



CHRISTIANS IN SCIENCE

INAUGURAL MEETING OF BRISTOL LOCAL GROUP

Science, Suffering and a God of Love

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Science, Suffering and a God of Love

The philosophical question

"How can an all powerful and all loving God allow suffering? Either he cannot be all loving or he cannot be all powerful"

Tonight's topic

How we can reconcile the scientific evidence that the causes of suffering and death - disease, predation, earthquakes and floods etc - existed from the very beginnings of life itself, with our understanding of God's good creation, the Fall and its consequences as outlined in Genesis 1-3 and elsewhere.

The Augustinian view

Widely held amongst evangelical Christians with a strong view of scripture.

- God created a perfect world (Genesis 1 and 2).
- Man rebelled, sin entered the world and with it death and decay (Genesis 3).
- In this view the whole of the created order was distorted by man's sin and like man it awaits recreation.

Gen 3: 16-19 " To the woman he said, "I will greatly **increase your pains in childbearing; with pain** you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' **Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you,** and you will eat the plants of the field. **By the sweat of your brow** you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Romans 5:12 – "...sin entered the world through one man, and **death through sin**, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned."

Romans 8:18-21 " I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. **For the creation was subjected to frustration**, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the **creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay** and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."

1. Death and the Fall

Death is referring to spiritual death, separation from God.

Romans 5:12 – "...sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned

1Cor. 15: 22 "As in Adam, all die; so in Christ shall all be made alive".

Paul probably thought of Adam's death as physical, but he was constrained by the culture of his day

Augustine seemed to accept that death and decay was part of God's means of keeping a fresh creation

2. Suffering and the Fall

Evidence from many branches of science suggests that death and disease, predation, earthquakes and floods have been part of the created order from its very beginnings. Indeed these processes are actually integral to the creative process.

The same processes than can cause suffering can also bring benefit and be vital for life

Mutations give diversity of life and cancer.

The earthquakes and volcanic eruptions give devastation but form beautiful landscapes

Extreme weather conditions gives floods and droughts and a diversity of climates and agricultural possibilities.

Bacteria and viruses give crippling diseases and decay to keep the world constantly fresh and new.

Cell death gives metamorphosis and removal of aging defunct cells

Birth would not be possible without the sadness of death

Pain is vitally important to protect our bodies but uncontrolled causes immense suffering

However, the potential for suffering leaves many people as casualties, suffering beyond human endurance leading to the question "Why does God allow it; why did he choose to make a world like this?"

Is this really compatible with the good creation that we read about in Genesis 1 – "And God saw that it was good"

Charles Darwin: "What a book a devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horridly cruel works of nature!"

Some possible solutions

Could it be that even for God there are some constraints by which he is bound.

There is an element of openness in the created order world, which brings with the opportunities for good and bad.

Quantum Theory

Weather patterns

Plate tectonics

Evolution

If God made his presence too obvious we would effectively be forced to believe in him rather than make a free choice.

The openness in creation that leads to suffering is ultimately for our best. Cf **Irenaeus** - suffering is woven into the fabric of God's creation with the specific purpose of leading us towards God. "The valley of soul making"

Several serious questions.

First, to what extent does God leave creation to its own devices? Is he really sovereign if he leaves so much to chance.

Has God imposed constraints on the created order that provides overall direction?

Blowing a candle

Chaos theory - patterns emerge within apparently random processes

Simon Conway Morris - The process of evolution itself is constrained along relatively limited pathways accounting for many examples of convergent evolution

Does God create with an openness at one level but a divine purpose and direction that ensures he achieves his ends?

Or is he constantly tweaking the system at a level we could never detect?

Einstein - if God played dice he would always win!

Theism - God is constantly at work in his creation
Deism - God sets up the system and lets it run itself

Is animal predation and disease really evil? Does it always cause suffering to animals or are we projecting our experience of predation, violent death and disease onto animals when this is inappropriate?

Predation as part of God purposes.

Ps 104:21 *The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God.*

Job 39:26-30 *"Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread his wings towards the south? Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high? He dwells on a cliff and stays there at night; a rocky crag is his stronghold. From there he seeks out his food; his eyes detect it from afar. His young ones feast on blood, and where the slain are, there is he."*

Endorphins in predation

Illness – Animals appear more “accepting” – Endorphins or lack of worry?

We should not confuse pain and disease in animals which are part of the natural created order with evil and suffering.

The problem with suggesting that the openness of the universe that allows pain and the potential for suffering is for us best is that: *“Some things are too evil to be permissible even when they’re for the best”*

Was there any way in which Adam’s sin, the Fall could have changed in the created order as some have argued from the passage in Romans 8: 18-21?

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Possible solutions – linking sin to suffering

The Fall brings spiritual death and separates us from God, so it may turn biological processes that have a useful biological function, into suffering which is evil.

The easy examples

Our unhealthy and selfish individual and corporate lifestyles and pollution of the world cause many diseases like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and allergies.

Our abuse of the worlds resources cause famine and now through global warming floods and droughts.

At the extreme we can actively cause enormous suffering to human and animals through emotional and physical violence.

C.S. Lewis in “The problem of Pain”.

“It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets and bombs; it is by human avarice or stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork”.

What about suffering that is not directly the result of our actions?

Suffering is greatly influenced by our state of mind probably because the brain controls Endorphin release. Contrast the deliberate injection with a blunt hypodermic needle with a prick from a thorn whilst out walking. Or a leg blown off in battle with an amputation without anesthetic.

The immune system fights disease and is affected by our state of mind. (Immune surveillance of cancer).
Is fallen man less able to utilize these natural defenses?

The fear of death causes great anguish but less so for those who know that this life is but preparation for the next

Animals have remarkable sensory perceptions that seems to allow them to detect earthquakes and tidal waves before they come enabling them to escape.
Some dogs can detecting an aura around an epileptic before they fit.

Has our dislocation from God impaired these senses?

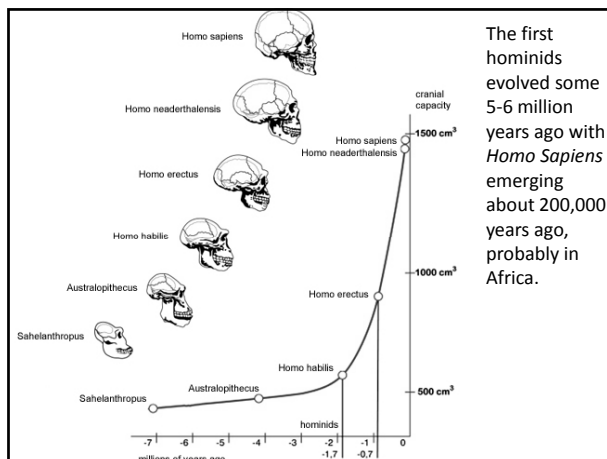
In this sense we can imagine that the fall may not have introduced death and pain and disease into the world, but rather have distorted its effects from fulfilling a useful biological function to causing meaningless suffering.

Adam and the Fall in the light of science

Was Adam a historical figure or only a literary device to aid our understanding of the nature of sin and of Man made in the image of God

Paul obviously thought of Adam as literal although he was constrained by the culture of his day that was ignorant of our understanding of the origins of *homo sapiens*

The fossil history clearly man evolved through a long sequence of intermediate forms, from a primitive ancestor that also gave rise to the chimpanzee and other great apes.



All humans alive today have genetic links (determined by modern Molecular Biological techniques – mitochondrial and Y chromosome DNA sequences) that converge some 150,000 years ago.

The genealogies found in Genesis and the mention of bronze and the development of cities in the early chapters of Genesis could place Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden about 10,000BC.

Thus there are many years of *Homo Sapiens* in the fossil record before the arrival of Adam and Eve.

Are these the mankind described in Genesis 1 whilst in Genesis 2 an individual (The man Adam) is described?

It was about 10-12,000BC in Mesopotamia (the probable location of Eden) that the primitive hunter/food gatherers began to domesticate cattle and cultivate plants.

Was this the point in time when the biological vessel that God had created through evolution was now ready to become aware of his creator and so be a spiritual being rather than merely an advanced animal? With this revelation *homo sapiens* becomes *homo divinus* and this may have initiated the process of civilisation.

If this were true we cannot be physically descended from Adam (which requires 150,000 years) but rather share a spiritual kinship with him.

Proposal 1 Adam was real even if we don't know exactly who he was and when he lived. His disobedience was representative of, or laterally transferred to all mankind.

Proposal 2 The whole account of Adam and Eve is figurative, a story to explain that as *homo sapiens* developed to the point at which he was able to recognise his creator, he immediately sought to exert his own independence and so sinned.

Many theologians would argue that Proposal 2 is not consistent with Paul's teaching where Adam's sin plays such a central role. But it would have been impossible for Paul to have thought other than in terms of a historical Adam.

The important point is that man is made in the image of God, but has sinned and the world bears the consequences.

Augustine of Hippo - 5th Century theologian.

Usually even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world... and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an unbeliever to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics, and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.

Thomas Aquinas - 13th century theologian

Two rules are to be observed, as Augustine teaches. The first is, to hold the truth of Scripture without wavering. The second is that since Holy Scripture can be explained in a multiplicity of senses, one should not adhere to a particular explanation, only in such measure as to be ready to abandon it if it be proved with certainty to be false; lest Holy Scripture be exposed to the ridicule of unbelievers, and obstacles be placed to their believing.

Sir Francis Bacon (17th century philosopher and scientist)

In this vanity some of the moderns have with extreme levity indulged so far as to attempt to found a system of natural philosophy (science) on the first chapter of Genesis, on the book of Job, and other parts of sacred writings; and repression of it the more important, because from this unwholesome mixture of things human and divine there arises not only a fantastic philosophy but also an heretical religion.

Books

- "Creation or Evolution – Do we have to choose?" Denis Alexander (2008) Monarch Books ISBN 978-1-85424-746-9
- Darwin, Creation and The Fall - Theological Challenges Edited by R.J. Berry and T.A. Noble (2009) Apollos ISBN 978-1-84474-381-0
- "Can we believe in Genesis today" by Ernest Lucas (2001) IVP (ISBN 0-85111-658-2)
- "The language of God – A scientist presents evidence for belief" Francis Collins Pocket Books ISBN 978-1-84739-092-9
- Henri Blocher "In the beginning" IVP