

CHAPTER SEVEN

REPLY TO CHRISTOPHER SOUTHGATE

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Setting the Scene

Christopher Southgate, whose help and collaboration I have appreciated in recent years, has queried my view that theism and Darwinism can be reconciled without resort to revelation and eschatology, suggesting that a compound theodicy (with more than one strand of defence) is needed. He also criticises what I have written about stewardship. Those who have not been able to read *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* may find these ideas puzzling, and so perhaps I should explain what is argued in the relevant part of that book.

In chapter Six and Seven I argue for the compatibility of Darwinism and belief in creation, but not from scratch. For the case for belief in creation has already been made out in Chapter Five, and the case for preferring Darwinism both to creationism and to variants such as Intelligent Design is now advanced. (To avoid confusion, I should explain that creationism alleges the special creation of species through supernatural interventions, while belief in creation holds that the material world is dependent on God, however the species may have originated; nor need belief in creation commit its adherents to the belief that certain biological phenomena are too irreducibly complex to be explainable by natural selection, as adherents of Intelligent Design maintain. Believers in creation believe in God as author of creation, but need not subscribe to the kinds of interventionism that both creationists and adherents of Intelligent Design tacitly invoke. All this is explained in Chapter Four and recapitulated in Chapter Six.)

The rest of Chapter Six addresses the problems of reconciling phenomena such as predation and parasitism with belief in creation, and argues that they can be reconciled, despite the apparent problems. Chapter Seven addresses various further aspects of the problem of evil, and argues

that a law-governed system like the actual system of nature is consistent with what a creator intent on generating a world of value would create. It does not claim (like Voltaire's character Pangloss) that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds, if only because there is no intrinsic maximum for the goodness of worlds. But it does claim that the world's evils are either due to the choices of agents such as human beings or to the operation of systems indispensable for the generation of valuable creatures, non-sentient and sentient, non-human and human.

Theodicy

Southgate recognises that I do not claim that our world is the best possible (despite including "Pangloss" in his title). This I reject for the reason already given. The other reasons suggested by Southgate strike me as inconclusive. Thus some worlds can be better than others (as people realise when they choose between futures). Consequentialism has no application to God, as opposed to supplying a criterion of rightness to human agents with limited knowledge seeking to do what is right in the constrained circumstances of human life. And, while God is not to be seen as a value-maximiser, there must be some relation between divine grace and the emergence of value (value being what there is reason to be glad about). Nevertheless Southgate and I are at one in rejecting Panglossism.

Nevertheless he is right to hold that I claim that worlds can be compared in point of value, and that the actual world is one that a good God could have created. He also takes me to be asserting a related proposition that I was not asserting, and so I need to introduce its context here.

The context was the compatibility of acceptance of the evils implicit in evolutionary processes and belief in God. But we can readily see that there is no inconsistency here, by adding to the disputed combination any possibly true proposition which, in conjunction with some members of the disputed pair or conjunction, implies the remaining one. And this is actually done in *Creation, Evolution and Meaning*, at p. 135. The possibly true proposition is the one now highlighted by Southgate, namely: "No other world that God could have created would have had a better balance of good over evil than the actual world, despite the evils it contains, has or will have." For this, in conjunction with standard theistic beliefs, entails that evils exist, without apparently being self-contradictory; for example, it avoids claiming that the actual world has a better balance of good over evil than any other, as it allows that other possible worlds could have an equally good balance to that of the actual one. Let me emphasise that I was

not asserting the truth of this possibly true proposition, and that my arguments do not collapse if it is rejected (for the world could still be compatible with God's good purposes); rather it simply serves to make the logical point just mentioned.

Nevertheless I did conclude, at p. 143, that the actual system of nature "may well be regarded as having an overall balance of value over disvalue". Also, in the context of the possibility of different laws of nature, I wrote, at p. 141, that "we have no reason to believe that a world with a better balance of good over evil than the actual world is possible". With regard to the possibilities under discussion there, I stand by this claim, but it should have had more qualification, since, as I have written in reply to Alan Holland, we can imagine a possible world just like the actual one but better through the addition of one more violet. But this clearly does not mean that God is less than good for failing to create that world. So I can also stand by what I went on to say, that we have no reason to believe "that the actual world is not a world that a good God would create". It may be that Southgate was misled by this passage into supposing that I was asserting the "No other world" proposition of p. 135.

The move made in that passage does, as Southgate later says he suspects my objective to be, "show the logical compossibility of God's goodness and evolutionary evil", without vindicating God's righteousness (another phrase he uses in that passage), as that task would go beyond consideration of God's role as creator. My overall objective, however, was more than the one about compossibility, as I was also replying to the probabilistic argument against the credibility of a good God creating a world such as ours, as well as to inconsistency arguments. My reply to the probabilistic argument is spread out across chapter 7 (and cannot be fully recapitulated here); it focuses on what Southgate calls "the no other way argument", but is supplemented by the argument from value of chapter 8.

Strictly, my argument does not say that there was no other way for God to create the world except through laws of nature such as that of evolution by natural selection. In the closing section of chapter 7, I recognised that a world somewhat resembling the current one could have been brought about through a sequence of miracles rather than through laws of nature, but added that it would be short-lasting without further miracles, and that the circumstances needed for the development of intelligent choices and of virtuous characters would be absent. So I concluded that such a world does not compare in value with one governed by laws of nature such as ours, and that there was thus "no other way" to a world including the flourishing of the creatures of the actual world (human and nonhuman) except through a system involving natural selection. This is a variant of the reply of

Michael Ruse to Richard Dawkins, and as long as the above qualifications are not forgotten, the label of “the no other way argument” can be accepted for present purposes.

Supplementing Natural Selection

Southgate’s view is that this argument is vulnerable to objections and is in need of being supplemented. But before considering all this, I should mention what he says about Holmes Rolston and Keith Ward, since it was in the same final section of chapter 7 that I made a slight adjustment to Ruse’s reply to Dawkins to accommodate the view, which I had attributed to them as well as to Arthur Peacocke, that a naturalistic supplement to natural selection may be needed to explain the biological phenomena of the actual world. For while natural selection would still be needed, so would the supplementary factors, whatever form they may turn out to take. Southgate does not dissent from this conclusion, but considers Peacocke alone (of the three figures mentioned) to be appealing to additional naturalistic factors, whereas Rolston and Ward, on his interpretation, introduce divine activity to fill gaps and make good what natural selection cannot otherwise explain.

Both Rolston and Ward certainly hold that natural selection is insufficient as an explanation of the actual biological phenomena. Yet it is not clear that the passages cited by Southgate involve them in “inserting God’s influence into gaps in the causal order as described by science”. Ward’s point seems to be that divine agency is the best explanation of “the progress towards greater consciousness and intentionality that one sees in the actual course of the evolution of life on earth” (Ward, 1996, 78); but this claim is consistent with the generic claim of theists that, but for God’s creation of nature and of the laws of nature, life and consciousness would not have evolved as they have. It does not commit him to God having intervened during the early stages of evolution on our planet to direct life in the direction of consciousness.

Rolston ascribes to God the information needed “for the key transitions in evolutionary history” (Rolston, 1999, 359), and considers natural selection unable to supply it. While his choice of words leaves open the interpretation that this information was newly inserted by God as life was evolving, it also leaves open the different interpretation that in creating the overall system of nature God provided for this information to be available when it was going to be needed. Southgate is right to be wary of theologians suggesting that natural processes are insufficient, where natural explanations are in question, to generate the effects that we

encounter, and must “either be steered or set aside”; and he may be right about one or both of the two theologians under consideration. Yet neither in Ward’s case nor in Rolston’s must readers take the view that God’s activity is being represented as a secondary cause, alongside and on a level with natural selection, rather than as that of the creator of a system of creatures devised so as to “make themselves” (Peacocke, 2004, 142; Attfield, 2006a, 167).

Objections to the “No Other Way” Argument

Let us return to Southgate’s reservations about the “no other way” argument, an argument which he seems to endorse when he agrees that “a created world realising the sorts of values we observe would have to be a Darwinian world”. Yet he raises the objection that if attaining goods involves treating someone as a means, that is unacceptable, at least if it is done systematically, and this gives the protester reason to “return his ticket”. However, as Ruse has pointed out, a Darwinian world is a world of predation and parasitism, for that is what natural selection involves; and apart from a world of supernatural interventions, the only alternatives open to a creator are a world of unicellular creatures or a world without life at all, or so the “no other way” argument concludes. So people who go along with it (as Southgate does) have no choice but to accept predation and parasitism, rather than to return their ticket. For to grant this argument is to grant that a creation is acceptable in which some creatures suffer as part of a system which facilitates or brings about goods such as animal and human flourishing; for the evolutionary processes of natural selection comprise such a system.

By now, what is left of the original objection is the suggestion that harms of the kind just described amount to God treating someone as a means (to the good of others). But this language is not obviously applicable. Certainly in inter-human contexts there are ethical objections to treating another human being as a means, although, as Michael J. Murray (2008) admits, this may be justified in cases of quarantine. But these problems arise in cases where the human being could have been treated otherwise, and where doing so would have respected their autonomy. Creating species some of which will become extinct through systemic natural forces is another matter, partly because of their lack of such autonomy, and partly because their very existence depends on these same forces, and there is no such thing, as long as natural forces remain in place, as these species being treated otherwise. Thus to suggest that ammonites were treated as a means because they became extinct and that

God should either not have created them or should have intervened to prevent their extinction is out-of-place. Given the options of the actual system of life or a world of unicellular creatures only or one of no life at all, the language of means becomes inappropriate.

But what of individual creatures that suffer in the course of natural selection, for example, frogs eaten by pythons? The suggestion that they (and all the other creatures eaten by the same pythons) are treated as means also seems inappropriate, because if they were not eaten, there could be no pythons, and generally if there were no predation there could be no higher predators, and probably no humanity. So the alternatives, if nature is to be governed by natural regularities, are a world of predation and a world either without life or with unicellular creatures only. But a creator who adopted either of the latter pair of options could with at least as much cogency be accused of treating as means all the creatures that would have existed had predation been authorised, through declining to create them.

Southgate, however, also represents appealing to the “no other way” argument without appealing to specifically Christian claims (such as God’s co-suffering with every suffering creature, and generating “a fulfilled life for the victims of evolution in some eschatological state”) as making God a “consequentialist calculator of values against disvalues”, the charge against such theodicies of D.Z. Phillips (2004). Phillips, it should at once be said, also regarded Christian eschatology involving life after death with disdain, but the issue still arises of whether adherents of the “no other way” theodicy should accept his “consequentialist calculator” charge.

Here it should be replied that God would have sufficient knowledge not to need to calculate, but could simply judge which possible world was worth creating; and in doing so would presumably take into account values and disvalues, rather than ignoring them. (If not, the critic comes close to saying that there are no possible worlds, however strewn with tragedies and atrocities, which God would decline to create.) The theory of consequentialism (as was mentioned above) is needed for us to understand the rightness of human actions, rather than God’s, and applies where relevant consequences are restricted to (humanly) foreseeable ones rather than ones that God alone could know. (Nor does the consequentialism that I uphold require even human agents to calculate the consequences of each and every action; in its more plausible versions, it works from the causal tendencies of types of action and/or of motivation, and declares behaviour right which complies with the types with the best overall impacts in general, as is argued in my response to Clare Palmer.) Accordingly the

charge of making God a “consequentialist calculator” is no more in place than the charge that God treats suffering creatures as means, and should not be allowed to count against the “no other way” argument, whether supplemented or unsupplemented. (Phillips’ criticisms of other theodicians cannot be considered here.)

In the same connection, Southgate suggests that “God’s love and care must be operative at the level of every individual”. Here it may be helpful to ask which claim it is for the sake of which this “must” applies. For it would be one thing for this to be required if New Testament claims about God are to be reconciled with Darwinism and the evils that Darwinian processes involve, and quite another where what is in question is the compatibility of Darwinism and the kind of theism that is common to Christianity, Judaism and Islam (or undifferentiated theism). What Southgate says may be necessary for the reconciliation of the former pair, but is less cogent as a requirement of the latter combination. For God could be good and loving in conferring on all actual creatures existence in a world of great intrinsic value, without conferring on them guaranteed security or long-term immunity from the processes by which that world is run. (Indeed many Christians would assent to this view of God’s goodness, without insisting on a stronger sense involving such immunity.)

Southgate, however, in presenting an eschatology in which non-human animals are included (see also Southgate, 2008), implicitly appeals to revelation, and is unimpressed with attempts to reconcile Darwinism and belief in God that stop short of this. Here I would like first to clarify the stance of *Creation, Evolution and Meaning*, which makes no appeal to revelation, and declares such matters beyond its scope. This does not mean that I have no time for revelation, but that I was attempting to see to what extent these beliefs and their co-tenability can be based on reasoning accessible to believers and non-believers alike. Thus I was not attempting to reconcile with Darwinism the claims of the New Testament, but rather the theism that is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. So my project is rather different from Southgate’s, and its implicit methodology is correspondingly different.

On the subject of revelation it should be remarked that I have also argued, in my review of Murray’s book, that appeals to revelation cannot be used to give grounds for belief in God’s goodness, for belief in God’s goodness is a presupposition of there being such a thing as revelation at all (Atfield, 2009). What is revealed could still, of course, supply additional grounds.

I should add that the difficulty with the move of invoking an animal heaven is to find grounds for this belief, and for that reason I have

preferred to stick to beliefs not dependent on revelation, even where ancillary and possibly true beliefs would make the task easier. Thus partly for the same reason I avoid appealing to the belief, held by some, that evils such as premature death resulting from cancer are to be ascribed to the free choices of Satan or Satan's cohorts, who have somehow been put in charge of the relevant natural regularities (a belief seriously considered by Murray). This ancillary belief would not, in my view, help to make a theodicy more credible, but rather less credible, as it would suggest massive bad planning on the part of the creator in giving this authority to such free spirits. I am not suggesting that Southgate's additional beliefs share this liability, but I prefer to argue from premises available to all-comers, as is appropriate in a work intended for a secular readership as much as for a readership of believers.

Such reasoning, I claim, supplies a clear basis for resisting both the view that theism and Darwinism are probably incompatible or not readily co-tenable, and the view that they are probably incompatible until and unless we are given some further premises which tell us that the suffering of humans and of nonhumans alike will be compensated in the life to come. At the same time, I want to resist Southgate's view that this theodicy implies the sufficiency of an ethic of preservation rather than one of transformative healing or of social justice. Even if these themes do not emerge from my endorsement of stewardship, they figure prominently in my writings about ethics (such as Attfield, 1995, 1999 and 2003). Besides, these themes and the theodicy that I present (including as it does a version of the Free Will Defence) are not unconnected; for, if this Defence stands up, the free choices facilitated and desired by the creator will include actions through which the needs of fellow-creatures are met, and at the same time virtuous traits are developed in their agents, none of which would have been possible if this autonomy had been absent.

Stewardship and Hope for the Future

On the subject of stewardship, Southgate reports criticisms from others, and adds some of his own. I have replied in some detail to Palmer's critique in *The Ethics of the Global Environment* (1999), chapter 3, a chapter reprinted in R.G. Berry's *Environmental Stewardship* (Attfield, 2006b). For example, I contested the claim that stewardship beliefs represent God as an absentee landlord. Several of the further criticisms that Southgate proceeds to mention represent stewardship as an anthropocentric and manipulative stance, incapable of recognising the value of the natural creatures for which the stewards are to care; but this is

an unhistorical interpretation, which ignores a long history of non-anthropocentric adherents of stewardship from the early Modern periods right up to the present (as I argue in *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* (Attfield, 1983 and 1991)). As for Bill McKibben's claim that stewardship beliefs supply too little guidance (McKibben, 1994), my response is that stewardship beliefs are not to be expected to serve as a detailed ethic, rather than as a model providing for human self-understanding; that is why I have gone on to present an environmental ethic, as in works like *Environmental Ethics* (2003).

Southgate now claims that, reasonable as my defence of stewardship in Attfield, 1999 and 2006b may be, stewardship's image continues to have the wrong connotations. So be it, if that is the case, for I am not in the business of image-enhancement, as opposed to exploring implications and presuppositions. He further suggests that stewardship beliefs imply that we are seeking a future no worse than the present, and a background belief that things tend to get worse. To this, I want to reply that stewardship (for example, of effort and resources) need by no means imply that the future cannot be better than the present. The world is unduly full of inhabitants with unsatisfied basic needs, and needs action and policies for development (preferably sustainable development, since unsustainable development will let down the following generations), which need not be incompatible with stewardship. The belief that things tend to get worse would be liable to undermine such effort, but fortunately is no implication of stewardship any more than the myth of the non-improving future is. Once again, what is needed is an ethic relevant to intra-human as well as environmental issues.

Clearly there is much more to Christian ethics than stewardship, although many Christians acknowledge it as one component of Christian ethics; but after all I was not seeking to expound Christianity. However, the view that humans have a part to play in the healing of the world is one that I am happy to endorse; I would merely want to add that it is not incompatible with a model of stewardship, or with a consequentialist ethic either. The further view, though, that through the sufferings of Christ God participates in the world's sufferings and in its redemption, is one that is unavailable to me, and I have to leave it for those who manage to believe in the incarnation of God in Christ, and in the ability of God to suffer.

Southgate has some final remarks on the extinction of species, and on humanity being called to reduce its rate. Here, I agree that it is sometimes the role of humanity to preserve species that would otherwise become extinct, as has been done with the Arabian oryx. I am also interested (indeed intrigued) at his suggestion that (some) polar bears should be

moved to the Antarctic. However, I am reluctant to agree that we should do all that we can to prevent extinctions. For extinctions are inherent in natural selection, and the very natural processes that have allowed humanity to emerge have also involved the loss of a large proportion of all the species that there have ever been. Adopting an evolutionary theodicy surely involves accepting the inevitability of at least some extinctions. Even if it were possible to resuscitate the mammoths and the dinosaurs, that surely would be low on the list of our current priorities.

These priorities include meeting human needs, preserving peace, equitably stabilising the climate, and bequeathing a sustainable world to our successors. These are far from hopeless undertakings. Indeed hope is a presupposition of consequentialist ethics and of Christian theology alike, as Southgate and I could readily agree.

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