

Evolution and Religious Texts

with Shoaib Ahmed Malik, “Old Texts, New Masks: A Critical Review of Misreading Evolution onto Historical Islamic Texts”; and James Henry Collin, “Soul Making, Theosis, and Evolutionary History: An Irenaean Approach.”

SOUL-MAKING, THEOSIS, AND EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY: AN IRENAEAN APPROACH

by James Henry Collin 

Abstract. In Romans 5, St. Paul claims that death came into the world through Adam’s sin. Many have taken this to foist on us a fundamentalist reading of Genesis. If death is the result of human sin, then, apparently, there cannot have been death in the world prior to human sin. This, however, is inconsistent with contemporary evolutionary biology, which requires that death predates the existence of modern humans. Although the relationship between Romans 5, Genesis, and contemporary science has been much discussed—often with goal of dissipating the idea that the two are in conflict—the specific issue of death entering the world through sin has remained difficult to resolve. I argue that the Eastern Orthodox tradition has the resources to respect both Romans 5 and contemporary science. Appealing to a broadly Irenaean notion of soul-making, and to the idea of theosis, opens up space for an understanding of these passages that is both scientifically informed and Orthodox.

Keywords: death; evolutionary biology; Irenaeus; theodicy; theosis

Genesis 1–3 has been an enduring source of discomfort for Christian theology, not least of all in the field of science and religion. Perhaps, more than anything else, these passages have stuck in the public imagination as a source of conflict between science and (at least Christian) religion. There are, of course, many issues that arise from these passages, but a coarse-grained list of what might be thought of as the “core” issues may look something like the following:

- (1) Genesis 1 apparently depicts the Earth as having been created over the course of six days, in the last of which human beings are created. As a result, many Young Earth creationists take the age of the

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Earth to be less than 10,000 years. However, even given reconstructions of the genetic tree based on data concerning mitochondrial DNA, which place a common female ancestor of all current human beings as living between 90,000 and 200,000 years ago, the age of the Earth suggested by Genesis 1 would still be well below the (approximately) 4.5 billion years given by radiometric dating techniques.

- (2) Genesis 2 apparently depicts the first human beings as being created out of dust from the ground, and not therefore as descendants of other animals. However, evidence from comparative anatomy, fossil records, low-probability mutations common to the genomes of humans and other animals, and other sources strongly suggests the descent of humans from nonhuman life.
- (3) The doctrine of original guilt—held by Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, among others—holds that all human beings (perhaps with some special exceptions, such as Mary and Christ) inherit the guilt of Adam as a result of being his descendants. This entails the existence of a historical Adam who is the progenitor of all human beings. However, evolutionary theory—again, evidenced by comparative anatomy, fossil records, and common mutations in genomes, and so on—treats human beings as descendants from an evolving population (of more than two). This makes it extremely improbable that all human beings are descendants of two individuals.
- (4) Paul's claim in Romans 5:12 that "sin entered into the cosmos through one man, and death through sin" apparently entails that there was no death in the world prior to human sin. However, radiometric dating techniques place the life, and death, of many creatures prior to the emergence of human beings, and therefore, human sin.

Here, I will largely set aside 1–3. Much has been written on these topics, but the broad shape of the debate is clear. Whether 1 and 2 constitute genuine instances of conflict between Christian theology and science depends on how plausible one takes to be the various readings of these texts that have been put forward. The result of any broadly nonliteral understanding of the early chapters of Genesis will be, obviously enough, that the apparent conflict described in 1 and 2 does not arise. Similarly, interpretations that treat Genesis 1 as an account of functional origins—assigning *roles* to various facets of creation—rather than material origins—assigning *causal histories* to various facets of creation—avoid the kind of conflict described in 1, and interpretations that understand Adam and Eve *typologically* avoid the kind of conflict described in 2. Again, much has been written on this topic, but see, for example, John Walton (2009, 2011, 2015) for a representative example of a contemporary exegete who understands the relevant passages these ways, and Peter Bouteneff (2008) for

an argument that many of the Eastern Fathers read these passages in a typological way.¹

The doctrine of original guilt, the source of the apparent conflict described in 3, needs to be unpacked somewhat. We need to distinguish here between “original sin,” understood as a universal human tendency toward sin, and “original guilt” understood as the idea that all human beings *inherit guilt* from the primordial sin of Adam. Original guilt is largely associated with broadly Western Christian theology: Augustine, Luther, and Calvin all endorsed some form of this idea. On the other hand, paradigmatically, Eastern Orthodox thinkers, such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and Maximus the Confessor, all explicitly reject the idea.² “Original sin,” understood in the less loaded sense as a universal human tendency toward wrongdoing does not entail the existence of a historical Adam. “Original guilt,” in the more loaded sense, however, does, or at least can, depending on how it is unpacked. Inheritance is, after all, a triadic relation involving two entities and one property: a thing inherits a property from another thing. If we human beings *inherit* guilt, we must inherit that guilt *from someone*. However, whether the conflict of 3 arises depends on how the mechanism of inheritance is understood. If original sin is transmitted from parent to child in the process of generation, as Augustine claimed, and every human being has this inherited guilt, then there must exist a single progenitor of all human beings. On the other hand, the idea that sin is transmitted via a mysterious unity of the human race (as, for instance, the Catechism of the Catholic Church has it) is *prima facie* compatible with human beings having descended from a population of more than two. Just by participating in the human race, one could inherit the sin of Adam, regardless of ancestry.³

The apparent conflicts in 1–3 then do not appear to be necessarily insoluble. So long as (plausibly enough) one understands Genesis 1–3 as doing something other than laying out the causal history of our universe and the emergence of life in it, and so long as one either eschews the notion of original guilt, or parses it in a way that does not require that all are descended from a single historical Adam, then the much heralded conflicts of 1–3 do not arise. Sketchy though this is, the gist should be clear: whether or not one eventually takes it, it is possible to chart a course that avoids the conflicts described in 1–3. However, 4 has proven less soluble. Paul’s claim is part of a difficult and contested passage that is worth quoting in full:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the

grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:12–19, NRSV)

Here, Paul ties together, in some way, sin and death through Adam, and, contrapuntally, righteousness and life through Christ. What is particularly problematic, with regard to the apparent conflict in 4, is the claim in verse 12 that “sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin.” Romans 5 appears to support, indeed *require* that there was no death prior to human sin: that the Earth was in a paradisaic state prior to the activity of humans. Even if the Genesis narratives themselves do not require it, Pauline theology seems to thrust into our unwilling hands a fundamentalist understanding of them.

This has not gone unnoticed. Robert John Russell, for instance, accepts that there is an insoluble conflict here and endorses “rejecting the biblical framework in which natural evil is the result of moral evil” (Russell 2008, 254). In the same vein, Arthur Peacocke (1998, 375) noted that “biological death of the individual, as the means of evolutionary creation of new species by natural selection, cannot now be attributed to human ‘sin,’” and Dennis Edwards (2006, 106) tells us that since evolutionary biology confirms that “death is deeply structured into the pattern of life” we have to accept that “[b]iological death cannot be attributed to human sin.” Mark Harris puts it this way:

Paul . . . does not appear to maintain Augustine's problematic idea that sin is somehow passed down genetically from our ancestor Adam, but he still maintains the causal connection between our sin and our death. It hardly needs saying that this flies in the face of all modern biological accounts of death, that death is entirely a natural and inevitable consequence of life. (Harris 2013, 140)

Returning to the outstanding problem of . . . how to understand Paul's causal connection between human sin and death in his atonement theology of Romans 5 . . . , we must concede that, scientifically, these are two things which cannot be connected clearly at present. (Harris 2013, 157)

There appears then to be a real and significant conflict between the “biblical framework” on the one hand and established science on the other. I will argue, however, that things are not as intractable as they seem. Two characteristically Eastern Orthodox ideas—Irenaeic soul-making

theodicies and theosis—provide the resources to hold *both* that “death came into the world through sin” and that death predated sin by millions of years.

SOUL-MAKING AND THEOSIS

I cannot possibly do justice, in a limited space, to either the content of broadly Irenaean theodicies, or to the reasons that might be brought to bear to motivate and defend them. However, characterizing at least their lineaments—something like a common core of all soul-making theodicies—will help to make clear their role in addressing the questions at hand. It may be enough, even, to ward off some superficial misunderstandings that have made Irenaean theodicies seem less plausible than they might otherwise have seemed.

Soul-making theodicies start from axiological assumptions—assumptions about what is valuable, what constitutes the good life, and so on—which, perhaps, are not widely held in contemporary Western culture. The soul-making theodicitist does not take the sorts of goods manifested by a life of untroubled relaxation and entertainment, for instance, to be the highest goods available to human lives. Instead, self-transcending or self-sacrificial love, manifested in traits such as enemy love, generosity, forgiveness, compassion, self-control, humility, truthfulness, integrity, and the like, is the most valuable thing available to a human life.⁴ Broadly, Irenaean theodicies need not be wedded to the idea that these traits, excellent though they are, are ends in themselves, or, at least, *merely* ends in themselves. For (putting things crudely) self-transcending love is a prerequisite for relationship and union with the God of perfect self-transcending love. This is the idea of *theosis* or *deification*: another characteristically Eastern Orthodox notion, associated with figures like Maximus the Confessor, and thought by some to be contained in 2 Peter where we are told that through divine power we can “escape the corruption that is in the world” and “become participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4, NRSV). In union with God then, one participates, in some way, in the divine nature. Virtue is required for one to be capable of receiving deification—theosis is only possible for those who have sufficiently oriented themselves toward God in the first place—but theosis itself also continues and perfects the process of soul-making. John Anthony McGuckin describes it this way:

[T]he grace of God ‘conforms’ the saints to his presence so that they can see and enjoy the divine radiance which is impossible for the unclean to witness except as a torment. The divine presence itself so changes the nature of the creature in this radical cleansing that this metamorphosis has to be spoken of as a transfiguration by grace. Theosis, therefore, is what the Orthodox East means by the perfection of the power of grace so irradiating the being of the redeemed saints that they too become light-filled, perfected by the mercy of God, in order to be conformed to the divine presence. (McGuckin 2008, 198–99)

Theosis—ultimate union with God—is the greatest good available to any human being,⁵ and, as we will discuss, perhaps for any creature, human or otherwise.

With this kind of axiological hierarchy in mind, we are in a position to see, in outline, how soul-making theodicies are intended to work. Arguments from evil trade on an interrelated cluster of claims; that there is suffering in this world and God would not permit suffering (e.g., Mackie 1955), or that there are instances of suffering in this world such that it is likely that God has no morally sufficient reasons to permit them (e.g., Rowe 1979, 1991, 1996; Plantinga and Tooley 2008; Tooley 2012), or that the kind of distribution of suffering we find in our world is more likely given naturalism than theism (e.g., Draper 1989). These are the major premises in arguments to the conclusions, respectively, that God does not exist, that it is unlikely that God exists, or that evil favors the hypothesis of naturalism over the hypothesis of theism. The goal of theodicies quite generally is to undercut or rebut rational entitlement to these premises, by describing plausible, morally sufficient reasons why God would permit suffering, or particular instances of suffering, or the kind of distribution of suffering we find in our world, such that this distribution of suffering is (at least) no more likely given naturalism than theism.⁶ Irenaean-type theodicies in particular focus on *soul-making* as something that makes explicable, or even probable, the kinds of suffering we find in our world, given the existence of God. How does this go? The idea, roughly speaking (and I will say some things to refine this shortly) is that through trials, one can develop virtues, for instance, the kind of virtues associated with, and manifestations of, self-transcending or self-sacrificial love mentioned above. Because these virtues, and ultimately, deification, are the most valuable things possible for a human being, the trials are worth it. Here is Irenaeus himself:

God has displayed long-suffering in the case of human apostasy; while the human person has been instructed by means of it, as the prophet says, “Your own apostasy will instruct you,” God thus determined all things beforehand for the bringing of human persons to perfection, for their edification, and for the revelation of His dispensations, so that goodness may be made apparent, and righteousness perfected, and that the Church may be “conformed to the image of His Son,” and that the human person may finally be brought to such maturity so as to see and comprehend God. (*Against Heresies*, 4.37.7)

Similar ideas were often expressed by the Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus) and Maximus the Confessor—for instance, scattered throughout his *Four Hundred Texts on Love*—as well as by Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius of Loyola, and Friedrich Schleiermacher in the West. In recent times, John Hick, in his 1966 *Evil and the God of Love*, brought about something of a revival in the idea. Since then, the likes of Richard Swinburne (1998), Marilyn McCord

Adams (1999), Eleonore Stump (2010), Paul K. Moser (2013), and Trent Dougherty (2014) have developed soul-making theodicies in various ways. Hick usefully outlines the key set of ideas at play:

There is thus to be found in Irenaeus the outline of an approach to the problem of evil which stands in important respects in contrast to the Augustinian type of theodicy. Instead of the doctrine that man was created finitely perfect and then incomprehensibly destroyed his own perfection and plunged into sin and misery, Irenaeus suggests that man was created as an imperfect, immature creature who was to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for him by his Maker. Instead of the fall of Adam being presented, as in the Augustinian tradition, as an utterly malignant and catastrophic event, completely disrupting God's plan, Irenaeus pictures it as something that occurred in the childhood of the race, an understandable lapse due to weakness and immaturity rather than an adult crime full of malice and pregnant with perpetual guilt. And instead of the Augustinian view of life's trials as a divine punishment for Adam's sin, Irenaeus sees our world of mingled good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man's development towards the perfection that represents the fulfilment of God's good purpose for him. (Hick 2007, 214–15)

But it goes further than this. Finite, embodied, free creatures *cannot* be ready-made in a state of saintliness, ready for union with God, because for finite, embodied free creatures, what is *constitutive* of saintliness is “having learned and grown spiritually through conflict, suffering, and redemption” (Hick 2007, 240). God could have made a world with no risk of severity, hardship, pain and grief, but given the ultimate, unsurpassable value of soul-making and deification, the trade-off would not have been worth it. For in a world in which there is no risk of suffering, soul-making is not a possibility, because morally significant action is no longer possible. Injury would not be possible. If you slipped on the stairs, God would immediately intervene to allow you to glide to the bottom unharmed. Quite generally, in fact, nature could not operate according to any very stable set of laws, because, to prevent any harm, God would have to continually intervene in a series of “special providences” (Hick 1973, 42). This would likely make developed sciences impossible. There would be no need to eat, sleep, exercise, or work, as no harm could possibly result from neglecting to do so. You could not make bad decisions, because the consequences of your decisions would always be divinely massaged to neutralize any bad results. According to the Irenaean, a world like this is incapable of developing the virtues:

One can at least begin to imagine such a world. It is evident that our present ethical concepts would have no meaning in it. If, for example, the notion of harming someone is an essential element in the concept of a wrong action, in our hedonistic paradise there could be no wrong actions—nor any right action in distinction from wrong. Courage and fortitude would have no point in an environment in which there is, by definition, no danger or difficulty. Generosity, kindness and the agape aspect of love,

prudence, unselfishness, and all other ethical notions which presuppose life in an objective environment could not even be formed. Consequently such a world, however well it might promote pleasure, would be very ill adapted for the development of the moral qualities of human personality. In relation to this purpose it might be the worst of all possible worlds! (Hick 1973, 41–42)

The necessary cost of a world in which the greatest goods are available to us is a world in which we live with the risk of suffering (a risk that will sometimes be actualized, sometimes appallingly so). Suffering may be truly terrible, but the opportunity for soul-making in a risky world, and one's ultimate (unending) deification, defeat the badness of (temporary) suffering. The first short segment of our infinite lives may include much that is bad, and even horrific, but when the *risk* of this is a *necessary* means to an unsurpassable good, the badness is defeated by the good. Seeing this, from the vantage point of deified eternal life with God, we will not wish away those bad parts of our life histories (see Adams 1999, 167).

Five points are worth bearing in mind here. The first is that what is important is not *just* that the goods attained *outweigh* the bad. If this were sufficient, then God could not care less about what happens to us in this life, and still be in moral good standing so long as sufficiently many good things of sufficient degrees of goodness happen to us on the far side of the eschaton (something that is pretty easily achieved if the latter is everlasting.) But this cannot be sufficient. If someone were to punch you in the face, then offer you £100,000 in compensation, the goodness of the compensation may well outweigh the badness of the punch (and you may even be glad, in retrospect, to have been punched), but this would not be the act of a perfectly loving person. So, although it is *necessary*, according to most soul-making theodicies, that the eventual goods will outweigh one's current suffering, it is not *sufficient* that they do so.

Typically (and this is the second point) what is thought to be required here is that the suffering be *connected* to the eventual flourishing in the right kind of way. Some soul-making theodicies reject the "crude" idea that the connection is merely *causal*, that suffering is merely a *means* to countervailing good (see Dougherty 2014, 108). Rather, it is in some way *constitutive* of a certain kind of value.⁷ Going through trials is not just a means to self-transcending love. Going through trials is *constitutive of* growing into self-transcending love. Responding to suffering in a saintly way is not (just) a case of the suffering being an efficient cause of saintliness. Responding to suffering in a saintly way is constitutive of saintliness itself. That is what it *is* to be a saint, and a human being cannot grow into sainthood otherwise.

The third point is that the sorts of goods at issue here do not all require any specific instance of suffering. What these goods *do* require is the *risk*, and often the significant risk, of suffering. No system in which these goods are available is one which the significant risk of suffering is not present.

This is related to the idea that God *permits* rather than *brings about* (or even *wills*) suffering. God did not will the gulag so that there would be more opportunities for soul-making. However, in creating a world with the kind of latitude required for human beings to be capable of morally significant action, and, as a result, capable of growing in virtue toward saintliness, the risk of suffering, and even terrible suffering, must be real.⁸ To endorse Irenaean theodicies, one need not hold that the gulag ultimately makes the world a better place, but, rather, that a world that includes opportunities for saint-making must also include the possibility of the gulag. As Dougherty (2014, 105) notes, as a result of the latitude God gives to human beings “Perhaps God got ‘unlucky’ and ended up with a world on the rougher edge of the spectrum within the range of permissible Saint-fostering worlds.”

The fourth point is that Irenaean theodicies are unabashedly *eschatological*. There are some kinds of suffering that are not defeated in this life, some kinds of physical anguish or psychological brokenness that are not repaired or that work to constitute some greater good for the person who suffers them. The saint-making process does not end with this life, however. If God’s work with an individual is unfinished at the point of bodily death, then God’s work will continue with that individual, one way or another, after the point of bodily death.⁹ This eschatological element is not an afterthought or an add-on. Not only is the “life of the world to come” a central tenet of Christian theology, it is logically required by the existence of a loving God in a world that includes suffering. The Irenaean holds that if there is a loving God, and if there is suffering, then there must ultimately be redemption or defeat of that suffering. Moreover, if this requires an afterlife, then if there is suffering, the existence of God simply entails the existence of an afterlife. In other words, a requirement of consistent theism is that there be an afterlife: the two come as an inseparable package (Dougherty 2014, 111).

The fifth point is that true saintliness, characterized by real self-transcending or self-sacrificial love, is *hard won*. Forging the highest virtues, required for the greatest union with God, can involve very significant trials. Truly saintly people display a depth of virtue that can seem almost unimaginable from the point of view of the morally unexceptional person.¹⁰ Moreover, it may be that the greater one’s saintliness, the greater one’s eventual union with God—the ultimate form of human flourishing—so that moral greatness and human flourishing covary for human beings (Stump 2010, 387).

Objections to Irenaean theodicies then typically center around the idea that moral excellence and union with God do not defeat the tendency for suffering to make one’s life bad on the whole (where the *whole* life encompasses both this life and the afterlife). For the Irenaean, this kind of objection simply underestimates how great, valuable, and blissful greater union with God is, and also the extent to which this kind of existence

can reconcile one with events of the past. Perhaps, in union with God, past suffering, no matter how horrendous, will simply no longer have any emotional or psychological grip on those who have suffered. Or, objections center around the claim that soul-making really does require the kind of risk of suffering we find in our world. For the Irenaean, this underestimates how exacting saintlike moral excellence is, and the extent to which this kind of self-transcending love is hard won.

According to the Irenaean picture, humans did not begin their time on Earth as perfect and then (mysteriously) behave imperfectly, bringing about the Fall. Instead, humans began as finite, limited, and sinful creatures, who require the right kind of environment to grow into saintly people, ready for deification. This environment requires the risk of suffering, and—if we follow through the consequences of Hick’s thought experiment on the necessary environment for morally significant action—death. Immortality in a sinful world may act against soul-making. As Gregory of Nazianzus suggestively says,

But even here he drew a profit of a kind: death, and an interruption to sin; so wickedness did not become immortal, and the penalty became a sign of love for humanity. That, I believe, is the way God punishes! (*Oration* 38, §12)

Further, the inevitability of death may itself be an important prompt in the soul-making process, since it stimulates human beings to place trust in God rather than the inevitably ephemeral things of this world:

Paul thinks of God as having subjected creation to futility for the sake of prompting humans to enter into a life of cooperation with God as their priority over all other sources of security (Rom. 8:20–21). He also puts this lesson in terms of the human need to die to all anti-God (including selfish) power in order to live cooperatively with God in God’s life-giving, resurrection power (see 2 Cor. 4:7–11, Phil. 3:7–11, Rom. 6:13, 8:36–39, Col. 3:1–6). A similar theme emerges from the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels. John’s Gospel, for instance, portrays Jesus as saying: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:24–25; cf. Mark 8:34–36, Luke 14:27, Matt. 10:38–39). Accordingly, the divine salvation of humans faces a sharp, severe conflict between familiar human life and God’s morally perfect life. Human life must die into God’s life, as humans appropriate God’s unique power via rigorous struggle. (Moser 2013, 160–61)

Death and sin are here linked, because death is a means, if a severe one, of prompting humans to turn toward God, and, as a result, lifting them out of sin.

ANIMAL THEOSIS

At first blush, the broad features of this theodicy appear to rule out the possibility that it could apply to nonhuman animal suffering.¹¹ The reasons for this are obvious. Moral shortcomings may be impediments to fuller union with God, but only for those creatures with the cognitive capacities required for moral responsibility. Nonhuman animals do not—at least for the most part—have these cognitive capacities.¹² On the face of it, it is not possible for the risk of suffering to be a prerequisite for animals to be raised into saintliness—a point famously made by C. S. Lewis:

The problem of animal suffering is appalling; not because the animals are so numerous . . . but because the Christian explanation of human pain cannot be extended to animal pain. So far as we know beasts are incapable of either sin or virtue: therefore they can neither deserve pain or be improved by it. (Lewis 1940, quoted in Southgate 2008, 41)

While the Irenaean should not think that all human suffering is deserved, they are committed to the thought that the risk of suffering is required for the development of virtue. For this reason, Irenaean theodicy is often thought to be inapplicable to the problem of animal suffering. Nancey Murphy (2007, 131) notes that “John Hick’s account of ‘soul-making’ strikes this author as still too anthropocentric, focusing as they do on good for us coming as the consequence of suffering”, and Christopher Southgate (2008, 11) criticizes Hick as having an “invincibly human-centered view.”

This much is surely right. Hick’s own development of the Irenaean theodicy was anthropocentric in this sense. However, the Irenaean need not stop where Hick left off; Irenaean theodicies can be quite naturally expanded beyond their traditionally anthropocentric domain. Dougherty (2014), for instance, develops his soul-making theodicy with animals explicitly in mind. How does this work?

A number of authors have, rightly in my view, insisted on the need for animal eschatology.¹³ Without animal immortality, it is very difficult to see how some animal lives—those that contain much suffering and little flourishing—could be overall worthwhile for the creatures themselves, and so permissible for an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly loving God to allow. On Dougherty’s view “[t]he paradigm case of the defeat of evil is when the individual endorses their role in the drama of creation and salvation and is glad to have played it (which might be different than being glad *for* it)” (Dougherty 2014, 147). Nonhumans, however, lack the cognitive capacities required to understand how their suffering could have contributed to God’s plan of salvation—or even to grasp *that* their suffering could have contributed to God’s plan of salvation—in such a way that they could, ultimately, come to see their past suffering as worthwhile. In fact, it is plausible that many, if not *all*, human beings themselves

lack the cognitive capacities to understand how their suffering could have contributed to God's plan of salvation. This is where the doctrine of *theosis* comes in. According to some understandings of theosis, humans, in their immortal, resurrected lives, "will never cease growing in knowledge, power, and love, and thus, in a sense, never cease to approximate God's nature" (Dougherty 2014, 143). In Pauline thought, the resurrected *σῶμα πνευματικόν* ("spiritual body") is, after all, something far less limited in its capacities than the perishable *σῶμα ψυχικόν* (often rendered "natural body," though arguably misleadingly). Theosis then is utterly transformative, and the transformation is cognitive as well as ethical. Deified human beings have far greater cognitive capacities than their nondeified counterparts. The point here is that all this applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the animal case. Animals too, in union with God, will "never cease growing in knowledge, power, and love." At some point in the process of theosis, they too will have the cognitive capacity to understand how their suffering could have contributed to God's plan of salvation, in such a way that they could ultimately come to see their past suffering as worthwhile. When theosis enters the picture, the difference between human and nonhuman life is no longer a difference that makes the eventual defeat of animal suffering less intelligible than the defeat of human suffering. There is no impediment then to a theodicy centered around the Orthodox notion of theosis applying to the nonhuman realm just as readily as the human.

Soul-making gravitates around the notion of forging one's character over time, often necessarily through the severe process of confronting and responding to trials, adversity, and suffering. I would suggest that there is something of great, unique, perhaps unsurpassable, value in—cooperatively, synergistically with a perfect God—being the author of one's own virtuous character. And this, quite generally, will involve overcoming adversity, and facing up to travails with truthfulness, courage, and compassion. We make this kind of axiological judgment all the time. We admire archetypal hero figures precisely because of the way they forge their character in the process of facing adversity. There is more value in the heroic life than in the life of leisure. At the same time though, this is hard to see in this life because, often, the adversity is so great and the growth so meager. But from the vantage point of eternal, blissful, ever-deepening union, and growth with God, one could come to see this as an integral part of a valuable, flourishing life, and come to be glad to have come through the process and emerged on the other side. Theosis is the process that both makes possible continued moral flourishing, and that makes it the case that this moral development will converge with happiness and flourishing more generally in the long run. Theosis is also the process that makes the very idea of *moral* flourishing equally applicable to nonhuman sentient life. The power of this kind of theodicy lies in the fact that there is no

item of suffering that could not be woven into the story of one's ultimate flourishing in this way.

THE ADVANTAGES OF SOUL-MAKING AND THEOSIS

My aims here are ecumenical rather than sectarian; I do not think that theodicies centered around soul-making and theosis should be accepted *in place* of other accounts. Plausibly, and as Southgate (2008, 15) emphasizes, any adequate theodicy will be multifaceted or "compound," drawing on a number of different mutually supportive strands of thought. However, theodicies that appeal to soul-making and theosis as facets of the overall account have particular advantages that I will sketch out all too briefly here.

A number of thinkers have recently appealed to "only way" or "no-choice" theodicies in providing an explanation of why God might allow the death and suffering associated with evolutionary processes. Broadly speaking, only way theodicies argue that the only way to bring about adaptive complexity—and the beauty and value inherent in complex life—was through evolutionary processes. The value of complex life is so great that, given the only way to bring it about is through evolutionary processes, God was warranted in permitting these evolutionary processes to take place. Robin Attfield (2006) has developed this kind of view at length, and it is part of the multifaceted theodicy suggested by Southgate (2008). Holmes Rolston (2003) and Murphy (2007, 131) also suggest a theodicy in which suffering is an "unavoidable by-product of conditions in the natural world that have to obtain in order that there be intelligent life at all." There is much to be said for these kinds of accounts; it is instructive to consider how, in an interconnected universe, changing one parameter can lead to unintended consequences. (See, for instance, Attfield's discussion of David Hume's suggested "improvements" to the natural world.) However, they have limitations that do not apply to the soul-making theodicy sketched above. The first is that the modal claim is not obviously true. Although it may be that the only way for adaptive complexity to arise through evolutionary processes involves suffering and death, it does not follow that the only way available *to God* to bring about adaptive complexity is through suffering and death, because God, being God, could presumably have created complex creatures *ex nihilo*. (Russell 2008, 254–55 also makes this point.) Of course, we know that this is not, in fact, how things have panned out, but that is precisely the point; if God would have had better options available, the fact that these options were not taken constitutes evidence against the existence of God. Soul-making theodicies make their own modal "only way" claim—that adversity and environments including the risk of suffering—are the only way in which finite creatures can develop saintly qualities. Arguably, however, this modal claim is more plausible than the claim that God could not have

brought about complex life without bringing into play evolutionary processes. The second is that no-choice arguments appear to assume that the end, in this case, justifies the means. This, however, is not obvious. If the only way to bring about complex life was via the squalid misery of billions of creatures—a misery that served no purpose for those creatures—then perhaps bringing about complex life was never morally justifiable. The worry is that God starts to appear Stalin-like: happy to crush the weak underfoot on the road to achieving utopia. Animal soul-making avoids this consequence. The suffering of any given creature is something that, in the long run, can be woven into a process that ultimately benefits that creature. Here, I take the point made by Southgate (2008, 12) as well as by David Bentley Hart (2005) and the likes of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, that God must have done God's best *by each creature*. Soul-making theodicies can live up to this demand. This makes soul-making theodicies particularly well suited as evolutionary theodicies. It is often said that what is troubling about evolution is that it reveals the *scale* of suffering and death, that is, the *sheer number* of creatures that have suffered and died. It seems to me that this is a mistake. Because God is supposed to be perfect, one unwarranted item of suffering is just as much an objection as a billion unwarranted items of suffering. There is a sense in which the task of the theodist is at once more and less daunting than it is often given credit for being. If God has done wrong by just one creature, then God does not exist. But if there is an account of why, for any given creature, God may have had good reasons for allowing it to suffer and die, then (assuming the account is a general one, not appealing to the specific life of that creature insofar as it differs from other creatures) this account will generalize to all creatures. The soul-making theodicy sketched above is general in this way. The length and scale of evolutionary suffering then pose no special problems for the soul-making theodicy, that shorter, smaller scale distributions of suffering do not already pose. Finally, soul-making theodicies have a ready answer to the question of why God did not simply skip the whole troublesome episode of this life and go straight to creating heaven. Heaven requires theosis, and theosis is the (necessarily hard-won) result of the severe soul-making process.

EXPLANATION BY CONSTRAINT

As I have argued, theosis-based theodicies constitute a real advance on the topic, and make a worthy addition to any multifaceted approach to theodicy (even, and perhaps *in particular*, evolutionary theodicy). Our primary aim though was to draw on the ideas of soul-making and theosis to explain how it is possible to consistently hold that “death came into the world through sin” and that death predated sin by millions of years, showing that there is no necessary conflict between this part of the “biblical

framework” and contemporary science. We are now almost in a position to see why this is the case.

Consider how a perfect God would structure a world containing creatures with morally significant freedom, and the inevitable sinfulness that results from this freedom. On the picture presupposed by soul-making theodicies, the greatest good possible for creatures is theosis, in which moral flourishing and happiness are combined. Theosis though requires saintliness on the part of these creatures. The best environment then for these creatures is one that contains opportunities for growth in virtue, and prompts—perhaps even severe prompts—that will encourage growth in virtue. As we saw, an important prompt is death, because the inevitability of death acts as a powerful prompt for creatures to place their ultimate trust in God, rather than ephemera of (infinitely!) less value. A perfect God who seeks the best for creation—where that creation will include free and hence sinful creatures—will have good reason to bring about a world in which there is death. There is death in the world because of sin. But the link here is not *causal*, it is *structural*. The idea that sin caused death, we will recall, was problematic, because it entailed that sin predated death; if one event causes another, then that event must be earlier than, or simultaneous with, the event it causes. Causal priority requires temporal priority, or at least contiguity. The kind of structural “because” under consideration here, however, requires no such thing.

The nature of the association between sin and death, on the picture suggested here, can be illuminated with an example from the recent literature on scientific explanation. In the more Augustinian picture, sin provides a causal explanation of death. Adam (or some early human) sins, and the effect of this sin is death. The explanation here, in contrast, is an explanation by *constraint* rather than a *causal* explanation. For reasons to do with the great good of theosis, any “system” ordained by God that contains sinful creatures must also be one in which these creatures face death. Marc Lange provides a compelling account of explanation by constraint, of which mathematical explanations are a species:

A distinctively mathematical explanation works (I propose) not by describing the world’s actual causal structure, but rather by showing how the explanandum arises from the framework that any possible physical system (whether or not it figures in causal relations) must inhabit, where the “possible” systems extend well beyond those that are logically consistent with all of the actual natural laws. (Lange 2017, 30–31)

There are many examples of explanation by constraint in the natural sciences, but a simple case will serve to illustrate the idea. It is impossible to tile a rectangular wall with 191 tiles (unless it is one tile wide) because 191 is a prime number.¹⁴ Because a prime number cannot be divided evenly into another number, there is no way to arrange the tiles into

any number of equally long rows (unless that number is one). The kind of explanation here is structural rather than causal. For a perfect God, creating a world that will include sinful creatures without allowing for death in that world is akin to trying to tile a rectangular wall with a prime number of tiles. There is no “arrangement” that is simultaneously most conducive to theosis for sinful creatures and that does not involve worldly death.¹⁵ Given the great good of theosis, God’s will that we receive the greatest possible goods, the fact that, for sinful creatures, theosis requires soul-making, and the fact that soul-making requires death, any possible “system” in which there are sinful creatures will be one in which there is death. The framework that any possible system must inhabit requires it. To reiterate, on this view, the Pauline association between sin and death is very much real, but because this association is not causal, it does not require that sin precedes death.¹⁶ Evolution, of course, necessarily involves death, and there is a *sense* in which it follows from this that human beings, as part of the evolved natural order, are subject to death *irrespective* of sin.¹⁷ The question though is why a perfect God would create a world like this in the first place. On the assumption that the world was created by God, the explanation for it being a world governed by laws that would end up including death is that it is a world governed by laws that would end up producing free, sinful creatures. In this sense, it is because God chose to create a world including (inevitable) sin that God choose to create a world including death. In this sense, death is in the world because of sin.

There has been a renewed interest in both soul-making theodicies and the doctrine of theosis in recent decades. This is to the good, not least of all because, in combination, they serve to advance the debate on theodicy and offer a distinctive response to animal suffering that could plausibly play a role in any multifaceted theodicy, but also because they make intelligible how it could both be true that death is somehow explained by sin, as the biblical framework has it, and that death has predated sin by millions of years, as evolutionary theory clearly entails.

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NOTES

1. Many of these figures took these passages to be *both* historical and symbolic or typological. This may seem strange. To the contemporary mind, the historical and the symbolic are usually understood as exclusive categories. History is the result of unfolding *facts* whereas symbolism is

the result of *authorial intent*. If God is the author of reality however, the two can converge. The picture that emerges in Bouteneff (2008) is that most significant early biblical exegetes *did* think that Genesis 1–3 described literal historical events, but that its theological significance lay in its symbolic meaning.

2. To what extent original guilt has become embedded in Western Christian theology more generally is up for debate. The claim that all human beings inherit Adam's guilt is strongly suggested, for instance, by Article II of the Augsburg Confession:

[S]ince the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost.

The Catechism of the (Roman) Catholic Church on the other hand (<http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p1s2c1p7.htm#III>) teaches that inherited original sin is only "sin" in an analogical sense, and "does not have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam's descendants." Inherited "sin," in the sense elaborated there not only does not obviously entail inherited guilt, as endorsed by Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, but seems to positively reject the notion.

3. This is not to say that this way of parsing original guilt is free from other problems, but there is no immediate conflict with evolutionary history here.

4. See Dougherty (2014, 120) on this, and Adams (1999, 12) for the idea, specifically, that religious believers attribute value to different things, and to different extents, than nonbelievers. John Hick also makes this point: "Antitheistic writers almost invariably . . . assume that the purpose of a loving God must be to create a hedonistic paradise; and therefore to the extent that the world is other than this, it proves to them that God is either not loving enough or not powerful enough to create such a world" (2007, 256–57).

5. See Stump (2010, 387) for an expression of this idea, in the context of defending a Thomist soul-making theodicy.

6. This is not to suggest that theodicy is necessary to undercut arguments from evil. See, for instance, James Henry Collin (2018).

7. See also Southgate and Robinson (2007) and Southgate (2008, ch. 3) for the distinction between "good–harm analyses" that take the good in question to be (1) a causal consequence of the harm or possibility of harm; (2) only achievable through a process that includes the possibility or necessity of harm; or (3) inherently or constitutively inseparable from the harm.

8. It should be clear that this does not make Irenaean theodicies equivalent to free-will defenses. Soul-making requires free will, but, though free will is a great good, it is not the good of free will itself that (or, at least *alone*) provides the morally sufficient reason to permit suffering. The relevant good is saintliness, and concomitant theosis.

9. Plausibly, any theodicy that links suffering to a greater good will require this eschatological dimension if the greater good is to be sufficiently good so as to have been worth the suffering. A number of authors have made this point. See, for instance, Russell (2008, 266), Southgate (2008, ch. 5), and Keith Ward (1982, 202), for discussion.

10. See, for instance, the injunction in Matthew 5:48 to "be *perfect*, as your Heavenly Father is perfect."

11. I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to address this issue.

12. See Collin (2017) for some of the cognitive differences between humans and other animals.

13. See Southgate (2008, ch. 5) for a helpful overview. Southgate mentions thinkers as diverse as Denis Edwards, Jay McDaniel, Jürgen Moltmann, Robert John Russell, Keith Ward, and John Wesley in this respect.

14. The example is from Stewart Shapiro (2000, 217).

15. We can weaken the thesis and retain the main point. What is required more precisely is that environments including death are *one* of the kinds of environments most conducive to soul-making. This retains the idea that God could be warranted in creating a world including death because it is a world that will go on to develop free, and hence sinful, creatures.

16. I hope it is clear that I am, in no way, attempting to provide a *reading* of Genesis 1–3, or of Romans 5. The task here is not exegetical, but *philosophical*. The question is under which

circumstances it can both be true that death is inextricably tied to sin and true that death has been a feature of our world long before creatures capable of sin inhabited it. (The problem was that it looked as though there were *no* circumstances under which both of these could be true.) The answer is that the circumstances under which both of these can be true are those in which the Orthodox notions of soul-making and theosis obtain.

17. I thank an anonymous referee for raising this point.

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