

Theodicy for a World in Process: God and the Existence of Evil in an Evolving Universe

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Abstract

The existence of pain and suffering is a source of profound anxiety to all reflective people of faith, for how do we sustain theistic belief in the face of the world's evils? Despite centuries of theological and philosophical reflection, a theodicy of adequate explanatory power has yet to be formulated. The theodicies which have been advanced have failed, in large part, due to their metaphysical deficiencies, including inadequate cosmologies, anthropologies, and descriptions of divine attributes. In this paper, I develop a theodicy that more faithfully reflects what we now know about humanity and the universe. I argue that both moral and natural evil can only be understood in the context of a God who creates evolutively. I first outline a theology of evolution based on a critical realistic appraisal of humanity's experiences of both the material world and the numinous. I make the case that a coherent theology must be true to both the evolutionary origins of humanity as well as to humanity's ubiquitous religious experiences. The development of this theodicy is a prerequisite to the overall theodicy project of this paper. Here, I consider as separate topics: (1) moral evil and the possibility of free will and (2) natural evil and divine action. Concerning the former, I argue against causal determinism in favor of true free will for humans and maintain that moral evil results from authentic choices of humans to do evil. For the latter, the logical problem of natural evil is readily dispatched by evolutionary arguments in which it is seen that a world in process is bound to cause harm to its evolving inhabitants. The existential problem of natural evil is less readily solved since it is unclear why a God who acts in history does not do so more often to help us. Here, we analyze the categories of divine activity in the world and discover that the solution to the existential problem of evil lies in right expectation. In the end, we see that evil has its origin in freedom. Out of love, God gives humanity freedom of choice and nature freedom of process.

Introduction

The Problem of Evil may have found its first formal statement as early as the 3rd century B.C.E. when Epicurus asked: If God is willing to prevent evil but not able, then he is not omnipotent; if he is able but not willing, he is not benevolent; if he is both able and willing, whence comes evil? [1] This question remains unanswered despite centuries of philosophical and theological reflection. Attempts to answer this question take the form of defenses or theodicies. The former mount apologetic arguments against the position that belief in the existence of God is logically inconsistent with the existence of evil, while the latter provide positive arguments which seek to justify a God who creates a world with evil. A defense is largely a problem of logic in which the defender need only show that there is no formal inconsistency in accepting the existence of both God and evil. [2] Defenses, in their focused attack on the logical problem of evil, leave untouched the existential problem of evil and thus lack deep explanatory power. We are left searching. To satisfy our hunger for understanding, we must undertake the more difficult task of the theodicy where we probe the mind of God to get a glimpse of why He allows evil.

In this paper, I outline a theodicy that is grounded in a scientific worldview and informed by contemporary natural theologies. I maintain that classic theodicies are inadequate because they ultimately view the universe and humanity as static and unchanging; we need to develop a new theodicy that more faithfully reflects what we know about humanity and the universe. My basic position is that if God actualized the universe in a single moment, there is no reason for humanity to suffer. However, in an evolving universe in

which humanity, and indeed all self-conscious life in the universe, is in process of becoming, suffering is unavoidable.

Inadequacy of Traditional Theodicies

Theodicies arise naturally from a balanced and creative interplay among the many beliefs that define an individual's worldview and metaphysics. Specifically, theodicy emerges from beliefs in three key areas: cosmology, anthropology, and concept of God. I believe that traditional and familiar theodicies [3] have been built on inadequate propositions concerning the universe and God and, thus, are doomed to failure.

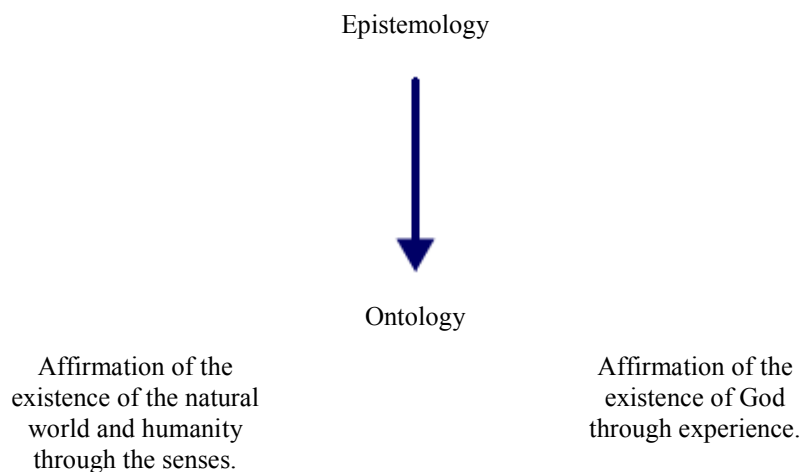
The traditional theodicies of Christian orthodoxy, developed by Augustine, Aquinas, the Reformers, and Leibniz, all posit a static and unchanging world that God brought into being at some specific moment. Here, the problem of evil has no rational solution because the static universe that God is said to have actualized could have been created without evil, if He had so chosen. Coherent arguments for why God brought evil into His universe are not to be found in any of these theodicies.

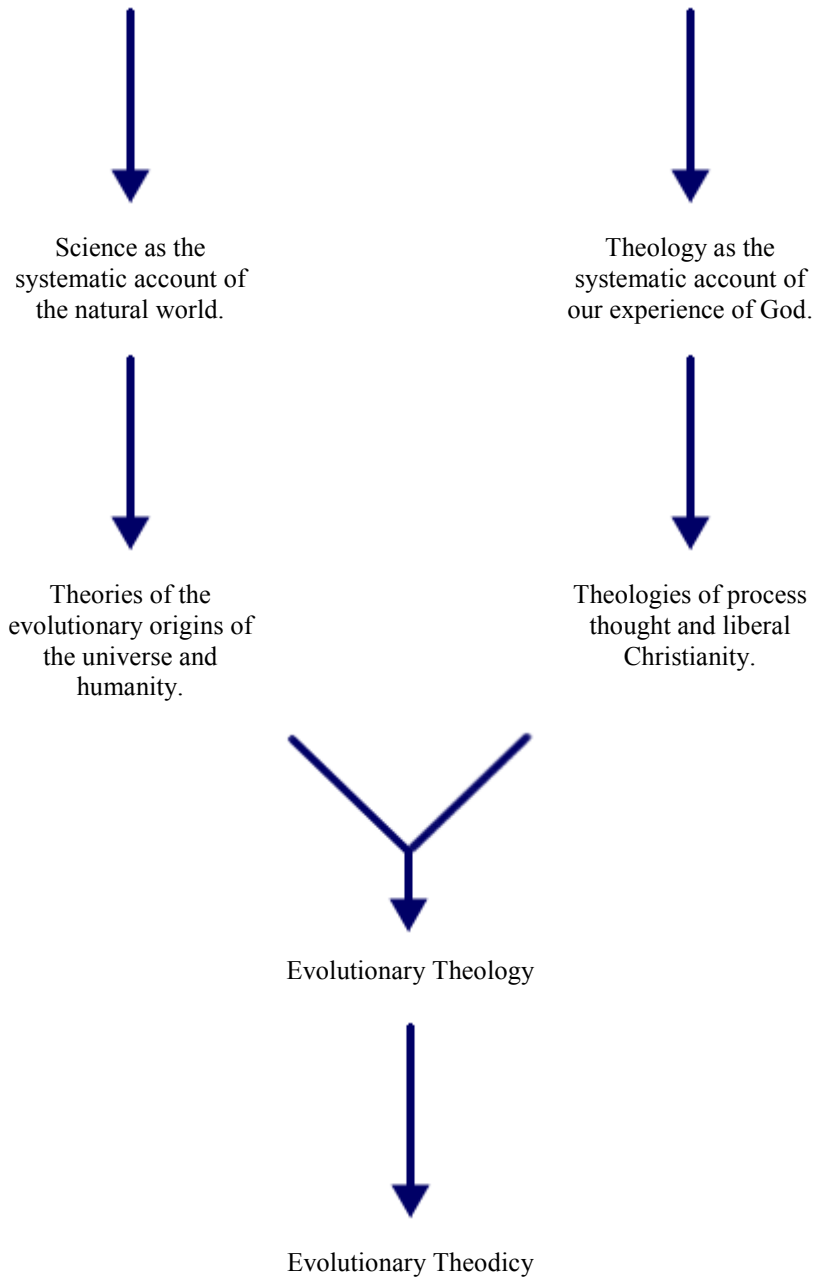
In the 20th-century, while many theologians came to accept the evolutionary origins of the universe and humanity, few incorporated these views into their theodicies. Such theodicies are strangely out of sync, at once affirming but yet ignoring a universe in process. For example, John Hick [4] and Richard Swinburne [5] both accept evolutionary tenets of contemporary science yet neglect to incorporate these critical pieces of reality into their theodicies. Hick tells us that evil is the means chosen by God to prepare us for communion with Him. Swinburn explains that evil provides us with essential knowledge and teaches us how to prevent (or bring about) evil. Ultimately, they, like their ecclesiastical predecessors, are left trying to justify a God who could have created a world free of evil, but chose not to.

Development of Theodicy in a Scientific Era

We must develop a theodicy that is free of these deficiencies. Significant challenges face anyone that chooses to formulate a theodicy in our current era, for how does one stay faithful to the basic tenets of theism while incorporating the depth of knowledge of the natural order that is revealed to us through science? The approach that I develop in the rest of this paper is outlined in Scheme I where theodicy is seen to emerge from a chain of thought that begins with some very basic questions: What can we know? What can we know of the existence and nature of the physical world and of God? What do we know (or think we know) of the universe and God? From the tentative answers to these questions emerge a distinct set of cosmological and theological propositions that ultimately allow a statement of theodicy.

Scheme I: Development of an Evolutionary Theodicy





Epistemology and the Critical Realistic Enterprises of Science and Theology

We start with the simplest of questions: What can we know of the natural world? And what can we know of the God that creates, sustains, and interacts with our world? These are foundational questions that must be answered, for as surely as our theodicy is derivative of our metaphysics, our metaphysics and worldview emerge from our epistemology.

We first need to know about origins. How did the universe and humanity come to be? The problem, of course, is that 20th century science and orthodox Christianity give very different answers. Science reveals a

slow process of evolving emergence, while orthodoxy teaches instantaneous creation. Orthodoxy asks us to reject the former for the latter and, in doing so, asks us to not only reject our knowledge of the physical world but also the entire inductive enterprise that claims to give us such knowledge. In its place, we are given knowledge based on authority, either the authority of Scripture or the authority of the Church or both. And this is where the problem lies.

If we accept this offer, we give up our ability to learn about the physical world. If we do not believe the cumulative biological knowledge of a century and a half when it speaks of evolution, how can we believe it when it seeks to cure disease? For precisely the same inductive techniques are used to inquire after humanity's evolutionary origins as are used to probe the origins of cancer.

Now, this argument should not be mistaken as an appeal for blind scientism. Science claims to offer much, but not all. While the enterprise of science claims to be able to give us an increasingly accurate account of how our universe came to be as it presently is, it must be silent when we ask it why there is a universe at all. Thus, science falls mute in the face of the ultimate questions. Answers to these can only be found in the domain of the spiritual; in the domain of the religious experiences of humanity.

But, how are we to assess the various truth claims made by science and religion? To do this, I believe we must appeal to an epistemology of critical realism [6] which allows for the existence of truth in what science claims to uncover about the universe. At the same time, a critical realistic appraisal of humanity's universal claims of religious experience compels us to also accept these as authentic revelations of a transcendent Real. Thus, as a critical realist, I affirm the potential truth content of both the sensual perceptions of the natural world and the numinous apprehensions of God. I maintain that the enterprise of science, which is the systematic account of our perceptions of the universe, is capable of providing knowledge about the natural world [7]. Science in its dual role of storehouse of accumulated knowledge and arbiter of newly perceived truth, provides the overall framework for our understanding of the universe. In the same way, theology is the systematic account of our experiences of God and provides the interpretative framework for religious experience and the language to express our apprehensions of God.

So, we ask again: What can we know? I believe that our epistemology must be informed by a critical realism that allows for the possibility of acquiring knowledge of the universe through scientific interpretation of perception, and knowledge of God through theologic interpretation of religious experience.

Foundational Ideas: An Evolving Universe and Heterodox Theism

From within the framework I have constructed, two ideas emerge as foundational for the development of a theodicy. From science come theories of an evolutionary universe with humanity as the most recent emergent on this planet. And from theology come heterodox theistic concepts of process philosophy and other liberal strands of Christian thinking.

An Evolving Universe Big Bang cosmology and the evolutionary origins of humanity are familiar to all of us and will not be rehearsed again here. However, one overarching idea must be emphasized. Our universe, and all that is in it, is still evolving and changing. The fabric of reality is process. This stands in opposition to metaphysical precepts within orthodox Christianity which claim a static universe. But, as we will see, 'process' is the single feature of reality that allows for the development of a coherent theodicy.

Heterodox Theism: Liberal Christian Theologies Possibly the single most important factor here is the development of historical critical methods for the analysis of the Bible. These methods grew out of the rationalism of the Enlightenment and with this new kind of analytical scholarship came the understanding that the Bible is not inerrant. This is especially important as it relates to the accounts of creation recorded in the first chapters of Genesis. Indeed, it can be argued that the authors of Genesis never intended an historical and scientific account of the creation of the universe, but rather they wanted to tell the unprecedented story of how the one true God commands the cosmos with His Word and how God made

man, not to serve Him, but in His image for loving communion. Thus, the authors of Genesis were not so concerned with telling how the universe came into being, but rather with why it came into being. When it is at its best, liberal Christian theology takes the Bible seriously, but not literally. Liberal Christian thought allows us to interpret our understanding of God, derived from religious tradition and experience, in the context of what science teaches us about His creation.

Heterodox Theism: Process Theology In his speculative metaphysics, Alfred North Whitehead presents a remarkably innovative picture of reality [8]. Whitehead's metaphysics tells us that reality is change. To be actual is to be a process [9] where process is taken to mean the temporal transition of one "actual occasion" to the next. Actual occasions are Whitehead's basic unit of reality and, significantly, are partially self-creative. This doctrine of self-determination reconciles influence with freedom. Thus in Whitehead's philosophy, genuine causal influence does not negate freedom.

Whitehead's philosophy is God-centered. Indeed, the basic view that reality is process agrees with the importance of linear, non-cyclic time that is found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Whitehead's thought, we find that God is the origin of all novelty since the prehension of God is an essential part of all occasions. Now, this God-relatedness of all experience does not restrict the freedom of the occasion; each occasion has self-determination. Divine power is persuasive, not controlling.

These thoughts have been developed into a comprehensive theology by Whitehead's students and intellectual descendants [10]. The goal of this theology is to give an account of God and His relation to humanity that embraces doctrines of Christian faith within the metaphysical context of process philosophy. The God of process theology is a God of responsive love. Unlike the passionless deity that Augustine and Aquinas drew out of the Greek notion of divine impassibility, this God partakes of His creation and shares with His creatures. This God is also a God of creative love, acting in the world through history as an expression of love for the world. But rather than coercive, this God's actions in the world are persuasive. God does not command the direction of actualities, and thus the outcome of reality, but rather non-coercively gives them direction. In this universe, matter has the power of self-determination and, thus, allows for the existence of true contingent freedom.

Evolutionary Theologies

After our initial ontologic bifurcation of existence into the realms of the natural and the super-natural, we have traveled down two parallel paths, guided by the principles of critical realism, towards our goal of a rational and coherent theodicy (see Scheme I). We have seen that science, as the systematic account of our sensual perceptions of the natural, provides us with a view of the cosmos that is thoroughly evolutive. Likewise, we have seen that theology, as the systematic account of our numinous apprehensions of the super-natural, is capable of providing an open and free environment where we discover a God who is unencumbered by orthodoxy.

If we are to advance further, this theodicy project must execute a delicate synthesis of science and theology. We must construct a new theology that incorporates the evolutionary doctrines of contemporary science while still remaining uncompromisingly faithful to the tenets of theism. Now, development of a systematic theology of evolution is an enterprise that is clearly beyond the scope of this paper and I will, therefore, give only the briefest outline of what such a theology would look like. Several such theologies have been presented, in more or less complete form, and hold promise. [11] While they differ in their details, all speak of a God who uses evolution as His mechanism of creation: "God does not make: He makes things make themselves." [12] Unfortunately, this proposition really doesn't take us very far in our development of theodicy since we have already affirmed both the reality of God and a universe in process. That God creates evolutively is merely a restatement of this two-pronged conviction. The more pressing question that we must address if we are to have a coherent theology of evolution is this: why did God use evolution as His mechanism? Why did He not create in an instant as depicted in Genesis? It is only with an answer to this question that we can move forward, for the answer to this question will prove critical to our theodicy.

I believe that three possible answers exist for this question: God creates evolutively by choice, by necessity imposed by the structure of nature, or by necessity imposed by His nature. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was perhaps the first to explicitly address this question [13]. He states that "God cannot create except evolutively". The origin of this necessity is to be found in the nature of God. Teilhard explains that to begin to understand why God creates only evolutively, we must first "create a higher metaphysics" and replace the orthodox metaphysics of *Esse*, pure act, with a metaphysics of *Unire*, union. The metaphysics of Pure Act cannot justify "the vastness nor the arduousness of the evolution in which we can see we are involved." Teilhard goes on to tell us that the new metaphysics of Union is centered on the *Pleroma*, the creative union of the universe with God. This union has as its goal Teilhard's mystical Omega Point where the cosmos becomes one with the Universal Christ in God. Significantly, *Pleroma* is not so much an event as it is an evolutive process: "the final identification of cosmogenesis with Christogenesis." [14]

In contrast, process theology tell us that it is the nature of matter that necessitates creation by evolution. This position hinges on the rejection of *creatio ex nihilo* in favor of creation from chaos. Thus, in the beginning, there was the realm of divine and non-divine actualities. The pre-existing chaos should be envisioned as absolute chaos in the most radical sense, comprising random, low-grade actual occasions [15]. From this absolute chaos, God brings forth the first primitive "enduring individuals"; the sub-atomic quarks, electrons, protons, and neutrons. As enduring individuals, these elemental species of matter not only persist in actuality, due to their inheritance from preceding occasions, but also self-determine, albeit to a quite limited extent relative to even atoms, molecules, and living cells. The stuff of the universe has properties that cannot be overcome or changed by God. God's interaction with the physical universe and His ability to actualize novelty within it is through persuasion. While God provides the initial aim to every actual occasion, they all have a measure of self-determinative power. We see then that the creation of galaxies and planetary systems and conscious life can only be accomplished through a evolutionary process of gradual change.

When the question of the divine reason for evolution was addressed by John Haught, he gave an answer that is an interesting mix of process theology and divine self-restraint and love: Since it is the nature of love to refrain from coercive manipulation of others, we should not expect the world that a generous God calls into being to be instantaneously ordered to perfection. Instead, in the presence of the self-restraint befitting an absolutely self-giving love, the world would unfold by responding to the divine allurements at its own pace and in its own particular way. The universe would then be spontaneously self-creative and self-ordering. [16]

To Haught, the universe's ability to self-determine is a gracious gift from God, not necessitated in any way by the nature of matter. The universe could have been other than as it is, if God would have chosen so.

I believe that Haught may be closest to the mark. While Teilhard's mystical arguments are emotionally compelling, they lack logical development towards a rationally derived conclusion. The idea of an Omega Point at the end of time where the universe is united with Christ in God is appealing and consistent with certain Christian intuitions, but it is not at all clear why an evolutionary process is required to arrive at the Omega Point. Indeed, why must the Omega point be arrived at, why can't it simply be? Process theology gives us a universe whose basic components do not allow facile intervention by God and claims that the refractory nature of matter to divine will derives from certain properties possessed by matter. However, these properties are difficult to reconcile with scientific accounts of matter. Specifically, what does "self-determination" mean in the context of an electron, a molecule, or even a cell? Now, Whitehead and his descendants do admit to a speculative philosophy, but would still like to claim that their endeavors are "productive of human knowledge"¹⁷. For their views to be incorporated into a contemporary metaphysics that should be as much informed by scientific observation as by deductive cognition they must move beyond panpsychism. They must establish an authentic connection between their metaphysics and matter as science reveals it. They must tell us what properties of matter allow atoms, molecules, and cells to have powers of self-determination.

An important corollary to the self-determination of matter, is God's inability to freely direct the universe. For example, Griffin tells that God can direct souls but cannot move rocks. [18] I see two problems here.

First, this picture of a materially-constrained deity is inconsistent with the human experience of an all-powerful God that can, and occasionally does, enter into time and space and bring about significant changes in the material world¹⁹. Second, in his endeavor to develop a comprehensive picture of reality, Griffin is allowing metaphysics to intrude upon physics. We are asked to accept the notion that the universe is so structured as to allow God to interact with mind but not with physical substance. If process theology wants to maintain this view, it must first provide an account of how God interacts with mind and then go on to explain how this mechanism is non-supportive of divine interaction with physicality. For process thought to truly be "a method productive of human knowledge", it must establish true and secure connections to science. The establishment of such connections are critical to any metaphysical system that wants to be comprehensive. If a metaphysical system, such as process thought, wants to make truth claims about the universe, and how God may or may not be able to interact with the universe, it must be informed by an epistemology of science.

So, upon what concept of God do we base a new theology of evolution? How do we finally answer our question of why God creates evolutively. I believe that a theology of evolution must emerge from the concept of a God who chose to create a universe that is in process. It was His desire to actualize a universe that develops, that brings forth new and surprising entities of every description. He creates this sort of universe rather than some other sort so He can participate, share, and enjoy the very process that so thoroughly permeates His universe. His goal was not only to bring forth humanity but all of creation of which humanity, and other sentient life in the universe, is one part. All other elements of a systematic theology of evolution flow from this concept of God's creative activity. One such element is theodicy, which we now consider.

Theodicy for an Evolving Universe

Since antiquity persons of deep reflection and wisdom have tried to explain how it is that evil can exist in a universe created and sustained by God. I believe these attempts have uniformly failed. They failed not for lack of intellect or sincerity, but for lack of epistemic resources. It is only now, as we sit at the threshold of the third millennium, that we have a sufficient understanding of the universe, ourselves, and our God, to undertake the theodicy project with any hope of success.

Such a theodicy will be a natural emergence from a new theology that is based on a critical realistic appraisal of human experience and honestly incorporates those features of the world that we are compelled to accept as actual. Thus, our guiding principle in this endeavor must be to let the 'data' shape our theodicy. The data that must be incorporated into our theodicy include the following:

- Humanity lives in an evolving universe of unimaginable temporal and spatial dimensions.
- Humanity evolved, and is still evolving, from this universe.
- Humanity experiences life as free beings that have the ability to make morally significant choices.
- Humanity experiences life as open and in process.
- Humanity may not be alone in the universe.
- Humanity, since its emergence, has experienced a profound religious impulse.
- From these primal spiritual intuitions have developed the great Axial Age and post-Axial Age religions of the world [20]; Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
- People of faith around the world and through the ages view their religious experiences as authentic revelation of an ultimate Real.
- Humanity both commits horrendous evil and experiences profound, life-shattering pain and suffering.

Theodicies that are attentive to this data have been alluded to by Teilhard [21] as well as by more contemporary thinkers who advocate Process Theology [22] or natural theologies [23] or some combination [24]. In all cases, they hold the view that humanity must be understood as emerging from within an

evolving universe. The theodicy that I will now propose draws on some of these ideas. In this theodicy, I discuss separately the problems of Moral Evil and Natural Evil [25].

Moral Evil and Free Will

I argue here that moral evil arises from the free choices that humans make. In contrast to Augustine and Aquinas, I believe that humanity possesses true freedom to make morally significant decisions. To maintain this belief, I must demonstrate the truth of two premises:

1. Both the efficient and the final causes of an action, or an intent to act, that is conducted by a human can be attributed in their entirety to the human agent. There are no Primary Causes²⁶ of divine origin for human actions; nor are the actions of humans predestined in any way.
2. The free will that we experience is actual free will, not apparent free will. Humans are not mere automatons in a deterministic, Laplacian universe. [27]

Both premises make truth claims about how we should interpret the human experience of choice. The first premise is theologic and is concerned with how human being should be conceived in the face of divine omnipotence and omniscience. The second premise concerns itself with the workings of the physical universe and how humans operate within this universe.

I believe that I can support my theologic claim with an evolutionary argument. We start with one of our primary pieces of data: humanity emerged from an evolving universe that is created and sustained by God. The question we are faced with is this: would God have create evolutively but yet withhold freedom of choice? To address this question, it may be helpful to consider some paleoanthropologic data. The most recent segment of our evolutionary lineage can be traced back thirteen million years to Ramapithecus, our primate ancestor that diverged from Dryopithecus and the evolutionary line that would ultimately lead to modern apes²⁸. Now, if we argue divine Primary Causation or predestination for human action, it seems that we must also argue divine Primary Causation for the actions of Ramapithecus and all his descendents that led to us. For if this is not the case, if Ramapithecus did have free will, we are faced with the mystifying situation of trying to understand why God would have given freedom of choice to our primitive ancestors but withheld it from us. A number of perplexing questions can be seen to arise: Where in our ancestry did God begin to withhold free will; with Homo habilis, with Homo erectus? Walking among us today, are there genetic throw-backs that possess vestigial free will? And we again come to our primary question, why would God create evolutively but yet withhold freedom of choice? I maintain that He would not.

God brings forth the cosmos through a process of becoming to provide His creation with true and actual freedom. But with this freedom comes the possibility of abuse; the possibility that humans will do enormous harm to one another and to God's world. We now must ask why God provides his creatures with this costly freedom.

The intent of the Creator seems to be to create free beings able to love, even if it was unavoidable that the price for the possibility of freedom and love, the appearance of evil, had to be paid. [29] Thus, out of God's love, humanity is brought forth with true freedom of choice. He does not deny us this freedom, for to do so would be to work against his goal of creating sentient beings that can freely choose to enter into divine communion.

We turn now to the second premise in my free will argument for the origin of moral evil. Here, I support the claim that moral evil originates in humanity's freedom of choice by arguing that humanity possesses actual free will, not apparent free will. Of course, contrary to this are deterministic views. While physical determinism, and the related causal reductionism, are far from settled matters and are debated vigorously among metaphysicians [30], they can clearly only be applied to human choice if they can be shown to extend to mind. However, I suspect that the body-mind interface represents an impenetrable barrier to deterministic elements of the physical universe; that the physical laws governing the propagation of

causality do not impact on mind. I recognize that such a claim smacks of Cartesian dualism and is at odds with evidence that human being is psychosomatic, but reductionist and deterministic alternatives that seek to explain human choice at the level of firing synapses and neurotransmitters leave little room for free will.

Nancy Murphy frames the issue well with a question and a statement of what is at stake: If mental events can be reduced to brain events, and the brain events are governed by the laws of neurobiology (and ultimately by the laws of physics), in what sense can we say that human beings have free will? . . . If free will is an illusion and the highest of human intellectual and cultural achievements can be counted as the mere outworking of the laws of physics, this is utterly devastating to our ordinary understanding of ourselves. [31]

To solve this problem, Murphy proposes nonreductive physicalism, the essence of which proposes that while mind is an emergent property of the neuronal activity of the brain, it is not merely epiphenomenal but rather has properties of an actual entity and is able to effect top-down causality upon the body. While the language of Murphy's arguments does differentiate her premise metaphysically from more classical strands of dualism, we are left with the same question: how does nonphysical mind cause neuroevents? [32]

But even with this nagging, unanswered question, it still seems to me that we must embrace some form of dualism if we are to allow for the possibility of human freedom. For the alternative is a reductionism that strips us of true choice. At this point, the most attractive way forward may be Murphy's nonreductive physicalism. The challenges here are to understand how mind emerges from the brain and how mind is then able to effect causation. [33]

Finally, how do we answer the problem of moral evil? Humanity is the product of evolution and, as such, has true freedom of choice. We are wholly responsible for our choices which are subject to neither divine nor physical preordination. Such is the universe that God, out of love, creates and sustains. But with this freedom that humans enjoy comes the capacity for misuse and, thus, the possibility of moral evil.

Natural Evil and Divine Causation

I believe that an evolutionary approach can be successfully used to solve the logical problem of natural evil. In an evolving universe, death and rebirth are unavoidable, for how else can novelty be introduced into the cosmos. Teilhard understood this and told us many years ago that in an evolutive universe the problem of evil disappears; evil is a statistically inevitable by-product of evolution. [34] More recently Polkinghorne has argued a free-process defense of natural evil that is analogous to the free-will defense of moral evil.

A world allowed to make itself through the evolutionary exploration of its potentiality is a better world than one produced ready-made by divine fiat. In such an evolving world there must be malfunctions and blind alleys. The same biochemical processes that enable some cells to mutate and produce new forms of life will allow other cells to mutate and become malignant. Entities will behave in accordance with their natures, a tectonic plate slips and causes a devastating earthquake. [35]

We see then, that a universe in process, reaching towards novelty, is bound to contain pain and suffering. Where there is to be new birth, there must first be death to make way for it. As rational creatures, we appreciate and possibly accept these solutions to the problem of natural evil. But they provide no deep satisfaction; they lack the explanatory resources to adequately meet our existential needs. We still need to understand God's apparent inaction. We understand how unstable atmospheric conditions produce tornados, but we still ask, why doesn't God turn the path of a tornado as it heads towards the Kansas town? We understand how a single, transformed glial cell can eventually riddle a brain with tumors, but we still ask, why doesn't God simply destroy these malignant growths? The existential problem of evil demands answers to three related questions:

- Does God enter into the universe and act?

- If so, by what means?
- And, if so, for what purpose?

An affirmative answer to the first question is axiomatic for theistic belief. As theists, we confess a God who creates and sustains a purposeful universe. Such creative involvement clearly constitutes divine action. Evidence of divine action of a more intimate type can be found in accounts of personal transformation and of the miraculous that have accompanied all human encounter with the Real. While our inheritance of Enlightenment skepticism works to discredit testimony of numinous encounter, our epistemic embrace of critical realism allows us to take an open, yet cautious, appraisal of these testimonies.

Having affirmed that God acts in the universe, we next ask by what means. Here we seek to define the 'causal joint' between God and His universe. This is a project of enormous importance to the science-religion dialog and has drawn the attention of many scholars. [36] However, I must admit, I am not optimistic about our ability to understand the mechanism by which God interacts with the universe. To truly understand the interaction between a person and an object, it seems that we first require a detailed understanding of both the person and the object. While we may someday possess such a detailed understanding of the fine structure of the universe, I do not see how we will ever have such knowledge of God, short of revelation. Beyond this, my skepticism is based on the descriptions of the God-universe interface that we find in the current literature. On the one hand, we find appeals to physical theory in which God determines the outcome of either subatomic, quantized events or macroscopic, chaotic events. On the other hand, analogy to the body-mind has been made in which God interacts with the universe in a top-down manner not unlike how mind interacts with body. While the former proposals claim to have located the 'causal-joint', they have made no proposal as to how God might 'flex' this joint. That is, if we have discovered that God ultimately determines the outcome of a macroevent event by determining the spin state of electrons, we still must answer how God determines these spin states. Turning to the latter proposal which is modeled on the mind-body interface, we see that it has not been able to be developed past the stage of analogy. And here we must very cautious. In the search for truth, analogy can be extremely dangerous since it masks ignorance with the familiar.

Despite our inability to understand how God interacts with the world, we must still ask when and for what purposes does He act. As theists, we affirm that God does act in history. But why doesn't He act more often to directly help us? This stands as a paradox and a cause of disbelief to all reflective theists. God's relative inactivity has been explained in several ways. Orthodoxy tells us that natural evil is part of the Divine Plan. When an earthquake kills the innocent, they die for a greater good. Or perhaps they weren't so innocent after all and deserved their fate as punishment. In contrast, process thought tells us that God does as much as He can; that His intrinsically non-coercive actions are limited by the very composition of the universe which resists divine persuasion. And finally, contemporary natural theologians explain, as part of a free-process defense, that God acts but does not overrule. The Spirit guides, but with a gentle respect for the integrity of creation. . . . God can indeed do anything that is in accordance with the divine will, but it would not be consonant with that will to create a world that is merely God's puppet theatre. [37]

I believe that the last of these arguments holds the most promise. In Christian Orthodoxy, I see a God who either intentionally obscures or is cruel and vindictive, while in process thought, I see a God whose limitations are inconsistent with experience. But in contemporary natural theologies, we find a God who withholds His power so His creation can evolve freely. It would defeat this God's purpose to intrusively interfere in the natural workings of His creation. Yet, as theists, we know that God sometimes does act in the universe. This sets up a dialectic of divine purpose; God wishes not to interfere, but does.

To understand the "why" and "when" of God's action in the world, I believe it is instructive to analyze the instances of divine action. The approach to be taken here is a 'bottom-up' approach where we allow the observed data (i.e., instances of divine action) to guide us to broad hypotheses of God's action in the world. As I see it, there are four categories of divine action [38]:

- Establishment of natural laws that govern the universe.

- Purposeful direction of the evolution of the universe towards a divinely-held end. While chance plays a role in the cosmos, there exists the overarching divine goal of bringing forth sentient, self-conscious life that can enter into perfect communion with God.
- Acts of power mediated by a very few individuals who are transparent to the will of God and act as 'conduits' of divine power. Possibly the best documented of these individuals is Jesus of Nazareth. His acts of power (or dynamis) were not simply for pastoral purposes but were one of the means by which he was to usher in the Kingdom of God. [39]
- Spiritual and emotional healings. Whenever we find our internal resources depleted and from this despair allow our hearts to be open to the transcendent, we will discover strength and comfort. This is a startling revelation to those who have experienced it; have pondered the mystery of it. The promise of comfort to those who seek is a theme found in all the great religions.

Given these data, what should our expectations be for divine action in the world? Viewed cosmically, we should expect God to continue to sustain the universe with the ultimate evolutionary goal of bringing forth life that can be in true communion with Him [40]. These life forms may or may not be descendants of humanity or other Earthly life and may, in fact, already exist on some far off planet in another galaxy. The data further tell us that the miraculous is the purview of the chosen few; we should not expect the miraculous cure of an ailing father or alteration of a hurricane's course. But God will give us strength to endure hardship and provide comfort as we grieve lost loved ones.

Thus, the solution to the existential problem of natural evil is to be found in right expectation. Disaster strikes; that is an utterly unavoidable part of this world. But God suffers with us and will provide comfort. In the end, we must agree with Rabbi Kushner:

No one ever promised us a life free from pain. The most anyone promised us was that we would not be alone in our pain, and that we would be able to draw upon a source outside ourselves for the strength and courage we would need to survive life's tragedies. [41]

Conclusion - An Answer for Epicurus

So finally, how do we answer Epicurus? First, we tell him of our universe. The whole of the cosmos is in process. The evolutionary forces which shape us, even now, have been a constant on this planet for hundreds of millions of years. Evolution is chance seeking survival. We see this and more as theists. Evolution is the divine seeking novelty, growth, communion. God does not coerce but lures the new from the common and the worn.

The evolutive processes that permeate the entirety of our universe are processes of freedom. And freedom brings possibilities; possibilities of amazing novelty and staggering beauty. Humanity's existence is testimony to the products of such freedom. For from within us has emerged a profound penetrating, self-conscious intellect that questions. We are that bit of the universe that can reflect on the universe.

But our world is not only light. We have only to look. Life is attended by pain and suffering; self-conscious life by the internal torment of knowing. We see, finally, the cost of the universe's freedom. With this freedom also comes the darker possibilities that rot and fester in the shadows. Evil comes from freedom. Out of love God, gave humanity freedom of choice and nature freedom of process.

I believe that Epicurus would understand the truth of this; but would he draw comfort from the knowing? Probably not. While this solution has the explanatory efficacy we seek, it does not speak to the heart. Our search for existential relief is to be found in humanity's evolution of mind and soul. Primitive self-centered consciousness grew and, slowly, began to apprehend a dimension removed from mundane existence. With apprehension of the Transcendent came comfort and strength. And hope; hope for a life beyond this one.

Within our theodicy, we must make room for an afterlife. As unlikely as it may seem, some form of personal existence after our physical death is a rational expectation of theistic belief. Indeed, the goal of the divine evolutionary nudge may be the emergence of life that can truly commune with Him beyond time.

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Endnotes

[1] Cottingham (1996), p. 260.

[2]lantinga (1974), pp. 24-29.

[3]For reviews of these see Chapters I - XI of Hick (1977) and Chapters 1 - 16 of Griffin (1976).

[4]Hick (1977).

[5]Swinburne in Peterson (1992).

[6]Polkinghorne (1998, pp. 101-124) provides a summary of this philosophy. In one passage, of particular directness to scientist and theologian alike, he tells us: "Like most scientists, I believe that the advance of science is concerned not just with our ability to manipulate the physical world, but with our capacity to gain knowledge of its actual nature. In a word, I am a realist. Of course, such knowledge is to a degree partial and corrigible. Our attainment is verisimilitude, not absolute truth. Our method is the creative interpretation of experience, not rigorous deduction from it. Thus, I am a critical realist." These thoughts should be contrasted with post-modern conceptions of science as relativistic and language-laden pseudo-knowledge and Christian fundamentalist views of science as God-intended and God-directed delusions. These views do not hold up to close scrutiny.

[7]I claim this in the face of post-modern skepticism that seeks to undermine the credibility of scientific propositions based on the alleged cultural-conditioning and relativism of science. To a practicing scientist whose work and conclusions are based on a century of science that was and is conducted in radically diverse cultural and political situations, the post-modern proposal would be laughable if it were not for the damage it can do to the perception of science.

[8]For an introduction to process thought, see Chapter 1 of Cobb & Griffin (1976).

[9]Such views do not originate with Whitehead, but can be traced as far back as to Heraclitus (540- 475 B.C.E.) who developed a philosophy of perpetual change, expressed in his saying 'you cannot step twice into the same river'. Stead (1994), p. 7.

[10]Cobb & Griffin (1976), Chapters 3 and 6.

[11]These include: Cobb & Griffin (1976), Edwards (1999), Haught (2000), Peacocke (1993), Schitz-Moorman (1997), and Ward (1996, 1998).

[12]Teilhard (1969), p. 28.

[13]Teilhard (1969), pp. 173-186.

[14]Ibid, p. 181.

[15]Cobb and Griffin (1976), p.65,

[16]Haught (2000), p. 53.

[17]This quote is from the first paragraph of the first chapter of Whitehead's *Process and Reality* entitled: "In Defense of Speculative Philosophy".

[18]Griffin in Davis (1981), p. 113.

[19]My claim of divine action in the world is not without its problems, for if God can and does enter into human history, why does He not do so more often to help us? This is part of the problem of evil and will be dealt with in the next section.

[20]Jaspers (1951), pp.99-102.

[21]Teilhard (1969), pp.33, 80-84, 149, 196.

[22]Cobb & Griffin (1976), pp. 69-75; Ford in Peterson (1992), pp. 247-266; Griffin (1976), pp. 275-310; Griffin in Davis (1981), pp.101-136.

[23]Schitz-Moormann (1997), 110-116, 144-145; Polkinghorne (1998), pp. 93-95; Ward (1998), pp. 92- 93.

[24]Haught (2000), 137-143; 184.

[25]Here, I take the standard meaning of evil to be any thing (eg, an idea, action, occurrence) that causes the world to be a worse place than it would have been otherwise. Moral evil is evil caused by the will of man and natural evil is all other evil.

[26]The concept of Primary Causes is part of Aquinas' doctrine of Deficient Secondary Causes that sought to reconcile human freedom with divine omnipotence (see Griffin (1976), pp. 80-82). According to this doctrine, every event has two different kinds of causes. While God is the primary cause of every event, every event must also have a finite, secondary cause. Aquinas affirms that God does not exert all causation and stresses that an effect is not due partly to God and partly to natural cause, but rather is wholly caused by God and wholly caused by the natural cause.

[27] Determinism can be discussed at several levels of causation, including physical, genetic and psychological. A moment of reflection brings two questions to mind: If psychologically-based determinism obtains, how do features of psychology depend on genetics? If genetically-based determinism obtains, how do genetics depend on the chemistry and physics of genes? While these are questions of enormous interest, addressing them in any detail goes beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, in my discussion, I will assume a 'purist' position and consider only physically-based determinism.

[28] Leakey & Lewin (1977), Chapters 3 and 4.

[29] Schmitz-Moorman (1997), p. 116.

[30] For a discussion of determinism as it relates to the mind-body problem, see Lycan in Bunnin & Tsui-James (1996).

[31] Murphy (1999), pp. 555-556.

[32] Bielfeldt (1999) gives a useful analysis of Murphy's claims.

[33] In these pursuits, we should expect considerable illumination from endeavors of scientists to develop non-human intelligence in machines.

[34] Teilhard (1969), p. 196.

[35] Polkinghorne (1998), p. 94.

[36] For a detailed account of divine action see the collection of essays edited by Russel, Murphy, and Peacocke (1995). Briefer treatments can be found in all of the science-religion books cited in the bibliography of this paper.

[37] Polkinghorne (1998), p. 95.

[38] These categories are listed in order of increasing perceived frequency. That is, while the first two categories of divine intervention are imperceptible to most, even to the point of complete dismissal by naturalistic scientism, the third is rare, yet part of recorded history, and the fourth is common and available to all who seek. I qualify 'frequency' with 'perceived', since natural laws, like the material universe, is held in existence from one moment to the next by God and, as I repeatedly emphasized, evolution is an ongoing process. Thus, in reality, these categories of divine action are continuous and, arguably, of greatest frequency.

[39] Brown (1998), p. 64-65

[40] It is interesting to speculate with Arthur Peacocke (1993, p. 318) that Jesus is this evolutionary breakthrough.

[41] Kushner (1981), p. 133.

Ross Stein is a research biochemist in drug discovery at DuPont Pharmaceuticals Company. His email address is Ross.L.Stein@dupontpharma.com