

REDEEMING A CRUCIFORM NATURE *by Holmes Rolston, III*

*Abstract.* Christopher Southgate recognizes that the natural world is both ambiguous, mixing goods and bads, and simultaneously dramatically creative, such creativity resulting from just this ambiguous challenge of environmental conductance and resistance. Life is lived in green pastures and in the valley of the shadow of death. Perhaps this is the *only way* God could have created the values found on Earth, by means of such disvalues, as a Darwinian natural selection account suggests. Generating Earth's biodiversity requires struggle, success, and failure—and such an *only way* would constrain a powerful, loving God. But Southgate judges this too uncaring of suffering individuals, the products of evolution sacrificed to the systemic process. Perhaps God through Jesus redeems all the sacrificed individuals—pelicans in a pelican heaven—but redemption of all the bullfrogs and acorns becomes an incredible hope. Nature is a cruciform creation, where life persists in perpetual perishing. Life is forever conserved, regenerated, redeemed.

*Keywords:* cruciform creation; evolution; Christopher Southgate; suffering

Christopher Southgate has been at the forefront of advancing the discussion of evolutionary theodicy since his landmark 2008 contribution, *The Groaning of Creation*. In this article, I outline six primary contributions

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that Southgate's work has introduced and develop them further, a sort of fugue on Southgate's themes.

#### AMBIGUOUS NATURE AND CREATIVE GENESIS

"God is the author of an ambiguous world" (Southgate 2015, 245). The ambiguous nature of creation is one of the hallmarks of Southgate's theology. Nature is neither entirely good, nor entirely bad. "The evolving creation is an ambiguous place with an ambiguous history, and . . . God may be both praised and questioned when God's creation is contemplated honestly" (Southgate 2008, ix). Southgate further recognizes that this mixture is essential to its creative genesis:

The difficult but fascinating conclusion to be drawn from evolutionary science is that it is the same process—evolution driven at least in part by natural selection—that gives rise to both the values of beauty, diversity, and ingenuity in creation, and to the disvalues of suffering and extinction. Further, it is the same processes that cause so much "natural evil" experienced by humans—earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, and typhoons—that made the world so extravagantly fruitful for life. (Southgate 2014a, 785)

Interestingly, he finds that biblical accounts of the "divine glory" interlock these natural harms transmuted into blessings.

All life is constituted—in the more scientific metaphor that I prefer—in a mixture of environmental *conductance* and *resistance*, where the world is both resource and threat. To adapt the Psalmist's religious metaphor, life is lived in green pastures and in the valley of the shadow of death, nourished by eating at a table prepared in the midst of its enemies. Struggle is a driving motif, but then again, its product is life forms selected for maximum adaptation to their environmental niches, and the harmony that comes out of the struggle is quite as impressive as the struggle.

This is a sweeping claim, and we must look at it in more detail.

#### SYSTEMIC PROCESSES: VALUES AND DISVALUES

There are two dimensions in the natural world. With the *processes* we need systemic analysis, such as physical (astronomical, geological), chemical, biological, and psychological. These will be lawlike, nomothetic, with elements of openness. With the *products* we need more individuated and particular accounts: a vein of iron ore in the Mesabi Range, that oak tree halfway up the hill above the vein outcrop, or that eagle nesting in that oak's branches. These will be more idiographic, specific to natural kinds, with new levels of openness and adventure. With development of these geological and evolutionary processes, the products become objective individuals with subjectivity; felt experience. In both the processes and the products, objective and subjective, there arise values and disvalues.

First, let us evaluate the systemic processes. Southgate's approach accepts and puzzles over what is called the "only way" argument:

A Darwinian world was the only way to give rise to beauty, diversity, and

complexity in creation. . . . Here is a constraint that seems to coexist with God from eternity, so for the philosophical theologian it is problematic. Surely God could have made creaturely beauty and diversity out of any materials and processes God liked? Whereas for anyone trained in the natural sciences it is a very plausible constraint—philosophers can dream up all sorts of alternative worlds, but the only way we know matter “works” and gives rise to life is *this* way, and the only way this type of life evolves and gives rise to novel and excellent adaptations, creaturely selves of all types and ingenuities, is via Darwinian natural selection, driven by competition, predation, and extinction. Theologically however this constraint continues to seem problematic, and calls for further exploration in relation to the classical doctrines of divine omnipotence and *creatio ex nihilo*. (Southgate 2011, 387-88)

To keep the fullest perspective, we must recognize that most of the creative genesis is neither Darwinian nor ambiguous. God did make vast cosmological beauties, the starry heavens above, the generation of matter (*ex nihilo* if you like), the myriads of galaxies, the macrophysics and the microphysics, atoms, molecules, crystals, in all of which Darwinian processes are entirely absent. These processes demonstrate enormous power, and are more or less congenial to divine omnipotence. Nor do they seem evil; if anything, in current cosmology they seem surprisingly “fine-tuned” for creative genesis (Rolston 2010, Chapter 1).

On Earth, Darwin’s account is not present in the geology, mineralogy, or hydrology. Even tsunamis and earthquakes are outside any Darwinian natural selection. Most of what goes on in the heavens above and on the Earth below is not Darwinian. We might call some of these processes “ambiguous.” Did the universe really have to be as vast as it is? Did there have to be black holes? But this is a different sense of “ambiguous,” not involving judgments of good versus evil, of pleasure or suffering. Southgate continues his worries about the “constraints on God”:

A world evolving by natural selection, and therefore necessarily involving the suffering of sentient creatures, is the only sort of world in which the values represented by complex and diverse life could arise. . . . [This] must be a logical necessity if it is to be a constraint on the power of the sovereign Lord. . . . The creation we so delight in and wonder at cannot arise all at once but only by an immensely long birthing, full of “futility” (Southgate 2014a, 804-05).

When there does arise “birthing” (or hatching, or cloning), and where there is life to be lost, some “futility” questions become relevant. But to worry whether a seed fallen on rocky ground where it cannot flourish is “futile” is ambiguously anthropomorphic.

How should we evaluate what *is* futile in evolutionary process? An organism grows, reproduces, repairs its wounds, and resists death. All this, from one perspective, is just biochemistry—the whirl and buzz of organic molecules, enzymes, and proteins. But from an equally valid—and objective—perspective, the morphology and metabolism that the organism projects is a valued state. “Vital” is a more ample word, now, than “biological.” A life is spontaneously defended for what it is itself, without necessary further contributory reference, although in ecosystems such lives necessarily do have further reference. Any organism can be stressed, even where we would not say (absent neurons or their analogues) that there is suffering present.

Each plant develops and maintains a botanical identity. An acorn becomes an oak; the oak stands on its own. This botanical program is coded in the DNA, informational core molecules, without which the plant would collapse into the humus. The genetic set is thus really a normative set; it distinguishes between what is and what ought to be. Plants are irritable; they “care”—using botanical standards, the only form of caring available to them. Plants detect and act upon environmental signals, taking positive or aversive actions. The plant life per se is defended—an intrinsic value. Is it “futility” when a plant dies? No. Despite their value, plants do not have ends-in-view. They are not subjects of a life, and in that familiar sense, they do not have goals.

But with the emerging of life and its new possibilities there are simultaneously new constraints. Not even God can make a world in which sentience arises and organisms cannot get hurt. This is both a logical and psychological impossibility. Therefore, we must evaluate the values and disvalues of subjective experience as well.

#### SUBJECTIVE INDIVIDUALS: ESCALATING SUFFERING IN FELT EXPERIENCE

“Suffering is an inevitable concomitant of sophisticated sentience” (Southgate 2015, 247). Southgate remains upset by the enormous number of individuals who suffer greatly when caught up in this comprehensive process. “The *process* . . . has “sacrificed” the victim’s interests to the interests of the larger whole.” We insist on concern about “the plight of the “casualties” of evolution, who have suffering imposed on them by God for the longer-term good of others” (Southgate 2008, 50). Southgate concludes: “A God of loving relationship could never regard any creature as a mere evolutionary expedient” (Southgate 2002, 821).

The most stupendous result of evolution’s creative genesis is that there is “somebody there.” Any caring God must care for such individual subjective presence, care for the experiencing *products* as much as the generative *process*. God may will the uncaring system as the “only way,” but that leaves God too uncaring of these apical results of the process. This makes God too “hard-hearted.” Southgate insists:

However, I have argued strongly that the “only way” argument by itself is not an adequate defense of the goodness of God. God is not merely such a God of systems, but of individual creatures. It is not enough to say to the limping impala calf picked off by hyenas, or to the second pelican chick pushed out of the nest to starve by its stronger sibling, to creatures whose lives know no flourishing, that God is the God of the system and the system is a package deal, the bad with the good. (Southgate 2011, 388; cf. 2014b, 102)

Southgate recalls Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*: “if the system of divine providence works at the expense of the torture of a single child,” better that one “returns his ticket” (Southgate 2011, 388). If a single sentient being suffers greatly, it is better that there should have been no such world (“overall system”) at all. It would seem to follow that women should have never borne children, at least in medically unskilled cultures, because historically most newborns died seriously suffering with diseases and starvation. Southgate resists “an evolutionary theodicy resting simply on the value of the overall system” (388); he cannot accept a world in which God is so constrained

systemically that God cannot protect value at the individual level. The world in which there are backup pelican chicks should never have existed. We ought to return the ticket.

Notice that the suffering problem was not introduced by Darwin. Job knew suffering; the Psalmist hears the young lions roar, seeking their prey from God (Psalm 104). Nor is the problem solved if one ceases to be an ethical monotheist. You still have the evil problem, as fiercely as ever.

But before we return the ticket, we should reconsider individuals in their systems. The death of earlier creatures makes room for later ones, room to live and, in time, to evolve. If nothing much had ever died, nothing much could have ever lived. Individuals are employed in, but readily abandoned to, the larger currents of life. Thus, the pro-life evolution both overleaps death and seems impossible without it. In one sense, the vast majority of the creatures born or hatched “know no flourishing” in the generate-and-test evolutionary ecosystem.

On the other hand, the vast number of creatures sprouted, hatched, or born are more or less well-endowed genetically and emplaced in a congenial environment. Even though most will not live to maturity, that task is a reasonable natural ideal, a *telos* for which they are fully programmed. Plant and lower animal forms, seeds, gemmae, and spores may be dispersed to impossible locations, and but briefly germinate, if at all. Sentient and mobile forms have more control over their circumstances. Indeed, the capacity to suffer is generally accompanied by possibilities of avoiding suffering, and some freedom and self-assertion. Animal forms have more or less, but to some degree without exception, a motile period in their life cycle during which they can select the environments that will select them.

Lethal mutants and severe abnormalities are aborted immediately, or survive in about that proportion in which they are viable, so that life is sustained in any individual in some relative proportion to its fitness for it. A new individual is born or hatched in a species in which all its ancestor individuals lived successfully to reproduce because they were impressively well formed, 99.999 percent hit, and .001 percent miss or mutational gamble, “blessed,” we might say, with the cumulative tradition of a billion years.

But it is just the “curse” they bear in which lies the possibility of there being forthcoming individuals yet better adapted, or even continuing on, in the future. The mutational element is very minor in any viable individual; the major thrust of life is remarkably stable. But flawless reproduction would not only prohibit development; it would mean certain extinction in a changing environment (as all environments eventually are). Variability is stability in a changing world.

If there is to be any selection over mutants, there must be a surplus of young, many of which are cut back by premature death, although even these shortened lives may have flourishing stretches between generation and demise. But what is premature death from one individual’s point of view, and thus bad, can, with selection over variants, be the source of better- adapted fit; a good from the point of view of later coming individuals.

Advancing life is impossible without ecosystems, food chains, and trophic pyramids. Autotrophs synthesize their own food; heterotrophs eat something else. In a world of grazers only, the animal skills demanded would be only a fraction of those that have resulted in actual zoology—no horns, no fleet-footed predators or prey, no fine-tuned eyesight and hearing, no quick neural capacity,

no advanced brains. Could we have had a world with only flora, no fauna? Possibly not, since in a world in which things are assembled something has to disassemble them for recycling. Predation preceded photosynthesis in evolutionary history.

A photosynthetic world would be largely immobile. Some species must sit around and soak up sunlight; other species will capture this value to fuel mobility. Heterotrophs must be built on autotrophs, and no autotrophs are sentient or cerebral. Herbivores evolve into carnivores, in an ecology of eating and being eaten. From a systemic point of view, resources are converted from one life stream to another—the anastomosing of web-worked life threads. Plants become insects, which become chicks, which become foxes, which die to fertilize plants. For all the borrowing and spending, little is wasted in biomass and energy.

Thus, the surplus is doubly beneficial. It permits mutational advance and it permits the interdependent syntheses of biotic materials with higher forms at the top of the ecological pyramid. The living materials flow through food chains, destroyed to be re-created, a conservation of the life process simultaneous with its historical development. The ecosystem (as my forefathers in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia said of God) writes straight with crooked lines.

The massive cutback in offspring is reduced in rough proportion as one goes up the phylogenetic scale. An oak produces a million acorns to regenerate one oak, but none of the acorns suffer. An earthworm produces hundreds of infantile worms to regenerate one adult worm, and all of them suffer slightly. A robin lays thirty eggs to replace one pair of parents. The premature dying is reduced as the capacity to suffer elevates. The human mother, on the average through history, has borne four or five children to see two survive to maturity. Without denying the tragedy of infant and childhood mortality, it is hard to see how the rate could be cut any lower and still have natural selection operate over mutants.

Darwinism needs also to suppose a natural selection for the maximally beneficial pain, at least within certain rough limits. Pain in dysfunctional proportions (too little of it to register alarm, or too much of it disorienting the organism) will be selected against. The pressures will be for enough of a good thing, or, seen another way, for the minimum of a necessary evil. Something is always dying, and something is always living on. For all the struggle, violence, and transition, there is abiding, escalating value.

#### REDEEMING CREATION: PELICAN HEAVEN

One route out of the quandary of evolutionary suffering is the “pelican heaven” hope. “Creatures whose lives know no fulfillment may experience fullness of life in some eschatological reality, a ‘pelican heaven’” (Southgate 2011, 390). “Every creature has some sort of prospect of a resurrected life” (Southgate 2013, 48). Southgate has a hope that “extends the concern of Christian soteriology beyond the human world to cover the healing of the evolutionary process and the redemption of the many casualties of evolution” (2002, 821). He has a vision of latter-day plenitude of life for every creature who has ever lived and died. Such conviction is reached by extending the redemption and resurrection of Christ to the whole creation.

It is the Cross of Christ that is the lens through which the problem of the ambiguity of the world must be read . . . . *Gloria mundi*, what the not-yet-

completely-redeemed world discloses of its creator, must be appropriated and understood in the context of *gloria crucis*, of the gift—made possible by the character of the creation—of the Incarnate Christ and his self-surrender on the Cross, and this in turn opens up and is informed by what one might term *gloria in excelsis*, the eschatological song of the new creation, in which creaturely flourishing will be attained without creaturely struggle. . . . There will be a transformed state of that world in which those that appear victims in the first story know flourishing in the third. (Southgate 2014a, 800)

Southgate is still apprehensive whether such animal flourishing in a redeemed new creation justifies their suffering during evolutionary history. “Why then did not God simply just create heaven?” (Southgate 2011, 390). “The way forward here must be a development of the only way argument—it would be necessary to posit that creaturely selves may be able to flourish (in transmuted form) in heaven, but they can only *arise* in an evolving biosphere” (390). (Southgate’s position begs the question whether or not angels can be considered “creaturely selves,” but that is an issue that cannot be explored here.)

We have a reasonably good account of why animals, plants, and other creatures can only arise in an evolving biosphere; but now the problem is rather the other way round: What would it mean for them to flourish in redeemed, transmuted form? Consider cosmic history. What would a redeemed star, asteroid, planet, or galaxy look like? Something improved over what they already are? Perhaps these need no redemption. Astronomical heavens in the new heavens can remain as they now are. Astronomical mathematics does not need to be transfigured. Nor does the chemical table.

The concern is rather for whatever seeks to flourish and is broken in Earthen evolutionary history. The vocabulary of “creatures” would seem to include bacteria, protozoans, fungi, and whatever can die. Plants are “casualties of evolution” when eaten by herbivores—at least over-eating that kills the plant or prevents its reproduction. When herbivores eat fruit, they kill any seeds that cannot pass unscathed through the gut. Will such redeemed animals still eat? Are there food chains in the redeemed creation? Presumably there can only be vegetarian chains, since eating meat causes suffering.

Think of one biblical claim of the new creation: the lion will be eating straw like the ox (Isaiah 11:7). (There are more than just gastronomic problems here: the brains of lions in zoos deteriorate when they cease to hunt.) If we try to imagine glorified elephants, bullfrogs, oaks, marigolds, we find ourselves believing what we do not understand, indeed believing what approaches the incredible. Redeemed rattlesnakes would be fangless and eat grass! Are all the dinosaurs, casualties of evolution, to be resurrected with glorified bodies? We cannot figuratively, much less literally, “flesh it out” because we do not know what sort of redeemed flesh will be present in the new creation.

A resurrected glorified life for every creature that has lived on Earth is a high-sounding hope. We may enjoy the theological exuberance of such sweeping claims. But on the ground they evaporate into some mixture of fantasy and comedy. A realist might wonder if this is not mostly pious theological hand-waving. Could there be a danger here of believing the absurd? This is a blanket claim that does not know what it covers, but it feels good to make such claims of the divine resurrection and transformation of all creation. The claim seems vaguely reasonable so long as it is kept reasonably vague. Sing such

praises of God in liturgy, but do not mistake this for metaphysics.

Yes, there are claims about a new creation in the Bible. But these are claims of exuberance, made by Bible writers carried away with their visions of the new Israel and Christ's consummate kingdom. They portray a new heavens and a new earth fulfilling the prophetic vision of the day when the "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid" (Isaiah 11:6). Most interpreters now see the Genesis creation and fall story as parable or poetry, as is Eden restored, the envisioned crystal garden city with streets paved with gold (Revelation 21).

These are peace pictures, hoping for the end of violence in culture. But this has nothing to do with natural selection in nature, where lions must eat meat, and predation must continue. The wolf with the lamb makes sense only as it poetically expresses human hopes for redemption within culture. Such passages do not have any biological application, in this world or the next. A lion without canines that eats straw has not been redeemed; such a lioness has been eviscerated. Any such lioness should "return her ticket."

The vision of all the creatures across evolutionary history flourishing in a redeemed creation faces a computational explosion. Each oak produces millions of acorns, with only one surviving to replace itself. Is each acorn to become a mighty oak in heaven? A bull-frog can lay twenty-five thousand eggs in a clutch and lay more than one clutch a season. If all survive, and these descendants continue repeating the cycle, the number of frogs in bullfrog heaven is soon approaching infinity. Fortunately, there is "no shortage of room in heaven" (Southgate 2011, 390).

When we come to a more plausible theological account, we have to accept, as Southgate recognizes, that God's "loving relationship" with plants or pelican chicks is nonpersonal, radically different from that with persons. These can be embedded in creative systems inescapably; their contribution as individuals is nothing more than their role in evolutionary development. They just are "part of the package." The dinosaurs had a significant story, with a beginning and an end. There were successors and replacements in natural history (crocodiles, birds), but the dinosaurs are gone. That part of the story is over. They exist only in the memory of God. It is neither necessary nor appropriate for God to resurrect all the Cretaceous fauna in a dinosaur heaven. Jesus heals the broken with compassion for their suffering, but his ministry is toward humans, persons broken in sin, if also broken in health. There is no indication that, in God's loving relationships, Jesus heals broken pelican chicks, or resurrects dinosaurs. Or bullfrogs!

#### CRUCIFORM CREATION: LIFE PERSISTING IN PERPETUAL PERISHING

Nature becomes a passion play long before humans arrive. The music of life is in a minor key. More passionately put: natural history is "cruciform." In physics and astronomy, the metaphysical question is creation *ex nihilo*. The formation of stars and galaxies is not cruciform, nor is Earth's geology and meteorology. But biology adds creation *ex nisu*, creation *per laborem*. To cause, there is added care; to movement, concern; to energy, effort. Something is at stake, requiring defense. There is success, and failure. In all creating of life there seems to be struggling through to something higher. In sentient life, the existential puzzle is creation *per passionem*.

Southgate recognizes Rolston's phrase "cruciform creation" as a "bold and

tantalizing metaphor” “lacking sufficient argumentative purchase to help much with the problem of evolutionary theodicy” (Southgate 2011, 385). Can we enlarge this argument? Southgate posits “the co-suffering of God with all creatures.” God “grieves and laments with suffering creatures.” “God is . . . with other creatures, in such a way, for each type of creature, as may be meaningful, as may make a difference” (Southgate 2014b, 102— 104). In their longing for their life to continue, creatures share in God’s “longing” for an evolving emergence of advancing sentience (Southgate 2014b, 113). “It seems at least possible that a redeemable world has to be a cruciform world” (Southgate 2014b, 110).

Life on Earth is not a paradise of hedonistic ease, but a theater where life is earned by toil and sweat. Sentience, co-present with neural structures, brings the capacity to move about deliberately in the world, and also to get hurt by it. The earthen story is not merely of goings on, but of “going concerns.” Animals hunt and howl, find shelter, seek out their habitats and mates, feed their young, flee from threats, grow hungry, thirsty, hot, tired, excited, sleepy. They suffer injury and lick their wounds. There must be endurance—in the more sentient creatures, passionate endurance.

There is death; but, with regeneration, life ongoing—like a seed fallen into the earth. “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Things perish with a passing over in which the sacrificed individual is delivered over to preserve a line. In the flesh and blood creatures, each is a blood sacrifice perishing that others may live. We have a kind of “slaughter of the innocents,” a nonmoral, naturalistic harbinger of the slaughter of the infants at the birth of the Christ, all perhaps vignettes hinting of the innocent lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). In their lives, beautiful, tragic, and perpetually incomplete, they have “borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” They share the labor of the divinity. Earthen natural history might almost be called the evolution of suffering. But that makes it equally plausible to call it the evolution of caring. This cruciform life suggests a logos of proactive caring coming into the world.

Life is indisputably prolific; it is just as indisputably pathetic, almost as if its logic were pathos. The fertility is close-coupled with the struggle. The most creative advances come in contexts of problem solving, facing the prospect of hurt. The story we have from Darwinian natural history echoes classical religious themes of death and regeneration. In the midst of its struggles, life has been ever “conserved,” as biologists say; life has been perpetually “regenerated,” “redeemed,” as theologians might say. Something is always dying, and something is always living on. In creative nature there are dimensions both of redemptive and vicarious suffering, whereby ongoing success is achieved by sacrifice.

Biological nature is always giving birth, always in travail. The root idea in the English word “nature,” going back to Latin and Greek origins, is that of “giving birth.” If we must use metaphors, after Darwin the Earth is as much a womb as it is, after Newton, a clockwork machine, or, after Einstein, energy and matter bubbling up out of a spacetime matrix. This requires “labor,” and the birthing metaphor, making possible this continuing regenerating, seems inseparable from elements of struggle. Birthing involves struggle, as every mother knows.

Earth slays her children, a seeming evil, but bears an annual crop in their stead. This pro-life, generative impulse is the most startling and valuable miracle of all. The “birthing” is nature’s orderly self-assembling of new creatures amidst this perpetual perishing. In a hurtless, painless world, there could never have come to pass anything like these dramas in botanical and zoological nature, events that in their central thrusts we greatly treasure. There are sorts of creation that cannot occur without death, without one life seeded into another. Death can be meaningfully integrated into the biological processes as a necessary counterpart to the advancing of life.

In the biblical model in either testament, to be chosen by God is not to be protected from suffering. It is a call to suffer and to be delivered as one passes through it. The election is for struggling with and for God, seen in the very etymology of the name Israel, “a limping people” (Genesis 32:22—32). Jacob limps physically, and this is taken up symbolically in his struggles with God. The divine son takes up and is broken on a cross, “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). The divine Logos becomes fully incarnate only when sacrificial redemptive love is taken at the pitch in the life, death, and resurrection of the Christ.

The capacity to suffer through to joy is a supreme emergent and an essence of Christianity. Yet, the whole evolutionary upslope is a lesser calling of this kind, in which renewed life comes by blasting the old. Life is gathered up in the midst of its throes, a blessed tragedy, lived in grace through a besetting storm. The cruciform creation is, in the end, deiform, godly, just because of this element of struggle, not in spite of it. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The enigmatic symbol of this is the cross. The cross here is not nature’s only sign, but it is a pivotal one. It would be a mistake to say that life is nothing but a cross, for life is gift and good news too. Still, all its joys have been bought with a price. The drama is Logos and Story, Cross and Glory. Evolutionary natural history, too, is a *via dolorosa*. In that sense, the aura of the cross is cast backward across the whole global story, and it forever outlines the future.

#### GOOD AND EVIL

Is there evil in nature? Southgate gave an article the title “God and Evolutionary Evil” (Southgate 2002; cf. 2014b). There is a classical distinction between moral evil and natural evil. The cosmos can be, and is, good. The possibility of doing evil arises only rarely at the apex of creation where sentience and morality emerge. Good and evil are frequently used as opposites but there is a dissymmetry between the terms. We readily speak of “the good Earth,” or of those ambiguous goods and bads. But we would hesitate before speaking of an “evil Earth.” “Good” covers a spectrum of positive values—a good rain, biodiversity, the evolution of life, natural resources. Bads are disvalues. But “evil” typically requires an agent with malicious intent.

Compare asking: Is nature cruel? Nature can generate caring, but nature does not have self-awareness enough to be cruel. Can some of nature’s creatures be cruel? Wolves, hyaenas? Predators kill to eat, being the sort of creatures they are, but they are not vicious enough to be cruel. Predators in packs defend their territory and drive off, even kill competitors, but this is not vindictive, savage retaliation in revenge. There are hierarchies in packs; subdominants challenge dominants. Males protect their harems. Chimps in a troop may gang up on an

overbearing dominant to restrict his power (punish him?). After fights, there is reconciliation. None of this seems to have high enough malicious intent to be called evil.

What then of nature's God—who (we assume) does have enough selfawareness to be loving? Could God be cruel? Demonic? Would God support a creative genesis that produced an evil Earth? Wild Earth is a gigantic food pyramid, a slaughterhouse, with life a miasma rising over the stench. Blind and ever urgent exploitation is nature's driving theme. The wilderness is a vast graveyard with millions of species, billions of individuals, hundreds, thousands laid waste for one or two that survive. But this is too bleak. Evil? Life is ever redeemed in the midst of its perpetual perishing. Southgate and I concur that on this wonderland planet, the highest creative genesis is of necessity cruciform glory.

Creative genesis on this promised Earth, this Earth with promise, requires a challenging ambiguous nature, supporting systemic processes where life grows ever more caring when confronted with disvalues, groaning in travail. Such vital suffering over the millennia cumulates and escalates in felt experience, until human life reaches divine sacrificial love, supremely incarnate in Jesus Christ, through whom we can redeem good from evil. Such is the providence of God yesterday, today, and tomorrow. That is gospel for people living in these times when our challenges and decisions are as sharp and as painful as ever.

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