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WHY EVOLUTION DOES NOT MAKE THE PROBLEM OF EVIL WORSE

Rope Kojonen

Does evolutionary history with all its apparent contingency, wastefulness, animal suffering and innumerable extinctions make the problem of natural evil worse? In this article, I argue that it does not. I respond to two main ways in which the evolutionary problem of evil might make things worse: (1) by increasing the scale of suffering to include billions of additional creatures over hundreds of millions of years, and (2) due to the apparent cruelty of evolution by natural selection as a method of creation. I argue that both problems fail to make a difference when considered in depth. Instead, the problem of natural evil is based mostly on factors that do not depend on evolutionary biology, such as the existence of animal mortality and suffering, as well as chance and contingency in the world.

Introduction

That evolution increases the severity of the problem of evil has been a widespread opinion ever since the advent of Darwin’s theory. According to one early view, evolution provides “a picture so dark as to be a challenge to its Maker, an unanswered problem to philosophy, an abiding offence to the moral nature of Man. The world has been held up to us as one great battlefield heaped with the slain, an Inferno of infinite suffering, a slaughterhouse resounding with the cries of a ceaseless agony.”

Instead of seeing evolution as akin to hell on Earth, most would concur with Rolston that in addition to being “random, contingent, blind, disastrous, wasteful, indifferent, selfish, cruel, clumsy, ugly, full of suffering, and, ultimately, death,” the evolutionary process can also be fairly characterized as “orderly, prolific, efficient, selecting for adaptive fit, exuberant, complex, diverse, regenerating life generation after generation.” Nevertheless, the disvalue in evolution—the suffering, death and waste—might at least add to the problem of natural evil.

1Drummond, Ascent of Man, 19.
2Rolston, “Does Nature Need to Be Redeemed?,” 213.
Nagasawa pithily summarizes what I see as the two main aspects of the problem, (1) the increased scale of suffering over evolutionary history, and (2) the apparent cruelty of natural selection as a process: “For approximately four billion years, uncountably many organisms have competed and struggled for survival. In this cruel, blind system, the weaker are eliminated, and even the survivors will eventually die, often painfully and miserably.” These are the two problems that I will mostly focus on in this paper. I will argue that contrary to popular opinion, evolution does not make the problem of natural evil more difficult.

I will grant, however, that evolution might impact our understanding of theodicy in several ways. For example, evolution is often thought to decrease the credibility of Fall-based explanations for natural evil. Young Earth creationists see the Bible as teaching that predation and animal suffering entered the world only after the human Fall, following a divine curse on the Earth, prior to which nature would have better reflected the perfection of God’s goodness. But on the evolutionary picture, suffering long predates humanity. Thus evolution requires adapting or abandoning this theodicy.

This argument against Fall-based theodicies is not dependent on evolution, however, since the ideas of deep time and pre-human animal death were already accepted before Darwin. My own belief is that Fall-based theodicies, if valid, are applicable to an old cosmos as well. One could appeal to God’s foreknowledge of the human fall—meaning that God may have created the world to be a fitting abode for sinners already beforehand, or speculate on the effects of an angelic fall that predated human sin. Although both of these are controversial proposals, the typical critiques do not have anything to do with evolution but with issues that would be equally problematic in a young world—such as whether God would be just in allowing human or angelic sin to affect innocent animals.

However, the approach here follows an alternative or complementary Augustinian understanding. The Fall as the explanation of natural evil seems to have become popular in Christendom only during the Renaissance and the Reformation periods. In contrast, ancient and Medieval Christian theologians largely assumed that predation and animal mortality are part of God’s good creation. Augustine, for example, argued that “it is ridiculous to condemn the faults of beasts and trees, and other such mortal and mutable things . . . for these creatures received, at their Creators will, an existence fitting them, by passing away and giving place to others.

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5Rudwick, *Earth’s Deep History*.
6Dembski, *The End of Christianity*.
7Peckham, *Theodicy of Love*.
9Bimson, “Reconsidering a ‘Cosmic Fall’”; Garvey, *God’s Good Earth*. 
to secure that lowest form of beauty, the beauty of seasons, which in its own place is a requisite part of this world. For things earthly were neither to be made equal to things heavenly, nor were they, though inferior, to be quite omitted from the universe.\textsuperscript{10}

Here and elsewhere, Augustine seems to assume that the existence of mortal animals is a good thing, and that animal death is an intended part of God’s good creation.\textsuperscript{11} Though mortal creatures are not perfect, each nevertheless has their own place and the good gift of existence. Even the existence of predators adds value to the creation, and God was within His rights to create such mortal beings. In the background of much patristic thought on the subject are the gnostic and Manichean controversies. Both of these heretical movements saw the order of the world as evil or corrupted, whereas ancient Christians saw the cosmos as God’s good creation.\textsuperscript{12}

In responding to the problems of increased scale and the problem of natural selection’s cruelty, I will argue that the problems are not based on evolution, but on phenomena that were mostly already known or at least knowable to patristic theologians like Augustine. I mean things like animal mortality, the animal capacity to suffer, and the existence of survival strategies that cause harm to other creatures, such as predation and parasitism. At the end of the article, I will also discuss ways in which evolution might indirectly impact theodicy, even if it does not make the problem itself qualitatively or quantitatively worse.

\textit{Part 1: The Problem of Increased Scale}

I will begin with what I consider the easier part of the problem, the problem of scale, meaning the greater amount of suffering allowed by a long evolutionary history. Sometimes evolution is not mentioned at all in the presentation of the problem. For instance, Dawkins argues that “the total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation,” basing his estimate on present minute-by-minute suffering.\textsuperscript{13} But perhaps the scale of evolution makes the problem even worse. According to Kitcher:

Darwin’s account of the history of life greatly enlarges the scale on which suffering takes place. Through millions of years, billions of animals experience vast amounts of pain, supposedly so that, after an enormous number of extinctions of entire species, on the tip of one twig of the evolutionary tree, there may emerge a species with the species properties that make us able to worship the Creator.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10}Augustine, \textit{City of God}, 12.4.
\textsuperscript{11}Rosenberg, “Can Nature Be “Red in Tooth and Claw.”
\textsuperscript{12}Garvey, \textit{God’s Good Earth}.
\textsuperscript{13}Dawkins, \textit{River Out of Eden}, 131–132.
\textsuperscript{14}Kitcher, \textit{Living with Darwin}, 123.
The picture of the present day nature behind these arguments is extremely negative: even apart from evolutionary history, the animal world is believed to be filled with suffering and cruelty—but this sad state is then extended by the scale of evolution. It is assumed that (1) the suffering of many creatures is a worse problem for theism than the suffering of just a few creatures, and (2) the great additional amount of suffering creatures over evolutionary time makes the world a worse place. Although both assumptions might at first seem to be almost self-evidently true, I will argue against them. My first counter-argument is based on the principle of repeatable reasons, the second on the comparison of possible worlds.

The Principle of Repeatable Reasons

Consider C. S. Lewis’s approach to weighing evils:

We must never make the problem of pain worse than it is by vague talk about the “unimaginable sum of human misery.” Suppose that I have a toothache of intensity x: and suppose that you, who are seated beside me, also begin to have a toothache of intensity x. You may, if you choose, say that the total amount of pain in the room is now 2x: search all time and all space and you will not find that composite pain in anyone’s consciousness. There is no such thing as a sum of suffering, for no one suffers it. When we have reached the maximum that a single person can suffer, we have, no doubt, reached something very horrible, but we have reached all the suffering there ever can be in the universe. The addition of a million fellow-sufferers adds no more pain.15

As Seachris and Zagzebski point out, Lewis’s brief remarks, taken as literally true, might lead to absurdity.16 For example, it seems clear that saving a person from a fire would decrease the amount of pain in the world, even if someone else is left to burn. Similarly, it seems that a world in which all persons suffer Lewis’s “maximum that a single person can suffer” would, all other things being equal, be worse than a world in which only few suffer the maximum amount.

Nevertheless, Seachris and Zagzebski go on to argue that behind Lewis’s argument is the plausible “principle of repeatable reasons”: “If person A has a sufficient justifying reason to permit \( p \) in situation \( s \), then A has a sufficient justifying reason to permit states of affairs relevantly similar to \( p \) in situations relevantly similar to \( s \).”17 For example, if a nurse has the right to cause pain when vaccinating one person, it is likely that the nurse’s justifying reasons will be repeatable with another person, and then another, and then yet further to millions—as long as the cases are sufficiently similar. These additional cases of vaccination provide no increase in the severity of the nurse’s moral conduct. Similarly, if God has the right to

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15Lewis, The Problem of Pain, 103.
16Seachris and Zagzebski, “Weighing Evils.”
allow one living being to suffer amount X, then why not two? Why not a million or a billion?

For this reason, it seems that the most difficult part of the problem of natural evil for theists should be the suffering of individual creatures, not the aggregate amount of suffering experienced by all creatures. No single individual experiences suffering in the aggregate, as Lewis pointed out. In order for God’s justice and goodness to be credible, the amount that God allows an individual creature to suffer must not be incompatible with these traits. But if the creation of one mortal creature and the suffering it endures is compatible with God’s goodness, and even adds value to the world, as Augustine’s approach implies, then so should the creation of two such beings. Nor does anything then prevent the creation of three such beings, or, adding more, the creation of millions and billions of such creatures existing over the long years of evolutionary time.

It seems to me that attacking this conclusion would require arguing that the creation of even one such animal, and allowing its suffering, is not morally right in the first place. In that case our primary examples of natural evil should be the existence of mortality and animal suffering as such, already apart from evolution. But if we can find it in ourselves to accept the Augustinian logic in the case of modern-day creatures, then it seems the added scale of evolutionary history poses no additional problem due to the principle of repeatable reasons.

A possible objection is that the scale and variety of evolutionary history makes it unlikely that reasons for suffering are repeatable across all instances. However, a similar objection could be raised without recourse to evolutionary history. Are the suffering of a fish and a monkey in the present day already not different enough to require different explanations? Is it not different to explain the death of an animal required to feed another and the death of a fawn in a forest fire? This seems plausible, though facts like animal mortality seem to be repeated. Yet, it does not seem that evolutionary history would plausibly include types of suffering fundamentally different from those in the present day biosphere. For example, the suffering of a dinosaur was not likely very different from that of a modern-day reptile or bird.

Another objection is that not all reasons are necessarily widely repeatable. Instead of a nurse giving out vaccines, consider the case of a researcher testing a new antibiotic on animals. Many would say that this researcher is justified in causing harm to these animals due to the great benefits. However, once the safety of the medicine is assured, the justification of causing harm vanishes. Thus this justification applies only to a small portion of the suffering humans inflict on animals. Similarly, perhaps God could have non-repeatable reasons for causing or allowing animal suffering.

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18I thank anonymous reviewers for raising this and the following objection.

In response, I believe repeatability is in practice relevant for all presented theodicies. Consider the previously cited simplistic theodicy on which evolutionary history is justified because it leads to humans. If credible at all, this might at first seem non-repeatable, since it would not apply to animals outside the human lineage. However, repeatability does apply: If benefiting the goal of human evolution justifies the creation of one mortal animal—so that its creation is a morally good act—then this should be repeatable for a larger number of animals as well. So repeatability is relevant for evaluating whether the scale of evolution affects this response. Moreover, if this theodicy works, then only slight modifications are needed to apply a similar justification further: For instance, other animal lives would benefit the ecosystems necessary for human evolution. Due to the repeatability of reasons, the problem of this theodicy is not the scale of evolution, but whether God’s actions in the individual cases are morally good or not. In my view this theodicy errs in assigning only instrumental value to animals, in contrast to the Augustinian approach of this article.

Although I do not know any fully non-repeatable theodicy, it does seem that, considered a priori, God’s reasons for allowing suffering could vary greatly in each individual case. For example, perhaps the types of suffering experienced by one gorilla in the jungle could be allowed for different reasons than the similar sufferings of a second gorilla. And so forth for each individual on the planet—perhaps the seemingly similar sufferings of each are actually justified for completely non-overlapping reasons. This kind of full non-repeatability strikes me as highly implausible—but if God can do it for the billions of present-day creatures, then it seems plausible God could also repeat this feat for billions more. In any case, any theodicy we could understand from our finite perspective would still have to appeal to generalizable explanations, and we would be in trouble with explaining present-day animal suffering without such a “repeatable” justifying reason, independently from evolution.

Also, we need to distinguish between (1) evolution making the problem of evil worse by increasing the amount or severity of suffering in the world, and (2) evolution giving us a reason to prefer particular features in our theodicy. Here, the objection only affects the latter. For instance, instead of a limited theodicy that treats animal suffering only as a means to an end, it seems better to look for a theodicy that is based on repeatable reasons and recognizes the value of each individual living being. Similarly, Stump and Dougherty have argued for the importance of showing how the suffering of each individual is redeemed to benefit that particular individual as well.

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20 Kitcher, *Living with Darwin*, 123.
Comparing the Goodness of Worlds

The principle of repeatability of reasons is not the only reason for dismissing the problem of increased scale. Another response is based on comparing possible worlds.22 Even if the most important part of the problem of evil concerns the suffering of individual creatures, surely the overall goodness of the world also has some effect on the problem of evil. A world in which just one being suffers seems to be better, all other things being equal, than a world in which two, hundreds or billions of beings suffer. It would thus seem that a world with a greater amount of suffering creatures should provide more evidence against God’s moral goodness—all other things being equal.

The key assumption here is in the phrase “all other things being equal.” Considering merely the absolute amount of suffering does not allow for a reliable estimate of a world’s goodness. Let us suppose that God had created only one hundred mortal beings, but the proportional amount of suffering was the same as in the present world. The hundred-creature world would contain a smaller absolute amount of suffering. Therefore, if the amount of suffering was our only criterion, then it should be a better world, and one that provides far less evidence against God’s existence. Taken to its logical conclusion, a world with just one creature should be even better. But this absurd conclusion indicates that there is something wrong with this way of evaluating things: it ignores the goodness, beauty and joy added by increasing the number of creatures.23 These additional goods counterbalance the amount of suffering and should also be taken into account when evaluating the goodness of the world. Yes, a larger world will have a greater absolute amount of suffering and other disvalues, but also a correspondingly greater amount of all goods.

Applying this to evolutionary history, if the billion-creature world is not worse than the hundred-creature world, then surely a ten-billion-creature world is not necessarily worse off either, even if the lives of these ten billion creatures are distributed in time over millions of years. What would be needed to increase the strength of the problem of natural evil would be an increased proportion of disvalue or some additional kinds of evil not present in a non-evolutionary world, rather than merely the amount of creatures or the length of history.

Moreover, additional disvalues would need to not be counterbalanced by other good things that a long history will enable. For example, the extinction of countless species over evolutionary time might seem to disturb the balance. However, each extinction will, on average, be followed by the addition of new species. With its changing ecosystems, evolutionary history allows for many eccentric and interesting species to find their niche

22Jacobs, In Defense of Leibniz’ Theodicy.
for millions of years. The average invertebrate species has a lifespan of 5–10 million years, and the average mammal species 1–2 million years. By comparison, on the Young Earth creationist time scale dinosaurs only existed for a few thousand years. From the point of view of these species and their individual members, the longer time allowed by evolutionary history is better. Moreover, extinctions happen today as well, so on average, evolutionary history is not qualitatively worse—although some evolutionary events, such as mass extinctions, might pose a separate problem.

One way of changing this equation would be to assume that the creation of each mortal creature on average adds more bad than good to the world. In that case, adding more creatures would make the world a worse place, and our world with its billions of creatures is a very bad place indeed. But then it would seem that God’s goodness is incompatible with creating even one mortal creature capable of suffering, and we would have plenty of evidence against theism regardless of evolution. This view of the world would also lead to a kind of problem of evil for atheists, as noted by Nagasawa, and to antinatalism, for then our parents would probably also have been unjustified in giving life to us, and we ourselves should also avoid procreating.

To clarify a potential misunderstanding, I do not mean to argue that the existence of additional goods in a larger world itself justifies the increased amount of evils. I am simply pointing out that the overall proportion of suffering in the world is the relevant factor for determining the severity of the problem, rather than the scale of the world. Defending the problem of scale would require showing why the same logic would not also lead to the (absurd) conclusion that a hundred-creature world is better than one with a million, due to the lower absolute amount of suffering. I am also arguing for reorienting the discussion to focus on the problem of the mortality and suffering of individual creatures, and whether God is justified in creating even one such creature. Due to the principle of repeatability of reasons, what is at issue is explaining types of suffering, and so the scale of evolutionary history does not add to the severity of the problem.

Thus, it seems that we have two good ways to argue that the scale of evolutionary history does not make the problem of evil worse, though it may impact some ways in which we respond to evil. I turn now to the aspect of the evolutionary problem of evil which I consider somewhat more difficult: the role of suffering and death as part of God’s evolutionary method of creation.

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24 Mace, “Getting the Measure of Extinction.”
25 Schneider, Animal Suffering and the Darwinian Problem of Evil.  
Part 2: The Problem of Natural Selection’s Cruelty

Hull argues that “whatever the God implied by evolutionary theory and the data of natural history may be like, He is not the Protestant God of waste not, want not. He is also not a loving God who cares about His productions. . . . The God of the Galapagos is careless, wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical.”27 However, most of Hull’s examples do not come from evolutionary history, but from present-day nature, and many are based on the “wastefulness” of nature, not suffering as such. He even references the fact that “millions of sperm and ova are produced that never unite to form a zygote.”28 Many examples involve survival strategies that involve harming other creatures in particularly ugly ways: cuckoo chicks push the eggs of their foster parents out of the nest, certain parasitic ants saw off the head of the host queen, and Ichneumonidae larvae feed on living caterpillars—an example also used by Darwin.29

However, in order to claim that something about evolutionary theory and natural history makes the problem of natural evil worse, we need to distinguish between factors of the problem that would exist even if God had created the same sorts of beings through other means. We cannot just claim all aspects of present day nature to be part of the specifically evolutionary problem. Present-day phenomena like animal mortality, predation and parasitism could be known—and mostly were known—even prior to the advent of evolutionary theory, and are part of creationist accounts as well. The amount of suffering caused by such features would not be greater or lesser depending on whether God created them through evolution or not. To argue that evolution makes the problem worse, we need to show that evolution somehow sheds new light on these facts, showing new causal connections that reveal the facts of suffering to be more problematic for theism than they would be apart from evolution. The idea of natural selection as a competitive “survival of the fittest” is the most promising candidate.

In accounts of the problem, evolution is commonly presented as an extremely cruel process in which the strong eliminate the weak in a struggle for survival. As Nagasawa puts it, “It might be no exaggeration to compare nature with a small cage in which many animals are placed together so that they desperately fight and kill each other for limited resources until a handful survive.”30 “Darwin’s Bulldog” Thomas Henry Huxley went even further to compare the “gladiator’s show” of nature to the hellish landscapes of suffering described by Dante in his Divine Comedy (1320).31

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29Darwin, “To Asa Gray 22 May [1860].”
One way to respond would be to argue that the perspective of the animals themselves should be the one that matters most. If the amount they suffer is not greater in an evolutionary creation, given the failure of the problem of scale, one could be tempted to see this as already undermining the problem of cruelty. However, the reasons for suffering do matter for its moral status. A nurse injecting a vaccine might cause the same amount of pain as someone who stabs a person with a small needle for fun, but the moral nature of these acts is opposite. Or suppose that a machine providing the energy needs of a seemingly happy city was powered by the torture of one innocent person. To evaluate the morality of each situation, we should not consider only the total amount of suffering but also the causal web in which it is embedded. And here evolution could be relevant. As Nagasawa points out, “the problem in question suggests not only that specific events or specific types of events are evil but also that the entire biological system on which nature is based is fundamentally evil.”

In the discussion of the problem of evil, pointless evil is often thought to be the main problem. But in the case of evolution, suffering happening for a reason could be problematic instead. If animals suffer and die for the purpose of making evolution happen, this might seem to add a dimension to the problem that is missing in a creationist account, even if the amount of suffering is unchanged. God does not merely create mortal creatures capable of suffering, but (it is alleged) purposefully makes creatures struggle to the death to enable evolution. I believe this is what the analogies of animals put in a cage and the gladiator show are meant to imply. God, having created this show of life, is like the master of the gladiator games, pitting animals against each other for profit. Thus, God’s creative act seems to become problematically dependent on evil. This calls to mind Ivan’s remarks in Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* (1880): if the price of eternal happiness is the tortures of one small child, he states, “I absolutely reject that higher harmony. It’s not worth one little tear from one single little tortured child.” As Peels notes, this might seem to apply *mutatis mutandis* to evolutionary history: if animals suffer in order to produce us, does this not make our existence dependent on evil?

Darwin comforted his readers at the end of the *Origin of Species* by arguing that “from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows.” Darwin believed that there was “grandeur in this view of life,” but if we understand evolution as negatively as

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32 Sterba, “Solving Darwin’s Problem of Natural Evil.”
34 Rowe, “The Problem of Evil.”
35 Hart, *Doors of the Sea*.
36 Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 306–308.
it is commonly presented, it seems difficult to agree. What grandeur could there be in a world built on the torture and suffering of billions of innocent creatures? At most we might hope for the future redemption of all creatures, including the suffering animals, and then see history as worth it only in light of this theistic hope.\textsuperscript{39} As Nagasawa argues, a highly negative view of evolutionary history seems difficult to combine with any other kind of existential optimism.\textsuperscript{40} This is the core of the evolutionary problem of suffering. God, it seems to many, would be much more likely to create through supernatural miracles, so as to avoid using suffering and death as crucial elements of the process of creation.\textsuperscript{41}

\textit{Faltering Foundations}

Having now presented the problem of cruelty, I will proceed to question it, beginning with foundational assumptions and by evaluating the underlying analogies. I will argue that the problem lies not with evolution by natural selection, but with other features of our world.

A foundational assumption of the problem of cruelty is that it is wrong to use living beings simply as a means to an end. If God created animals in a situation of evolutionary struggle purely for the purposes of driving evolution forwards toward humans, then this would seem to treat animals disrespectfully as just the means to an end. But there is an unjustified logical leap here. That evolution occurs as a divinely intended result of the way animals live their normal lives does not demonstrate that God created animals merely for this purpose. There is no contradiction in animal lives being intrinsically valuable and also resulting in evolution by divine design.

Actually, God’s choice of evolution as a method of creation arguably provides evidence that God does value each individual animal. After all, God could have also created humanity directly, which would be expected based on an anthropocentric (as opposed to a biocentric) perspective.\textsuperscript{42} Perhaps God decided to use an evolutionary process precisely because He values the strange and quirky species of nature, not just the strong, and evolution allows a greater number of valuable species and creatures to find their niche for millions of years. We humans may tend to evaluate animals in evolutionary history based on whether they were part of a “successful” evolutionary lineage or not. But linking worldly success and value is not necessarily correct. Calling to mind Matthew 20:16, those who are the least to us are not necessarily the least in God’s perspective. Peels similarly argues that perhaps God has reason to allow for differential survival—such as ensuring the survival of species—but nevertheless

\textsuperscript{39}Peels, “Does Evolution Conflict with God’s Character,” 563; Southgate, \textit{Theology in a Suffering World}.
\textsuperscript{40}Nagasawa, “The Problem of Evil for Atheists.”
\textsuperscript{41}Draper, “Darwin’s Argument from Evil.”
\textsuperscript{42}Sterba, “Solving Darwin’s Problem of Natural Evil,” 511.
also values the existence of all the individuals that did not “win” in the evolutionary competition.43

**Questioning Analogies**

Is evolution indeed plausibly understood as akin to a gladiatorial death match? The contemporary understanding of evolution calls into question the most extremely violent descriptions.44 Evolutionary theory now includes a prominent role for co-operation in evolution, and there is even talk of “survival of the friendliest” in addition to survival of the fittest.45 Rota even argues that it “appears that the world we are in was poised from the beginning to develop forms of life that exhibit highly advanced types of cooperative, almost self-sacrificial, behavior.”46

If we define natural selection merely as “differential survival”—to use the neutral scientific terminology—then this mostly happens in ways that do not involve fighting and killing others. Only a small minority of animals are predators,47 and predators like wolves, dolphins, sharks and lions have a positive role in keeping ecosystems healthy—so removing them would also end up harming peaceful animals.48 Nor is planet Earth with all its vastness quite like a cage with just a few scraps thrown in. It is true that nature’s resources, though abundant, are limited, not infinite. But when life fills every nook and cranny of nature, there will eventually be competition even if resources are abundant to begin with.

Many survival strategies do indeed involve killing and harming other beings. Thus, survival of the fittest is not just survival of the friendliest—there is plenty of brutality in nature. Yet, consideration of more cooperative evolutionary strategies can help us think about what, exactly, is evil about natural selection as such. Suppose an environment where resources are abundant for all animals, but access to the maximum amount of food requires cooperation. Thus the animals that end up with slightly more offspring are those that cooperate the best to help their kin, even non-kin. Suppose that the animals are able to limit their reproduction to an amount that is sustainable in the environment, and assume that none of these animals is a predator or a parasite. If you like, suppose further that the animals can experience only minor amounts of pain, so that something akin to Neo-Cartesianism is true.49 This world would still have differential reproduction, meaning evolution by natural selection, but it would seem strange indeed to compare it to a cage of a gladiator fight, or its Creator to a sadistic torturer. This indicates that the problem of natural evil has more

44Nowak and Coakley, *Evolution, Games, and God*.
45Hare and Woods, *Survival of the Friendliest*.
47Hatton et al., “Predator-Prey Power Law.”
48Terbough and Estes, *Trophic Cascades*.
49Miller, “Do Animals Feel Pain.”
to do with specific features of animals and particular environments, rather than with evolution by natural selection.\textsuperscript{50}

Thus, though natural selection is not merely “survival of the friendliest,” a more objective understanding shows the problem of natural evil to be much less severe than assumed in the analogies. If natural selection is problematic, it would be in cases of very limited resources and violent competition—but then these circumstances are the problem, not evolution. Even independently of evolution, we could ask what justifies God in creating animals with competing interests and letting them settle their conflicts without divine intervention.\textsuperscript{51}

\textit{Miracles versus Selection?}

Moving on to the assumption that a supernatural creation of similar organisms might be less cruel, we need to consider what things would then be like, since only by comparison can we claim that evolution adds to the problem. So, assume again as part of our background knowledge that creatures are mortal, that predators exist, and that resources are limited. Unfortunately for the evolutionary problem, it seems to follow from these things that differential survival, including violent struggles, will also happen. Even within a creationist world, some creatures will be more likely to get more offspring, based on how well adapted to their particular environment they are. And if genetic variability is also allowed, then differential survival will have the positive function of keeping species alive. As Peels points out, if there was no selection effect in nature, then over time, harmful mutations would accumulate until animals were no longer able to procreate—unless constant divine miracles were to prevent the deterioration.\textsuperscript{52} Similarly, even in a creationist world, organisms would have to take care of their own kin first of all, for otherwise their lineages would go extinct.\textsuperscript{53}

The difference in an evolutionary way of creation is merely the extent to which natural selection is able to produce positive effects in nature. In a creationist world, natural selection would maintain species and at most allow them to adapt slightly to different situations. In the evolutionist world, natural selection would, together with other evolutionary processes, also lead to more large-scale evolution. But in both cases, the process of natural selection would have a positive, divinely intended role to play. The central difference is that in the creationist world the effects are not able to accumulate to greater positive effects, as in the evolutionary world. However, it is unclear why this increased beneficial effect should

\textsuperscript{50}Similarly, Peels, “Does Evolution Conflict with God’s Character,” 547.
\textsuperscript{51}Sterba, “Solving Darwin’s Problem of Natural Evil.”
\textsuperscript{52}Peels, “Does Evolution Conflict with God’s Character,” 559.
\textsuperscript{53}Cunningham, \textit{Darwin’s Pious Idea}. ch. 3.
make the problem of evil worse. The problem, then, does not seem to be evolution, but rather other facts about nature.

Part 3: Evolution’s Indirect Effects

I have argued that the problems of scale and the problem of the cruelty of nature are not made worse by evolution, as compared with creationist accounts. However, it could still be that features of evolutionary history affect the problem of evil in some more indirect way, such as by altering the plausibility of some theodicies, as noted. But there are also other potential effects.

Messer points to evolutionary outcomes instead of the features of the process as being the central problem: “The problem posed by Darwin is that the same evolutionary processes that have generated all living things, including our own species, have also given rise to much of the violence, suffering and destruction that we experience and see around us.”54 The question is why God would use an evolutionary process if it leads to such outcomes, or why does God not control the process more in order to prevent such outcomes? However, similar questions could also be asked in a creationist world: why did God intentionally create this or that feature of biological organisms, or why did God choose to let the Fall corrupt nature so greatly? Again, the features of nature are the problem, not the process of creation.

Another problem is related to the existence of chance and contingency in the world as such, due to the possibility of suffering they create. Standard accounts of evolution require the existence of some kind of “chance” events, although popular-level definitions of the term are commonly murky.55 Perhaps one could argue that evolution requires chance events to have a greater role in nature. However, the existence of chance and contingency was known already before the advent of evolutionary theory, and could exist even in a world that was unable to support evolution. Consider, for example, the effects of natural disasters and chance encounters on human history, all discussed before Darwin.56

Another point worth noting is that evolution itself might provide an additional response to the problem of natural evil. Against the notion that God has divinely designed all complex contrivances in nature, Darwin believed it is preferable to see them as being produced by natural processes in the context of divinely designed laws.57 This requires a distinction between things in nature that are directly intended by God and things that are merely allowed by God as part of a created system. Darwin was building on the idea that God need not have expressly intended every lightning

54Messer, Science in Theology, 79.
55Ulanowitz, “Process Ecology.”
56Fergusson, The Providence of God; Giberson, Chance and Providence.
57Darwin, “To Asa Gray 22 May [1860].”
strike or every death of a fly, for example. Similarly, argues Darwin, God did not directly design every single feature of biological organisms, but simply allowed these to emerge by the laws of evolution. This might then explain the ugly or malevolent features of animals better than the creationist picture.

There is a vast body of critical literature on such evolutionary theo-dicies, and many potential prospects and problems. ⁵⁸ My purpose here is simply to note that evolution might provide an additional way of responding to the problem of natural evil, rather than merely undermining theodicies. ⁵⁹

Evolution’s effects on design arguments provide another avenue of indirect influence on theology. Though the alleged wastefulness of evolutionary history does not increase the severity of the problem of natural evil—as wastefulness is known already in the present day, and does not necessarily increase the proportion of suffering—such features might nevertheless impact the plausibility of divine providence. Paley, for example, saw nature’s abundant and beneficent “purposeful contrivance” as providing the sure foundation for recognition of divine providence, without which human history might seem just chaotic. ⁶⁰ While Paley’s picture of nature as a “happy world” has been ridiculed, he did acknowledge the existence of predation, suffering, death and disease. But he believed the good in nature outweighs the bad, and thus provides us with powerful evidence of the Creator’s goodness. Thus understood, the design argument contributes to the “problem of good” counterbalancing the evidential force of evil. As Boethius asked, “If God exists, whence comes evil? Yet whence comes good, if He exists not?” ⁶¹

If evolution undermines design arguments, then the counterbalancing force of the “problem of good” might decrease. However, several authors, such as Wahlberg and Kojonen argue that an evolutionary view of the

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⁵⁸Peels, “Does Evolution Conflict with God’s Character”; Southgate, Theology in a Suffering World; Wahlberg, “Divine Design and Evolutionary Evil.”

⁵⁹An objection suggested by a reviewer homes in on one problem. Consider features leading to maternal death in childbirth, explained by Ayala, Darwin’s Gift to Science and Religion, as evolved adaptations that are understandably imperfect. For Ayala, removing divine responsibility for such features is “Darwin’s gift” to theology. However, one could object that the evolutionary origin of such features does not remove God’s responsibility, given that God already knew beforehand what evils would emerge from evolution and could have acted to prevent those evils. So why did God choose to create through evolution? However, the doctrine that God was free in his creation, and so could have created different kinds of beings, is independent of the theory of evolution. The possible defects of the human birth canal (and other perceived faults of nature) would need to be explained in a creationist account as well. The main creationist responses (such as appeals to the Fall and the denial of suboptimality) are also available for theistic evolutionists.

⁶⁰Paley, Natural Theology, 271.

⁶¹Boethius, Consolation of Philosophy, pt. IV.
world still allows for perceiving design in biological nature.\textsuperscript{62} Wahlberg argues that even parasites are “expressive of divine intent and intelligence by virtue of being capable of displaying rather clever functional behavior. However, the specific kind of functional behavior it displays need not, if I am right, have been intended by God.”\textsuperscript{63} Similarly, for Southgate, an apparently evil design like the malarial parasite might nevertheless express “something of the fecundity and generativity of creation. As such it too, hard and troubling though it is to say, is an aspect of divine glory.”\textsuperscript{64}

Alternatively, one could argue that natural theology does not need to establish divine goodness in the first place. For example, Luther argues in the \textit{Large Catechism} (1529): “We could never attain to the knowledge of the grace and favor of the Father except through the Lord Christ . . . outside of whom we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge.”\textsuperscript{65} Luther was not necessarily consistent on this point, and elsewhere argued that nature’s order gives reason to be grateful to our good Creator.\textsuperscript{66} Luther’s remarks nevertheless illustrate the fact that for many, belief in God might indeed find some support in natural revelation, but God’s nature is nevertheless best known in and through Christ.\textsuperscript{67}

\textbf{Conclusion: Mortal Creatures and Evolutionary Evil}

Evolution is traditionally seen as increasing the difficulty of the problem of natural evil. However, I have argued that the problem is related to animal mortality, capacity for suffering and other specific features of our world, not evolution. Unless we adopt an extremely negative view of the value of mortal creatures, then the added scale of evolutionary history will not increase the severity of the problem. The problems will be the same as they were before. For instance, in addition to asking for reasons for animal mortality, we might ask why God gave animals the ability to suffer in a morally relevant sense, assuming Neo-Cartesianism.\textsuperscript{68} Moreover, given that God acts miraculously in salvation history, why does God not act even more to prevent specific evils in natural history? And so on.

I believe the Augustinian approach applied here has potential for refo-cusing the discussion on such fundamental issues. Consider: is the creation of a mortal animal capable of suffering a good thing? If not, then it seems

\textsuperscript{62}Wahlberg, \textit{Reshaping Natural Theology}; Kojonen, “Salvaging the Biological Design Argument” and \textit{The Compatibility of Evolution and Design}.

\textsuperscript{63}Wahlberg, \textit{Reshaping Natural Theology}, 185.

\textsuperscript{64}Southgate, \textit{Theology in a Suffering World}, 143–144. There has also been a multifaceted discussion on design arguments and the problem of evil in the context of the controversial Intelligent Design movement involving the question of the proper amount of divine intervention into natural history. See Corabi, “Intelligent Design and Theodicy,” Kojonen, \textit{The Intelligent Design Debate and the Temptation of Scientism}, 149–168, and Peckham, \textit{Theodicy of Love}, 113–116.

\textsuperscript{65}Luther, “The Large Catechism,” III, 65.

\textsuperscript{66}Loikkanen, “Early Lutheranism and Natural Theology,” 181.

\textsuperscript{67}Southgate, \textit{Theology in a Suffering World}; Wright, \textit{History and Eschatology}.

\textsuperscript{68}Miller, “Do Animals Feel Pain?”
that this will lead to antinatalism and a problem of evil for atheists. But if it is a good thing, so that our participation in the cycle of life is morally right, then it seems that an evolutionary world full of such creatures can also be a good world, even though not perfect. If we have the right to give life to a mortal creature capable of suffering, seeing that a child’s existence adds some good to the world, then would God not also have the right to create mortal animals? Why would giving the gift of existence become an evil thing merely because it is God who is doing the creating, not us?

A possible objection is that since God has greater capacities than finite humans, it could be more morally problematic for God to create imperfect beings than for us, given that God could do better. Perhaps a good Creator should create only beings that are as close to perfection as possible. But I would ask how we know that the present creation is not indeed God’s way of creating the best possible beings, as soul-making theodicies claim? More fundamentally, it seems problematic to assume that God is morally required to create only supremely perfect beings. If the existence of a less powerful being is intrinsically good, then it should also be an intrinsically good act to give such a being existence, even for God.

In conclusion: it seems to me that if God has the moral right to create even one mortal animal capable of suffering, then God would plausibly be equally justified in creating two, or creating billions, and creating an evolutionary world.

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