

## OPEN ACCESS VERSION

### Response

Christopher Southgate

*Abstract: In this brief response to the papers of Sollereeder and Allen in this issue, Southgate considers the state of the debate on evolutionary theodicy, and specifically the source of the disvalues in creation. He responds to Allen's Augustinian suggestions by reference to a recent article on Augustine and theodicy by Stan Rosenberg. He ends by reflecting on the journey in his own thinking in relation to suffering.*

I thank Bethany Sollereeder and Paul Allen for their generous thinking about my work. In this reply I consider the state of the theological debate on suffering in nature and go on to reflect on the development of my explorations in theodicy in the last twenty years.

The key fault-line in the conversation in evolutionary theodicy seems to me to be whether God's first intentions in creation are realised in the natural world as we know it. And I am fairly sure that Sollereeder would join me in having the courage to answer yes, that God, for whatever set of reasons, did create processes that *both* give rise to great beauty, ingenuity and complexity in flourishing life, and also give rise to predation, parasitism, intensity of competition for food supplies and mating opportunities, and in turn to great creaturely suffering and very widespread extinction. This conclusion leads to the so-called 'only way' argument, that God necessarily had to create the suffering and destruction in creating the fecundity and the flourishing.<sup>i</sup>

Among those who want to say that God's first intentions are not wholly realised, one may make a further distinction between those who ascribe the obstruction of those divine intentions to a conscious rebelling force – this is the position of Michael Lloyd,<sup>ii</sup> who draws on the rebellion of angels to account for the violence in creation – and

those who want to say that some mysterious influence obtrudes upon God's intentions, and that the world we know is a combination of those intentions and the mysterious negativity. I have called these approaches 'mysterious fallenness', and place in this category Neil Messer, with his appeal to a Barthian '*Nichtige*' or 'nothingness' as the influence,<sup>iii</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond with her language of 'Shadow Sophia',<sup>iv</sup> and Nicola Hoggard Creegan with her metaphor of the 'tares' growing among the wheat in the parable from Matthew 13.<sup>v</sup>

So, I am wondering in which category to place Paul Allen's careful and fascinating response. In his section on privation, he invites me to think about tectonic plates not in terms of the same processes causing fertility and flourishing, and also suffering and destruction, but in terms of 'the potential for flourishing being and the privative character of non-being'. For Paul, as I understand him, disvalue is not to be weighed against value, because they are teleologically different. Perhaps in this area I am too much the physical scientist and not enough the Augustinian metaphysician, too rooted in efficient causation to see the nuances of final causation dissecting out value from disvalue. But I do resist the grafting of this category of *privatio boni* into physical processes to which it does not obviously belong. Those physical processes cause both great benefit and great harm, and do not seem to stand in need of metaphysical dissection.

What is the motive for such dissection? It seems to me that it is to safeguard the absolute goodness of God and God's intentions. But I wonder if it succeeds. Just as I can pose to the advocates of mysterious fallenness the question – did their God set out to create straw-eating lions, and prove unable to do so,<sup>vi</sup> so I can pose to Paul Allen the question: why does the activity of the absolutely good God give rise to 'the privative character of non-being, the decay and destruction of being'? If this is a divine decision, then has the goodness of God been safeguarded? And if this is a logical necessity, then this fancy privative language has only restated the 'only way' argument.

Interestingly, a recent essay by Stan Rosenberg in the valuable collection he has edited called *Finding Ourselves after Darwin*, offers a re-reading of Augustine on natural evil.<sup>vii</sup> In Paul Allen's terms, this is a Manichaean retrieval of Augustine.

Rosenberg rejects the notion that Augustine thought of the pre-Fall world as perfect and lacking in disvalue. He cites texts suggesting both that that pre-Fall world naturally contained contingency, change and decay, and also that it contained creatures such as poisonous vipers. So, he concludes, 'the Fall did not create hurricanes, earthquakes, plagues, and the like. As a result of the fall, however, humans relate to such things differently and so experience torment'.<sup>viii</sup> The origin of *privatio boni*, then, is a moral and spiritual choice by spiritual beings that leads, among other effects, to our failure to see the tapestry of creation as a whole. And indeed, I do acknowledge the power of the *privatio boni* approach as a way of describing moral evil, so perhaps I am enough of an Augustinian after all.

In Allen's other section, on the power of the demonic, he invites me to draw nearer to the dualisms that are inescapably present in the New Testament, whether in the figure of Satan in the Gospels or the personified power of Sin in St Paul's writings. This takes us back in the direction of Michael Lloyd's position – creation is the ambiguous place it is because of the rebellion of angelic powers. Again, I find this leads to an awkward and unsustainable dissection of the natural world into what God intended and what demonic influence has caused. The straw-eating lions raise their ugly heads once more. If this dissection is to be resisted, then I prefer to retain my sense that, whatever the mysterious origins of spiritual rebellion against God, it gains its power only in relation to human choices.<sup>ix</sup> If you like to put it this way, the compulsive character of negative human choices draws them further into the chasm of non-being. Or, in a more Pauline formulation, it transfers humans more and more under the lordship of Sin, from which they are in need of salvation by a power greater than their own.

Allen is right that redemption in Christ sits in the centre of my position, and that it tells us that the protological creation is only half the story. It gives rise not only to a world full of beauty and also suffering, but also to a world capable of hosting, and being saved by, the Incarnation of the divine Son.

As we look around at the world today, two thousand years after the Cross and Resurrection, we can only groan at the extent to which love, goodness and meaning are so often absent from our words and actions. The Spirit too groans with us, and

perhaps part of the calling of Christians is to hear those groans of the divine longing more clearly. But I am by no means, to return to Allen's questions, over-optimistic about human nature. Rather I think human self-sacrificial goodness and human selfish rejection of the good co-arise in the evolutionary process, and the one is as important to explain as the other.

Where does this field need to go in the future? Lloyd is right, I think, to press exponents of the only way argument to say more about what this constraint on God's activity consists of. Likewise, I invite Messer, Deane-Drummond, and Hoggard Creegan to clarify the origins of the mysterious fallenness to which they in different ways appeal. If it is not a logical inevitability affecting God's intentions, and if Rosenberg is right to reject a *privatio* argument for the origins of natural evil, where does it come from?

I want to end by indicating briefly the direction in which my thinking has gone since *The Groaning of Creation* was published in 2008. In various articles and chapters I have refined my response to fellow theodicians.<sup>x</sup> But as Sollereeder explains with such clarity, in my new monograph *Theology in a Suffering World*,<sup>xi</sup> I have explored discourse on divine glory as a way of exploring the nature of the God who has given rise to this ambiguous world. This has been an exercise in facing up to the enigma of what can be known of God from God's creation, rather than providing reasons to excuse God. To see this as a 'constitutive approach to theodicy'<sup>xii</sup> is a very interesting suggestion of Sollereeder's. Whether the glory-work fits that category depends, I think, on whether the deeper exploration of God involved in such a theodicy is *through* the experience of suffering, as one might argue from the cry of dereliction as we hear it in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 15.34), or *in spite of* it, as one might argue from the Indian Ocean tsunami.

Versions of this contemplative strategy might link with Sollereeder's proposal for a compassionate theodicy. But I have also, as she indicated, been involved in reflection on traumatising events,<sup>xiii</sup> and that leads me to ask why Christian responses to disaster rarely make much use of the resources of protest in the Jewish tradition, from the Psalms onwards. Specifically, why in Christian countries in which terrible disasters have occurred, stemming directly from the natural forces by which

God created and continues to sustain this beautiful world, is there not more articulation of the cry that God is culpable, God has failed God's people, a cry so agonisingly familiar in Judaism following the *Shoah*?<sup>xiv</sup> Perhaps Christians need more liturgical resources that acknowledge that sense of protest and disappointment with God, and yet *in spite of that protest* affirm continued hope in God.

So, my journey over twenty years has in a sense been from arguing that disvalues exist in creation *because* of certain reasons that can be given on behalf of God to holding fast to a God known in Jesus *in spite of* recognising God as deeply implicated in those disvalues. Is that just me, I wonder, or is it typical of the journey of aging and seeing one's life silt up with sufferings, one's own and those of loved others?

The common theme in both approaches is my effort to be committed to honest exploration of the ways of God with the world, not seeking to avoid the awkward implications of what the sciences tell us about that world.

Bio: Christopher Southgate was trained originally as a biochemist. He has been lecturing and writing on the science-religion debate since 1993. He is the editor of the textbook *God, Humanity and the Cosmos* (T&T Clark, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn 2011), and the author of *The Groaning of Creation* (WJK 2008), and *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (CUP, 2018). He currently serves as Professor of Christian Theodicy at the University of Exeter, UK, and is also the author of eight collections of poetry.

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<sup>i</sup> Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). A similar argument lies

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behind Nancey Murphy's 'by-product' position, 'Science and the Problem of Evil: Suffering as a By-product of a Finely Tuned Cosmos' in *Physics and Cosmology: scientific perspectives on the problem of evil in nature* ed. N. Murphy, R.J. Russell, and W.R. Stoeger SJ. (Vatican City, Vatican Observatory and Berkeley, Ca., Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 2007), 131-52, and Niels Gregersen's 'package deal' formulation, 'The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World.' *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, (2001), 192-207.

ii Michael Lloyd, 'The Fallenness of Nature: Three Nonhumans Suspects' in *Finding Ourselves after Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil* ed. Stanley P. Rosenberg, Michael Burdett, Michael Lloyd, Benno van den Toren (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018), 262-79.

iii Neil Messer, 'Evolution and Theodicy: How (Not) to do Science and Theology', *Zygon, Journal of Religion and Science* 53(3) (2018), 821-35.

iv Celia Deane-Drummond, 'Perceiving Natural Evil through the Lens of Divine Glory. A Conversation with Christopher Southgate', *Zygon, Journal of Religion and Science* 53(3) (2018), 792-807.

v Nicola Hoggard Creegan, 'Theodicy: A Response to Christopher Southgate', *Zygon, Journal of Religion and Science* 53(3) (2018), 808-20; *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

vi Christopher Southgate, 'Re-reading Genesis, John and Job: A Christian's Response to Darwinism', *Zygon, Journal of Religion and Science* 46(2) (2011), 365-90.

vii Stanley P. Rosenberg, 'Can Nature Be "Red in Tooth and Claw" in the Thought of Augustine? The Later Invention and Misunderstanding of a Major Theologian' in *Finding Ourselves after Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil* ed. Stanley P. Rosenberg, Michael Burdett, Michael Lloyd, Benno van den Toren (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018), 226-43.

viii Rosenberg, 'Can Nature', 242.

ix Southgate, 'Re-reading'.

x E.g. Christopher Southgate, 'Does God's care make any difference? Theological reflection on the suffering of non-human creatures' in *Christian Faith and the Earth:*

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*Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* ed. Ernst Conradie, Sigurd Bergmann, Celia Deane-Drummond and Denis Edwards. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 97-114; 'God's Creation Wild and Violent, and our Care of Other Animals', *Perspectives in Science and Christian Faith*, 67 (2015), 245-53; 'Free-Process and Only-Way Arguments' in *Finding Ourselves after Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil* ed. by Stanley P. **Rosenberg**, Michael Burdett, Michael Lloyd, Benno van den Toren (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2018), 293-305; 'Response with a Select Bibliography', *Zygon, Journal of Religion and Science* 53(3) (2018), 909-30.

<sup>xi</sup> Christopher Southgate, *Theology in a suffering world: Glory and Longing*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>xii</sup> Christopher Southgate and Andrew Robinson, 'Varieties of Theodicy: An Exploration of Responses to the Problem of Evil based on a Typology of Good-Harm Analyses' in *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the problem of evil in nature*, ed. Nancey Murphy, Robert J. Russell, and William Stoeger SJ, (CTNS and Vatican Observatory: Berkeley, Ca. and Vatican City, 2007), 67-90.

<sup>xiii</sup> See [www.tragedyandcongregations.org.uk](http://www.tragedyandcongregations.org.uk).

<sup>xiv</sup> Made very vivid in David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), e.g. at 299.