

Created Goodness or Mythological Perfection? Reflections on the Genesis Narrative

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Introduction

This summer I visited the newly opened “Museum of Creation” in Petersburg, Kentucky. The museum is the work of Ken Ham, cost £15 million pounds, and is “Creation Science,” brought to life, so to speak. I spent three hours there with my family carefully reading the statements on display all the while considering the relative benefits of the museum compared to its costs. One of the more problematic statements to my mind was the claim the creation itself was completely “perfect” in every aspect: the idea that an idyllic paradise without death, disease, poison, or even weeds existed before the first human sin. Furthermore, on this view, the human creature was also perfect in every way. According to Ham and his colleague Paul Taylor, the “Fall of man [is] from holy perfection to rebellion and evil.” The assumption is that death, disease, and evil were not part of the “original creation” but entered because of the sins of Adam and Eve. But this perspective is not limited to the so-called “Creation Scientists” but can also be found among professors teaching science in Christian Colleges and Universities.

Two years ago, I was asked to teach a Senior Seminar course on Science and Christian Ethics for the biology department at Azusa Pacific University. During discussion one evening, the topic turned to the Christian doctrine of creation. One student asked “But doesn’t the Scripture say that the creation was perfect?” I challenged the student to find that term (in English) anywhere in the 1st three chapters of Genesis. She couldn’t. The following week I heard back from one of her biology professors who said to me, “But I’ve been teaching my students that “good” implies “perfect” in Genesis.” I told him, “Then you have been teaching them incorrectly.”

Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds argue for a “recent creation” in which the world has apparent age.¹ They contend that God is somewhat like a person who has seen a video and wants to get through the boring parts to get to the really interesting bits. Thus, God creates with apparent age in order to avoid the boredom of an evolutionary process. If we can lay aside the horrendously weak analogy, and the presumption to know of God’s ennui, we see a line of thought in accordance with the “perfection myth.” The world is young and all evil, death, disease, and harm comes through human agency. They confess that, “Our sin caused the pain of the world and its creatures.”²

My topic today concerns the issue—the myth in the common sense of term—of the perfection of creation. I argue that this myth is detrimental as it causes both Christians and atheists to have unreasonable expectations about the created order. Christians inevitably see the creation narratives in ways that

¹ Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds, “Young Earth Creation,” in *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*, ed. J.P. Moreland. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999).

² *Ibid.*, 48.

distort the scriptures and lead to incoherent theological positions while atheists tend to think these untenable ideas are actually central to the faith. This is an important issue that as noted biblical scholar James Barr has observed, “is one that our religious traditions have not adequately faced.”³

I. The Augustinian Inheritance

The myth of a perfect creation can be traced back at least as far as St. Augustine. In one of his early works, *De Libero Arbitrio*, Augustine argued that humans were created *posse non peccare* (i.e., able not to sin). Free will was a good God bestowed upon human creatures that enabled them to choose either to do good or to do evil. After the Fall Augustine says that we are all *non potest non peccare* (i.e., unable not to sin). The Fall, in the earlier work of Augustine, is a fall from a natural capacity to do good or evil to do only evil. Although the human capacity for knowledge is imperfect and incomplete, humans know enough to obey God and do what they should but they do not have a perfection that makes temptation unthinkable. The early Augustine sees the creation as good but not perfect. However, this is not Augustine’s final word on the topic.

In his middle to later years, while responding to the excesses of Pelagianism, Augustine came to have an increasingly pessimistic view of human nature. He maintained a view on the creation of the first humans that they were created “upright” and not “perfect.” In *De Civitate Dei*, he says that the first human was created *rectus*, that is, “upright,” or even more loosely “righteous.” He says that, “God, who is the author of nature, and not of vice, created the

³ James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*. (New York: Clarendon Press, 1993), 65.

human upright; but the human creature, being of his own will corrupted, and justly condemned, begot corruption and condemned children.”⁴ Later in the following book, he says, “Man was made upright, that he might not live according to himself but according to the One who made him—in other words that he might do the Creator’s will and not his own.”⁵ Augustine’s concern here is not so much the state of the original humans but of the entry of sin and death into the world. This concern is echoed in *De Genesii ad Litteram*.

In this work, which was composed about the same time as Books 13 and 14 of *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine again focuses upon the origin of sin and the nature of the human creatures had they not sinned. Even in a pre-Fall state the human creatures were sustained by grace and would need God’s transformative power to inherit “spiritual bodies.” He says,

The first human pair had natural bodies indeed, but bodies destined to die only if

they sinned, bodies that would have received an angelic form and heavenly quality. But when they disobeyed God’s command, their bodies contracted, as it were, the deadly disease of death, and this changed the gift by which they had ruled the body so perfectly.⁶

In this work, Augustine realizes that only God is perfect and those angelic creatures which have the gift of being created in perfection and sustained by their own desire to be happy in God.

⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, Book 13, chapter 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Book 14, Chapter 4.

⁶ Augustine, *De Genesii ad Litteram*, Book 9, chapter 10..

In his later years Augustine began work on a *Letter to Julian* that remained unfinished at his death. In the letter he remarked that prior to the Fall, Adam possessed “the highest excellence of wisdom” and he had “no imperfection whatever.”⁷ In his desire to overcome Manichean tendencies in the Church, Augustine over-stepped his earlier, more modest contentions about the goodness of creation and insisted on its perfection.

This idea of perfect humans and a perfect creation carries on through the work of Calvin in his commentary on Genesis⁸ right on through to the more controversial and popular writing of Ken Ham and Paul Taylor.⁹ My aim here is reviewing the work of Augustine is not to take sides but simply to give an understanding of how the myth became embedded in the Christian tradition. Moreover, I believe that at places he offers essential assistance in understanding the scriptures. The so-called logic of the argument works something like this:

Premise 1: A perfect God creates perfect creatures.

Premise 2: The cosmos and all therein (including humans) are creatures of God.

Conclusion: The cosmos and human beings as God created them were perfect.

Included in the conclusion are the following statements:

Inference 1: Humanity was perfect without sin or ignorance.

Inference 2: There was no pain or death.

⁷ Augustine, *Unfinished Work Against Julian*.

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*,

⁹ Kan Hamm & Paul Taylor, *The Genesis Solution*. (Masters Press, 1988).

Although this type of reasoning is common it is also deeply flawed in a number of respects. First and foremost, it fails to take the scriptures seriously. As I will point out shortly, nowhere does Genesis ever read that the creation was “perfect.” Moreover, there are a number of other scriptural warrants for us to reject this myth besides the use of “good” not “perfect.”

Second, the philosophical evidence against this reading is tremendous. The logical leap from “good” to “perfect” is unsubstantiated. My car is “good,” not “perfect.” That is, it runs well, the brakes work sufficiently, and it keeps me cool on warm California afternoons. It is not, however, “perfect.” In fact, I am inclined to think that this term just may be unintelligible with respect to any created thing since any finite creature or object that exists must exist within the parameters of finitude. These parameters themselves seem to suggest that perfection itself is unattainable and Augustine himself seems to note this in his earlier work, *The City of God*. Aquinas also held that matter is a principle of corruption and therefore the created order itself had to rely on God’s supernatural grace to sustain it. But let’s take a closer look at the arguments against a perfect creation and why this is important.

II. Biblical Interpretation

Scripture rarely fits into our predetermined categories but seems to create categories of its own. The scriptures do not speak to issues of science or of rationalist metaphysics but to the ongoing narrative of God’s relationship with the creation and with humanity. We do well to keep this in mind when we consider

the Genesis narratives. The creation narrative speaks primarily to God's lordship over all creation. In the words of Walter Brueggemann

When the text is heard as news in a theological idiom, it leaves open all scientific theories about the origin of the world. The Bible takes no stand on any of these. The faith of the church has no vested interest in any of the alternative scientific hypotheses. The text is none other than the voice of the evangel proclaiming good news.¹⁰

Gordon Wenham agrees with this assessment and says,

The Bible-versus-science debate has, most regrettably, sidetracked readers of Gen. 1. Instead of reading the chapter as a triumphant affirmation of the power and wisdom of God and the wonder of his creation, we have been too often bogged down in attempting to squeeze Scripture into the mold of the latest scientific hypothesis or distorting scientific facts to fit a particular interpretation.¹¹

These disclaimers by experts on biblical literature serve as a helpful starting point for our discussion since they indicate the thrust of these scriptures is not science or theodicy but an affirmation of the lordship of God over all creation.

The standard arguments concerning the appropriate interpretation of Genesis often focus on the Hebrew word for "day." As most of us know the word *yom* can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It typically refers to a 24 hour day but it can also "refer not just to some short period but equally well to a length period

¹⁰ Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 26-7.

¹¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 40.

of indefinite duration.”¹² The specific context, grammatical construction and especially the genre of the literature play critical roles in interpreting the meaning of the term. Is the Genesis narrative a literal, New York Times, front page story? Or is the genre more akin to the parable Jesus told in Luke’s gospel? Is the language more akin to what we find in the Psalms, to the Revelation of John, or is it more similar to the gospel accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection?

The more interesting word, however, in the narrative is the word *ṭob*, Hebrew for “good.” The interesting idea here is that *ṭob* means simply “good,” not “perfect.” The Hebrew word for “perfect” is *shalom*. Moreover, the author of Genesis could have used *shalom* in these first three chapters of Genesis but chose not to! Why is that? And why should we care?

It may be that the author of Genesis never intended that we think of the creation as perfect. Since there is a distinction between *ṭob* and *shalom* we can say that the author focuses our attention on the goodness of creation not on its perfection. According to the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, “Things are good for the purpose for which they were fashioned without any suggestion of objective evaluation.”¹³ The idea here is that there is a basic integrity to the work of creation. God’s work is such that various beings have enduring natures that makes them behave in regular and predictable ways. In this way, Genesis tells us that “God created each thing after its own kind.”

¹² M. Saebø, “Yôm,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* Vol. 6, Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 16-7.

¹³ I. Höver-Johag, “Ṭob,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* Vol. 5, Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 304.

Brueggemann sees the goodness of creation with reference to the aesthetic value of God's work. On this view, the idea of God's blessing connotes an axiological judgment with regard to the fruitfulness and generative powers of the world. Brueggeman says,

Blessing theology defines reality in an artistic and aesthetic way.

Throughout the narrative, God judges the results of his work "good" and in verse 31, he pronounces the whole "very good." The "good" used here does not refer primarily to a moral quality, but to an aesthetic quality. It might be better translated "lovely, pleasing, beautiful."¹⁴

And as anyone who has ever been deeply infatuated with a member of the opposite sex, it can be a very painful experience to discover that "beautiful" and "morally good" are not always synonymous.

At least three passages call into question the idea that creation is good and not perfect. First, God leaves much of the work unfinished. Although God creates the various creatures that populate the earth, there are a number of tasks that remain unfinished. God had the human creature name the animals. Even though we may not perceive this as an important issue, a name had critical importance in the ancient world. Names had power over the object named. In a sense God gives the human creature the prerogative of having power over these creatures: a power God could have reserved solely for Godself.

A second passage concerns the divine command to fill the earth and subdue it. In a "perfect" creation this command would not be necessary. In a "perfect" world there would be exactly the right number of inhabitants and no

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 37.

need to subdue anything since all creatures and vegetation would already have been subdued. Thus, any deviation—any change—from the initial order would be a change for the worse. This is a critical point since it reveals a more neo-platonic understanding of the scriptures that many Christians have unwittingly accepted as the only interpretation. On this view, any deviation away from perfection must be for the worse since we cannot improve upon perfection.

A third passage concerns God's statement to the woman, "I will increase your pain in childbearing." Of course an increase in pain means that there was already pain there to begin with. This observation has led many to believe that pain and death were all part of the "Eden Narratives." As James Barr tells the story of when he was presenting a paper to a fairly conservative Christian audience one evening he was nervous that some of the more vocal reactionaries might argue against his views about there being death before the Fall. He was saved by an elderly professor who said that death had to have been present since God made clothes for Adam and Eve out of skins those animals had to have died! A more sophisticated account is C. S. Lewis' understanding of pre-Fall death in his science fiction work, *Out of the Silent Planet*, where he argues that death is a natural part of the created order.

Another argument against a perfect creation is the fact that the human creatures are created without the knowledge of good and evil and that they are also created without the ability to live forever. Note well, that God commands them not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Note also

that God casts them out so that they will not eat of the tree of life. This deserves some special attention here.

How can we say that the created order is perfect when humans are less than what they ought to be? That is, if there is no knowledge of good and evil then the primordial humans seem to lack what we possess. In this case how can they be held responsible for their activities since knowledge—as any introductory ethics student can tell you—is a necessary condition for responsibility? But this is still problematic because the text indicates that God does hold them to some level of responsibility. What this means is that there is some level of responsibility correlative to their ability to know what they were doing. That is, as Irenaeus says, God created them as children knowing a little about what they should do but clearly not perfect. On Irenaeus' view the so-called "Fall" is a Fall upward. On this view, creation serves as the starting point for a developmental process that culminates in the human agent's conformity to the image of Christ. Jürgen Moltmann says,

The notion of a perfect, self-sufficient equilibrium in the resting, stable cosmos contradicts the biblical—and even more the messianic—view of a creation aligned towards future glory. The idea of the future as a *restitutio in integrum* and a return to the original paradisaal condition of creation (*status integritatis*) can neither be called biblical or Christian. A simple comparison between the first chapter of the Bible and the last is enough to refute this traditional doctrine.¹⁵

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 208).

Fourth, and most importantly, the “perfection theory” is simply incoherent. As philosophers and theologians ranging from Lynwood Urban to Nancey Murphy have observed, the “Fall is utterly incoherent.” How could perfect beings—beings whose knowledge was unsurpassed—turn away from the supremely lovable object of love? It simply cannot happen. However, if we realize that they are not perfect to begin with we have begun to make some interpretive headway and simultaneously begun to deconstruct the myth of perfection.

Finally, one last problem for our more literally-minded friends is the fact that God declares, as we have seen, that “You may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” However, as the scriptures themselves show us Adam and Eve do not die but live on for hundreds of years. So, did God lie or should we take a more intelligent approach and see this passage in a figurative way? It seems that the passage may refer to the death of their innocence rather than their physical existence. However, a literal reading of this passage leads to obvious absurdities. We could construct the following dilemma:

1. If “day” is univocal then the Scriptures are false when God says “On that day you will surely die.”
2. If “day” is an analogous term, then it cannot be univocal (and in this case our literalists cannot insist on 24 hour days) and may have a variety of meanings.
3. Either “day” is analogous or it is univocal.

4. Thus, either the scriptures are false or day can have a variety of meanings.

A more intelligent interpretation of this passage would be that “on the say that you eat you will have begun the process of your spiritual death and alienation.”

James Barr observes that “When it says that God saw all his work, that it was good, is this something that was to be changed when humanity fell? . . . For, if the goodness of creation was destroyed through human sin, then how does it help us to know that creation was (originally) good but no longer is so?” (64) Again, the myth of creation is rendered incoherent.

III. Scientific Evidence

In this section I raise 2 issues concerning the relationship of scientific evidence to Christian theology. The various natural sciences teach us that the earth and the universe are extremely old. The earth itself is about 4.5 billion years old and the universe itself is about 1.5 billion years old. Radioisotope methods for dating are not the private domain of a very few atheistic scientists hell-bent on refuting the existence of God. Rather, they are the unanimous agreement of geologists, physicists, and biologists, theistic and non-theistic alike. So, if there are extremely old fossils of carnivores, it follows that death and pain were part of the created order for some time prior to the last 6000 years. Do we *really* believe that God suddenly changed the decay of radioactive isotopes, that God suddenly changed some herbivores into carnivores? The ecological order may not be free from pain and death. Indeed, it most likely has never been free of these. Thus, it

may not be perfect, but we might be able to argue that the balance and order is good. We can construct an argument that refutes the young earth position on the age of the earth.

Premise 1: If the world is a mere 6-10 thousand years old then this refutes as false the entire scientific enterprise from biology and geology to physics and chemistry.

Premise 2: But the entire scientific enterprise is not refuted (rather, it had been extremely successful).

Conclusion: Thus, the world cannot be a mere 6-10 thousand years old. Of course young earth creationists might protest that God could have changed the rate of breakdown of isotopes in the past 6000 years. But is there *any* evidence whatsoever that would lead anyone to hold such a position? The burden of proof is clearly on those who say that God changed the rate of decay, but there is absolutely no evidence for this anywhere. This vacuous logic has a name- the fallacy is known as “an appeal to ignorance” along the lines of “You can’t prove to me absolutely that aliens don’t exist!” Spurious arguments like this only serve the purposes of atheists who see the god of the creationists as a charlatan.¹⁶

A second issue is one raised by many Christians working in environmental biology. For these Christians death and decay have played such a critical role for millions of years that it is impossible to believe that the earth is but a few thousand years old. For them, the existence of fossil fuels is irrefutable evidence

¹⁶ I borrow this felicitous phrase from Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin’s God: A Scientist’s Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution*. (New York: Harper-Collins, 1999), 57.

that death *must* have been part of the created order since fossil fuels take millions of years to form. Again, the only way to counter this is to appeal to the Charlatan God who capriciously changes scientific laws when it suits the divine whim.

As I see it, the Genesis narratives—regardless of the mythological accretions—provide us with the most important questions we can ask. Among them are questions regarding what responsibilities do humans have for the environment? If God creates a good creation why is there evil? To what extent are humans prone to good or evil? In what sense am I responsible for my actions? Does sin reside primarily in our biological or cultural nature? And to what extent is the pursuit of knowledge a moral—or immoral—activity?

III. Philosophical Reflection

The biblical evidence clearly points to the notion that creation was “good” and not “perfect” but we still have not delineated what we mean by the phrase “the goodness of creation.” On my view, there are at least three possible ways to consider “goodness” in reference to creation: (1) ontological goodness (2) aesthetic goodness, and (3) moral goodness.

The idea of ontological goodness is fairly uncontroversial. A being is good, ontologically, in the sense of its having its own substantial integrity. In the middle ages ontological goodness was often identified with the concept of “nature.” This was especially true for Aquinas who makes a clear distinction between what he

calls the “material” and the “natural.”¹⁷ A material nature concerns the physical constitution and powers of any being in the natural world. Rocks, trees, and squirrels all have a material nature. Rocks possess only a material form, while trees an organic form, and squirrels also possess an animal form, which provides them with a principle of locomotion. For a human, her nature consists of her material form, which includes her matter as well as the various principles of locomotion. Yet humans are more than mere matter in motion; humans are also rational beings. The term “nature” has a more inclusive meaning that refers to the specific nature of any being. Although the first sense of the term emphasizes the physical aspects of a being, the second sense emphasizes the essential characteristics of a being, physical or immaterial. In the same place Aquinas makes a careful distinction between these two uses. “The term nature is used in a manifold sense. For sometimes it stands for the intrinsic principle in movable things. In this sense, nature stands for any substance, or even for any being. And in this sense, that is, said to be natural to a thing which befits it according to its substance; and this is what is in a thing essentially.”¹⁸

For our purposes, ontological goodness in creation is simply God’s activity in providing creatures with “intrinsic principles” such that they act accordingly. Herbivores and carnivores possess ontological goodness in the sense that they have intrinsic principles that guide them to their appropriate food sources. In this sense, ontological goodness has been and continues to be an important part of

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.10.1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

creation from time immemorial to now and extends into the future. When God declares, “It was good,” we can justifiably say that this is an ontological claim.

We can also distinguish aesthetic goodness from the other two forms of goodness. In a sense, aesthetic goodness is dependent upon ontological goodness but requires something more.¹⁹ A rock or a squirrel may possess both ontological goodness as well as aesthetic goodness (e.g., The Stone of Scone or a particularly interesting red squirrel). However, in the aesthetic sense of goodness, we find that each one possesses a peculiar beauty appropriate to its kind. Here, ontological goodness is a necessary condition for aesthetic goodness but not sufficient. The ontological character of the being indicates that it has a basic integrity and structure such that it can perform the necessary acts to maintain its own existence. However, aesthetic goodness is the capacity to perform those acts “with grace.” The “something more” of aesthetic goodness is emotional or psychological response the being in question evokes from a perceiver.

It seems that Brueggeman indicates that this may be one of the senses of God’s declaration, “It is good.” On Brueggeman’s view, God is the divine artisan creating, sculpting, molding, and shaping the creation in specific ways. Here, death, pain, and disease could be seen as part of the entire “aesthetic package” so to speak. On this view, a creation that develops and evolves from earlier forms of life may be “pleasing” to the creator and not merely “boring parts of the video” as our creationist friends would have it. Rather, we might suggest that

¹⁹ Occasionally philosophers speak of “supervenience” with reference to the term “goodness” as it denotes a judgment about the act or item in question.

God finds the process not only possessing a functional integrity-i.e. ontological goodness—but also pleasing—i.e. aesthetic goodness.

Finally, there is what we can call “moral goodness” which requires at least two necessary conditions: (1) knowledge of one’s actions, and (2) freedom to do otherwise. We can only use the term moral goodness with reference to creatures which have appropriate knowledge of their activities and can do otherwise. This term, therefore, cannot apply to non-rational animals. With regard to the Moral goodness: of creation we may tentatively suggest the following:

1. Although ontological and aesthetic goodness may apply to non-rational animals (or other non-sentient creatures), it seems that moral goodness does not since these beings lack the capacities of freedom and choice.
2. The biblical narrative suggests what I call “proto-morality” since there is a minimal sense of responsibility but not the mature understanding which is had after eating of the tree of knowledge.
3. Genuine responsibility comes only with the advent of full consciousness—at least in the last 30,000 years or so.
4. To suggest, as the young earth creationists do, that the cosmos was “morally perfect” is to engage in a category mistake.

Moral goodness seems to apply only to sentient beings with the capacity to be responsible for their behavior. Whether or not early hominids possessed this capacity is beyond the scope of our inquiry. However, if we think of the biblical Adam and Eve it seems plausible to suggest that they could not have had the kind of responsibility that we require of moral agents in the 21st century. In any

case, distinguishing among ontological, aesthetic, and moral goodness seems to point us in the direction of a creation that is ontologically and aesthetically “good,” but not necessarily morally good. As such, when young earth creationists conflate ontological goodness and moral goodness, as they so often do, they fail to see that sin (a moral act) has little bearing on the eating habits of various carnivores. An overly literal reading of the biblical text (not only Genesis but also Romans 5) leads one down the path to confusing the various kinds of “goodness.”

IV. Questions for Further Thought

Evolutionary biology obviously calls into question a good deal about the created order—or disorder—depending on your perspective. Moreover, often times evolutionary thought is used as a means of undermining Christian beliefs: this approach usually takes one of two routes. First, one may use evolution to discredit religious creation narratives since, it is assumed, science displaces the need for any kind of religious explanation whatsoever.²⁰ As Edward O. Wilson proclaims, “If humankind evolved by Darwinian natural selection, genetic chance and environmental necessity, not God, made the species.”²¹ Second, evolutionary theory may be used as a battering ram to beat believers into submission by the claim that there is so much natural evil in the world that no good God could permit such horribly gratuitous evils. However, evolution has

²⁰ For an argument of this kind see John Worrall, “Science Discredits Religion,” *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Michael Peterson and Raymond van Arragon. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004): 59-71.

²¹ Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 1.

been and still is used as an attack against Christian belief. Dawkins has said that Darwinian evolution made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist. In the late 18th century David Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion* called into question the goodness and intelligence of a divine architect.²² However, Hume did not have a precise mechanism for explaining all the pain and suffering. With Darwin and the theory of natural selection we see that suffering and death are essential elements of existence. Those that can compete do; those that can't starve and or are eaten by the successful individuals.

Dawkins sees in this grand evolutionary drama clear evidence against the goodness of a creator. Yet, we have to wonder what is his basis for objecting to God's existence. In one extended diatribe he says,

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. . . The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.²³

Yet, Dawkins' ill-advised use of the term "decent contemplation" seems to appeal to some moral sense of decency. Yet, if his analysis is correct, the term itself is

²² David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).

²³ Richard Dawkins, "God's Utility Function," *Scientific American* (November, 1995), 85.

vacuous since it can not possibly have any meaning in a universe that has no meaning.

Scientists can neither pronounce the cosmos “good” nor “evil” since their proper domain is not questions of first order ethics or aesthetics but of the natural processes that govern physical events. To be sure, secondary and tertiary ethical judgments come into play when conducting one’s experiments, as we have noted. But this is parasitic upon the work of philosophers and ethicists who actually know what they are doing in the realm of moral philosophy. To suggest, as Richard Dawkins does, that the inordinate amount of waste in the evolutionary process is clear evidence against God presupposes first, that Dawkins can give authoritative judgments on the nature of good and evil, and second, that he has a clear idea of just how much evil constitutes a decisive argument against God’s existence.

So how can a “good” but not “perfect” creation help address this issue? As I see it, when we see creation as evolving—in process—we see that our expectations of God and the world are changed. God is interested in relationship and development not eradicating all possible instances of evil. The world then becomes an arena for the development of character and virtue—an arena that also can be open to the novelty of new species. To suggest that God created and then stopped leads us down the road to deism, where God passively watches the creation unfold because “His work is done.”

Moltmann sees the creation as open since God’s real work is not done until at least the last day. Creation is more like a song that begins with a simple

melody, and continues to play, improvising here with variations on a theme there. Like Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, it begins simply, grows, develops through cacophony, and varies the theme and the tempo. So too, God's creation is open to possibility, novelty, and ever-increasing goodness and beauty.