What if Theologians Took Evolution Seriously?

John F. Haught

A noted theologian who has been engaged in the dialogue between theology and science invites readers to reflect on how a serious consideration of evolution could impact our lives, particularly our understanding of suffering. An evolutionary lens can change a view of suffering perceived as rooted in past human offenses and the need for expiation to one open to eschatological hope for all life in our world.

If theologians took evolution more seriously than they have in the past, I believe it would lead to constructive shifts in our thoughts about God, the meaning of our lives, our sense of human destiny and the meaning of suffering and redemption. By evolution I mean the conventional Darwinian—and now neo-Darwinian—understanding of the journey of life on earth. It would be salutary for theology to steep itself fully in the best and most up-to-date versions of evolutionary biology. Like all science, Darwin’s portrait of life is subject to constant revision. However, what will remain, no matter how much science shifts in the future, is the disclosure of life’s long struggle. And taking into account the pre-human chapters of evolution can allow theology to give voice to the silent striving of an entire universe, and not just human life, for the redemption promised by God.

I shall focus my comments on the suffering in evolution. However, it is necessary first to look at the question of whether evolution admits of any plausible theological interpretation whatsoever. After all, many Darwinians subscribe to a

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version of scientific naturalism that claims to be able to explain all aspects of life, including suffering, in purely biological terms; that is, without having to invoke the idea of God at all. As viewed by Darwinian biology, suffering (which I shall take to be inclusive of the sensation of pain by all sentient life), is nothing more than an adaptation that enhances the probability of survival and reproductive success in complex organisms.

Can theology add anything of explanatory substance to the Darwinian naturalist’s account? Darwin himself observed that suffering is “well adapted to make a creature guard against any great or sudden evil” (Barlow, 88–89). Suffering, he surmised, is life’s warning system, and if at times the torment seems exorbitant, this tragic overload is still consistent with a purely naturalist understanding of life. To many Darwinians, religious and theological responses to the fact of suffering have no comparably lucid explanatory value. Nowadays some neo-Darwinians account for the suffering of sentient life in terms of the “striving” of genes to make their way into subsequent generations. Genes somehow “understand” that they will not survive unless they fashion organisms equipped with sensory feedback equipment that can signal when their survival is in jeopardy. And so, genes cunningly engineer delicate nervous systems in order to guarantee their immortality. To the scientific naturalist such machination only seems intelligent, and to most evolutionists the process is at bottom blind and impersonal (see Sherrington, 266).

Darwin himself drifted away from belief in divine providence after observing such displays as ichneumon wasps laying their eggs inside living caterpillars so that the newly hatched larvae would have undecayed flesh to feast on. Resourceful as this snapshot from the life-story may be from the wasp’s perspective, it is difficult to attribute the caterpillar’s fate to divine providence. The outspoken evolutionist Richard Dawkins views such inconsiderate genetic productions as unambiguous cause for atheism: “So long as DNA is passed on,” he says, “it does not matter who or what gets hurt in the process” (Dawkins, 131). And so, any universe that puts up with such indecorous behavior is at bottom blind and pointless (133).

After Darwin, a plausible theological treatment of the fact of suffering cannot simply disregard ichneumon wasps and other instances of evolutionary insensitivity. Clearly nature, even independent of human evil, has never been paradise. Moreover, suffering, death, and mass extinctions always have been inseparable from the creation of life on earth. Christian faith encourages us to hope that, in the end, all tears will be wiped away and that death will be no more; and for
people of faith it should not be a terribly uncomfortable doctrinal stretch to extend such extravagant hopes to the suffering of all life. But theology still needs to consider in depth what evolution tells us about God, sin, evil, redemption, and especially the meaning of suffering. Of all the recent attempts to take into account the suffering (or pain) of sentient life, John Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love* is, in my opinion, the most impressive. Yet even Hick’s theodicy is not as deeply influenced by evolutionary biology as it might be.

The irrepressible question, “why suffering?” has led to the countless myths about the origin and end of evil. Accounts of how suffering came about have provided reassurance that life is not absurd, and their speculations about how suffering can be redeemed have opened up the spiritual space in which most peoples have lived, hoped, and aspired to ethical goodness. To ignore the traditional myths of evil’s origin and end would be to forfeit a great treasury of wisdom. However, none of the ancient narratives about evil and suffering had anything to say about evolution. This is entirely understandable, of course, but it is no mark of theological courage that most religious thinkers today still touch only lightly on Darwin’s science, if they mention it at all, in their reflections on the problem of pain and suffering. And yet, I believe that a sustained meditation on the suffering, loss, and death that occur in the whole story of life may prove to be a transformative theological adventure for Christians.

**Can Darwinism Fully Explain the Suffering of Sentient Life?**

Science is not even close to understanding the origin of life on earth, but in its notion of adaptive fitness Darwinian biology can at least claim to provide a powerful, if incomplete, account of life’s morphological diversity. Moreover, the notion of evolutionary adaptation can help explain why so much life became sentient to the point of suffering. The capacity to have feelings, both physical and affective, gives some organisms an adaptive advantage over others not so equipped. And even though the capacity for suffering is never perfectly adaptive, it can provide information to an organism about present danger, and thus promote the cause of survival and reproduction.

To the Darwinian naturalist, adaptive fitness is the ultimate reason why suffering occurs in living beings. Of course, the amount of suffering by sentient beings is often much more than the minimum that would be adaptive (as Darwin himself noted), but to the pure naturalist (one who believes that “nature is all there is”) this surplus is simply one more sign of the universe’s fundamental unfairness and impersonality.

Nevertheless, one may still wonder whether Darwinian science accounts fully for the facts of sentience and suffering. The latter, after all, are empty notions
apart from the existence of subjects that can register sensations of pain or pleasure; and science, strictly speaking, has little if anything to say about subjectivity. Because of its methodological self-limitations, science, including biology, does not talk about subjective centers of feeling or awareness. It discards all discourse about inner worlds, and deals only with what is objectifiable. The throbbing, elusive interiority without which neither sentience nor suffering could exist at all, necessarily slips through the broad meshes of objectifying inquiry. And since science, including Darwinian biology, cannot comprehend the subjective centers that actually experience suffering, it cannot plausibly claim to explain everything there is to know about organic beings as such.

Above all, science says nothing substantive about why subjectivity bothered to enter into the universe’s evolution at all. Evolutionists are often content to view inwardness as a fluke, a purely contingent by product of natural processes in a world where accidents happen abundantly (Gould and Lewontin). But the fact remains that even the most rudimentary instances of subjectivity place the universe at least partly beyond the boundary of what can be captured cognitively by conventional scientific method. Evolutionary biology may account, at one level of understanding, for the gradual intensification of sentience in natural history, but it cannot provide an adequate account of subjectivity as such.

Moreover, only sentient subjects are able to strive; that is, to aim intentionally at a specific goal, and only a striving being could experience success or failure. Living beings, unlike non-living, are able to try, and, therefore, to succeed or fail in their various endeavors. Indeed it is only a personally intuitive awareness that organisms are able to strive, that allows biologists to distinguish the domain of living beings from the inanimate world (Polanyi, 327ff). Because of its objectifying method, science itself has no access to the sentient, striving, subjective centers in the life-world. Sentient, striving subjectivity, and, hence, suffering also, lies at least partly beyond the reach of scientific modeling of nature. And so Darwinian science can only presuppose the subjectivity, sentience and striving that it uses as explanatory categories. So frustrating is the fact that subjectivity, sentience and striving do not submit to full objectification that eliminative materialists such as Paul Churchland (1995) and Daniel Dennett (1991) in effect deny that they really exist at all (for a critique, see Wallace, 2000).

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This denial makes it all the more ironic that contemporary Darwinism cannot banish from its own accounts of life a presupposed element of subjectivity in living beings. The theme of striving, subjective centers keeps showing up especially in contemporary gene-centered evolutionary explanations. Genes themselves are treated as subjects striving to get into the next generation (see Ridley, 92–94). The point is that Darwinism takes for granted the existence of sentience, striving, suffering and hence subjectivity. It cannot explain these since it uses them as explanatory categories. Darwinism can help us understand that suffering has adaptive significance, but it cannot tell us why striving subjects came into the universe at all.

Theodicy after Darwin

What theological meaning, though, can we discover in life’s suffering after Darwin? And what shape will theodicies assume in an age of evolution? I doubt that these can plausibly remain the same after Darwin as before. The millions of years of life’s suffering prior to human emergence challenge the predominantly human-centered theodicies in our religious traditions. As Buddhism emphasizes, there is suffering in all of life, so theodicy must stretch itself to encompass the whole biological world.

Theodicy in the classical sense has dwelt almost exclusively on human suffering and has typically construed our own suffering as in some sense the penalty for sin. The appeal of the traditional reading is that it seems to be able to safeguard the idea that God cannot be an accomplice of suffering as long as evil arises from the human heart. But evolutionary science now shows quite demonstrably that suffering and death have always been constitutive of the ongoing creation of life. So how can this wider vista of life’s undeserved suffering make any theological sense? Often theology has avoided the issue by denying, in effect, that a larger arena of innocent suffering even exists at all. One assumption has been, for example, that nonhuman animals don’t really suffer. Theologist John Thiel (parallel to C. S. Lewis and John Hick) allows that animals experience pain, but not suffering. Even to make this distinction, however, seems to be an implicit dismissal of the issue of theodicy as pertaining to nonhuman life (Thiel, 1–31). Moreover, theodicy must address not just the issue of suffering, but also the perishing of every present moment of experience by all of sentient life (Whitehead, 340).

By ignoring the wider story of suffering, the dominant theodicies have set things up in such a way that in paying the price for guilt there might be an end to suffering. With Paul Ricoeur, one may call this the “ethical vision” of evil (Ricoeur 1965, 125; 1974, 455–67). In order to preserve the idea of divine justice the ethical vision, generally speaking, has assumed that suffering cannot be
separated from freedom and human fault: “All we, like sheep, have gone astray.” However, in Christianity the one exception to such straying is Jesus, whose innocent suffering pays the price for our own delinquency. Ricoeur recalls that the Suffering Servant theology of Second Isaiah adumbrates the Christian intuition that the innocence of an undefiled victim can transform suffering from penalty into gift, thus subverting the dominant role that the ethical vision has played in religious thought and spirituality (Ricoeur, 1969). What he fails to bring out is that this radical transformation in principle calls for a Christology in which the suffering of all of life must be translated from penalty into gift. And for this interpretation to be plausible, the suffering of all of life must somehow be seen as God’s own suffering.

In forcing theology to consider the wider-than-human domain of life’s suffering as essentially having the character of gift (rather than penalty), I see one of the great consequences of a serious encounter of theology with evolutionary biology. Theology could be invigorated by an expanded awareness of the pervasively sacrificial character of innocent life in evolution’s vast sweep. Eons of living, subjective centers have all become de-centered by giving themselves over to death and extinction, thus allowing new life (including our own) to rise up continually on the mound of their great self-surrender. Theology and theodicy should not ignore the wider drama of life’s many instances of self-sacrifice, but instead seek to rescue some meaning from it all.

What meaning? At the very least, the innocence of life’s victims means that the theme of sacrifice has henceforth to be decoupled from the ethical vision’s emphasis on suffering as expiation. Where there is no guilt, there is no need for expiation. The massiveness of nonhuman suffering in the life-story spoils any tidy ethical solution to the theodicy problem. Perhaps, then, the suffering of sentient life has a profound significance in its opening up the future to new life. The suffering of life at bottom is not rendered meaningful solely by the notions of adaptation or expiation. Rather it can make sense at all only in terms of the biblical theme of expectation. Theology is encouraged by evolutionary awareness of the travail of nonhuman life to situate all of suffering primarily within the horizon of an eschatological hope that looks toward the definitive conquering of suffering and death by God’s redemptive love.

Science over the last two centuries has been demonstrating, at least to those who bother to look, that life’s suffering spills out over the boundaries of the ethical vision of evil. To some, the excessive suffering of sentient life is final vindication of the ancient tragic interpretations of life. But to Christians there is

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available another space in which to situate life’s innocent suffering—that of life in God’s future. Here the meaning of suffering and sacrifice can be radically transfigured by a sense of promise that looks forward to new creation. Theology may be confident, after Darwin, that the long reign of the expiatory vision has, at least in principle, been overthrown by the power of the future.

However, the expiatory understanding of suffering is so deeply embedded in our spiritual and ethical sensibilities that it seems nearly ineradicable. It first took verbal shape in ancient stories about how an original cosmic perfection was spoiled by free human acts of rebellion. In the biblical world the Adamic myth, with which Paul Ricoeur associates the ethical vision of existence, represents the intuition that suffering exists mostly because of human freedom and sin (Ricoeur 1974, 294–95). The offshoot of this influential theodicy has been that even today, in secular as well as deeply religious societies, whenever suffering or misfortune occurs, people are inclined to look for culprits (Teilhard de Chardin, 81). The assumption that a price in suffering must always be paid for the defilement by human freedom of a primal purity of creation has underwritten the entrenched habit of looking for victims. It has legitimated a history of scapegoating that has only exacerbated violence and misery.

In 1933, Teilhard de Chardin wrote:

In spite of the subtle distinctions of the theologians, it is a matter of fact that Christianity has developed under the over-riding impression that all the evil round us was born from an initial transgression. So far as dogma is concerned we are still living in the atmosphere of a universe in which what matters most is reparation and expiation. The vital problem, both for Christ and us, is to get rid of a stain. This accounts for the importance, at least in theory, of the idea of sacrifice, and for the interpretation almost exclusively in terms of purification. It explains, too, the pre-eminence in Christology of the idea of redemption and the shedding of blood (81).

Unfortunately, theology and religious education still exaggerate the idea of an hypothesized primordial offense, which in turn usually assumes that God’s original creation was one of rounded off perfection. Western Christianity theology in particular has situated suffering in the context of myths that emphasize the primordial purity of creation. This only makes the original fault seem all the more enormous; hence, running the risk of unleashing demonizing expeditions to find someone or something to blame. The logic implicitly operative in an expiatory theodicy is that if a state of paradisal wholeness had preceded the original fault, then the fault itself could be no trivial matter. An expiatory view of suffering and sacrifice would then be called upon to make things right. And setting things right would mean the restoration of what has been, rather than an opening to new creation up ahead.
The Meaning of an Unfinished Universe

It is important to ask, therefore, just what theological consequences would follow if the universe, as evolution implies, has emerged only gradually from a state of relative simplicity and still remains unfinished. What need would there be for expiation or scapegoating if things had never been perfect in the beginning? And what if the perfection for which humans yearn were envisaged as a future creation instead of a forfeited past? What if the idea of an “original” breach were closed off by the logic of evolution? Wouldn’t an evolutionary view of life call for a theology that purges sacrifice of its motifs of expiation, situating life’s suffering and sacrifice once and for all (ephapax) within the horizon of an open, redemptive future? These, it seems to me, are questions that evolutionary science invites theology to explore.

It is no coincidence, after all, that expiatory interpretations of sacrifice find endorsement in myths that suppose a primordial paradise. A sociologist of knowledge might even speculate that it has been the social and psychic infrastructure of expiation and victimization that gives rise to mythic superstructures and theologies that project perfection back into a sacred paradisal past so as to lend religious sanction to entrenched habits of retributive violence and expiatory sacrifice.

I am asking, then, what might be the consequences for theology were it to think out fully and conclusively the implications of the evolutionary claim that a state of complete cosmic integrity in the realm of created being has never yet been an actuality. By ruling out any past epoch of created perfection, our religious aspirations may henceforth be turned more decisively than ever from regret and remorse, and more decidedly in the direction of hope. A clear and consistent understanding that the universe and life have emerged only gradually, and that there has never yet been any actualized paradisal perfection in the cosmos, might permit our religious aspirations to turn irreversibly toward the eschatological future, the only arena in which the fulfillment of our longing for perfection could conceivably be realized. At the very least, such a turn of events would align theology more closely with biblical theologies of promise and hope.

Unfortunately, however, the story of human religiosity has often been more one of nostalgia for an imagined past perfection than an eschatological anticipation.
of new creation. Even in religions descended from the biblical environment a longing to restore or recover some idyllic past has at times suppressed the spirit of Abrahamic adventure into the unknown future opened up by a God of promise. To rephrase my question, therefore, what would be the implications of situating the longed for realm of perfection in the not-yet-future instead of in a remote cosmic Urzeit, or in a Platonic realm of present perfection hovering eternally above the flow of time?

I believe that one of the consequences of a serious encounter between eschatology and evolutionary science would be a relativizing of the expiatory interpretation of suffering. Simultaneously, a vivid awareness of evolution would no longer permit our theodicies to overlook the possibility that a great portion of life’s suffering has been tragic and innocent, having nothing at all to do with guilt. Sentient forms of life have been subjects of striving and failure for many millions of years prior to human emergence. After Darwin, a sense of our human solidarity with the suffering of all sentient life, therefore, can no longer permit our interpreting suffering, including human suffering, as primarily punishment. Rather, suffering is essentially the tragic consequence of the fact that life is still emerging in an unfinished universe. Therefore, going far deeper than the Darwinian understanding of suffering exclusively in terms of adaptation, theology may emphasize that the meaning of suffering—at the very least—is that of turning the story of life, especially in its recent mode of human sensitivity and striving, irreversibly toward a new future, one in which suffering will be healed and all tears wiped away.

Consequently, the task of theodicy henceforth should not be to fit the fact of suffering onto the grid of guilt and punishment. Instead, if it hopes to get closer to the truly substantive issue, theodicy might ask why an all-good and all-powerful God would create an unfinished, imperfect, evolutionary universe in the first place rather than one that is complete and perfect from the beginning. Could it be that a truly good and deeply powerful God has no choice? This is material for another essay, but I believe the short answer is that any imaginable world that is completely finished and perfected ab initio (from the beginning) could not really be distinct from God and could not really be a creation at all. An originally finished creation, as Teilhard and others have emphasized, is theologically inconceivable.

**Conclusion**

What if theologians really began to take seriously the evolutionary understanding of life and the universe? What if they realized that the cosmos, earth and humanity, rather than having wandered away from an original plenitude of perfection, are even now, in spite of all failures, tragedies and dead ends,
invited to fuller modes of being? Evolution, I believe, is incompatible with a backward looking nostalgia for an hypothesized state of original cosmic or human perfection. But it is quite compatible with hope for a final future fulfillment. That Christianity is essentially a religion of the future should make theology leap with excitement at the fact that evolution is inconsistent with seductive dreams of reinstituting an imagined past perfection. Evolutionary biology and cosmology have closed off this retrograde path to salvation once and for all. For this, theology should be grateful.

Theodicy—if it is to survive at all after Darwin and contemporary cosmology—must take advantage of the entirely new setting in which the universe is pictured as still emerging into being rather than having been complete from the beginning. Of course, it would be an act of violence on the part of theology to wrest from the human heart its native tendency to project itself toward some idealized state of perfection. An evolutionary theology must remain entirely continuous with the history of religious longing for perfection. However, it has not been demonstrated that we need to picture the perfection to which our hearts aspire as though it were something that once was and has now been lost or besmirched. It may be more appropriate instead to picture perfection as a state that has never yet been actualized but that we may hope will come into being in the future, not just our own future, but also that of the entire universe.

The biblical accounts of creation and promise are themselves struggling to bring about just such a radical reconfiguration at the roots of the human longing for perfection. The ancient narratives of a promising God, the God who always opens up a new future whenever dead-ends appear, encourage us to move beyond nostalgic obsession with a lost Eden, and outward into an open future that relocates the essential domain of perfection in the domain of the “up-ahead,” in the direction of a creation yet to come. The Bible’s eschatological orientation arouses hope for an unprecedented future, even as it deflects our nostalgic pining for a paradisal past. Evolution sits comfortably in such a setting.

Finally, in order to offset predictable protests against my proposal, I want to close by insisting that what I have said here in no way entails a diminishment of a sense of sin, or of the need for genuine remorse for the evil humans bring about, and hence of our need for redemption from sin. In fact, just the opposite is the case. What I have been proposing is that evolution, were we to take it with full earnestness, requires our replacement of the expiatory vision and its obsessive dwelling on an idealized past with a fresh emphasis on the future of creation and the Christian promise of creation’s ongoing divinization. Sin, in this light, is essentially our resisting God’s will to gather creation more and more intimately into the differentiated unity of the divine life. Failure to acknowledge evolution, I believe, allows theology too easily to persist in expiatory explanations of suffering and an excessive anthropocentrism that leave most of life’s history outside of the process of the world’s creation. What is worse, such an oversight can lead
theology to close us humans off from the world's future, the true palace of God, the horizon from which the redemption of the world arises anew everyday.

References


