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Evolutionary Theodicy and Incarnation of Desire: *Altruism, Cooperation, and Apophatic Excess*

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ABSTRACT: This article seeks to tie together three theological concerns: the incarnation, apophasis, and evolutionary theodicy. The goal, ultimately, is not to answer the problem of evolutionary theodicy but to reframe it through an act of decentering of the human in theological discourse. I accomplish this through a reading of three problems within the problem of evolutionary theodicy, apophatic theology as speech to excess that ends in silence, and the Incarnation as a transformation of hope in desire. Ultimately, this paper is doomed to fail, if it is sought as a resource to answer the problem of evolutionary theodicy. However, if the reader seeks a way to reframe discursive practices connected to theological arguments concerning evolutionary theodicy in light of an apophatic theology of the incarnation, then this could be a humble starting point for a reader engaged in this immense problem.

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The problem of evolutionary theodicy seems almost too deep, too difficult, and too paradoxical to even talk about as part of a theological project. This hesitancy, I am convinced, is not solely due to the difficulty of the topic, but also the continuing and ever lingering anthropocentrism of my thinking. I will not answer the problem of evolutionary theodicy but reframe it as part of the ever-continuing struggle to be honest in theological reflection and hopeful that the world is not merely streaming toward some hopeless end but held in love by a God who knows suffering intimately and desires communion. David Abrams asserts that it is through a re-enchantment of nature that we can begin to notice the ways we can heal the world.

¹ The paper argues that the problem of evolutionary theodicy —while not able to be fixed or solved—can be reframed by a hopeful ontology of desire with apophatic theology, cooperation, and altruism because Jesus as the consummation and redemption of our desires compels a reorientation of theological language and a decentering of the human that reenchants the theological imagination engaged in the struggle to speak about God and the suffering of the other-than-human animal world.

I will begin this paper with an extended discussion of some problems that are implicit within evolutionary theodicy. The issues are described as the problem of suffering, sin, and the problem of language, specifically theological and ethical language. I then move into a discussion of these three interrelated terms within theology and science around evolution. I will attempt to describe and relate apophatic theology, cooperation, and altruism. Denys Turner argues that apophatic theology is more about excess to exhaustion than linguistic negations, which compels a broader imagination around the impact of the incarnation. I will combine Turner's description with Sarah Coakley's emphasis on an "ontology of desire" within the theological enterprise to open the question of God talk potentially to the whole of existence through relationship. In the case of cooperation and altruism, I will use the language from Sarah Coakley and Martin Nowak's edited volume: *Evolution, Games, and God* while avoiding stringent discussion of the game theory they evoke. The careful reader will notice that the relationships and effects from how altruism, cooperation, and apophatic theology show up differently in various sections and this is on purpose. I will then attempt to show that these three terms allow space for the decentering of the human in the conversation on evolutionary theodicy. To be clear, this paper is concerned with the task of theological language and the question of the incarnation. The problem of evolutionary theodicy demands clarity and doctrinal acuity because it puts immense pressure on theological language.

Three Problems within the Problem of Evolutionary Theodicy

¹ David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Press, 1997), Introduction.

Now, I will explore three interrelated problems that intersect in Evolutionary theodicy and ask a variety of questions to begin to clarify some ways of approaching the problem. This section is not— and potentially cannot— solve the difficulty around speaking about the suffering that occurs within the evolutionary process. It would not do justice to the individual lives lost, or the entirety of the species lost. The section will attempt to highlight the problem of suffering within evolutionary theodicy, the question of sin and original sin, and, finally, the difficulties encountered in our language concerning sin and suffering as they impact images of God.

The extreme manifestations of pain in other-than-human animals must be acknowledged and grieved as evolutionary theory is discussed. The process of evolution shows that some— generally conceived of as the stronger— survive while others— generally conceived of as weaker— die out because they cannot evolve to survive. J.R. Illingworth writes, “The universality of pain throughout the range of the animal world, reaching back into the distant ages of geology, and involved in the very structure of the animal organism, is without a doubt among the most serious problems the theist has to face.”² The reality of mass suffering within the other-than-human animal population is a challenge that any theist must choose to wrestle with if they adhere to the scientific worldview of evolution.

The problem of evolutionary theodicy expands the question of suffering beyond the question of “why bad things happen to Good people?” to the question of the seemingly unbounded suffering in the other-than-human world. Charles Darwin was troubled by the reality of the suffering of all life on this planet. He held till the very end of *The Origin of Species* that the Creator was somehow involved, evolution was clear, and the world was continuing to evolve. Darwin writes, “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one... are being evolved.”³ The evolutionary theodicy question confronts theological language and

² JR Illingworth, “The Problem of Pain: Its Bearing on Faith in God,” in *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, 15th edition., ed. Charles Gore (London: John Murray Press, 1904), 83-84.

³ Charles Darwin. *The Origin of Species* (New York: Signet Press, 2003), 507.

theological concepts of God with the question of the cost of evolution. If God set evolution in motion and it is only through pain and suffering that evolution occurs, then what does this say about God? I am hesitant to articulate a definition of evolutionary theodicy because I do not want to limit the question. Yet, I will offer the following working definition: evolutionary theodicy questions the ramifications for a theological vision of and understanding of the justice of God from the suffering of animals that is a part of the evolutionary process.

The reality of suffering and pain must be held by the theist, especially for theological work. You cannot talk about God and the relationship to the world of the other-than-human animals without discussing the reality of suffering unless your view of God is either distant and hands-off, a vacated being above and beyond the world, or you can disregard the suffering of animals because it is not the human suffering. The other option for a theist could be to abandon the theistic project in the face of suffering or in the light of the scientific project leave it all in the hands of genetics. I cannot and will not make any of these choices but attempt to continually reframe the way I am thinking, writing, loving, and praying.

After discussing Darwin, I want to make it clear that I do not equate death with suffering. “Like pain and suffering, death is indigenous to the evolutionary process. Without it, not only would there be no food for eaters to eat, but eventually there would be no room for new sorts of creatures to emerge. The time-limit that ticks away in all living organisms and ends with their death is deeply structured into the creative advance of life.”⁴ The advance of life comes at a cost—the cost of some lives— and this is a part of the evolutionary condition. There is a temptation to attribute death to a fall within the Biblical Story—Genesis 3—but I think that this comes with questions about population control, diversity, and the relationship with the world. I follow Elizabeth Johnson who continues, “It is important to note that none of this agony and loss is due to human sin.”⁵ E. Johnson is explicit here that the point is missed if the first move is to jump

⁴ Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 184.

⁵ *Ibid.*

to a primal origin point where everything was perfect. The problem of theodicy is not avoided by attributing it to the Fall but is made even more complicated. When the Fall is used as an event that occurred in the past that humanity and all of creation suffers because of a choice that moves from a pure origin point of blessing to sin then the project of theodicy becomes more difficult and divisive.⁶ When problem of evolutionary theodicy is added to the mix, then it seems you are unable to speak at all.

Pain and suffering are different. To make theological language lovingly excessive, the theologian must pay careful and precise attention to her language. One must be cautious in parsing theological discourse as to not glorify or diminish either pain or suffering as evolutionary process is analyzed. Andrew Linzey writes, "Pain usually refers to the reaction following an adverse physical stimuli..." and "suffering is sometimes taken to be pain of a specific sort—for example, sufficiently unwarranted, prolonged, and outside the control of the subject."⁷ It is important to note that pain in the evolutionary process is a way that encourages adaptation and development within the process. Suffering can be debilitating and counterproductive to the process. Pain and suffering are not identical. Pain can accompany suffering but it can also be your body responding to stimuli.⁸ Suffering exceeds just the physical response to stimuli. Finally, Linzey articulates this clearly writing, "In general suffering may be defined as a deficiency in that animal's well-being."⁹

Christopher Southgate does an intriguing and exceptionally nuanced discussion and attempts a resolution to the problem of evolutionary suffering in his book, *The Groaning of Creation*. It is remarkable because of its depth of research and stringent adherence to its logic and argument. It is beyond the scope of this article to deal in total with the work for it surely should be read for all who are drawn into awareness of the life of the planet and the other-than-human animals in the evolving process of our

⁶ Bethany N. Sollereeder, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering: Theodicy Without A Fall* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 1-124.

⁷ Andrew Linzey, *Why Animal Suffering Matters* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 68-9.

world. I explore several critical concepts in Southgate's analysis while avoiding the necessary extrapolation of his points against other views because he has done such an extraordinary job comparing his task with a myriad of others.¹⁰

Southgate's thesis is that evolution is the 'only way God could create a planet of such range, beauty, complexity, and diversity of creatures the Earth has produced.'¹¹ Specifically, Southgate asserts, 'evolution is the only way that creatures could formally situate into the process of "selving," which means when a creature "behaves in its most characteristic ways" or a creature being a creature.'¹² Southgate attempts to solve the problem by allowing all creatures to flourish as they would flourish and die as they would die. Evolution is the only way, for Southgate, for the beauty of this world to flourish as it has. The "only way argument" implies a difficulty that if evolution is the only way then the only way for such beauty, range, diversity, and sophistication to happen then the evil and suffering of the world is inherent to the system. I follow Southgate's "only way" thesis while adding that this points not to a God who is removed from the system but intrinsically intimate. Southgate admits this causal move, and it is why he argues in chapter three for the "Good Harm Analysis" and in chapter Five articulates the idea of the "Pelican Heaven."¹³

The second problem related to evolutionary theodicy is the problem of sin. I will not attempt a survey of what original sin means due to constraints on paper size and, frankly, desire; however, it is essential to understand that this sin is distinctly related to the creation of binaries that have added to the extinction of species through human neglect. Is extinction a sin? The alarming extinction rate that occurs today due to human negligence and greed is sinful. Death as part of the natural order

¹⁰ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 18-39. For an extended critique of Southgate's work (and many other attempts at ET problem) see: Mats Wahlberg, "Was Evolution the only possible way for God to make autonomous creatures? Examination of an argument in evolutionary theodicy," *INTJ Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 77 (2015): 37-51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40-54, 78-91.

including extinction is not. It is a part of the natural progression of life. In the winter plants die, they germinate in the ground, and in the Spring with the correct combination of water and sunlight bloom again! The beauty of this activity takes death not only for room to grow but resources, nutrients, and space.

To return to the idea of a fall, I propose following Jay Johnson who wants to reframe this as a “severing.” J. Johnson writes, “Christian traditions refer to this moment in Genesis 3 as “The Fall.” We might more accurately and pointedly refer to it as “The Severing” —the separation from all avenues for intimate communion with other humans, with the natural world around us, and with God.”¹⁴ The reframing of sin to a breakdown of our most intimate relationships is extremely powerful. Relationality becomes the most dominant and hopeful category in this analysis. J. Johnson continues, “The dissolution of intimacy provides a powerful theological reminder about *sin*, which involves much more than simply breaking a particular rule; sin marks the tragedy of broken relationship.”¹⁵ J. Johnson would, I believe, add emphatically to his definition of the absolute binary that is constructed between the other-than-human animals and human-animals. This sort of language is fleshed out in racial slurs calling some beasts and in Nation State guidelines that continue to lock up an entire generation of young men of color in pens.

Mary Midgley writes, “The impression of desertion and abandonment which Existentialists have is due, I am sure, not to the removal of God, but to this contemptuous dismissal of almost the whole biosphere—plants, animals, and children. Life shrinks to a few urban rooms; no wonder it becomes absurd.”¹⁶ The binary between the human and the other-than-human animals has become so stark that life has shrunk. Humans have severed our relationship with each other, other-than-human animals, God, the planet, and all others to the point that, of course, people feel abandoned.¹⁷ The complete breakdown of this relationship

¹⁴ Jay Emerson Johnson, *Divine Communion* (New York: Seabury Books, 2013), 59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶ Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man*, Revised Edition (New York: Routledge Press, 1995), 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-19, 28-29.

comes from something that has become inherent to who humans are, how human make decisions, and how social policy is constructed. The gross division implies a dualism that has been set up and is now part of the totalizing discourse. It takes work to overcome the newly minted fundamental alienation between humanity and all that is other than human. Societally this has led to mass deforestation, factory farming, trophy hunting, and other uses of other-than-human animals and creation as a means to an end of the human's pleasure. Theologically this points to a crisis of the capacity to speak about the God who creates through the evolutionary process. The binary has been established, but can it be overcome?

Midgley makes the case that our degradation of the world comes from a place of our nature— that is, something essential to being human— and Johnson points to an event—a fundamental breakdown of relationships. Event here is not a singular historical moment that occurred in the flat plane of history but as a change of radical immensity. Johnson elaborates well, “Adam and Eve’s exile from Eden mapped visually what had already happened inwardly; their means for communion had withered and only the barest hope of its recovery remained.”¹⁸ The mapped event of the “expulsion from Eden” shows more clearly what has been mapped on bodies, especially bodies of color and other-than-human animal bodies, through our severing of relationship with God, the other-than-human world, and one another. Absolute binaries are created that governs how one lives, moves, and has being in this world and in relationship to all. The very way of being of humanity— ontology— has been severed and abandoned based off broken relationships and violence. Desires are disordered. The other-than-human animals cannot even be considered as able to fully love or sacrifice or able to fully cooperate for the redemption of this world.

The third and final problem for theology is the latent images of God if you pay serious attention to the suffering of the world. It is a problem of theological language, which hovers over and through all of the other issues have and will be encountered. David Hull writes, “What Kind of God can

¹⁸ J. Johnson, *Divine Communion*, 59.

one infer from the sort of phenomena epitomized by the species on Darwin's Galapagos Islands? ... The God of the Galapagos is careless, wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical. He is certainly not the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray.¹⁹ In many ways, Hull's analysis is correct and mirrors a move to pay particular attention within theology to how theology talks about God, especially in light of suffering and evil. I will return to a specific engagement with the language in Hull's analysis in section three but first must comment on the theme of sin within this loaded quote.

Hull, who I will presume would not use the language of sin, is making a forceful case that the most fundamental severing that occurs within the process of evolution is the severing with our images of God! The breakdown that has occurred in the establishment of the great binary of human and other-than-human animals and severed the very capacity for us to speak about God. Who would want an apathetic and uncaring God? Apophatic language is vital for the task of talking about the Divine in light of evolutionary theodicy because sin has profoundly corrupted the fundamental capacity for language. Who would want the God of the Galapagos Islands? What Hull has done correctly is decenter the analysis from the human to the animal. Hull, to be coy, it seems has asked the beasts! The messiness of the "entangled bank" of evolutionary theory and God-talk is even more deeply thrown into chaos!²⁰

Apophatic, Altruism, and Cooperation

In this brief section, I will begin to offer some ways to reframe the problem of evolutionary theodicy in light of the critique of anthropocentrism. I will provide a few new perspectives on some old words as they relate to evolutionary theodicy, the potential to decenter the human in theological discourse, and language. I will begin with a discussion of apophatic language, then turn to cooperation, and finally end with a study of Altruism relying for the last two on the minds of Martin Nowak and Sarah Coakley. I

¹⁹ David Hull, "God of the Galapagos" in *Nature* 352 (August 1992): 485-86; Southgate, *Groaning in Creation*, 7. I will return to this later in section 3.

²⁰ E. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 1.

am convinced that cooperation and altruism will allow us to decenter the language around evolutionary theodicy from an anthropocentric point of view and provide a potential rallying cry for ethical speech, radical acts of love, and excessive prayerful desire filled speech about God.

The apophatic is exhaustively negative in its description of the divine, and yet it is absolutely and exhaustively positive in its description of the divine. This is the paradoxical nature of apophatic theology. Denys Turner writes, “The apophatic therefore presupposed [in the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus] the cataphatic dialectically in the sense that the silence of the negative way is the silence achieved only at the point at which talk about God has been exhausted.”²¹ Turner, as a good Marxist, supposes this as a dialectic that runs parallel with one calling caution to the other’s speech and the other ending in silence at exhaustion. Turner is emphatic that beyond the knowing of God is the unknowing of God.²² Turner is concerned with the linguistics limits of speaking about God, but my proposal is to emphasize exhaustion and excess come from the speaker who encounters an other in an embodied event. Desire comes to the fore as one sits by the shore of a river, listens to the caw of a Raven, or watches the Berkeley Turkeys create a traffic jam. The necessity to speak in light of the suffering of creation compels an understanding of language that is enfolded in the life of the world and apophatic in its continual work to unknow each linguistic act. An apophatic response to the suffering of all creation is not singularly an act of silence but excessive speech to exhaustion concerning the ethical calls to work to transform this world in light of suffering and a knowing of what to say that leads to an unknowing in light of the profound depths of mystery encountered in the life of Jesus. Apophatic theology, therefore, is always incarnational theology. Therefore, my working definition of Christian apophatic theology articulates a performed response in light of an encounter with God in Christ that compels the theologian to speak to excess realizing that what she writes will ultimately fail and silence follows.

²¹ Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, *Silence and Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 22.

Two extra emphases that I would like to bring in are from Sarah Coakley. Coakley writes, “[An ontology of desire] indicates how God the ‘Father’, in and through the Spirit, both stirs up, and progressively chastens and purges, the frailer and often misdirected desires of humans, and forges them, by stages of sometimes painful growth, into the likeness of the Son”²³ The prayerful act of engaging in the excessive speech of the apophatic theological task is a task done in the name of excessive relationship to the one desired! The disciple is chastened and stirred up by the Spirit to live into this Christ-like life through radical self-giving acts of love. Coakley continues:

The vision it [an invitation to life] sets before one and invites ongoing—and sometimes disorienting—response and change, both personal and political, in relation to God. One might rightly call theology from this perspective an ascetical exercise—one that demands that bodily practice and transformation, both individual and world. And to admit this is also to acknowledge that the task of theology is always in motion (*in via*), always undoing and redoing itself, not only in response to shifting current event, but because of the deepening vision that may—and should—emerge from such ascetical demand and execution.²⁴

This practice of theology, as an ascetical enterprise, will compel a continual unknowing of the binary towards an “ontology of desire.” The transformation of the disciples by the chastening of the Divine compels a performed unknowing that comes from desire. The disciple is made of and by desire. It will help the disciple to see the connections with our hopes, spirituality, and our animality. “All life is animated. Each and every living being— from the smallest microbes to the largest of mammals— carries a desire for satisfaction to the situation at hand. This desire is his or her “spirituality” and also his or her animality. Spirituality and animality are not

²³ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

two.”²⁵ How am I ordered to the other? What is the relationship between the human and the other-than-human world?

The two streams of interconnected apophatic thought, Turner and Coakley, lead me directly to another project of Coakley’s around evolutionary biology, altruism, and cooperation in *Evolution, Games, and God* with Martin Nowak. Coakley and Nowak write, “Cooperation is a form of working together in which one individual pays a cost (in terms of fitness, whether genetic or cultural) and another gains a benefit as a result.”²⁶ Fitness is the mathematical term coined to designate the cost that an action or person takes as they act.²⁷ Cooperation is not something that has generally been seen to take on positive costs, especially in evolution. Generally, it has been argued that it is the selfish gene²⁸, the one that eliminates or takes on less cost to their fitness, which thrives. Nowak argues that this is how evolution has seemed to progress over the generations, yet this can be misleading when mathematical game theory is applied to evolution. “Cooperation is the master architect for evolution.”²⁹ What cooperation does is decenter certain lines and narratives about evolution and the process through which all can flourish as they are to thrive. What if other-than-human animals cooperate? What if there is more to evolution than ‘red tooth and claws?’³⁰ Clearly, the idea of cooperation does not undo or make better the suffering that is in evolution, but, perhaps, it gives us a glimmer of light to see the hope in the lives of the other-than-human animals.

²⁵ Jay McDaniel, “Epilogue. Animals and Animality: Reflections on the Art of Jan Harrison,” in *Divinanimality* ed. Stephen D. Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 261.

²⁶ Sarah Coakley and Martin Nowak, eds., *Evolution, Games, and God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd Edition (Oxford, UK: Oxford Press, 1990).

²⁹ Martin Nowak, *Super Cooperators: Altruism, Evolution, and Why We Need Each Other To Succeed* (New York: Free Press, 2011), xx. If you wanted to explore the mathematical basis for his theories in detail see: Martin Nowak, *Evolutionary Dynamics: Exploring the Equations of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2006).

³⁰ Alfred Lord Tennyson coined this phrase in: “In Memoriam A.H.H” quoted JR Illingworth, “The Problem of Pain,” in *Lux Mundi*, 83.

What if cooperation goes further in the other-than-human world? What if there is action out of love? What if the normative claims about the other-than-human world that suggests they cannot do things out of pure love are false and solely based on anthropocentric tendencies? Coakley and Nowak write, "Altruism is a form of (costly) cooperation in which an individual is motivated by good will or love for another (or others)."³¹ Southgate's remarkable analysis of Evolutionary theodicy revolves around the only way argument while limiting altruism to humans only. He extends his rather terse analysis of "examples" of altruistic behavior but reaches the conclusion that this is not true "other love" or radical altruistic behavior.³² The denial of altruism to the other-than-human animals by Southgate is because, for Southgate, evolution and the suffering involved are the only way. If there is only one way, then anything that troubles your thesis must be denied and not in an apophatic manner!

Why apophatic language, cooperation, and altruism? There is, I am convinced, a correlation between the modes of speech about the Other—Radical and Wholly— with the Other—that is the other-than-human animals. The correlations show up in severed relationships between humans and God, humans and other humans, and humans and the natural world. The brokenness is shown in the acts of selfishness and greed. Can one even do an act out of selflessness? Of course, the truth of this statement is evident in modern western capitalism where everything is a part of production! I contend that this is manifested directly in our theological activity of speaking about God. We expect that there is something that has to be said, needs to be measured, and can only be said by humans.³³ What if it all is a part of the apophatic reorientation of our desires through chastening from the Divine? I want to be clear that I am not suggesting suffering of the other-than-human animal world is a part of the chastening of the Divine, but the chastening is a radical reorientation of

³¹ Nowak, *Super Cooperators*, 5.

³² Southgate, *Groaning of Creation*, 68.

³³ For a litany of a variety of altruistic acts from the other-than-human animals see: Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know how Smart Animals Are?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 2017); or Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 56; or Thomas Dixon, "Altruism: Morals from History," in *Evolution, Games, and God*, 60-81.

the disciple's and the Church's relationship with the other-than-human world and the language about the Divine. What reorients our language and our discipleship is the love of God expressed in the excess of the incarnation. The orientation to the world became kenotic and enfleshed in words of altruism in response to the suffering of the world. This is a place to challenge how each individual and community lives into this world by considering the ecological impact of diets, travel, church services, and life together. The challenge is to reorient one's life questioning the ways in which your language is impacted by the radical enfleshment of the incarnation and the expansion of a theological imagination to its impact upon the animal world.

In this section, I have briefly sketched a few primary definitions that will aid in my constructive project around theological language and evolutionary theodicy. Apophatic language as excessive language gives us credence to speak to the point of exhaustion about ethics and God, cooperation offers us an opportunity to reframe the discussion of evolutionary theodicy, and altruism decenters the human in the entire conversation.

Hope in Desire

I have situated this paper in a paradox that seems inescapable. If I make a claim about evolutionary theodicy, then am I saying I have solved it? Am I minimizing the suffering? Am I able to speak? It is here that I will expand on the thesis that apophatic language can bring to the fore the concepts of cooperation and altruism to have a decentering effect on the anthropocentric arguments around evolutionary theodicy. I will offer ways of speaking and ways of noticing and ways of incarnating fully in the world around us.

The "ontology of desire" that is part of the excessive and transformational speech of apophatic theology leads to a radical ethic with the other-than-human animals.³⁴ The call to live through an ontology of desire is a reminder that desires ordered through the desires of the Divine transform the work of the disciple in this world. That is, the disciple's

³⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 6.

imagination is grounded in this world through the incarnation. Incarnate desire remakes the theological project to be a mode of prayer and radical imagination. Coakley writes, [W]hat I have argued here about authentic contemplation, in contrast, is that it's very practice of gentle effacement allows communication with the 'other' at a depth not otherwise possible, indeed perhaps not *even imaginable*.³⁵ When you read gentle effacement think anthropocentric decentering. The practice of theology is in relationship to the ascetic practices of prayer. The prayer acts— theological speech— effaces and decenters the one speaking so that they/I/we can begin to think the unimaginable. It compels the theologians to dream the unthinkable as possible. I could ask the beasts without laughing at the seemingly impossible and would not limit theology to human speech. Flesh and language are expanded through this transformation of the theological project through the incarnate desire. Flesh considered and cared for is not singularly human flesh and flesh is expanded beyond "blood and flesh" to all creation.³⁶ Language spoken about God and the suffering of the world does not need to start with the language of the human theologian. One can, in essence, begin not with the words spoken but the sighs of creation as she groans awaiting redemption.³⁷

The theological project should call us to a renewed ontology of desire for one another that radically subverts the severing. "[T]hese purgations are also the conditions for seeing what is awry without falsely projecting one's inner darkness onto the 'other' and perpetrating new political and theological idolatries."³⁸ The potential ramifications of this transformation extends into ethics and all of life. The unknowing that comes after our knowing transforms the ways one enfleshes in this world because hope is transformed by mystery. It is this hope that gives over to the excess of apophatic speech. It is this hope that allows for "animal ethics" to be an apophatic ethics because the incarnation as an apophatic event of excess continually opens the disciple to transformation. There is

³⁵ Ibid., 86. Emphasis mine.

³⁶ Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (Bloomington, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 24-25.

³⁷ This is, of course, a paraphrase of Romans 8:19-21.

³⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 87.

too much to say and too much to fix for silence yet, and this is fundamental, if I think that simply saying, speaking, shouting, or the other uses of our bodies and human voices are the only way to fix the situations, then the fundamental anthropocentric idol will continue to be propped up by these actions. I realize after shouting myself hoarse that my speech ends and I sit, pray, hope, listen, and stay with those who are suffering and in pain. I sit with the broken flesh. I become enfleshed with the sufferer as God was enfleshed as human and continues to be enfleshed in the world.³⁹ I cannot fix it but believe that the one I am praying to feels it, knows it, and suffers with all. The example I follow is the God who became incarnate and knows suffering in its fullness. The "Why" question is decentered out of hope for this world.

I have repeatedly used the refrain "Asks the beats" to reference a decentering of the human from theological discourse. I am convinced that this is utterly and exhaustively apophatic. In chapter 2 of *Asks the Beasts*, Elizabeth Johnson traces Darwin's personal and scientific development in the stream of personal and perhaps a spiritual odyssey. E. Johnson's primary affinity for giving us a glimpse into Darwin's life is to end by and calls attention to Darwin's capacity to "look" or to "see" all life through a lens of admiration and beauty. She gives a litany of examples from *Origin of Species*. She mentions Himes' term *sacramental beholding* as a reasonable way to view Darwin's capacity to look. I believe a sacramental beholding is encapsulated in an ontology of desire by a Creator who lavishes love on all creatures. All creatures are beings that desire and desire together. Darwin was such a keen observer— a looker— that he noticed in the mix of various shrubs of 32 trees or little shrubs that had been trampled on and choked out by the stronger plants. He was down on his hands and knees in a cow pasture observing the land. If that is not love, then I do not know what is! "But I am proposing that the sustained attention he *lavished* on the natural world models something of keen religious value to those who approach his work from the perspective of faith."⁴⁰ By a reorientation of my desires to

³⁹ I am making a stance about Divine Action in these sentences but it is outside the possibilities of this paper to go further than that. See: Sollereeder, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering*, 125-155.

⁴⁰ E. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 41. Emphasis mine.

the One that desires me, I can approach lavish (excessive) speech about God, ethics, and the ways suffering occurs in evolution and know the hope of all creation is enfleshed in more than singular acts.

The incarnation shows the desire of the Divine and is the full picture of ordered desire. The human and other-than-human desires are made whole by the desires of the Divine. The Incarnation is the full symbol of the necessity of the ordered desires facing out toward the world and to work for transformative healing. The disordered desires brought by sin anchor toward selfishness and brokenness that has led to the intense images of suffering that is beyond even the "normal suffering" that is a part of the evolutionary process.

I am convinced that there is a connection here between the love lavished on each plant and creature with what Eric Daryl Meyers calls a return to the animal gaze. "The unsettling eyes of the animal gaze... are unsettling not because they convey an excess of meaning that cannot be borne in language."⁴¹ It is the abyss of the animal gaze that threatens to swallow, devour, or break the anthropocentric worldview and proposes a reorientation of what Abrams calls *re-enchantment*. It is the suffering of the single animal that threatens to devour our inability to ask the beast or to allow the thought that they may be altruistic. The clearest example of radical altruism is the divine who suffers with those who suffer. The return of the animal gaze is a return of the divine gaze.⁴² This is a vision of the Divine that is excessive and altruistic; ever expanding beyond what can be asked or imagined. This requires a theological speech that knows it must speak to exhaustion and the knowing that leads to an unknowing.

Can the beasts be asked because they are "nonrational" creatures? Does this not, in the end, quell my argument that the beasts should be asked through apophatic-altruistic utterances and the answers waited upon? In his discussion of suffering and rationality, Linzey asks, "But is it true that rational comprehension always or generally heightens suffering?" He continues answering, No and "They [animals] experience the raw terror

⁴¹ Eric Meyer, "The Logos of God and the End of Humanity: Giorgio Agamben and the Gospel of John," in *Divinanimality*, 160.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, *The Animal Therefore that I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 1.

of not knowing. And since the argument implies that animals live closer to their bodily senses than we do, the frustration of their natural freedoms may well induce more suffering than we allow.⁴³ Rationality, the “trump card,”⁴⁴ and its relationship to a nonknowledge does not negate my thesis but enhances the argument. It returns the animal's gaze to the fore of humanity's vision. The suffering of the animal world cannot be overlooked. No one can avoid the animal tied to the tree or the dolphin caught in the fisher's net. The severing is subverted even for just a moment. The Incarnation interrupts our normative divisions— God and human— to live fully into that which is unknown. Ask the beast not in spite of their “nonknowledge or nonrationality,”⁴⁵ but precisely because they are can show the way to greater wholeness. Sacramental beholding becomes a way to live incarnationally in the world not restricted by brokenness but held in hope, love, calls for altruism, and work to change the world.

What do I mean by this definition or addition to the definition of cooperation? It is by cooperation at a cost (fitness) that will be the only means of helping this world out of despair. Abrams writes, “Intermittently, I began to wonder if my culture's assumptions regarding the lack of awareness of other animals and the land itself was less a product of careful and judicious reasoning than a strange inability to clearly perceive other animals.”⁴⁶ Humanity has severed our lives from others so radically that the gaze of the other is avoided. I avoid the gaze of the wounded, so I do not need to open myself in vulnerability to the other.⁴⁷ The other side of this gaze is the human so wounded by the brokenness of the world that the person cannot take it. This woundedness is a moment of apophatic excess. The act of turning away from the brokenness of the world is the opposite of the Incarnation. The silence in the face of the suffering of the world is not the same as the silence of the apophatic, yet both silences compel a

⁴³ Linzey, *Why Animal Suffering Matters*, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 27.

⁴⁷ Daniel Miller, *Animal Ethics and Theology: The Lens of the Good Samaritan* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

linguistic caution. The apophatic silence is a silence based in the hope of the transforming power of the Divine act in the world. The Divine chastening of the disciple is a transformation into the image and likeness of the Son. This turn will require cooperation. It will need radical vulnerability to the other. It will require being caught up in the animal's gaze. "God's Logos is the charged silence over which humanity finds itself interminably babbling. The logos of humanity can find no entry into the Logos of God: it tries to speak its way over a communicative abyss rather than being immersed in the silence of divinanimality."⁴⁸

If humanity's attempt to wrestle with how to participate in the divine life reaches nowhere but babbling and nothingness, which profoundly is the usual charge against the other-than-human animal's world, what can humanity do? Humanity should ask the beast and shut up, as Job reminds us: But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the LORD hath wrought this?⁴⁹ What if, the only way to begin to gain insights into this life-world, this interconnected and interwoven life that experiences all the pain and suffering of the world, is for the human to move out of the center? What I am offering is a reframing of theological and philosophical discourse around an "ontology of desire" that, like Abram's description of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, "would strive, not to explain the world as if from the outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation within it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events, and powers that surround us on every hand."⁵⁰ This recovery would allow the human to be decentered from the evolutionary theodicy problem and still encounter it! The human person would be reminded that they are to encounter this suffering in their flesh. The human encounters the other-than-human animal, not as a "Cartesian

⁴⁸ Meyers, "Giorgio Agamben and the Gospel of John," in *Divinanimality*, 160.

⁴⁹ Job 12:7-8; King James Version

⁵⁰ Abram, *Spell*, 47.

automaton,⁵¹ but as another thinking, feeling, suffering, loving, and cooperating subject. It is here that the return of the gaze is most impactful. The gaze of the other-than-human animal looks upon us and sees us. We, the human, return that gaze seeing the animal as one who suffers, desires, communicates, loves, and hopes. The “answer/nonanswer” to evolutionary theodicy is here in this radical seeing, cooperating, unknowing, and incarnating love. It is here in this revolutionary act of cooperation that drives us all toward a better and more incarnated world.

An emphasis on an apophatic incarnation puts extreme pressure on language to be incarnated in the disciple’s work to change the world. The incarnation is the reminder that God is not just a co-sufferer with the world but enfleshed in and invested in the life of the world bring the world into a full and right relationship. This pressure on language is also a compelling force to respond ethically—altruistically and cooperatively—to the increased suffering in this world. The apophatic emphasizes excessive speech concerning the world with the knowledge that the work for change is not solely in the hands of the human. The human is decentered in the apophatic even as this is, potentially, part of the soul’s journey to God. Coakley writes, “Rather, God is that without which there would be no evolution at all: God is the atemporal undergirder and sustainer of the whole process of apparent contingency or randomness yet— we say in the spirit of Augustine— simultaneously closer to its inner workings than it is to itself. And as such, God is both within the process and without it.”⁵² The desires of the human are transformed by the desires of God. The desires of creation are transformed because of the desires of God for ultimate and whole transformation of the Cosmos. This is incarnation.

It is here that I wish to return in the end to Hull’s analysis in “God of the Galapagos” where he writes:

What Kind of God can one infer from the sort of phenomena epitomized by the species on Darwin's Galapagos Islands? The evolutionary process is rife with happenstance, contingency,

⁵¹ Ibid., 48.

⁵² Coakley, “Evolution, Cooperation, and Divine Providence” in *Evolution, Games, and God*, 377-78.

incredible waste, death, pain, and horror....Whatever the God implied by evolutionary theory and data of natural selection may be like, he is not the Protestant God of waste not, want not. He is also not the loving God who cares about his productions. He is not even the awful God pictured in the Book of Job. The God of the Galapagos is careless, wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical. He is certainly not the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray.⁵³

There are, clearly, underlying assumptions from Hull about the way God is pictured and talked about in discourse. Hull is imaging a God so removed from the problem of suffering that He [*sic*] is not even remotely concerned with what happens. Ultimately, the capacity to speak to excess to the point of exhaustion, both about God and evolution, grants the disciple an ethical capacity to speak for resistance to those acts that cause suffering for the whole of the animal world, a theologically ethical call to incarnate their lives with those who suffer, and a theological practice of continuing to be open to new encounters with the Divine that reframes the way of speaking, praying, resisting, and loving.

Nowak offers us a renewed vision, a hopeful one, based on the understanding that cooperation provides a renewed sense of evolution and the potential for God-talk. What kind of God is pictured in Hull's understanding? It is indeed not one to whom I would pray. The only thing that the Christian God showed through 'kenotic self-emptying on the cross'⁵⁴ is that this God is a God that is careless and wastefully altruistic in the outpouring of love, not a removed and indifferent deity. The God who chastens and corrects our severed desires is a God who enters fully into communion with all of creation. What the evolutionary process envisions is a God who is "a God of intimate involvement in empathy, risk, and suffering."⁵⁵ There may be a temptation to ask how someone can decenter the human as part of the theological project and argue for the incarnation.

⁵³ David Hull, "God of the Galapagos" in *Nature* 352 (August 1992): 485-86; Southgate, *Groaning in Creation*, 7.

⁵⁴ Coakley, "Evolution, Cooperation, and Divine Providence" in *Evolution, Games, and God*, 378.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 383.

Frankly, this misses the point of the argument. I do not seek to demean or devalue the human to raise the other-than-human world. What I seek is to articulate a framework that enfleshs a performed response to the problem of evolutionary theodicy, which has been exacerbated in light of human severing. Also, I seek to understand more fully the incarnation in light of the problem of suffering that seems so fundamental to the evolutionary project. This is why, ultimately, I argue for an apophatic theology of the incarnation because the excessive acts of speech and transformed by the enfleshing of God in this world. This is the fundamental reason why I spend so much time looking at Southgate, altruism, and cooperation.

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