Introduction

The Darwinian Problem of Evil

In this book, I invite readers to join me in facing one of the most difficult challenges that modern evolutionary science poses to traditional theistic religion, based as it is on belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect God. I refer to this challenge simply as the Darwinian Problem.

The source of the Darwinian Problem is the vast vista of animal suffering that has come into view with dramatic discoveries in the natural sciences. The Darwinian Problem is a modern form of an ancient and perennial problem for theism – the problem of God and natural evil. Unlike moral evil, which arises from the deliberate choices and actions of moral persons, so-called natural evil originates in nonhuman systems of nature. The problem is in trying to explain how such evil could exist in a world designed and created by a supremely powerful, wise, and good God. Pioneering scientists – especially in the fields of geology and biology – have made discoveries about systems of nature here on earth that make the problem of God and natural evil more difficult for theism now than it has ever been. In this book, I give a detailed account of this new Darwinian Problem, I consider the prevailing solutions that thinkers offer, and then I offer my own account of God and natural evil as unveiled in this new Darwinian form.

So what exactly is the Darwinian Problem? I believe this question, along with several distinctive – and controversial – features of the book, calls for brief preliminary attention.

In Chapter 1, I propose that scientists have not merely made new discoveries that advance our knowledge of the natural realm. They have thoroughly revised our picture of nature on earth by unveiling it in

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Darwinian evolutionary terms. I refer to this revolutionary new picture in shorthand simply as the Darwinian World. The unveiling of this Darwinian World in the sciences is the source of the Darwinian Problem that confronts theistic religions – most notably, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. My concern in this book is primarily with the challenge posed to distinctly Jewish and Christian canonical theism – theism that is shaped by and stands within historic Jewish and Christian canonical biblical and theological tradition.

I propose that the Darwinian World consists of four interconnected unveilings about the origin and evolutionary development of the earth and species. I label them, the unveilings of (1) "deep evolutionary time," (2) "a plurality of worlds," (3) "anti-cosmic micro-monsters," and (4) "evil inscribed." Individually and together, these unveilings include a configuration of natural evil that adherents of theism did not expect, to say the least. The configuration of natural evil unveiled in the conditions of existence for animals, both past and present, seems inexplicable on the assumptions of theism. Contemporary atheists see the Darwinian Problem as proof positive that theism is false. While they may overstate this case, as I believe they do, it is also important that theists not underestimate the seriousness of the Darwinian Problem. Let me give a brief preview of the points I make in explaining why.

The first unveiling – "deep evolutionary time" – is self-explanatory. In the course of studying fossils in sedimentary layers of rock, the new corps of stratigraphic geologists unearthed the hidden truth that there has been an unfathomably long pre-human history of species, and perhaps more stunningly, that this history has an evolutionary character, with species gradually evolving from very simple forms into evermore complex ones, including ours. This unveiling completely blew away the commonly accepted "biblical" calculation that the earth began around 6,000 years ago, along with the picture of God creating all existing species fully formed at the same time. More seriously, however, the unveiling made it very hard to ascribe natural evil in the animal realm to a human Fall. Furthermore, it revealed that the sheer amount of such evil that has transpired on earth is unimaginably great – billions of nonhuman creatures caught in natural disasters, the savagery of predation, various diseases, and of course, pain and death – during many tens of millions of years! Canonical theists still debate over how best to match this picture of existence for animals with their particular version of theism. The other unveilings, moreover, only sharpen the problematic point of the question. Does this picture of the pre-human planetary past look at all like

something designed and directed by an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-benevolent God?

The unveiling of (2) "a plurality of worlds" is also decidedly modern – and much more complicated to explain than the first one. The phrase comes from the title of a book by William Whewell (1794–1866), who was Darwin's colleague and tutor at Cambridge. In *Of the Plurality of Worlds* (1853), Whewell expressed worried wonderment at the discovery that entire "tribes" – whole "worlds" – of animals unlike any species existing now had inhabited the earth in strangely disparate succession during the planetary past.[1] By now, we are used to picturing this pre-human "plurality of worlds" in the terms coined by the prominent evolutionist Stephen J. Gould, who referred to the unexpected rising and falling of entire biomes – "tribes of animals" coming and going in an epochal past – as a pattern of "punctuated equilibrium."[2] The course of evolution has not been a seamlessly smooth progression that would at least arguably evince evidence of purposeful divinely directed creative design. Instead, its broken and unpredictable development seems to be more a matter of undirected random chance, particularly when it comes to the mass extinctions that "punctuated" the flourishing of entire "worlds." We now know that 99.5 percent of all species that ever walked the earth are gone, most often in a violently horrific, cataclysmic fashion, many of them without leaving so much as a genetic legacy to generations yet to come.

I will propose that this unveiling adds a subtle yet important *aesthetic* aspect to the conspicuous moral problem of Darwinian animal suffering. A major thesis of the book, in fact, is that the aesthetics of Darwinian evil intensify and deepen the *moral* challenge that the Darwinian Problem poses to theism, so that even if one does not think that animals can really suffer (see Chapter 3), the Darwinian Problem is not entirely dispelled. In that light, then, I propose that to be successful, a God-justifying account must somehow provide a perspective in which to *see* signs of divinity in the nonhuman evolutionary realm. It is extremely hard to make this pre-human history of a "plurality of worlds" fit

[1] William Whewell , *Of the Plurality of Worlds*. A Facsimile of the First Edition Published in 1853: Plus Previously Unpublished Material Excised by the Author Just Before the Book Went to Press, and Whewell's Dialogue Rebutting His Critics, Reprinted from the Second Edition. Edited and with New Introductory Material by Michael Ruse (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[2] Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge, "Punctuated Equilibria: The Tempo and Mode of Evolution Reconsidered," *Paleobiology* 3 (1977): 115–51.

plausibly into any story told in the terms of theism. Nevertheless, in Chapters 8–10, I will try to do so.

Meanwhile, the unveiling of (3) "anti-cosmic micro-monsters" refers to the unexpected discovery that huge hordes of microbial, viral, and other sorts of monstrous miniature creatures inhabit the earth. This unveiling adds to the aesthetics of horror created by the mass extinctions of entire animal "worlds." And obviously, this horror conjoins with the moral aspect of the unveiling. Do these hideously horrific creatures really reflect direction by divine design? Or are these "anti-cosmic micro-monsters," so called, yet further proof that no God of theism exists? To be acceptable, I propose that a God-justifying explanation must take this troubling form of Darwinian evil into account, too.

Finally, however, the unveiling of (4) "evil inscribed" refers to the Darwinian theory that the driving mechanism of evolution in the creation of species is natural selection, or "survival of the fittest." This thesis – that adaptation to the natural environment (rather than miraculous divine intervention) accounts for the origin and success of existing species – contains the core of the Darwinian Problem. For it entails that, if the God of theism did create species, it was by an extraordinarily inefficient, wasteful, and brutal means. Is it not rather the best part of rationality to see the thesis of natural selection as almost inherently atheistic?

Going on with this "phenomenology" of the Darwinian Problem, then, in Chapter 2, I discuss both informal and formal anti-theistic arguments that are based on these aspects of Darwinian evil. Considering these arguments helps further to show how very challenging the Darwinian Problem is. The arguments will also serve as points of reference for assessing the theists' accounts of Darwinian evil that we will consider in Chapters 5–7.

The discussion in Chapter 3 is a digression. In this chapter, I briefly consider two paths that some thinkers recommend that theists take in order to get *around* the Darwinian Problem rather than try to face it full on. They are quite different appeals to serious skepticism towards the assumptions that create the problem in the first place.

The first skeptical approach is known as neo-Cartesian theory. Advocates of the theory contend that we are in no position to *know* that animals really do suffer, as they appear to do. Appearances can deceive, and adherents of this approach propose that we have good grounds for suspecting that the strong appearance of animal suffering is deceptive. The main contention is that animals very likely lack the sort of mental capacity necessary for real, subjective, humanlike suffering. They

reinforce this suspicion with experimental examples showing that both human and nonhuman subjects can react reflexively to painful stimuli without actually processing them consciously as pain. The theory provides theists, then, with an expedient means of escape from the Darwinian Problem, insofar as it presupposes that animal suffering is real. Some theists propose that this neo-Cartesian thesis is probable on theism, because (so they argue) if God employed natural selection in creating species, it is improbable, on the goodness of God, that the apparent suffering by animals that is inherent in that process is actually real.

As tempting as this way around the Darwinian Problem is, however, I give reasons for thinking that it is unwise for theists to do so. For one thing, the appearance of animal suffering is very strong, and so we need unusually powerful evidence in order to override the commonsense intuition that their suffering is real. I appeal to writers who contend that the evidence for neo-Cartesian theory is not nearly strong enough to do so. Furthermore, scientific evidence against the theory is growing, and a consensus seems to be building for belief in animal sentience in the higher species, at least, and for need to worry about the moral obligations we have to nonhuman beings. Meanwhile, the theory strikes many of us as all too like a pretext for justifying highly profitable concerns – such as in mass production of animals for food, or in experimental uses of animals in laboratories – for which the reality of animal suffering is a major inconvenience. The reality of animal suffering is also a major inconvenience for theists. However, I suggest that we are well advised to deal with it as best we can rather than seem to be disingenuous and evasive in the extreme.

Meanwhile, the second way around the Darwinian Problem is fittingly known as Skeptical Theism. The label comes from its main skeptical thesis: human beings are not in an epistemic position to *know* that evils that strongly *appear* to be morally unjustified – morally gratuitous rather than necessary – really *are* unjustified. Again, we are urged to suspect that appearances deceive. We should rather *assume*, on whatever grounds we have for belief in theism, that God has some morally justifying reason for apparently gratuitous evils. As for the Darwinian Problem, then, theists may justifiably appeal to the limitations of human knowledge – compared with God's unlimited cognitive capacity – in order to avoid having to give a positive God-justifying account of evolutionary suffering by animals. It is indeed tempting to take this skeptical way around the problem.

As with neo-Cartesian theory, I propose that Skeptical Theism is too counterintuitive to be sufficiently plausible for adoption in a God-justifying account. Further, however – and more importantly – I suggest that this

skeptical thesis is implausible on theism itself, and especially on canonical Christian theism. Why so? In brief, I contend that it is implausible because it entails that God is silent on the reasons that God has for evils, and such silence seems unlikely on the goodness of God towards human creatures, particularly if God's goodness is *parental*, as Christian theists believe it is. The appeal to human cognitive limitations becomes irrelevant to this line of criticism, because on the one hand, giving some sort of comprehensible and reassuring explanation for extreme suffering could not be hard for an omniscient and omnipotent God. On the other hand, further, we must think that as a "parent," God would wish to give at least the glimmerings of an explanation to dangerously confused suffering "children." In this book, at any rate, I assume that God has not been completely silent on this score and has provided some sort of explanation for evils that are inscrutable on ordinary moral grounds. In the end, I will argue that if we look in the right places, in the right way, we can at least begin to make out the bare beginnings of an explanation, although it may not be the one we want!

In Chapter 4, I focus on the slippery subject of standards that an account of God and evil must meet in order to be a "success." There are three main issues to unravel.

One issue involves the *evidential* quality of the account. Does it deal with all the relevant – and worst – instances of the evil in view, or does it omit important evidence that supporters of anti-theistic arguments include? The purpose of Chapters 1 and 2 is to make sure that this evidential condition has been met.

Included in this evidential area of concern is something I refer to as the Seeing Condition. This evidential condition requires that the God-justifying account should not merely make the relevant evils seem plausible on theism in a manner that is too intellectually abstract to seem genuine. I argue that the account must hold together intellectually, of course, but that it should also help enable people to regain the "theistic sight," the ability to "see" signs of divine design and purpose in nature, that the Darwinian unveilings have weakened, or perhaps obscured altogether. Restoration of rational yet deeply intuitive and affective "theistic sight," then, will be a major purpose of Chapters 8–10.

Besides evidential concerns, however, there is the crucial matter of which *moral* conditions to employ in thinking about the moral agency of God. What moral conditions, if any, should we think a being such as *God* must meet in order to be justified in causing and/or allowing – "authorizing" (the term I prefer) – evils? On this question, readers should know in advance that I part ways with the majority of writers on God and evil. I follow Roderick

Chisholm's advice to take an unconventional avenue of explanation, instead.

Chisholm expressed serious doubt that any God-justifying account could avoid failure so long as one accepted the moral-justificatory conditions stipulated by authors of anti-theistic evidential arguments. These authors stipulate that to be justified morally in authorizing serious evils, God must meet conditions that we normally enforce on ordinary – human – moral persons in theoretical ethics. Normally, for instance, we enforce the Necessity Condition.

Briefly, the Necessity Condition rests on the normative belief that a morally good person always minimizes evil so far as s/he can, and so authorizes evils only when *necessary*, i.e., when it is impossible for some reason to prevent the evil. For instance, authorizing an evil would be justified on the Necessity Condition if preventing the evil would cause something even worse, or would thwart the forthcoming of a good that outweighs the evil. We will also consider the widely held "only-way" thesis that Darwinian evolution was the *only* means by which God could have created an acceptably valuable world (see Chapter 6).

The trouble is that it seems implausible on its face that an omnipotent and omniscient God would ever be forced in this tragic moral fashion into having to authorize *any* evil, and even less so that no non-Darwinian way of world making was open to God. However, if it was not *necessary* for God to authorize the Darwinian configuration of animal suffering, what moral justification could there be for God to do so? Chisholm recommended an alternative approach that contemporary theists have rarely taken. He proposed that it is enough for theists to make it plausible that God will *defeat* the evil that God has authorized. What is it, according to Chisholm, to defeat evil?

In the essay "The Defeat of Good and Evil," the significance of which far exceeds its succinct size, Chisholm explained that an evil is defeated when it is integrated as a constitutive part of a valuable composite whole that not only outweighs the evil, but could not be as valuable as it is *without* the evil. In that instance, the evil remains evil in its own right, but it is defeated, since it is made to be a good-making, non-regrettable part of the whole.[3] The evil of sadness, for example, is defeated by the compassion that someone feels

[3] Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 42 (1968–69): 21–38. Cited in Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 53–68.

for a friend. Perhaps the most obvious example, however, is the Christian account of Jesus' death and resurrection. The evil of Jesus' torturous death by crucifixion is not just outweighed by his subsequent resurrection, but is defeated by it, since the crucifixion is integrated as an essential good-making part of the larger redemptive whole, which could not have the value it does without the crucifixion. Instead of the ordinary ethical Necessity Condition, then, following Chisholm, I propose that God's only moral obligation in authorizing evil is to meet the Defeat Condition.

Meanwhile, in the same essay, Chisholm made a second recommendation that I will also build upon. In fact, building upon it is a major controversial feature of the book. I think, then, that readers should be prepared to consider it in advance.

Chisholm proposed that while (for good reasons) we rarely apply this Defeat Condition in human ethics, we do typically apply it to aesthetic agency in the realm of art. Especially in post-classical art, we are accustomed to admiring artists who include aesthetic "evils" – ugly elements – in their works of art with a view towards defeating them by means of a beautiful larger whole. We routinely ascribe this aesthetic freedom to artists, in part because subjects are fictional and so morally fitting for use as instrumental means to aesthetically beautiful ends. We normally do not ascribe such freedom to ordinary moral persons. However, as Chisholm intimated, God is no ordinary moral person. God is by definition an extraordinary moral person in a unique moral position – *qua* God. So perhaps the aesthetic avenue is open to God in a way that it cannot be for non-divine ethical agents. Perhaps God can be justified morally in authorizing evils that are not necessary in an absolute sense, so long as God defeats the evils in the end. This is the avenue I will take in constructing my own God-justifying account of Darwinian evil suffered by animals.

I am sure that my taking this aesthetic avenue invites serious initial skepticism, perhaps even dismissal out of hand. Some readers may in fact have good reasons for strongly suspecting that this approach is inherently misplaced and so is doomed to fail, at any rate. Why so? There are several reasons why, but in this introduction, I will focus only on the main one.

We are used to assuming that a morally good person *minimizes* evil so far as s/he possibly can, and permits evil only when necessary. On the alternative aesthetic picture, however, God is not good in that meticulous moral manner. On the analogue of God as Artist, God is rather committed to *maximizing* goodness, truth, and beauty even at great cost to creatures. On this artistic analogy, God uses evil, including the suffering

of creatures, as instrumental means to these valuable cosmic ends. Is this moral depiction of God even marginally acceptable? We will see that a good many people protest quite emphatically that it is not.

The challenge, which I accept, is to show that despite this seemingly immoral utilitarian treatment, God is in fact good to the creatures that God employs as means to valuable ends. Readers need to know in advance that I am well aware of this challenge and the need to meet it in a plausible fashion. To do so, I will contend, on the basis of Jewish and Christian canonical traditions, that the God of canonical theism will defeat the Darwinian evils that God has authorized to be inscribed into conditions of existence for human and nonhuman creatures. More specifically, I will contend that God will not defeat those evils only in an abstract global sense, as an amoral "artist" would do, but will defeat Darwinian evil for the creatures themselves. I hope that skeptical readers will at least suspend judgment until reading through to the end.

Let us move ahead, however, to the subject of which *epistemic* criteria we should reasonably expect a God-justifying account of evil to satisfy in order to succeed. In accounts of this kind, what counts as success?

What sort of epistemic standing must a God-justifying account have in order to "succeed"? Must the explanation of evils be demonstrably true? Must it be most probably so, or at least more probable than not? Participants in the discussion usually refer to a positive explanation of this kind as a *theodicy*, from the Greek *theōs*, for "God," and *diké*, or "justice," as in "justification" for authorizing evils. Or does the account merely have to show that the coexistence of God and the relevant evil is possible in a purely logical sense, i.e., that to assert their coexistence involves one in no logical contradiction? Participants in the controversy commonly refer to this exceedingly modest epistemic approach as *defense*. I have chosen to follow Michael Murray's recommendation that we adopt an epistemic standard that falls somewhere between these extremes.

Murray, whose book *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* will play a prominent part in our discussion, recommends that we adopt an approach that he labels with a phrase borrowed from the great philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716).[4] Murray recommends that to be successful, a God-justifying scenario must be *as plausible as not*. He proposes that we label an approach offered on this modest epistemic

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[4] Michael J. Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Page references will be given in the course of the discussion in Chapter 4.

standard a *causa Dei* or "a case for God." So understood, a God-justifying account of evil counts as successful if it is plausible to the extent that one is not justified in rejecting it on all acceptably rational grounds. This standard for success is relatively low. Furthermore, it is admittedly somewhat relativistic, since theists and non-theists may differ on what to count as "rational grounds," at least on some points. Like Murray, I presume that one can adhere to canonical Christian theism in an acceptably rational fashion, as I seek to do.

At any rate, my aim in the book is to offer a *causa Dei* that makes the apparently atheistic configuration of evolutionary evils suffered by animals sufficiently plausible on the assumptions of canonical Christian theism. I believe that my account of Darwinian evil and the God of Christian theism exceeds that minimal standard for plausibility, and I hope more than a few readers will also believe it does. However, it is the minimal criterion that I invite all readers to employ in judging whether the work succeeds, on the whole, or not.

In the light of these preliminary discussions of the Darwinian Problem and criteria for successful explanation, then, in the middle chapters of the book – Chapters 5–7 – I examine the prevailing God-justifying approaches to the problem. In my judgment, none of them meets the minimal standard for success as a *causa Dei*, but I propose that some explanations fail conspicuously, while others help considerably to further the cause of theism in the controversy.

In Chapter 5, I consider ancient Lapsarian Theodicy (the label comes from the Latin, *lapsus*, for "fall"). I contend that despite its prevalence mainly, but not only, in non-academic Christian circles, the explanation is implausible in the extreme. According to this God-justifying approach, which goes back to ancient Christian times, natural evil, including animal suffering in nature, originated from a world-ruinous Fall set in motion by the first human beings when they defied the command of God. I explain why I think it is wise for Christian theists to abandon this traditional approach to theodicy, not just because Darwinism seems clearly to antiquate the explanation, but also on several analytical-theological grounds that I will give. In the light of both Darwinian science and Christian theology, then, I propose that participants in the controversy are indeed right to abandon Lapsarian Theodicy, as most have done, and to move on to a search for plausible non-lapsarian answers.

In Chapter 6, I consider Only Way Theodicy, previously mentioned. According to advocates of this approach, creating a Darwinian World with its astonishing vista and apparently godforsaken landscape of