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## Creation:

### “Why did God create carnivores?”

(By Randal Rauser)

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*“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”* (Genesis 1:31)

Sunday evenings in our home tend to center around the television as we gather to watch one of our favorite programs, the PBS series “Nature.” One evening, the anticipation in the household was running especially high for we were all looking forward to the episode titled “Born Wild: The First Days of Life.” While we were expecting to witness intimate and miraculous portraits of newly born creatures, the reality was rather less sentimental. As we soon discovered, new life is granted no grace period in those first days of life. Instead, nascent creatures are immediately forced to adapt to what the narrator ominously referred to as the “world of predators”. From the earliest moments looms a world of unremitting hostility, violence, suffering and death.

In one disturbing scene, seals and their newborn pups are shown lying on the rocks, baking in the summer sun. Eventually the mothers become so overheated that the drive to survive

trumps even maternal instincts and they make the agonizing decision to leave their helpless pups on the shore in order to take a brief cooling dip in the ocean. Tragically, those few minutes are all that is required for a pack of roving hyenas to walk onto the beach and select the plumpest bleating young pups for lunch. And then comes the final pathetic scene when one mother returns to the beach and frantically begins the search for her offspring, a pup which by that point is already being digested in the belly of an engorged hyena.

The death of those seal pups was disturbing enough, but on the sinister scale it paled in comparison with the fate of that clutch of adorable lion cubs. That scene opens with an adult male lion entering the pride after having defeated the previously dominant male lion. Anxious to assert his new status with the lionesses, the lion saunters coolly down to the innocent cubs of the defeated lion. The little creatures frolic happily in the grass as a new potential playmate approaches, oblivious to their rapidly impending fate. Then as the mother watches helplessly on, the interloper begins to rip apart the wailing cubs and eat them as a final show of leonine sovereignty. With his status securely in place, he can now turn to mate with the bereaved mother. (As unthinkable as this act of violence may be, it is not guaranteed that the cubs would have fared any better with their own father for, as the narrator explains, it is not uncommon for father lions to kill their own cubs.)

Through all of these deeply unsettling images of violence at least one relationship seems sacred: that of mother and offspring. The seal mother and lioness may have been unable to protect their babies from the brutality of life, but at least they manifested the universal maternal desire to protect and nurture their offspring. Surely here in the care of mothers there is at least one secure bastion against the world of predators. But alas, in the world of the predators, even this bond is open to stomach churning corruption. To begin with, there are those mothers that

immediately push their offspring out of the nest or burrow, leaving them to fend for themselves with what strikes us as an inexplicably callous indifference. And yet, ironically enough, those poor creatures pushed from the nest may actually be the lucky ones. This much becomes clear when one discovers that many mothers, like the familiar wood mouse, will occasionally cull their litters of the weakest elements by *eating* the most vulnerable offspring. Once again the austere cruelty of nature invades and corrupts even the sacred space of the mother's nest.<sup>1</sup>

The world of predators invades the maternal/offspring bond in another way as well and this brings me to perhaps the most bizarre image from "Born Wild". Although the scene involves the kind of lowly arachnids that you might step on without a second thought, it is there that we see the vicious cycle of predation extended into the maternal theatre in a way that becomes almost absurdly nightmarish. The scene opens with an Amaurobius spider crouched as a hundred or more of her babies are being hatched. For an arachnaphobe like me that's disturbing enough. But then things get even worse as the famished little tykes begin to eat the remaining eggs in their midst. (Now that's what I call sibling rivalry.) But grotesque though that may be, the worst is yet to come, for once the stock of eggs is exhausted the baby spiders begin to swarm their mother, not to establish a tight maternal/child bond, but rather to continue their feast. In essence the collection of baby spiders turns into a fleet of one hundred eight legged Pac-Men that methodically eat their way through their mother. Even the narrator departs from his typically aloof stance at this point by calling the little creatures "monsters". Monsters they may be, but they certainly are not alone. This is just one more instance of the brutality and horror that characterizes the callous world of predators.

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<sup>1</sup> I discovered this tendency among rodents when I was a child and when we purchased a cute, plump hamster. One morning we realized that our "plump" hamster had actually been pregnant for there were now eight wiggling babies in the cage. But that didn't last for long. When we saw *five* babies a few days later we gradually realized with horror that our pleasant pet was had taken to feasting on her children in the wee hours of the morning.

When the program finally ended and the credits began to roll we were left sitting shell-shocked on the couch. Far from being merely “born wild”, those baby spiders seemed to have been born *wicked*. And as for the rest of those newborn creatures, most of those that would survive the earliest days of life would either become monsters themselves or one day succumb to one. As I mulled over the sorrows of the tortured natural world, the words of Jesus came to mind: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.” (Matthew 10:29) These were meant as comfort words: just as God has full knowledge of and care for the struggles of the sparrow so does he for the disciple. But now as I thought about it, the passage seemed anything but comforting. After all, Jesus affirms that the sparrow can experience a fatal fall to the ground while in the Father’s care. What’s so comforting about that? Put it this way: would you hire a babysitter who assured you, “not one infant will fall from her high chair outside of my care?” As if it’s okay if the infant falls *inside* her care? Which parent would consider this an adequate standard for prospective caregivers? And yet this seemed to be the dilemma.

Of course falling out of a nest is but the tip of the iceberg. If God’s care is consistent with a sparrow’s untimely death then it is presumably also consistent with a hawk picking off a baby sparrow for a snack, with seal pups becoming lunch for hyenas, with lion cubs becoming the unwitting victims of an interloper, with a wood mouse eating its babies, and with tiny *Amaurobius* spiders eating their mother. After an hour gawking at the blood shed within inches of the nest, how could I speak God’s fatherly care for creation *at all*? What kind of care is it that is consistent with every brutality of the world of predators?

The range of horrors immortalized in “Born Wild” a specific kind of evil. On this point theologians and philosophers distinguish between moral evil and natural evil. While morally evil

events are those which are undertaken intentionally by moral agents, natural evil involves no such intentional agency. The case where a man kills and cannibalizes his stepchildren would be a gross moral evil. But things are very different when a lion kills and eats another lion's cubs. Although we also find this repulsive it doesn't carry the moral dimension of the stepfather's crime. While the stepfather is a moral agent the lion is not, and so while the former act is an instance of moral evil, the latter act is a case of natural evil. The flood that drowns prairie dogs and the forest fire that fatally roasts poor Bambi are also instances of natural evil.<sup>2</sup> Our primary focus here is with the range of natural evils that encompass predation and carnivory. As "Born Wild" illustrates, animal suffering and natural evil pervade the world. But why?

Generally speaking, the depth of the problem of animal suffering has not been adequately acknowledged in the Christian tradition. This is due to at least two factors. To begin with, Christians (like other people) have often treated animals as being of negligible value and thus worthy of little theological reflection or moral concern. The low point of this marginalization of animals arguably came with the followers of the seventeenth century philosopher René Descartes who claimed that animals are little more than highly complex machines, devoid of a mental life and thus incapable of suffering. (Based on this most dubious assumption, it was believed that animals could be subjected to the cruelest procedures like vivisection for the most trivial reasons.) Fortunately these days few people say that animals are without a conscious life or worthy of no consideration. Indeed, today we are more likely to hear concerns for animal welfare and even animal rights.<sup>3</sup> But with every degree of increase in our moral sensitivity toward

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<sup>2</sup> The suffering of human beings as a result of nonagential causes (e.g. a fire caused by lightning rather than an arsonist) also is an example of natural evil.

<sup>3</sup> On this point I recommend the reader consider Matthew C. Halteman's booklet *Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation* (USA: Humane Society USA, 2008) available online: [http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/faith/ar-halteman\\_book\\_lowres2.pdf](http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/faith/ar-halteman_book_lowres2.pdf). Often the love of a pet can be a real help in awakening our moral awareness toward animals: when we become sensitive to the suffering to which our beloved dog or cat can be subjected, we likewise become sensitive to the suffering to which animals that are not under human domestication are subjected. See my

animals comes a heightened awareness of the problem presented by the natural evil of animal suffering.

The second reason that we have not been as disturbed by this problem as we should be relates to the huge influence of the traditional Adamic explanation for animal suffering. According to this explanation, the world of predators is the result of the sin of our original parents, Adam and Eve. That is, when Adam and Eve fell, suffering, predation, carnivory and death entered the world. But even if this explanation has a very long history – indeed it appears to be present right in Genesis 1 – it is no longer credible. Today Christians are increasingly coming to terms with the fact that the world of predators predates the appearance of human beings by millions of years, and for all those years countless creatures have been subjected to agonizing suffering. When we think of a world created in pain and violence from the towering T-Rex to the tiny Amaurobius spider, red in tooth and claw, stained and soaked with the blood of billions of victims, how can we consider calling such a world *good*? And yet this is precisely what we are to confess, as the goodness of the original creation is the repeated refrain of Genesis 1, culminating in the final assessment of verse 31 that indeed the world was created *very good*. So then what are we to think? If we begin to doubt the original goodness of creation, do we not also doubt the goodness of the creator?

We will address these difficult questions concerning the goodness of creation and creator in three steps. To begin with, we will consider the traditional response to animal suffering, what I refer to as the “Adamic thesis”, according to which creation was created good but human beings messed it up (two human beings in particular). I will consider two forms of the thesis and note why neither ultimately works. Next, we will consider another response that admits creation was

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discussion in *You're not as Crazy as I Think: Dialogue in a world of loud voices and hardened opinions* (Biblica, 2011), ch. 9.

created much less good than we would think, but also affirms that God is still good, not least because he offers a future recompense for some, if not all, of the creatures that suffer. Finally, we shall turn to consider the difficult challenge of the atheist who charges that the groans of creation ultimately drown out the praises, forcing the honest observer to doubt that there could be a benevolent God behind it at all.

### **Is Adam responsible for animal suffering?**

Let's begin on the familiar ground of the Adamic explanation. According to this account, the reason that the world is permeated with animal suffering traces back not to the direct creative act of God but rather to the fall of Adam and Eve. The suffering, predation, death and carnivory that pervades creation cannot be blamed on God. Rather, responsibility for the agony of the seal pup, lion cub, and Amaurobius spider lies at the feet of the first human beings. God did not create a world of predators. On the contrary, he created a good and peaceable kingdom of harmonious relationships. Consider how the writer of Genesis 1 describes the original situation:

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." (Gen. 1:29-30)

The claim of the passage is actually quite extraordinary. All creatures were originally given plants to eat: Amaurobius spiders and African clawless otters, bushy tailed mongooses and buzzards, saber-toothed tigers and sea lions, T-Rexes and Tasmanian devils, wolves and wolverines, and all other creatures were originally created herbivores with an appetite for

nothing more than verdant vegetation. (Presumably then, even a carnivorous plant like the Venus flytrap would ultimately trace its ancestry back to some sort of vegetarian “leaftrap”.) It is only after the fall that some creatures (and some plants) developed a taste for sentient flesh ... along with the physiology necessary to masticate and digest it.<sup>4</sup>

The transformation of creation from a paradise of dreamy herbivores to a ferocious nightmare of blood, claws and teeth is so extreme that we should expect to find a rather clear description of this cosmic fissure in the Genesis text. But instead all we find is a rather vague account of the sundering of relations between human beings and creation (in Genesis 3:14-19, to be discussed below) and a rather cryptic reference to God clothing Adam and Eve in “garments of skin” (Genesis 3:21). Many commentators have mused that this latter reference to animal skins constitutes a veiled allusion to the introduction of death into the world. One finds fuller descriptions of the impact of the fall on creation elsewhere in scripture, but perhaps nowhere as intriguingly as in Paul’s description in Romans: “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.” (Romans 8:20) The Greek word translated here as frustration is “*mataiotēs*” and it can mean “depravity” or “weakness”. Clearly the natural world is not depraved in a literal sense for that would entail that creation is a moral agent which produces moral evil. As I said above, the suffering of the natural world, such as when a hyena eats a seal pup or a lion eats a lion cub, are not instances of moral evil but rather of natural evil, of creatures acting out of instinctual impulses with suffering and death being the byproduct. Such horrifying behaviors, evil though they may be, are simply what hyenas and lions *do*.

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<sup>4</sup> Let us be sure to note that according to the text, humans also shared this original vegetarian diet. Yes indeed, hard though it may seem, the Garden of Eden had no hamburgers, hotdogs or pepperoni pizza.

But even if creation is not fallen in a moral sense, there is still something distinctly fallen about the litany of horrors depicted on the “Born Wild” episode. In an innumerable number of ways, creation bears the marks of Adam and Eve’s fall. And so, while we may lament the state of the world, we ought to interrogate those first human beings, not the creator who made the world. It is understandable why that Adamic story has had such a formidable influence for it is rooted in the natural reading of Genesis 1 and establishes the culpability of human beings while retaining the goodness of God. At the very least, by placing the immediate blame on the shoulders of the first human beings the story helps us keep the carnage of the world of predators at arms-length from the divine goodness.

But trouble looms nearby. How does the Adamic thesis propose to explain the monumental proposition that millions of creatures were changed from being herbivores to carnivores in a relatively brief period of time? What kind of incredible transformation would be required to turn a large peaceable, algae-eating fish into the terrifying great white shark, or a giant, loveable Barney-like dinosaur into a bloodthirsty T-Rex? Just how many bewildering changes would be required to morph this original Edenic Dr. Jekyll creation into a crazed, bloodthirsty Mr. Hyde? There are two possible avenues of response for the proponent of the Adamic thesis. The impact of sin upon the natural world can be explained either in terms of natural consequence or divine judgment.

Let’s begin with the natural consequence explanation. In order to illustrate this approach, picture the unfortunate scene of a young man who trips and, in an attempt to break his fall, ends up sticking his hand into a fire. The effect is immediate as the flesh begins to burn, char and blister the poor bloke’s hand. When this happens we don’t say that God *judged* the man for stumbling. Rather, we simply explain the unfortunate event as a manifestation of the natural laws

that God created and sustains in operation: when you put your hand in fire, your hand gets burned. No special divine action is required, and God *certainly* didn't undertake a specific intervention just to burn the flesh. The idea behind the natural consequence view is that we can explain the origin of the world of predators in similar terms. To put it bluntly, by sinning Adam and Eve were effectively thrusting the hand of creation into the fire, and the result was the charred, blistered landscape of suffering, predation, death and carnivory that was on display in "Born Wild".

The natural consequence approach is appealing in that it keeps the suffering of creation at arms length from God's providence. Yes he sustains the natural laws of the world he created, but at least he didn't intervene directly to introduce suffering and death to creation. However, the view also suffers from some pretty serious problems. Here's one problem: one marvels at the notion that two human beings in one tiny corner of the globe could, through their wanton actions, combust the entire world. Surely as far as natural laws go, this claim strains our credulity. Moreover, it begs the question of why God would choose to create an unstable vegetarian T-Rex which would become a murderous beast upon the first human sin. Surely he could have created a stable vegetarian T-Rex that would remain a docile behemoth even if Adam baked a whole apple pie. So why didn't he? Why would he create an entire world that would collapse into predatory chaos at the first foible of human creatures? Surely it is not beyond the capacity of omnipotence for God to create a natural world that would remain unaffected by human sin. So why didn't he?

The problems with natural consequence lead to the second explanation of divine judgment according to which the predatory transformation of creation represents God's punishment for the Adamic fall. This proposal can appeal to Genesis 3:14-19 for support since God responds to the fall here by cursing the serpent, the woman and the man. If we take these

three individuals as emblematic for creation, we could see the curse extending out to the four corners of the earth (and presumably to the vast cosmos beyond). With this in mind, the Genesis 3 curse of creation includes countless more specific curses like the following:

Cursed are you peaceable great white shark. From now on your desire shall be for the flesh of tuna and seal. And cursed are you peaceable tuna and seal. From now on you shall flee in fear from the great white shark.

While the divine judgment explanation avoids the implausibility of viewing the world of predation and animal suffering as a natural effect of human sin, on the downside it suggests that God (perhaps acting through “the Angel of the Lord”) entered into the flow of nature and miraculously transformed millions of cuddly creatures into bloodthirsty brutes. If you stop to think about it, the proposal is staggering in its scope. Two human beings sinned on a well-manicured plot of land somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates and in punishment God transformed a docile great white shark swimming off the coast of the Cape of Good Hope to go from craving kelp and algae to fresh tuna and seal. Here’s the obvious question: how could this be a proper form of *punishment*? Punishment for *whom* exactly? Frankly this recalls to mind the picture of a boss frustrated by his workers who goes home and kicks the dog. How can it be just for God to “kick” the poor great white shark (not to mention the poor seal) for the rebellious actions of a couple foolish humans some eight thousand kilometers away?

While both the natural cause and curse explanations of creation’s fall leave something to be desired, the weightiest objection to the Adamic thesis is found in the fossil record. The problem is that the fossil record provides powerful evidence for the existence of widespread predation, carnivory, death, and even entire extinctions millions of years prior to the appearance

of human beings.<sup>5</sup> The fossil evidence for death is overwhelming: just one bed of trilobite fossils can contain tens of millions of specimens. And there is also ample evidence for carnivory. To note one example, scientists have found crushed Triceratops frill in fossilized T-Rex dung, dung that predates human beings by eons. All told, the fossil record provides indisputable support for the claim that animals were suffering, dying, eating other creatures and being eaten by them, millions of years before human beings appeared on the scene. As theologian and scientist Denis Lamoureux puts it: “The scientific facts reveal the appearance of humans at the very top of the geological column, 100s of millions of years after physical death had entered the world.... This fossil pattern in the crust of the earth is as solid as the fact that we live on a planet that rotates on its axis and revolves around the sun.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the struggle to survive, extending from the trilobite to the T-Rex, had been going on for millions of years before human beings. (While this can be a disheartening discovery, there is an upside. Had the five ton T-Rex with its 12 inch serrated teeth been resident in the Garden of Eden, then there’s a good chance that none of us would be here today.)

To sum up, the Adamic thesis faces a range of objections relating to the way that human sin impacted creation and, most seriously, to the contrary testimony of the fossil record. But before we abandon the Adamic thesis completely, we should briefly acknowledge a very interesting amended form of it. This modified view concedes that God created the world with predation, carnivory and death, but it proposes that God only did so because he knew in advance that Adam and Eve would fall. Consider by analogy a father who provides his child with a faulty car because he knew the child would end up crashing the vehicle anyways. Just as the father’s

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Southgate estimates that at least 98% of the species that have existed are currently extinct. *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus & I Accept Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 142-43.

foreknowledge that the child would drive recklessly determined that the child would receive a faulty automobile, so God's foreknowledge of human sin determined that God created a world already in the throws of suffering and death.<sup>7</sup>

This modified Adamic thesis avoids the problems with positing a suffering-free period in the past, but it still leaves unaddressed the relation between human sin and the natural world. Think of another great white shark killing and eating a tuna off the Cape of Good Hope sixty million years ago. It may be possible to conceive of this great white shark being created carnivorous because of the sins human beings would commit millions of years in the future, but the claim still appears quite extraordinary. Why would God do this? To put it bluntly, how can the fate of a Paleocene tuna and the feeding habits of a Paleocene shark be explained either as a natural consequence of, or a punishment for, the actions of two human beings some sixty million years later? Despite the cleverness of this retroactive Adamic position it still leaves us grappling with the question of why God would create a world with about three hundred million years of groaning prior to the first human beings.

Let's consider one final possibility, namely that God allows the suffering of creation for a greater good, either the good of human beings or, perhaps, the good of the creatures themselves. As a general rule we know that God allows humans to suffer in part because this can spur on spiritual formation. As Paul wrote, "we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." (Rom. 5:3-4) Could it be that animals also suffer, at least in part, for our benefit? Perhaps their suffering challenges us to persevere and develop courage, compassion and other virtues. I suspect this could explain at least some animal suffering. When I was a child a cat killed a robin near our

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this view see William Dembski, *The End of Christianity: Finding a good God in an evil world* (B&H Academic, 2009).

house, leaving a nest of newborn chicks. We ended up taking those chicks into our home and raising them before we released them into the wild. I learned a lot about compassion and care through that experience and it is certainly possible that one reason God allowed the robin to be killed was so that I could develop as a person through the care of her chicks. But is human benefit adequate to explain *all* animal suffering? That seems to be an impossible claim since most animal suffering never impacts human beings. Consider for instance that tuna that was eaten by a great white shark off the Cape of Good Hope some sixty million years ago or that triceratops that was torn apart by a T-Rex seventy million years ago. What benefit could there possibly be from these and millions upon millions of other cases?

This brings us to our final possibility: perhaps God allows creatures to suffer for their own personal development. After all, if God allows humans to suffer so that they might develop perseverance, character and hope then couldn't the same be true of the "beasts" as well? (Writers of an earlier generation called all non-human creatures "beasts", a convention that strikes us today as a bit harsh.) Perhaps this could be the case for some higher primates (chimpanzees maybe?) but for the most part the answer surely is a resounding *no*. As C.S. Lewis observed, "So far as we know beasts are incapable either of sin or virtue: therefore they can neither deserve pain *nor be improved by it*."<sup>8</sup> Certainly Lewis is correct. Who could seriously claim that the Amaurobius spider mother learned courage and altruism by submitting to her offspring's cannibalism? Which tuna learns to be courageous by fleeing the jaws of a great white shark? Unfortunately such explanations absolutely fall flat. And as they do we find ourselves wondering once again in what sense this world of agony and pain could be considered *very good*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 129, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Theologians have occasionally argued that the devil and his wicked minions might be responsible for the original corruption of creation. However, once we accept that there never was any pristine, predation-free period of creation

### **The best is yet to come**

Despite these difficulties, many theologians have maintained that the goodness of creation can be reconciled with the fact that creation came “out of the box” with suffering and death. While I don’t dispute that this may be possible, it seems counterintuitive to call creation very good when it manifests the kind of natural evils depicted in “Born Wild”. But rather than pursue the question of creation’s goodness further, at this point let’s switch our focus to the question of the creator’s goodness. What can we say for God given that he subjects the natural world to such misery through no fault of its own?

While we might not be able to find a satisfactory explanation for the extraordinary suffering of creation, this problem could be greatly mollified if we at least had a ground to believe that God would promise better days for creatures that suffer greatly in this life. And this brings us to an interesting proposal: the possibility, as C.S. Lewis put it, of “animal immortality”.<sup>10</sup> With this proposal we shift our discussion from matters of protology (the original state of creation) to eschatology (the final state of creation).<sup>11</sup> I call this proposal the “future compensation thesis” and the idea is simply that at some future point animals will be compensated for sufferings in this life with a renewed life free of such suffering.

This “all dogs go to heaven” theology may sound appealing, but is there any reason to think it is anything more than mealy-mouthed sentimentalism? Perhaps there is. To begin with this future compensation thesis has a promising analogue in the future hope promised to

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we are forced to posit this demonic corruption at the beginning of the emergence of life. And this prompts the question of why God would allow his creation to become corrupted from the outset.

<sup>10</sup> See *The Problem of Pain*, 136.

<sup>11</sup> An aside: Be warned that if you’re ever writing about protology, you might discover (as I did) your over-eager spell check automatically changing the word to “proctology”, an alteration which could be both embarrassing and confusing if it is not corrected.

followers of Jesus Christ. Though they may suffer greatly, they are promised a future of immense joy. As Paul declared, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (Romans 8:18) This passage provides the hope and promise to those who undergo suffering that these sufferings will be recompensed in eternity with a future glory. Is it too much to think that this promise might be extended to animals as well?

There is perhaps more to this suggestion than you might think at first blush. On this point we should first observe that the future hope of the Christian is not simply to go to heaven (as texts like John 14:2 are often interpreted), but rather to inhabit a new heaven and new earth (see Isaiah 65:17 and 2 Peter 3:13). Indeed, arguably the most vivid picture of our future destiny comes in Revelation 21:1-3, and note that the picture here is not of human beings going up to heaven but rather of God’s presence coming down into our midst: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God....” (v. 2) So the central biblical teaching is not of taking human beings out of the world to an immaterial heavenly existence but rather of providing a renewed creation in which we may exist for eternity. Our hope is not to sit on a puffy cloud singing the Hallelujah chorus forever, but rather to live in a perfected world.

Once we recognize that God is going to create a new earth, the possibility that creatures just might find a home there takes on a new degree of plausibility. Whatever God’s role in the origin of the ominous world of predators may be, we can hope that one day he will turn things around and establish his peaceable kingdom. In fact, Paul muses on this theme as he reflects on a specific hope for creation in Romans 8:21: “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.” While this is an intriguing passage, what does this notion of creation being liberated from bondage actually mean? In the next two verses Paul explains the hope of creation’s liberation in analogous terms

to the Christian's hope in the resurrection of the body: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies." (8:22-23) Just as we humans long for our incorruptible resurrection body when we shall be liberated from the effects of sin, so creation too longs to be liberated from the bondage of suffering, predation, death and carnivory when it takes on its own perfected, incorruptible form.

This sense of restored harmony is precisely the state of affairs that Isaiah appears to be describing in his famous messianic prediction in Isaiah 11:6-8:

The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

Infants will play near the hole of the cobra;  
young children will put their hands into the viper's nest.

Isaiah offers here a range of images in which creatures presently at enmity with one another will be brought into harmonious relation. The promise seems to be that the violence and pain of the world of predators will finally end. With images like this providing a glimmer of hope we can take solace knowing that the litany of carnage chronicled in "Born Wild" is not the final chapter for creation.

There are two basic ways to conceive of Isaiah's evocative images coming to fulfillment. On the one hand we could adopt a "Noah's Ark" interpretation according to which God selects certain representative creatures from every species in order to populate the new heavens and earth with a menagerie. The down side of this proposal, with its focus on representative species rather than individuals, is that it offers no solace for the vast number of animals that suffer miserably. (Sorry, we only need a couple hundred tuna at best, so the vast majority of tuna eaten during the Paleocene period will be out of luck. Ditto for most of the canned tuna on the supermarket shelf.) Given these problems with the Noah's Ark approach, we might promising the second approach, which I call, rather inelegantly I must admit, the "All dogs (and everything else too) goes to heaven" interpretation. The interpretation proposes exactly this, that God will provide a blessed resurrection and eternal life of bliss for *all* creatures including every tuna that was ever eaten by a Paleocene shark or stuffed into a can and sold at Walmart.

I have no doubt that an omnipotent God could accomplish this feat. The problem lies not with what is possible, but rather with what strikes us as plausible. And it doesn't take much reflection to see just how enormously implausible this idea really is. When C.S. Lewis proposed animal immortality as a response to animal suffering, he was aware of the kind of skepticism animal resurrection elicits and he responded with his characteristic wit: "Nor am I greatly moved by jocular enquiries such as 'Where will you put all the mosquitoes?'—a question to be answered on its own level by pointing out that, if the worst came to the worst, a heaven for mosquitoes and a hell for men could very conveniently be combined."<sup>12</sup> While this is good rhetoric, it simply avoids a very serious question. The fact is that mosquitoes *won't* be in hell. If they are resurrected it will be to live in a renewed creation. And that merely forces the question on us again: will mosquitoes *really* be in the new creation? If they are I suppose I should come

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 136-7.

clean and admit that once, in a fit of vindictive anger, I burned a mosquito with a match (though in my defense, this was not until *after* it had engorged itself on my AB positive). I suppose that this poor bloodsucking pipsqueak is as fine a candidate for compensatory resurrection as any. But even if this remains possible, the more you think about it, the more implausible it appears. If we're not willing to concede a resurrected mosquito, do we really have the right to hope for the resurrection of a beloved family pet?

In addition to being very implausible, the notion of a universal animal resurrection promises to be something of a logistical nightmare. I remember watching "101 Dalmatians" as a child and puzzling at how two people, no matter how dog friendly, could ever take care of more than one hundred dogs. (Picking up one hundred plus poops a day? I love dogs, but not *that* much.) That may have been quite a chore, but it ain't nothin' compared to housing all the creatures that have ever lived. When we think about all the brachiosauruses, woolly mammoths, blue whales, trilobites, mosquitoes and the trillions of other creatures that would be in the queue waiting to be resurrected, it is clear enough that one earth would be way too small to accommodate them all. Needless to say, carrying out this plan would oblige God either to create a Jupiter-sized planet or two, or dozens of earths to accommodate all these creatures. Again the problem here is not omnipotence: surely if God could create the entire universe the first time around then he could add a few dozen additional earths to it. Rather, the problem is with core plausibility. There may be some initial plausibility to thinking of animals being resurrected onto a new earth, but a giant Jupiter-sized monolith (assuming that planets that size could be a feasible home for creatures) or dozens of earths packed with dinosaurs, mammoths, and other exotica?

Indeed, the more you think about the crazier the "All dogs (and everything else too) goes to heaven" interpretation seems. Personally I'm not that happy about some of the extinct

creatures of earth's long history seeing the light of day once again. For example, if God does create a few dozen planets, I sincerely hope I'm not on the same one as the resurrected *Arthropleura armata*, a giant 8 foot long millipede that thrived on the earth three hundred million years ago. (*Brrrr*. Never mind the mosquitoes. That's one bug that *definitely* belongs south of the border.) While I would very much like it to be the case that all suffering creatures receive some kind of future recompense (if I'm in the mood, then perhaps even the giant millipede, *just so long as it's on another planet*), the more I reflect on the implausible implications of this proposal, the more the nagging suspicion grows that it really is little more than sunny sentimentalism.

Setting aside the great implausibilities with both notions of animal resurrection, the resurrection compensation proposal leaves me with many other questions as well. For instance, what would it *mean* to resurrect a lion, shark or T-Rex as a *herbivore*? Isn't this like resurrecting an eagle debeaked and with clipped wings? Try as I might, I cannot see a lion perfectly expressing the terrible and majestic grandeur that is lionhood (think Aslan) when it nibbles every evening on a hay bale. Nor can I see the majesty of a great white shark that has had its serrated teeth replaced by smooth gums so that it can slurp up buckets of algae and kelp in a harmonious sea. A future payoff may be fine for those creatures that are already herbivores for they can look forward to more of the same (*sans* a hungry predator on their tail). But is it a real hope to the fiercest predators to affirm that they will one day be defanged, declawed, and domesticated?<sup>13</sup>

### **The ambiguous praise of creation**

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<sup>13</sup> Here's another possibility to deal with those issues: God will resurrect carnivores to live on a sort of game farm in which they hunt and kill zombie like creatures that have no conscious life. Hence, the lion gets to stay a lion and nobody gets hurt. But once again the death knell is plausibility. Try as I might, I cannot shake the suspicion that this whole notion is little more than a fanciful just-so story.

Twenty years ago I spent a few memorable months backpacking through Australia. While travelling up the east coast on my way to Cairns I suddenly found myself stranded in Hervey Bay when a severe storm blew in off the Pacific. After being cooped up in the hostel for a couple days I was relieved when the storm finally moved on and I could venture out once again. When I did my first course of business was to walk down to the beach, and I shall never forget the scene that greeted me. While the abundant flotsam and jetsam littering the shore provided a vivid reminder of the brutal storm that had just passed, what struck me instead was the incredible tranquility of the scape. The crashing surf was now gone, replaced by the gentle roll of the waves. The palm trees which just hours before had been thrashing about in severe gales were now serenely swaying in the cool evening breeze. And even as the sun was illuming the western hills with a deep red glow, in the east the moon was rising silently over the sparkling Pacific as the stars gradually appeared as if on cue.

Never have I experienced such a moment of oneness with nature as on the beach at Hervey Bay. At that moment I gained a new sense of the power of those familiar verses from Psalm 19:1-4:

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they display knowledge.

They have no speech, they use no words;  
no sound is heard from them.

Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world.

That day I heard the voice of creation praising God, declaring God's glory, pouring forth speech of his divine majesty through the roll of the waves, the rustle of the palms, and the cycling of the heavens. And as I stood there reverently in nature's grand cathedral, I found myself drawn into those same praises.

As I look back on my brief sojourn in Hervey Bay, I remember little of the two days spent riding out the storm in the hostel. But I do remember every detail of those transcendent moments standing on the beach with the promise they provided of something creation could yet become. To this day I have no doubt that moments like that do indeed reveal the praise of creation. And as such, they provide a taproot into a profound and transcendent dimension of existence. But how does one reconcile the praises of creation that we can even now grasp with the tumult of the most violent storms?

It can be disturbing to listen to the groans as I learned when watching an hour of "Born Wild". For many other people however, they seem to have the praises of creation drowned out altogether by the speech of predators and prey, of survival of the fittest, of sickness and suffering, of carnivory and death. The roar of those hunting and those being hunted, of those eating and those being eaten, also goes out to the ends of the world. This brings me to the description of Richard Dawkins, a famous evolutionary biologist and perhaps the world's leading atheist. When he looks at nature he hears not the praises but the groans, as in this description of the relationship between cheetah and antelope:

Cheetahs give every indication of being superbly designed for something, and it should be easy enough to reverse-engineer them and work out their utility function. They appear to be well designed to kill antelopes. The teeth, claws, eyes, nose, leg muscles, backbone and brain of a cheetah are all precisely what we should expect if God's purpose in

designing cheetahs was to maximize deaths among antelopes. Conversely, if we reverse-engineer and antelope we find equally impressive evidence of design for precisely the opposite end: the survival of antelopes and starvation among cheetahs.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting part of this passage is the way that it identifies the *mutuality of violence* in the predator/prey relationship. We tend to focus on the active violence that the predator visits upon the poor prey, and for good reason: there is a real disparity between eating and being eaten. Nonetheless, there is also a subtler passive violence in the prey as it resists succumbing to the wiles of the predator. Like a finely-tuned weapon, the cheetah appears to be designed to kill antelope with maximum efficiency. But the antelope returns the violence as it aims to starve cheetahs and their cubs. Thus predator and prey are involved in a mutually violent struggle for survival.

As an atheist, Dawkins does not really believe that either the cheetah or the antelope was designed. From his perspective the cries of creation speak not to divine care but rather to “pitiless indifference.” Dawkins goes on to explain how incongruent this violent predator/prey relationship looks for those who believe in a loving, benevolent God who watches over creation:

It is as though cheetahs had been designed by one deity and antelopes by a rival deity. Alternatively, if there is only one creator who made the tiger and the lamb, the cheetah and the gazelle, what is He playing at? Is He a sadist who enjoys spectator blood sports? Is he trying to avoid overpopulation in the mammals of Africa? Is he maneuvering to maximize David Attenborough’s television ratings?<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps some Christians will find Dawkins’s comments disturbing, irreverent, or even blasphemous. But let’s try to see things from his skeptical point of view. Natural theology is the

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 106.

<sup>15</sup> Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, 106.

practice of attempting to learn something of God from the creation. With that in mind, what does our theology look like after viewing the meticulous design of the cheetah to kill the antelope and the antelope to starve the cheetah? Can we see how for Dawkins the groans of creation cannot be reconciled with the presence of a loving God?

The Christian wants to find in the suffering of creatures some sort of compensating good to explain it all. But as I noted above, it is very difficult to see how sufficient goods could emerge from all this suffering which might benefit either human beings or animals. To illustrate the problem, consider the scenario atheist William Rowe tells of a fawn critically injured in a fire:

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse. Nor does there seem to be any equally bad or worse evil so connected to the fawn's suffering that it would have had to occur had the fawn's suffering been prevented.

Rowe's point is that we cannot imagine any greater good which would require the intense suffering experienced by this fawn. Rowe concludes that the roasted fawn is a case of suffering without a point and as such it tells against the claim that an all good and all powerful God is somehow working behind the scenes.

I readily admit that Rowe's case is disturbing, and keep in mind that we are talking here about *a single fawn*. So what happens when we pull the scope back to encompass literally

*billions* of creatures that have been subjected to the most horrendous and unimaginable suffering down through the eons? An incalculable number of these agonies were experienced millions of years before human beings ever came on the scene. What could possibly be the value in that incredible suffering of a triceratops ripped apart by a T-Rex? For millions of years this show of suffering and agony has been unfolding. Are we to believe that every one of these moments of suffering was for some sort of a greater good? Don't we owe skeptics like Dawkins and Rowe some hopeful reason to interpret the groans in light of the praises?<sup>16</sup>

### **After the Storm**

Here we are standing soaking wet on the ramparts as the storm moves on. After the storm surge the surrounding fields look like a mini-sea and to add insult to injury, a number of fish are flopping about in the shallow water (yet more natural evil to be addressed). So now it is time to fix the walls, rebuild and extend the boundaries, and pump out the water. But how should we proceed?

To begin with, we could consider a very traditional response, one that I short-shrifted in this chapter. That is the position that all the predation, death and carnivory only entered the world after the fall. On this traditional view one would affirm that Adam and Eve were created in a peaceable world without predation, carnivory or death. As for that Triceratops frill that I mentioned has been found in fossilized T-Rex dung, it must date from after the fall. But this position faces two enormous challenges which, it seems to me, make it uniquely vulnerable to future storms. To begin with, it stands against an enormous scientific consensus which, as I noted above, identifies enormous spans of time – millions of years in fact – in which predation,

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<sup>16</sup> This is the demand of atheist John Loftus in “The Darwinian Problem of Evil,” in *The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails*, ed. John Loftus (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2010), 237-70.

carnivory and death existed prior to the appearance of human beings. One could always buck this consensus and say that most scientists are dead wrong, but let us not pretend that doing so is easy. To make matters worse, this position still needs a plausible account of how the original sin of the first human beings transformed an vegan creation into a carnivorous frenzy in the first place. Even if we could swallow the claim that T-Rex was once a docile teddy bear, we are still left to puzzle over what it was that transformed him a bloodthirsty thunder lizard.

If we conclude that the weight of scientific consensus on predation, carnivory and death existing before the fall is too substantial to dismiss, then we shall have to rebuild with that fact clearly in view. But then we must ask one final time: how can a world such as this be called good?

Perhaps as we reconstruct this dike we should think of goodness not in terms of spotless perfection but rather in terms of *fittingness*. After all there are Hebrew terms for perfection and the writer does not use them here. So maybe creation was made good, and this goodness is consistent with the suffering and death that we see every day. And how might this be? In his book *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* theologian Christopher Southgate offers one possibility. He argues that God created through the gradual evolutionary steps of random mutation and natural selection. Southgate recognizes that these processes produce a great amount of suffering along the way but they also produce as an end an enormous amount of biodiversity. Perhaps then the suffering of creation is a byproduct which serves greater ends not unlike the way that labor pains lead to the greater good in the birth of a child.

Whatever one thinks of evolution as a theory for biological diversity, we should not be too quick to dismiss the potential that natural evil has to spur on goods in other creatures. So perhaps, as I suggested above, God allows some animal suffering for the greater good of

maturing human beings. Perhaps this is also true of other moral agents like angels. Who can say that this is not possible? These kinds of questions lead me back to the skepticism of William Rowe. As we saw above, Mr. Rowe was quite confident that there could be no compensating good that could warrant God to allow the death of a fawn. But this statement strikes me as claiming far more than Rowe can reasonably know. It seems to me that we really have no idea – indeed, only our imaginations constrain us – on the potential goods that God could draw out of a suffering creation. And thus even if Rowe finds this suffering sufficient for his atheism, it leaves me very far indeed from that conviction.

This leads us back to the second part of our dike construction, one that comes in that incredible hope of animal immortality. Could it be that suffering animals, either in terms of representative types or all suffering individuals, might be resurrected to a compensatory life free of suffering? Admittedly as I noted such proposals present manifold logistical problems which gnaw away at their plausibility. Think again of the prospect of one giant Jupiter sized-earth or a dozen earth-sized earths to accommodate all the resurrected fauna. There is no doubt that such a notion is pretty incredible. But then we should also remember that all sorts of incredibly implausible claims turn out to be true. (Remember the physicist's account of the roast beef dinner?) So I personally do not remain too troubled over the hope that God may offer to a suffering creation an eternal solace that we cannot now conceive. Indeed, it may be that one of our biggest problems is our lack of imagination in seeing how the goodness of God in the original creation attests to his greatness both now and in the age to come.

### **Questions for Further Discussion**

1. Do you agree that the problem of animal suffering seems to be incompatible with the goodness of creation? If so, then what is most troubling?
2. Do you think the idea of animal resurrection is possible? Is it plausible?
3. Most scientists dismiss the claim that predation, carnivory, and death post-date the existence (and fall) of two original human beings. Does that strike you as significant?
4. How do you think the fall impacted or relates to natural evil in the world?