

Evolutionary Theodicy

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CHRISTOPHER SOUTHGATE’S COMPOUND THEODICY: PARALLEL SEARCHINGS

by Denis Edwards

Abstract. Christopher Southgate proposes that a theological response to the suffering that is built into an evolutionary world requires a compound evolutionary theodicy, made up of four interrelated theological positions. This article proposes a fourfold response to the suffering of nonhuman creation that parallels Southgate’s compound theodicy. In its similarities and differences, it is offered in the spirit of a tribute to Christopher Southgate.

Keywords: compound theodicy; cross; evolution; incarnation; resurrection; Christopher Southgate; suffering

One of Christopher Southgate’s characteristic contributions is his idea that a theological response to the suffering that is built into an evolutionary world requires a “compound evolutionary theodicy.” He outlines this theodicy in his monograph *The Groaning of Creation* (2008), and further develops it in a later book chapter (2014). It is his way of responding to the fact that, for the human observer, our evolutionary world appears to be deeply ambiguous, marked not only by values such as cooperation, fruitfulness, and beauty but also by disvalues such as cruelty, loss, and extinction. What is beautiful emerges only through evolutionary processes that involve predation, competition for resources, pain, and death.

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The traditional Christian solution to the problem of evil has been that the disvalues of the natural world are due to human sin. But as Southgate points out, this no longer works: “We can be clear now that this is simply an understandable prescientific anachronism—yes, it is true that modern humans have been devastators of their environment and precipitators of many extinctions, but we also know that processes of predation and disease, and other much larger extinction events than the ones yet caused by humans, long preceded the evolution of humankind” (Southgate 2014, 100). If human sin is not the cause of nature being red in tooth and claw, this seems to leave the responsibility with God. How, then, can we speak honestly about a God of love in relation to the suffering that is built into God’s creation? Southgate’s response is found in the four interrelated components that make up his compound theodicy.

The first component is the *only way* aspect of Southgate’s proposal. He argues that we need to think of God as limited or constrained in achieving God’s loving purposes in creating a universe of creatures. The constraint is due to the fact that God is working with creaturely reality that is limited in its possibilities. Southgate’s best guess is that there are logical limitations to God’s creation of a life-bearing universe, which means that it is not logically possible for God to create the kind of world we inhabit without the costs that come with evolution: “a world of competition and natural selection was the only way God could give rise to creaturely values of the sort we know to have evolved in the biosphere of Earth” (Southgate 2014, 101). But Southgate insists that this *only way* argument is not enough on its own. More is needed because we need to respond theologically to the pain and loss of individual creatures, as well as accounting for the broader system of the life-bearing universe. So, he adds three further components to his theodicy.

The second component is that he sees *God as co-suffering* with all creatures. He embraces the strong theological tradition of God’s presence to each creature: “God is present to every creature both in its flourishing and in its suffering” (Southgate 2014, 103). This means, he says, that no creature suffers or dies alone. He points out that for Christians the suffering of creatures is both focused and exemplified in the cross of Jesus, and he embraces Niels Gregersen’s theology of deep incarnation that emphasizes the solidarity of Christ with all creatures, particularly with the victims of evolution. The cross of Christ, Southgate suggests, reveals a God who suffers with all suffering creatures, and he further proposes that this suffering of God with creatures makes a difference, “at some deep existential level,” both to God and to the creature. Not only is the creature not alone in moments of suffering, but also the creature, “in whatever sense, knows this, and that this awareness makes a difference” (Southgate 2014, 112).

The third component of Southgate’s theodicy, based on the Christian conviction of resurrection life, is the hope that suffering creatures will

experience a participation in God's *eschatological fulfillment*. Picking up Jay McDaniel's phrase, Southgate says that the pelican chick that has been pushed out of the nest may come to experience "pelican heaven." He continues: "If we take altogether seriously the loving character and purposes of God, I think we cannot believe that lives consisting of nothing but suffering are the end for those creatures that experience them" (Southgate 2014, 103). This line of thought leads him to the conviction that our eschatological fulfillment, or our heaven, will be "rich in creaturely diversity" (Southgate 2014, 113).

The last component in Southgate's compound theodicy is his idea of the high calling of redeemed humanity to be *co-redeemers with God* in the drawing together of all things. Christians who are made in the image of God the Trinity are called to participate in the Trinity's longing for, and work toward, "a peaceful, holy and loving creation" (Southgate 2014, 113). He suggests that Christians who are responsive to this Trinitarian call will delight in systems that manifest cooperation and self-transcendence, such as those found in tropical forests, in symbiosis in the oceans, and in the lives of social animals. Participating in God's longing for creaturely cooperation, he says, "we shall exert ourselves the more powerfully to make sure we damage them only with the greatest reluctance and allow them space to flourish wherever possible" (Southgate 2014, 114).

Rereading these and other texts of Southgate, I have become even more aware that he has been an important companion and colleague in my own work over the decades. I am struck by his abiding commitment to the idea of God's loving purposes in the creation, and his fidelity to the conviction that individual creatures matter, and that their struggles and suffering matter to a loving God. And I have become conscious that my own theological response to the suffering of nonhuman creatures echoes both the structure and some of the key ideas of his compound theodicy, while also differing from him at some points. In what follows, I summarize my own approach in a fourfold compound response to the suffering of nonhuman creation that parallels Southgate's compound theodicy. In its similarities and differences it is offered in the spirit of a tribute to Christopher Southgate, whose work, commitment, and fidelity to suffering creation has influenced me in ways of which I am conscious and, I suspect, in other ways of which I am not aware.

A NONINTERVENTIONIST CREATOR, ENABLING CREATURELY AUTONOMY, ACCEPTING THE LIMITS OF CREATURELY PROCESSES

I do not think we finite creatures can know why the world is the way it is. Southgate proposes that the *only way* that God could create our kind of finite world is through evolutionary processes with their built-in costs. While I understand the reason for this move, my own tendency is to stand

with Job before the unfathomable mystery of what we do not know. I see this mystery as involving not only God in God's self, but also God's creative act, and the reason why God creates in the way God does. This element of negative theology means that I describe my own theological reflections on the suffering of creation simply as a theological response rather than as a theodicy.

While I do not invoke the "only way" argument, I do believe that we need to start from the kind of universe in which we find ourselves. We have to start from the fact that this is the way things are: we are evolutionary creatures in an evolutionary universe, and this is a package deal. Scientific cosmology can trace the observable universe back to within the first second of its existence 13.7 billion years ago and describes a universe that is expanding, cooling, and growing in complexity according to its own laws. Evolutionary biology sees all life on Earth evolving from its origin 3.8 billion years ago, through processes that include contingent events, random mutations, and the law-like operation of natural selection. Both the observable universe and life on our planet seem to evolve through autonomous emergent processes.

With Southgate, I think that this autonomy and integrity is entirely congruent with a view of the Creator as one who is not constantly intervening to disrupt natural processes but works in and through them, enabling finite creatures to evolve and flourish on their own terms. Thomas Aquinas long ago taught that God enables creaturely causes to be fully causal in their own right. He saw creaturely causes as having their own integrity: God acts "out of the abundance of his goodness, imparting to creatures the dignity of causing" (Aquinas 1967, 99). God so upholds the dignity of creatures that God wants them to be fully causal, with their own integrity and proper autonomy. In terms of contemporary science this would mean that God respects the integrity of the laws of nature, including all that is involved in the emergence of the universe over the last 13.7 billion years and the evolution of life on Earth over the last 3.7 billion years. God creates through creatures acting in their own right. God's creative act is precisely the kind of causality that enables a universe of creatures to exist in their own proper being with their own proper operations. God creates in such a way that creation is "set free" in its own natural being (Te Velde 2006, 141).

This means that I agree with Southgate that God appears freely to accept limits in creating a finite world. I think that this is true to the kind of divine power that is revealed in the cross of Christ, "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24–25, NRSV). Of course, the conviction that God is all-powerful is fundamental to Christian faith, but it is essential to ask about the nature of this divine power. The truly Christian understanding of divine power is given only in the life and teaching of Jesus and its culmination in his death and resurrection. The cross reveals God's

power as working through self-humbling, self-emptying, love (Philippians 2:7–8). The resurrection proclaims that this kind of humble divine love is not impotent, but the most powerful thing in the universe, bringing life in its fullness to the whole creation (Ephesians 1:10). The power of the cross is a vulnerable power-in-love. The resurrection shows that power-in-love has the capacity to bring forgiveness, healing, and transfiguration to the universe of creatures. To believe in God as all-powerful, then, is to believe in the omnipotence of divine love and in its eschatological victory over sin, violence, brokenness, and death. It is this vulnerable kind of power that is at work in the creation of a world of creatures, a power that delights in creaturely autonomy and accepts the limitations involved in creating a finite world.

A GOD WHO SUFFERS WITH SUFFERING CREATURES

The second element in Southgate's compound theodicy, and in the parallel approach I outline here, is the theological conviction that God is present to each suffering creature, accompanying it and suffering with it out of divine compassionate love. All theological talk of God suffering with creatures has to deal with the Christian tradition that has seen God as free from suffering. For the great theologians of the early church, the concept of divine impassibility defends the biblical concept of the radical otherness of God, and resists any idea that God is trapped in the changing patterns of creaturely existence, or is at the mercy of changing emotions and passions like the gods of Greek mythology. In the early Trinitarian controversies, impassibility is invoked of the Word and the Spirit to manifest and proclaim their full divinity. To my mind it is a fundamental theological insight that should not be simply dismissed in a twenty-first century theology of a God who suffers with suffering creation.

But theologians like Irenaeus and Athanasius were defenders not only of divine transcendence, but also of God's intimate presence to creatures. They hold to God's radical transcendence and impassibility on the one hand, and to God's closeness and accompanying love for creatures on the other. Both of these great theologians see the relationship between the transcendent God and the world of creatures from the perspective of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Their theological understanding of the divine nature is determined by their Christology, above all by the cross. It is from the perspective of the love poured out in the incarnation and culminating in the cross that they understand the divine act of creation.

Irenaeus typically holds together God's transcendence and God's closeness to creatures by bringing together God's greatness (*magnitudo*) and God's love (*dilectio*) in a systematic way (Slusser 2012, 133–39). His high view of God's greatness does not leave God at a distance from creatures and uninvolved with them. The apparent ontological gap of divine

transcendence is bridged by the divine love (*dilectio*) that is revealed in Jesus Christ, and in his cross. And this *dilectio* finds expression in Irenaeus's view of the divine act of creation, where he sees the two hands of God, the Word and the Spirit, as engaged in the down-to-earth creation of creatures from mud, and where this creative act is directed toward its fulfillment in the incarnation of the Word. Michael Slusser makes the claim that this systematic understanding of the relationship between God's greatness and God's down to earth love is Irenaeus's most creative contribution to Christian theology (Slusser 2012, 133–39).

In Athanasius, the concept of divine transcendence is interpreted in terms of the biblical notions of God's kenotic, self-humbling love. He says that, in taking flesh and accepting death on a cross, the Word of God, who was always divine, "was not advanced but rather humbled himself" (Anatolios 2004, 97). The incarnation reveals a God who comes down to be with us. For Athanasius, in both creation and incarnation, the God who is radically beyond all creatures condescends to be directly present to creatures out of generous, compassionate, loving kindness. As Khaled Anatolios points out, Athanasius radically transforms the idea of divine transcendence by means of the biblical categories of divine mercy and loving kindness. In both creation and incarnation, there is a "simultaneous contrast and interplay" between God's two attributes of God, God as "beyond all being" (*hyperekeina pasēs ousias*) and the "goodness and loving kindness (*philanthrōpia*)" of God (Anatolios 2004, 40). Because of the divine attributes of loving kindness and mercy, Anatolios says, God can transcend God's own transcendence (Anatolios 2011, 104).

The kind of theology found in Irenaeus and Athanasius does not support the idea of an impassive, unfeeling, and distant God. They both held to the concept of God's transcendence and impassibility, but this does not mean that God is uninvolved with creation. On the contrary, they see the divine nature as revealed in the Christ-event as self-giving, self-humbling, radical love. I think Paul Gavrilyuk is right to say that the notion of impassibility functions as "a kind an apophatic qualifier of all divine emotions and as the marker of the unmistakably divine identity" (Gavrilyuk 2004, 173). It rules out fickleness, arbitrariness, and inconstancy, and all the emotions and passions unworthy of God but found in mythological gods including lust, jealousy, vengeance, and violence. It does not rule out God-befitting emotions, such as love, compassion, and generosity, when it is acknowledged that they are of Godlike kind, infinitely beyond all human emotions.

I think that we can build on the ancient Christian tradition today to say that the kenotic love of the cross is the very love that is at work in the emergence of the universe, and the evolution of life on Earth with all its terrible costs and in all its wonderful outcomes. It is this love that can enable us to affirm the compassionate presence of God to all the creatures

of our evolutionary world, accompanying creatures in their groaning, and promising them their participation in liberation and fulfillment in Christ.

Christopher Southgate says on the suffering of nonhuman creatures, such as a wounded impala or a starving pelican chick: "I can only suppose that God's suffering presence is just that, presence, of the most profoundly attentive and loving sort, a solidarity that at some level takes away the aloneness of the suffering creature's experience" (Southgate 2008, 52). Elizabeth Johnson takes up this quotation and then comments: "Without psychologizing the chick's or the impala's experience, however, it is my view that this is one of the most significant things theology can say. Seemingly absent, the Giver of life is silently present with all creatures in their pain and dying. They remain connected to the living God despite what is happening. The indwelling, empowering Spirit of God, the Spirit of the crucified Christ, who companions creatures in their individual lives and long-range evolution, does not abandon them in the moment of trial. The cross gives warrant for locating the compassion of God right at the center of the affliction. The pelican chick does not die alone" (Johnson 2014, 206).

With Southgate and Johnson (and others) I think that, looking from the cross of Jesus, Christian theology can see an infinitely compassionate divine presence accompanying suffering and dying creatures, suffering with them in loving solidarity. And as the cross of Jesus opens out to the unthinkable, the resurrection of the crucified, so divine love for suffering creatures contains the promise of an unimaginable liberation and fullness of life (Johnson 2014, 210).

THE RESURRECTION PROMISE: "CREATION ITSELF WILL BE SET FREE" (ROMANS 8:21)

I am at one with Southgate in his third element, the inclusion of the wider creation in God's salvation. It is true that Christians have at times thought of themselves as being saved by being taken out of this world, leaving the rest of creation behind. At times they have thought of salvation as simply a matter of the soul, as the soul going home to God. But these ideas are not faithful to the central Christian doctrines of incarnation and resurrection. The incarnation is about God embracing this creaturely world, the world of matter and flesh, and doing so eternally. The resurrection is about the transfiguration of the whole Christ, very much including matter and flesh, and with him the rest of us, and with us the whole creation. The healing and hope that is given in Christ embraces the whole creation, as Paul points out:

The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God . . . in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We

know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:18–25, NRSV)

What is distinctive about this text, according to Pauline scholar Brendan Byrne, is the way that it “includes the whole of non-human creation within the sweep of salvation alongside human beings” (Byrne 1996, 255). He notes that Paul is building on a widespread biblical understanding that human beings and the rest of creation are closely linked in their destiny (Byrne 1996, 256). Paul thinks of creation as longing for the fulfillment that will come to it only through its participation in the resurrection. Something has begun in the risen Christ, something in which the whole creation will participate. We humans already possess the first fruits of the Spirit, the sign that the same Spirit of life is engaged with the wider creation, perhaps like a midwife, bringing to birth the new creation.

Paul sees the promise of “a new heavens and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17–18) as being fulfilled in principle in the new creation begun in Christ (Galatians 6:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17). The theme of the new heavens and new earth is also taken up in 2 Peter 3:13 and in Revelation 21:1–5. In First Corinthians, Paul takes up the image of a great cosmic victory, speaking of the risen Christ as one who conquers death and all negative forces so that “all things” are subject to him, and who then “hands over the kingdom to God the Father” (1 Corinthians 15:24). In the later letters of the Pauline tradition we find the promise that “all things” will be recapitulated in the risen Christ (Ephesians 1:9–10, 20–22) and “all things” will be reconciled in him (Colossians 1:15–20).

How do we think about the final transformation of “all things,” when all things includes plants, insects, and animals? Some medieval thinkers thought the “all things” applied to human beings and to the universe of matter, but not to plant and animal life. But this does not represent the richness of the Christian tradition found in the Scriptures, and in theologians like Irenaeus. It does not do justice to contemporary science, which cannot isolate humans from their evolutionary and ecological relationships. In my view it also does not do justice to the love of God that embraces the whole creation, or to the universal saving will of God.

I think Southgate is right to hold firmly to the view that animals and plants will participate in new creation in Christ. At the same time, I believe that we need to admit that we do not have any kind of clear view of this new creation. As Paul says, “we hope for what we do not see” (Romans 8:24). Long ago, Karl Rahner wrote an important article about the interpretation of the biblical promises of our future in God (Rahner 1974, 323–46), where he points out that the scriptural images, such as the heavenly banquet, or the new Jerusalem, do not provide any

clear conceptual content, or any good imaginative picture, of life in God. We have no experience of resurrection life from the inside. What we have experienced is Jesus Christ in our midst and the Spirit of God in the life of grace. In Christ and his resurrection, we have the unbreakable promise of God, but we do not have clear vision. Ultimately, Rahner thinks this is not surprising, because the future for which we hope, for ourselves and the wider creation, is in God. The incomprehensible mystery of God is our future. Our hope for the natural world, and for ourselves, is beyond our imagination, beyond our limited human minds. It is found only in God, and God is always beyond our comprehension. We cannot imagine the final transformation of ourselves, or the rest of creation. Our hope for the natural world, and for ourselves, is based not on what we can see or imagine, but on the unbreakable promise of God in Christ.

Jesus tells us that not one sparrow is “forgotten before God” (Luke 12:6). This suggests that God does not forget or abandon any creature but inscribes it eternally in the divine life. The sparrow that falls to the ground is not abandoned, but is gathered up and in some way brought to new life in Christ, in whom “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21). It (the sparrow) is among the “all things” that are reconciled (Colossians 1:20), recapitulated (Ephesians 1:10), and made new (Revelation 21:5) in the risen Christ. We can hope that, in our participation in the communion of saints, we will share in God’s delight in other animals within the abundance and beauty of creation brought to its fulfillment. In particular, we may hope that the relationships we have with particular creatures, such as a beloved dog, do not end with death, but are taken into and enabled to flourish in our life in God.

PARTICIPATING IN GOD’S LOVE FOR THE PLANETARY COMMUNITY OF LIFE

I am in complete agreement with Southgate, when he says of human beings that being made in the image of God the Trinity, we are called to participate in this God’s longing for, and work toward, “a peaceful, holy and loving creation” (Southgate 2014, 113). We are called to be agents in contributing in the ways we can to the peaceable kingdom.

However, I am not inclined to use the language of co-redeemers to speak of the call of the human to participate in God’s saving action toward the wider creation. Using the word prefix “co” in this way can suggest an inflated view of the human, which is not Southgate’s intention. My own theological instinct is to see redemption as God’s action through Christ in the Spirit, an action in which, by God’s grace, we are called to participate. I am not sure either that we humans should see ourselves as called to bring about the change in creaturely behavior implied in the peaceable kingdom. This would involve a radical transformation of processes such as natural

selection. This is God's work, I think, not something we humans can do. It involves God's radical act of new creation. We need a new action of God to transform both our humanity and the rest of creation.

But in the light of our vision of this transformed creation, we are called now to ecological conversion, to a new Christian love for our common home, and for the community of life on our planet. Recent science has suggested that we humans have so disrupted the systems of Earth that we are bringing about a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. We understand that humans have become extremely powerful players in changing the climate, and by so doing we are endangering life as we know it on the planet, and are already causing the extinction of many species.

As Christopher Southgate has repeated so often, we are called to a radical change of heart, mind, and action. We are called to do all we can to allow other creatures to survive and flourish. We are called to respect them, to love them, and to deepen our sense that we form one community of life with them. Learning to relate to nature, to birds and trees and animals, is part of coming to ourselves. It is part of an interior conversion. It is also the discovery of who we are, in relation to Earth and its creatures, our human brothers and sisters and God.

CONCLUSION

I hope it is clear that in putting some of my own searchings in parallel with Christopher Southgate's compound theodicy, that I do so in a spirit of great respect for his work. I do not have the intention of offering criticism of his positions, but of recognizing a great deal of common ground, while also being aware of some differences that no doubt spring in part from our sources and theological traditions. I am wanting, as well, to point out how Christopher's commitment to the issue of the suffering of nonhuman creation has been a constant challenge and inspiration for me, and many others, over several decades.

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