

# *Evolutionary Theodicy*

with Denis Edwards, “Christopher Southgate’s Compound Theodicy: Parallel Searchings”; Ted Peters, “Extinction, Natural Evil, and the Cosmic Cross”; Robert John Russell, “Southgate’s Compound Only-Way Evolutionary Theodicy: Deep Appreciation and Further Directions”; Bethany Sollereider, “Exploring Old and New Paths in Theodicy”; Holmes Rolston, III, “Redeeming a Cruciform Nature”; Ernst M. Conradie, “On Social Evil and Natural Evil: In Conversation with Christopher Southgate”; Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp, “Evolution, Contingency, and Christology”; John F. Haught, “Faith and Compassion in an Unfinished Universe”; Celia Deane-Drummond, “Perceiving Natural Evil through the Lens of Divine Glory? A Conversation with Christopher Southgate”; Nicola Hoggard Creegan, “Theodicy: A Response to Christopher Southgate”; and Neil Messer, “Evolution and Theodicy: How (Not) to Do Science and Theology.”

## FAITH AND COMPASSION IN AN UNFINISHED UNIVERSE

by John F. Haught

*Abstract.* The theme of compassion is prominent in the work of Christopher Southgate. This scientist and theologian is deeply affected by Charles Darwin’s nineteenth century disclosure of the long, previously unknown, history of life’s suffering. Southgate is also aware of the many unsuccessful attempts by Christian theologians to make sense of it all. Here I build on Southgate’s work. I note, first, that both the suffering of life and the protest against it by compassionate human beings are integral parts of a single *cosmic* drama; second, that the drama is still far from finished; and, third, that the suffering of innocent life remains unintelligible and unredeemed apart from faith’s anticipation of a fulfillment that awaits the entire cosmic drama.

*Keywords:* cosmic story; cosmology; evolution; redemption; resurrection; rightness; suffering

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Recently science has shown beyond doubt that our universe is still coming into being. During the last two centuries geology, biology, astrophysics, cosmology, and other fields of inquiry have cumulatively demonstrated that our universe is at best “unfinished” (Haught 2017). We may not know where it is going or to what end it may be heading, but by all appearances the cosmic story is far from over. We know for sure that the story of the

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universe, at least so far, has been one of gradual awakening. For eight billion years the physical world slept silently and insentiently. Then, four billion years ago it began to stir. It came to life and eventually became conscious. Life has undergone at least five major periods of extinction separated from one another by millions of years. It has wandered down countless pathways, including the winding road that led to us. Along with the birth of thought on Earth—and perhaps elsewhere amidst the many billions of galaxies—our Big Bang universe has also gradually given rise (at least in human beings) to moral aspiration and religious longing.

Formerly nobody would have thought of the birth of compassion as a *cosmic* development. Until recently even the greatest thinkers had no awareness that the universe itself is an ongoing story of development that could lead to such surprising outcomes if given enough time. The cosmos was usually thought of as a staging ground for human narratives. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for example, took the physical universe to be a backdrop for the human search for meaning and goodness rather than an interrelated set of finite things to which science could direct focal attention (Jaki 1992, 27). Kant thought that the most important questions we can ask in our personal terrestrial journeys are: What can I know? What must I do? And what may I hope for? If he had known what science is now telling us about the natural world, however, he may have asked a fourth question: “What is going on? What is coming to pass in the journey of the universe?”

Until recently it was unimaginable to most great thinkers that the universe is a narrative composed of its own unique dramatic twists and turns. Today an informed philosopher would wonder not only about the starry skies above and the moral law within, but also about whether the cosmic story carries a meaning. And he or she might notice that the human capacity for compassion—wonderfully conveyed in Southgate’s essays, books, and poems—is not only a mark of human moral excellence but also an important new chapter in the career of the cosmos. As a result of the last two centuries of natural science, we now have a sense that the entire cosmos, and not just life and human history, is moving into an unpredictable future. This universe’s openness to a new future allows human moral life to take on a new meaning, namely, one of contributing to the ongoing creation of the universe. Being vehicles of compassion may be the best part of this creative mission.

We now know that nature has never remained continually the same indefinitely. It is marked throughout by dramatic phase transitions in which unpredictable outcomes have often spontaneously emerged. After slumbering throughout most of its temporal passage, the universe is now waking up—cognitively, morally, aesthetically, and religiously. During the last two centuries geologists have mined from the earth an informative record of fossils whose distinct layers, as they ascend from lower to higher, tell the

long story of matter becoming increasingly vitalized, eventually sentient, and very recently self-aware. With the invention of human language, symbolism, and culture, as we can now see, matter has lately become conscious and sometimes compassionate. Clear evidence of the emergence of compassion among humans shows up, for example, in prehistoric burial practices and the marking of gravesites that archaeologists have brought out into the open especially during the last century.

Our evolutionary ancestors became increasingly endowed with cooperative instincts beginning many millions of years ago but evidence of compassion's decisive arrival in the universe is clear from the beginning of human existence on Earth. The artifacts our early human ancestors left behind indicate without a doubt that they were self-conscious and could act purposively. They appear also to have had interior lives and an ability to reason and make judgments of value. Perhaps as long as two hundred thousand years ago anatomically modern ancestors already had a highly developed talent for symbolic expression. They may very well also have acquired the skill to tell stories that gave meaning to their lives, stories that implicitly imparted to them a sense of right and wrong. Without the emergence of symbolic and narrative consciousness they could have had no thoughts of a spiritual world beyond the limits of their physical lives. It is doubtful that their care for the perpetuation of life beyond suffering and death could have taken root apart from a simultaneous intensification of the affect of compassion. It is not only a sense of their own loss but also compassion for those who have died that led the living to make a permanent place of fulfillment for the latter beyond death.

Accompanying the evolution of compassion there arose a consciousness that the world is not right as it presently exists. Awareness of the wrongness of suffering and death required at least a vague anticipation of *rightness* with which to compare and contrast it. In the evolution of human consciousness our ancestral awareness of the wrongness of suffering could scarcely have arisen unless people had felt themselves being drawn to an alternative state of being, whether real or imagined, wherein suffering is conquered and death is no more. It is especially in religion, with all its ambiguity, that humans for ages have anticipated and awakened to a realm of rightness existing indestructibly beyond the wrongness of pain and death.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF AN UNFINISHED UNIVERSE

In the context of our new cosmic story, we may now assume that what our ancestors felt as wrongness has something to do with the fact that the universe is still coming into being. The cosmos in its present state of becoming cannot yet be fully "right" or fully intelligible, for it is not yet fully actualized. Wrongness enters into our temporally unfinished universe not because time is a dangerous departure from eternity, as traditional pre-scientific

religions have assumed, but because the universe is still on the way. Wrongness is neither necessary nor justifiable, but it can befall any universe that has yet to be brought fully into being. The new picture of an emerging cosmos allows that rightness may at some point be realized, but clearly its full realization is currently far out of range. An unfinished universe is not wrong, but it leaves room for wrongness. For now, as long as the cosmos is still coming to birth, each present moment in its emergence shares in the overall incompleteness of the cosmos. The present incompleteness of a universe that is still in the process of becoming leaves open logically a space for both natural and moral wrongness (Teilhard de Chardin 1969, 79–95; 84–86; 131–32).

Natural wrongness includes not only the disintegration and perishing of organisms, but also the excessive amount of suffering that accompanies the long story of life, as Southgate's work highlights. Moral wrongness in an emerging universe consists not only of our destructive, violent human acts but also of our willful settling for intermediate goals when wider narrative coherence is yet to come. If the universe is still coming into being, in either case, the classical theological assumption that creation must have been perfectly good "in the beginning," and that goodness entails an initial completeness and an eternal changelessness, is highly questionable. The religious and theological notion of an initially fixed and eternally perfected creation is problematic today especially because it implies that nothing more can be accomplished in time and history than has existed eternally. Cosmic and human history could easily seem in that case to be inconsequential—and the passage of time pointless—as many modern thinkers, especially Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx, have claimed. Removing the prospect of a truly novel future state of being—whether of life, humanity, or the cosmos—detracts from the importance and urgency of moral action here and now, and it considerably dampens what Teilhard de Chardin has called the "zest for living" (1970, 231–43).

If, on the other hand, creation is not yet over and done with, evil need no longer be interpreted as the result of an original human fault, nor as the consequence of a prehistoric rebellion that separated light from darkness. Evil is always a possibility as long as creation is still on the way and as long as the world is short of being perfected. The wrongness evident in our world, including the suffering of innocent life, is a reality compatible with—though in any specific moment not necessitated by—the fact that our universe is unfinished. From a cosmologically informed theological point of view the anticipated fullness of being, meaning, truth, goodness, and beauty is *still* rising during the dawning of a still-emerging universe.

Only by acknowledging the unfinished state of the universe, then, can theology any longer appropriately address the problem of suffering and the meaning of compassion. Such an acknowledgment allows at least in principle for an eventual conquering of evil by good, whereas a purely materialist

worldview by contrast gives wrongness a lasting place in the scheme of things. Contemporary cosmic pessimism, with its concomitant materialist metaphysics, holds that the entire cosmos is destined to end up in a state of final disintegration and absolute death. Accordingly, all instances of life and consciousness that have appeared along the way will sink back at last into lifelessness and mindlessness. Suffering, in that worldview, is finally irredeemable. Materialist naturalism by definition spurns any hope that in the cosmic drama light will ultimately banish darkness. Its followers claim to be “realistic,” but they fail to notice that the cosmos has, at least so far, always left open narrative space for more and fuller being to take shape up ahead—for example when the atomic and molecular epochs of cosmic history opened themselves to becoming eventually alive and, more recently, conscious. So in principle it cannot be ruled out that the realizing of even more unforeseen emergent possibilities awaits the cosmic process farther along—including finally an irreversible awakening to the indestructible rightness as anticipated by religious traditions (Haught 2017, 79–92).

To materialists, formally speaking, wrongness is real and permanent while rightness is only occasional, accidental, and unintended. And yet, the warmth of compassion shines through even in the lives and thoughts of cosmic pessimists. Ever since Charles Darwin, for example, the aversion by pessimistic, but compassionate, biologists to nature’s inherent wrongness has become evident in their heartfelt condemnation of biological evolution for its indifference to suffering. Evolution, as many prominent Darwinians understand it, runs counter to any properly ethical sense of rightness. Like Charles Darwin and T. H. Huxley, these compassionate scientists see wrongness as an absurdity built irredeemably into the evolutionary process, and hence into the cosmos itself. Consequently, for them the natural world can no longer function as a reliable source of instructions for how we humans should conduct ourselves morally. During his studies at Cambridge, and prior to his famous journey on HMS *Beagle* (1831–1836), Darwin had embraced the traditional religious belief that the natural world somehow reflects a transcendent intelligence and goodness, albeit imperfectly. As a young man he seems to have accepted the assumptions of natural theology. His later reflection on the observations he had made while sailing the seas and visiting strange lands, however, led him to realize that life is a long and often violently creative process, one in which individual organisms suffer excessively and out of proportion to most human standards of justice.

Life, as humans have always known, is challenging, but until Darwin the full scope of life’s suffering had not yet been so nakedly manifested. The organic design that had earlier pointed to benign divine governance turned out, in Darwinian perspective, to be the outcome of a heartless selective process that has left all but a few organisms to struggle and die unredeemed and unremembered. Natural selection, Darwin learned, uncaringly lays

waste to most organisms, allowing only a few to survive and reproduce. After Darwin, the engineering inefficiency of the evolutionary process, and the vast amount of time life takes to bring about a few survivors, has made it harder than ever for ethically idealistic people to attribute rightness to the universe.

Reflecting on the excess of suffering in the long story of life, Darwin came to doubt that nature is governed rightly. Today “gene-centered” evolutionists sometimes go even farther than Darwin and Huxley in censoring the wicked ways of nature. “With what other than condemnation,” biologist George Williams has asked, “is a person with any moral sense supposed to respond to a system in which the ultimate purpose in life is to be better than your neighbor at getting genes into future generations?” (1995, 217–31). Similarly, the late Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould declared that the “cold bath” of Darwinism should instruct us once and for all that we can never expect to learn anything henceforth about moral goodness by looking at the natural world:

When we thought that factual nature matched our hopes and comforts . . . then we easily fell into the trap of equating actuality with righteousness. But after Darwin . . . we finally become free to detach our search for ethical truth and spiritual meaning from our scientific quest to understand the facts and mechanisms of nature. Darwin . . . liberated us from asking too much of nature, thus leaving us free to comprehend whatever fearful fascination may reside “out there,” in full confidence that our quest for decency and meaning cannot be threatened thereby, and can emerge only from our own moral consciousness. (Gould 2001, xiv)

More recently, the philosopher Philip Kitcher has exclaimed that “a history of life dominated by natural selection is extremely hard to understand in providentialist terms.” Nature is inseparable from wrongness now and forever. “Indeed,” Kitcher adds, “if we imagine a human observer presiding over a miniaturized version of the [evolutionary process], peering down on his ‘creation’ it is extremely hard to equip the face with a kindly expression” (2009, 124).

#### EVOLUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF A DRAMATIC UNIVERSE

Instead of focusing narrowly on the Darwinian chapters of the cosmic story, however, let us locate the evolution of life more deliberately within the larger cosmic narrative laid out by science after Darwin. Before indicting the mechanism of natural selection for its insensitivity to suffering, as Kitcher, Gould and Williams do, let us first take into account the new post-Einsteinian scientific awareness that every living being and the whole of evolution are part of a much larger and longer *cosmic* story. Second, let us recall that the comic story is one of a gradual awakening. Third, let us observe that this awakening includes, at least in one newly conscious

species of life, an increasingly refined sense of the distinction between wrongness and rightness. And, fourth, let us suppose that the extraordinary phenomenon of human sensitivity to life's suffering—exemplified both by Southgate and the compassionate evolutionists just mentioned—is an emergent new chapter in the long drama of a *cosmic* awakening.

Then, even if the ways of evolution, as we look back into the story of life, seem ethically warped when measured by our own moral standards, we need not completely ignore the fact that the same universe that has sponsored the severe and wasteful process of natural selection has also given rise lately to humans and religious traditions that aspire to indestructible rightness. In other words, if the cosmos itself is a long dramatic awakening to the dawning of an infinite and transcendent rightness, we are permitted to focus on the “dawning” no less than on the rightness. Darwinian science, no doubt, has raised the question of nature's past and present rightness, perhaps more agonizingly than anything else in the history of science. But the universe is much more than its past. It is a still unfolding story. As in the case of any story still being told, what it is really all about we cannot now say. We can only wait.

Even when we look at life's evolution apart from the larger cosmic story, we note that the process has never been unambiguously evil. It has been a narrative of competition, struggle, and strife, but it has also been a tale of creativity and cooperation. If the story offends the sensibilities of beings who aspire to moral rightness, it must not be forgotten that evolution has also created the nervous systems of those very organisms who proudly profess to having higher moral standards and a deeper sensitivity to rightness than nature itself. What the compassionate evolutionists arbitrarily ignore is that their own moral idealism is also an emergent development in a long—and still unfinished—story of *cosmic* awakening. If so, just as their highly prized intelligent subjectivity is a blossoming of the entire cosmic process, so also is their awakening to unconditional rightness.

To evolutionary naturalists, no doubt, my suggestion that their own sense of moral rectitude is part of a long process of cosmic awakening may sound strange. This impression occurs, I believe, at least partly because they tacitly and wrongly assume that their own moral subjectivity is not part of the same cosmic story that earlier gave rise to life and the evolutionary process. Unfortunately, most materialist scientists and philosophers still adhere unknowingly to the modern, post-Cartesian assumption that their own intelligent and moral subjectivity is not part of the “objective” world. Some even doubt that subjectivity—ironically, at times, even their own—has any real existence at all (e.g. Daniel Dennett, 1995). Even though morally compassionate evolutionists are required in principle by post-Darwinian scientific discoveries (and even by their own materialist monism) to accept the fact that they and their own mental and moral capacities are fully part of nature, they illogically wall off their own highly valued intellectual and

moral subjectivity from the long and messy story of cosmic awakening that gave rise to it.

I believe an unconscious attachment to prescientific religious dualism keeps our morally confident evolutionists from realizing that their own compassion is part of a long and dramatic cosmic awakening. While the materialist Darwinians have little doubt about the moral rightness of their condemnation of natural selection's wrongness, they quietly protect their own moral sensitivity and mental agility from being contaminated by too close a connection to the allegedly pointless natural process that gave birth to them. Only their tacit endorsement of a puritanical dualistic mythology permits them to detach themselves so cleanly from the rest of nature.

Southgate's theological vision, on the other hand, seems to me to be open to the religious notion that the whole universe is one continuous story of creation. If humans, along with our mental and moral capacities, are narratively continuous with the rest of nature, it follows that we can learn as much about the universe by contemplating the newly emergent human capacity for moral compassion as we can by looking at what went on earlier in the lifeless and mindless phases of the story. Allowing that rightness dawns only gradually, a cosmologically informed theology is under no obligation to repudiate morally the messy Darwinian chapters as though they are not part of the same story that eventually leads to an intellectual awakening to truth and a moral awakening to the virtue of compassion.

Theologically speaking, creation is still awakening—haltingly and not without setbacks—to rightness. The newly emergent sensitivity to life's suffering, whether by thoughtful religious thinkers such as Southgate or morally committed Darwinian materialists such as Gould and Kitcher, is all part of a single narrative of cosmic awakening. This recent conscious awakening to rightness must be taken into account whenever we ask what the universe is really all about.

Considered in this dramatic way, the universe is much more than a reshuffling of mindless material particles across the emptiness of time and space. Moreover, the temporal universe is much more than an imperfect analogy of an unworldly perfection existing timelessly "up above," as much traditional theology and spirituality have assumed. Theologically (biblically) interpreted in our post-Einsteinian context, the universe is a self-transformative drama of awakening to an infinite and indestructible rightness, to a horizon of imperishable goodness, truth, and beauty dawning from up ahead. An Abrahamic cosmic sensibility fully acknowledges the past and present imperfection of nature, including design flaws and evolutionary suffering, but it makes room for cosmic meaning and redemption by looking toward a future deliverance presently out of range.

Unlike cosmic pessimism and otherworldly optimism, this theology takes for granted that the dawning of rightness does not occur without



long shadows. The drama has not yet met with the fullness of noonday illumination. Yet a cosmically informed Abrahamic theology does not leap abruptly into a world beyond time in order to remove all traces of present imperfection. It does not look for an easy exit from an unfinished universe. Rather, it waits in hope for the redemption of the *whole* cosmos. It protests the evil of suffering in evolution, of course, but it does not impatiently condemn the whole universe, especially since the latter has not yet had the opportunity to become fully actualized. A cosmic theological perspective after Einstein is realistic enough to acknowledge that the human dreams of rightness expressed mythically for many ages cannot be satisfied in an instant. There is still room for hope.

The cosmic pessimists, no less than the religious dualists, on the other hand, are unwilling to wait before passing judgment on the universe. They demand impatiently that any world created by God *should* have been put together perfectly from the start. Any world fashioned fully from all eternity, however, would be a work of magic, dead on delivery, not a drama that might carry a meaning. Evolutionary naturalists such as Kitcher insist as a condition of their accepting a religious interpretation of the world that nature should have been finished instantaneously in the beginning. They fail to notice, however, that such a rounded-off initial creation would leave no space for a temporal transition between beginning and end, hence no drama that might carry a meaning. A world magically ordered from the start, moreover, would leave no room for life, for a new future, and for human freedom, qualities that can emerge and flourish only in a world that is in some sense not-yet.

The cosmos, as we have now come to realize, has a dramatic rather than a mechanical or architectural complexion. We are still far from realizing clearly that the universe is a long story whose intelligibility cannot reveal itself in the stiffness of mechanical design but only in the indeterminate fluidity of a narrative coherence yet to be fully actualized. Steeped for centuries in time-despising visions of the natural world and otherworldly ideals of human destiny, neither theologians nor their critics were ready for the unfinished universe disclosed by contemporary cosmology. Dualists, Cartesians, Darwinian materialists, legalists, and perfectionists of all kinds have failed to realize that nature cannot be an immediate instantiation of rightness without forfeiting its capacity to carry life, mind, and dramatic meaning. Moreover, the objectifying habits of modern thought cannot allow that the cosmic drama carries an inside story that always remains inaccessible to the externalizing leer of exclusively scientific scrutiny.

#### CONCLUSION

Finally, I do not anticipate that either cosmic pessimists or religious people in general will soon embrace enthusiastically the scientific news that

the universe is an “unfinished” drama of ongoing self-transformation. I want to point out, however, that our religious traditions, since they too have just barely—and only ambiguously—awakened to the dawning of rightness, remain as far from “finished” as the universe that carries them. Religions, indeed, spend much of their finite spans of existence turned in some measure *away* from rightness. Religions have mingled with wayward movements and moral monstrosities that lead them to sink back into magic and idolatry. The evil wrought by religious people, often in the name of a shallow perfectionism, is perhaps the most palpable demonstration we have of the fact that the cosmos has not yet been aroused fully from its long sleep.

Hence, neither the wrongness of evolutionary suffering nor the unspeakable evils in human history and our religions can ever be rendered intelligible in terms of any present understanding of things. I am aware of no scientific, religious, theological, or metaphysical system that can presently make sense of suffering and death. And even if it tried to do so, as I mentioned above, it would subtly legitimate wrongness by giving it a fixed place in the total scheme of things. Wrongness is not a topic for reason but an open cosmic wound calling for redemption. For me—as I believe for Southgate also—Christian faith is compatible with the suffering in life and evolution only because of its expansive hope for a cosmic redemption, and along with it the ultimate end of all suffering in a final resurrection of life beyond all death.

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