The claim that Christians reject evolution as incompatible with belief is a canard. Mainstream theology sees evolution as the means of God’s continuing creation through the within of natural processes, viewing science and religion as compatible. Evolution resonates with today’s typically historical understanding of revelation, also with a Christological sense of God’s world-transforming involvement through incarnation, cross and resurrection. Three streams of Christian thought struggle with evolution, however. Two are products of modernity, namely Protestant biblical literalism and reasonable Anglicanism’s fixation on the argument from design. The third contrary stream does not deny that evolution takes place, though it does question God’s responsibility for a dark and violent process so alien to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, who is light of the world and prince of peace. Some theologians, including activists for animal welfare, condemn the undoubtedly harsh and wasteful process that Darwin revealed, against ecotheologians whose delight in the holistic complexity of evolving natural systems is not matched by a concern for natural selection’s myriad victims.¹ There are necessary insights on both sides of this argument. Can they be held together across a significant divide in theological and scientific imagination?

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I

Spiritual squeamishness about material existence has a long history. Gnosticism posited a demiurge as creator of the flawed, material world, from which human souls had to be rescued. Some see evolution itself in similar terms, excusing God from responsibility for a world of violent predation. Others blame 'the fall', but look beyond Adam and Eve’s misguided choice – since we now know that 3.5 billion years of natural selection preceded humanity’s appearance – to the fallen angels, who were thought to have rejected their appointed role in running God’s world, hence corrupting a hitherto non-violent creation. In this way, everything from earthquakes and tsunamis to disease, predation and death can be seen as emerging contrary to God’s will.

Both scientific and theological training reinforce my conviction that this is not the right answer. As Richard Kingston put it:

> if God entrusted to fallible ... angelic beings such absolute control over creation that it was within their power to 'brutalize' the animal kingdom for all time, then he cannot be exonerated from all culpability for what actually happened. Must we not go further and say that such action would indicate either incompetence or the fact that the sufferings of the lower creatures are unimportant in the eyes of the Creator! The fall of the angels, in brief, provides neither a sound theodicy nor a stimulus to animal welfare.

Those who blame the fall for ruining a kinder, gentler version of life as we know it cannot appreciate how inconceivable that life is apart from long aeons of natural selection in unyielding environments – as if there could have been recognizable species in a world with the same physics, chemistry, geology and biology as our world but without animal suffering and death. Apart from the fundamental physics which produces order at the expense of entropy, disorder and decay; or stellar evolution forming (and supernovae releasing) the heavy elements that eventually coalesce in planets and living bodies; or the geological churning producing habitable landmasses and fertile soil (along with earthquakes and tsunamis); and apart from global catastrophes and mass extinctions in pre-history clearing the way for mammalian life, we would not have ‘all things bright and beautiful’.
No Eden-like state of finely wrought, pain-free herbivores without predation or natural selection did or could ever exist. The big beautiful eyes, acute senses and agility of deer, for instance, emerged over millions of years under pressure of predation, just as the breathtaking speed of cheetahs only arose through the slower and less alert starving and failing to breed. Likewise, resistance to disease was won at the expense of much collateral damage among weaker specimens, while adaptation to the biosphere’s many liveable niches means that today’s exquisitely adapted rock-climbing goats, soaring eagles and darting fish evolved at the cost of countless others who succumbed to death-traps of gravity, adverse temperature, wind and water. Complex creatures cannot be imagined as finished products without acknowledging their ‘palimpsest quality’, with layers of earlier life forms revealed within the structures of their being. As for predation, without which a world of alert, fleet, gorgeous and intelligent creatures would never have emerged from somnolent protoplasm, it is also likely to be the case that human brains could not have achieved the necessary complexity without assimilating sufficient proteins available only from meat.

The tendency to resist nature’s brute facts may reveal a wish-fulfilling motive, resisting the inevitability of creaturely finitude, imperfection and hence suffering, as if unwaveringly positive outcomes for all creatures in all circumstances represent the only scenario compatible with a loving God. This reflects the typical expectations of modern Western individuals for their own lives, given the premium we place on control and personal satisfaction. Such thinking recalls the theologia gloriae which Luther condemned, looking instead to a theologia crucis – a theology of the cross – for understanding the costly, counterintuitive nature of God’s investment in the world. Further, it precludes any satisfying account of divine action in a world open to creaturely freedom, which entails the possibility of outcomes that God will not control. Such an account follows the Catholic imagination of Aquinas into a sacramental understanding of God at work in, with and under the creaturely processes of nature and history. Rather than isolating God from the bitter facts of life, I want to assert that this whole tragic, savage but also wonderful world is the world God is still creating, and that the necessity of death and decay entailed by fundamental physics and revealed by life’s evolution is a process in which God is working out the Christ event.
II

Admitting that God’s will embraces 3.5 million years of animal suffering does not necessarily entail that Christus Redemptor has given way to a harsh, unfeeling Christus Selector – as Jürgen Moltmann fears. Rather, a God who works through evolution can still be the God of natural selection’s victims. It is not only the blood of Abel that cries out to God from the ground (Genesis 4:10), but that of every unlucky wildebeest snatched by a crocodile, every injured foal circled by wolves, every pelican chick tossed from its nest by efficient parents favouring its healthier sibling. How can God’s love for creatures be squared with the tragedy of ‘nature red in tooth and claw’ – including 97 per cent of all animal species which ever lived now extinct, apart from individual creaturely suffering? This requires a compound theodicy.

A first step is to reinterpret divine providence as God ‘letting creatures be; according to their own natures. Recall William Blake’s reminder that God is not only the creator of lambs:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? …

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?!

Process theologian Jay McDaniel concludes that God was on the side both of the orcas he once saw attacking a grey whale and of the whale trying to escape them. A loving providence can be understood as fitting creatures to thrive in their respective niches, not least by allowing pain mechanisms their necessary protective place in any complex creaturely existence. God’s care over animals is not in the personal form appropriate to humans, therefore, nor can every circumstance be bent to a kind purpose, as Austin Farrer pointed out.

The God of nature gives his animal creatures pains out of love for them, to save their lives; he makes the way of destruction
distasteful to them, as a parent makes the path of danger distasteful to a child, by little punishments. Again, out of love for them, God moves his creatures to shun their pains and mend their harms, so far as their sense and capacity allows. And at last, when they must acknowledge defeat, as every perishable creature must, he relieves them of the power and will to struggle, of the pain on stimulus of which they can no longer usefully act, and of the being they can no longer hopefully defend.12

The second element of a compound theodicy reappraises suffering. Holmes Rolston views predation not in terms of ‘value loss’ but of ‘value capture’, with a redemptive element built into life’s ongoing creation. ‘The secret of life’, he concludes, ‘is that it is a passion play’.13 His connection of natural selection with the cross is echoed by today’s leading theorist of human sacrifice underpinning cultural creation, René Girard, who sees Darwinian nature as ‘a super-sacrificial machine’.14 Yet Girard is no supporter of human sacrifice as cultural glue, seeing the cross as God’s definitive outing of the sacrificial mechanisms holding nature and humanity in bondage. While responsibility for natural selection and its attendant suffering must be sheeted home to God, it is not the whole story, nor will it be God’s final word about creation. Christ’s cross begins undoing nature’s iron law whereby the fittest alone survive, in the meantime testifying to God’s acceptance of responsibility for natural and human worlds that appear to have required these means for their emergence.

It is this new creation, emerging from and promising finally to overtake the old, that provides a necessary third element in the compound theodicy animal suffering demands. As John Wesley preached, ‘the Father of All has a tender regard for even his lowest creatures, and ... in consequence of this, he will make them large amends for all they suffer while under their present bondage’.15 The suffering and loss of so many species and individual creatures looks very different if they are not gone forever, but somehow preserved in God’s love and life.

Some have argued that it only makes sense for sentient life with a memory of its suffering to be redeemed, but all resurrection is a gift from God rather than a right entailed by strictly earthbound creaturely natures. The Book of Revelation (5:13) pictures all creatures gathered together around
God’s throne in the new heavens and the new earth, but what could this mean if God respects the particularities of animal nature? Isaiah’s lions eating straw like oxen (65:25) are surely at best suggestive. Likewise, to limit animal redemption to their remembrance by God, as process theology suggests, is too much like today’s popular eschatology, which sees immortality in terms of memory only. Further, it risks overspiritualizing the new creation while underemphasizing God’s regard for creaturely otherness and integrity. A more concrete outcome is surely entailed by God’s care for all life on its own terms, as James A Dickey imagines in his 1961 poem, ‘The Heaven of Animals’.

Here they are. The soft eyes open.  
If they have lived in a wood  
It is a wood.  
If they have lived on plains  
It is grass rolling  
Under their feet forever.

Having no souls, they have come,  
Anyway, beyond their knowing.  
Their instincts wholly bloom  
And they rise.  
The soft eyes open.

To match them, the landscape flowers,  
Outdoing, desperately  
Outdoing what is required:  
The richest wood,  
The deepest field.

For some of these,  
It could not be the place  
It is, without blood.  
These hunt, as they have done,  
But with claws and teeth grown perfect,  
More deadly than they can believe.  
They stalk more silently,  
And crouch on the limbs of trees,
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And their descent
Upon the bright backs of their prey

May take years
In a sovereign floating of joy.
And those that are hunted
Know this as their life,
Their reward: to walk

Under such trees in full knowledge
Of what is in glory above them,
And to feel no fear,
But acceptance, compliance.
Fulfilling themselves without pain

At the cycle’s centre,
They tremble, they walk
Under the tree,
They fall, they are torn,
They rise, they walk again.\textsuperscript{17}

A theodicy adequate to the terrible extent of animal suffering requires something like this heaven for animals, while in the meantime God’s providential care extends appropriately to each creature, with Christ sharing creation’s groaning in travail (Romans 8:22). His physical resurrection heralds a day when the traumas of animal life are soothed and forgotten at last, in a mysticism of love which is God’s first and last word about every beloved creature.

Notes


5. See, for example, Neil Shubin, Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5 Billion Year History of the Human Body, Pantheon Books, New York, 2008.


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