that is not the goal of the theory. The goal is to better understand the origins of life.

Whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, or

atheist, humans struggle to answer the question of innocent suffering that is witnessed throughout the world. Whether trying to refute this suffering as not part of God's plan, or attempting to eliminate the belief of a higher being all together, people need explanations and reasons. It is this innate wondering that drives humans to the depths of the ocean and to the face of the moon, all in pursuit of the ever-fleeting answer.

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