



THEISTIC EVOLUTION

Session 3: Love Amid Suffering

Introduction

Watch a YouTube video of the former director of the Human Genome Project, Francis Collins, introduce the topic of suffering as a part of the theistic evolutionary process.

The Problem of Evil & Suffering

Psalm 5:1-7, James 1:2-4 & 13-14, Hebrews 12:5-11

Learning Activity: Counseling a Friend

Imagine that a person you know is going through a period of terrible suffering and tragedy. A loved one has died, she is struggling to live day-to-day, and she is wracked with depression. She is struggling to make sense of it all. She comes to you for guidance and asks the perennial questions, “Why does all this evil in our world exist?” and “What is the purpose of suffering?”

1. Use the passages above to answer her perennial questions from a Christian, biblical perspective.
2. Use the basic outline of natural selection below to answer her perennial questions from a theistic evolutionary perspective.

A Simplified Outline of Natural Selection:

1. Gene mutations occur in the DNA of living creatures.
2. A favorable gene mutation may produce a favorable characteristic in a living creature.
3. A favorable characteristic may allow that living creature to compete more successfully for scarce resources and have a greater chance of survival.
4. The descendants of this living creature inherit this favorable characteristic. Gradually, those who lack it die off because of their inability to compete, and all members of that species eventually come to possess it.
5. As more random mutations and the favorable characteristics they produce accumulate in a species or in a sub-population of a species, an entirely new species develops.
6. Natural selection requires a large amount of time and suffering to produce the various species we find in our world today.

Note: The role God plays in the process of natural selection is debated among theistic evolutionists, and it will depend on where they fall on the spectrum of views. However, one author states, “But in spite of the differences, they are all in agreement concerning their assumptions that death, disease, birth defects, struggle, suffering, inordinate pain, carnivorous violence, bloodshed, and destructive ecological disasters of every kind were all prevalent on earth from its earliest beginnings.”¹

Supporters of Theistic Evolution: Christopher Southgate

Christopher Southgate was originally trained as a research biochemist. He is now a professor of theology and religion at the University of Exeter in England and specializes in the intersection between evolutionary theory and theology, especially the problem of suffering in philosophy, science, and theology. Below is a summary of one of his books, *The Groaning of Creation*.

Christopher Southgate attempts to combine natural selection with the love of the Creator. He expresses well the theistic evolutionist’s conundrum. In explaining the goal of his book, he writes: “I seek to show that the evolving creation is an ambiguous place with an ambiguous history, and that God may be both praised and questioned when God’s creation is contemplated honestly.”² Southgate says that evolutionists must be convinced that “there is a necessary correlation between the values to which the evolutionary process gives rise and the disvalues of suffering and extinction.”³ In other words, they must be convinced that the good produced by evolution outweighs the evil (the “disvalues”) God uses to create it: “A good and loving God would have created the best of all possible universes in terms of the balance between its potential for realizing creaturely values and the concomitant pain.”⁴ In fact, Southgate says that the good creation as we see it can only come from the suffering that is built into the process of evolution. He asks: “Why did God not create a world free from all this suffering and struggle? . . . we cannot know the answer to this question.” But one thing is certain: We must begin with the assumption “that the formation of the sorts of life forms represented in the biosphere required an evolutionary process.”⁵ He explains, “I hold that the sort of universe we have, in which complexity emerges in a process governed by thermodynamic necessity and Darwinian natural selection, and therefore by death, pain, predation, and self-assertion, is the only sort of universe that could give rise to the range, beauty, complexity, and diversity of creatures the Earth has produced.”⁶ Central to that goodness is human freedom: “The only way to arrive at certain good features of creation, including freely choosing self-conscious creatures, [is] via a route involving creaturely suffering.”⁷ Southgate explains why human beings have such a penchant for evil: “How then do evil powers have such a hold on the human will? Because of the consistency with which God upholds and treasures the evolved freedom of that will. The same processes that gave rise to that freedom are the ones that endowed humans with their capacities for its misuse.”⁸ In other words, God will not hinder our evil will because if he did he would also be hindering our ability to choose freely and be all that we can be.

¹ Greg Haslam, “The Fall and Death,” in *Should Christians Embrace Evolution?* ed. Norman C. Nevin, 58.

² Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, ix.

³ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 47.

⁴ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 48.

⁵ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 48.

⁶ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 29.

⁷ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 31.

⁸ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 39.

Southgate wants to enrich the discussion by retaining Scripture's emphasis on Jesus' work. "It is possible to postulate that the creation has unfolded as God intended it to unfold, and yet is still in need of final healing and consummation."⁹ Evolution can take creation only so far. The task of healing creation—ridding it of the tools God had to use to create it—is Jesus' work. It is also the work of God's people as they work along with God to overcome the reasons why creation is groaning (Romans 8:22).

Respond to the following theistic evolutionists, who emphasize similar points as Southgate made above:

1. *Suffering Leads to New Life*: "Ironically, therefore, death must be another part of God's good creation. . . . To accept death as essential to biological life is easier if you view natural selection as a positive process whereby the negativity of death is redeemed for the sake of new life."¹⁰
2. *Suffering Leads to Freedom*: "Moral evil represents the price for human freedom. . . . For there to be the possibility of good, ethical behavior—especially where we can love God and other human beings—there has to be freedom. This freedom allows for both good and evil."¹¹
3. *Suffering is Part of Goodness*: "The only one who defined the concept of 'good' is the Author of Good. . . . But Scripture indicates that predation is part of God's ordained and sustained plan. . . . In this way, the suffering and death associated with evolution can be viewed in a new light, and even be seen as a good aspect of the Lord's method of creation."¹²

Conclusion

Compare this view to the sequence of events about the fall into sin in Genesis 3. In what ways does a theistic evolutionary view affect the character of God?

⁹ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 31.

¹⁰ Daniel Harrell, *Nature's Witness: How Evolution Can Inspire Faith*, 108.

¹¹ Gregory Cootsona, *Creation and Last Things* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2002), 64,65.

¹² Denis Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation*, 296.