

# Boyle Lecture 2022

with Christopher Southgate, "God and a World of Natural Evil: Theology and Science in Hard Conversation" and Andrew Davison, "Theodicy and What Could Be Otherwise: A Response to Christopher Southgate."

## THEODICY AND WHAT COULD BE OTHERWISE: A RESPONSE TO CHRISTOPHER SOUTHGATE

by Andrew Davison

*Abstract.* In June 2022, Christopher Southgate delivered the Boyle Lecture for that year at St Mary-le-Bow, in the City of London, on the theme of evolutionary theodicy. This article contains the text of the short talk and vote of thanks delivered in response that evening.

*Keywords:* Thomas Aquinas; Christian Theology; evolution; evolutionary theodicy; Karen Kilby; necessity; science and religion; Christopher Southgate; theodicy

---

The well-established academic can all-too-easily turn up on an occasion such as this, and simply recycle a lecture that has served its purpose for a decade or more. Christopher Southgate certainly stands at the apex of his field, but he has by no means repeated this evening what he might have said 5, 10, or 15 years ago. Rather, he tells us, his "views in this area are quite fluid," and have developed even in the past couple of months. Therefore, quite apart from the rich content of this evening's lecture, I also note and express our gratitude for the openness of heart and generosity of intellect so visible on display.

In making my response, I am going to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the online panel discussion next week, and not only record my gratitude but also raise a few possible topics for conversation on that occasion. I will begin by getting out of the way a subject that might seem impolite. Professor Southgate is our leading writer on evolutionary theodicy, but over the past few decades, the claim has arisen, and grown in prominence, that the very idea of theodicy is problematic. At the end of

Andrew Davison is Starbridge Associate Professor in Theology and Natural Sciences, University of Cambridge, Dean of Chapel and Fellow in Theology, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, UK, and Visiting Fellow, Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, NJ, USA; e-mail: apd31@cam.ac.uk.

[*Zygon*, vol. 57, no. 4 (December 2022)]

[www.wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/zygon](http://www.wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/zygon)

© 2022 The Authors. *Zygon*® published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385 This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

the twentieth century, Kenneth Surin (1986) and Terrence Tilley (1991) argued against theodicy as an exercise, so, broadly speaking, has Rowan Williams (2007). The principal objection is that any attempt to give a rational response to the place of evil or suffering in the experience of a person or community risks rationalizing it, or accommodating ourselves to it. I take the most convincing advocate of this line today to be Karen Kilby at Durham.

We are used to a classic formulation showing the need for theodicy: the so-called inconsistent triad of Epicurus or Hume. In the words of Philo in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (Hume 2008, 100). Kilby subverts this, suggesting an alternative set of three competing ideas.

Standard discussions of theodicy set up three apparently incompatible propositions: God is powerful, God is good, evil exists. [In contrast, summarising her essay in terms of a different trilemma:] ... there are three features of a Christian theology, all of which are desirable, but not all of which can be achieved: a theology ought to provide a fully Christian picture of God; ought to give, or at least leave room for, a full recognition of the injustice, terror and tragedy that we participate in and see around us; and it ought to be coherent. I am suggesting that not all of these can be achieved. Something has to be sacrificed. (Kilby 2003, 24–25)

Kilby lists three desiderata: (1) The Christian doctrine of God; (2) frank acknowledgement of evil; (3) systematic neatness. Process theology, Kilby notes, lets go of the traditional picture of God (her first desideratum). Many theodicies, she worries, play down recognition of the full extent of evil (her second desideratum). In contrast, she thinks, perhaps we may need to forego the third: "The option I am recommending is to sacrifice neither the picture of God, nor the recognition of the range and depth of evils in God's world, but instead the possibility of a manifestly coherent theological vision" (Kilby 2003, 25).

This is as forthright a criticism of theodicy as we are likely to find today, but Southgate's lecture stands up to it. I will leave it to him to address how much he thinks theodicy may require us to modify a traditional doctrine of God. When it comes to taking suffering seriously, he has shown himself eminently willing to do that this evening, and more generally. He has held the place of suffering in evolution before us unflinchingly. What of coherence? I do not see Southgate's work, nor his talk this evening, as a rationalization of evil, yet there is also a caution, a reserve, to his writing. This is, indeed, seen in his remark about all this being a work in progress, still a matter of conversation, still somewhat marked by mystery.

It does not come naturally to theologians writing on science to give up the search for a coherent picture, but we also note that Professor Southgate

is a poet, and therefore willing to chart the boundaries where language and reason fall short. Given the move in some recent theology to think that a rational account of what is going on with evil is beyond us—or at least providing a neat account would be—I wonder what Southgate makes of that. He has demonstrated a willingness this evening to leave questions open. To what extent does it help with that for our register to be as much, or more, a poetic one than one of cut and dried logic?

What, indeed, is the mode of thought appropriate to thinking about evil and its place in the world? Or, to put it another way, what are we after? What might success look like? When it comes to questions of God and evolutionary suffering—to ask that question again—is it analytic rigor we are after? Or is our mode of thinking, our mode of judgment, an ethical one? Or is the resolution we are looking for actually more pastoral, or practical? Or should our criteria of judgment be aesthetic? Presumably we are not hoping to find beauty. That would rankle with much of what Southgate describes. (In a recent book (2018), he has focused on the category of glory.) But could there be theodicy worked out in terms of dramatic cogency, for instance? Can ideas of tragedy be useful? Or what about Kant's alternative, not the beautiful but the sublime (Kant 2001, part one, first section, second book)? Putting that in summary form, is it logical rigor that we are after, with the emphasis therefore on truth, or should we look to truth's Platonic siblings, with goodness, for instance, or beauty, or something adjacent to beauty? There is a breadth to Southgate's thinking, embracing many, maybe all, of those modes of thinking, or principles of judgment. Does Southgate think that his decades of poetic writing have something to do with that breadth, with his concern for goodness, perhaps for beauty, as well as truth?

At the heart of Professor Southgate's talk, and his work in this field, is his "only way" diagnosis: that evolution and suffering are a package deal, and you simply cannot get to the sorts of creatures we rightly celebrate without evolution and its "Darwinian debris." I appreciate Southgate's advocacy of this position, and his astute challenge to those who wish to separate God from evolutionary suffering: if they remove God from that side of the process, can they still implicate God in all the good evolutionary outcomes?

This is fascinating territory (and I append a few additional comments about the "only way" approach at the end of this text of my spoken response to the lecture). Among the many areas for discussion that this opens up, I have a question for clarification. Sometimes Southgate writes "only way" and sometimes "best way": do they amount to the same thing? I ask that because it maps rather directly onto questions in the sorts of scholastic literature that I like to read and write about. Suppose you are a Thomist, and you think that God does not do simply what is possible, or strictly necessary, but what is suitable or fitting. However, if *one* course is best, only one course is most fitting, would God not then be constrained to

act that way, after all: to do the most fitting thing, not anything else less fitting? Perhaps “best way” ends up meaning “only way” after all?<sup>1</sup>

I began with praise for the example that Christopher Southgate has set us this evening. I want also to end there. I cannot but note the generosity on display throughout his talk this evening. Southgate missed no opportunity, for instance, to record his debt and gratitude to others, and to recommend their work. I am not sure he named *any* of his own books, while he named the books of others straight out of the gate.

Many writers on evil have commented that theory is not enough; we need also to respond practically. And perhaps even *responding* to evil is not enough, because that is too reactive: we would need also to be *active* about the business of propagating the *good*. Well, while I admit that the goodness and generosity of spirit we have heard in this evening’s lecture is not by itself going to undo suffering—whether of human beings, or of other animals—Southgate’s outlook and his example to us in this lecture embody that cardinal principle of Christian theology, that we should actively follow the example of the Light who shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

#### “ONLY WAY” APPROACHES: SOME THOUGHTS NOT PRESENTED ON THE EVENING OF THE BOYLE LECTURE

If there is any necessity to God’s action, any “only way,” how deeply and widely does that apply? This brings us to a distinction between relative and absolute necessity. In what Southgate discusses, are we talking about only relative necessity?<sup>2</sup> On that view, while  $x$  itself would not be necessary, what  $x$  entails, given  $x$ , would be:  $x$  is not necessary, but, if  $x$  then necessarily also  $y$ . To draw an example from this evening’s lecture, perhaps there does not need to be a world like this one, but if there is, then perhaps evolution and suffering will necessarily go together. Or, is the sense of necessity at work here something stronger: is it absolute or “metaphysical necessity”—something that *could not* be otherwise, even for God?<sup>3</sup>

I think that Southgate’s “only way” logic of evolutionary theodicy employs relative necessity. If so, I can suggest some perhaps surprising parallels in Aquinas. He wrote, for instance, that there need not be a creation like this one, but for any universe like this one, a circular motion for the heavens will be integral. Likewise, while God need not create human beings, but if he does, God owes it to himself, and therefore to us, to give them hands. Similarly, God could not create a human being and not give it a rational soul, since it is by the rational soul that it is a human being (Aquinas 1963a, book 1, lecture 4; 1912, I.21.1 *resp* and *ad* 3; 1955, I.83.5).<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the Christian tradition is not a stranger to absolute necessity either, in that case applying an “only way” logic to

*everything*. Leibnitz seems to stand in that territory, as would Spinoza among Jewish thinkers (Spinoza 1996, part 1, appendix).<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher certainly does. For him, freedom and necessity so perfectly overlap in God that God could not do otherwise: God must will that there is a world, and could not will for it to be different from how it is. “We must ... think of nothing in God as necessary without at the same time positing it as free, nor as free unless at the same time it is necessary. Just as little, however, can we think of God’s willing Himself, and God’s willing the world, as separated one from the other. For if He wills Himself, He wills Himself as Creator and Sustainer, so that in willing Himself, willing the world is already included... the necessary will is included in the free, and the free in the necessary” (Schleiermacher 1999, §54.4, 217).

Schleiermacher, the father of liberal Protestantism, is joined here by the contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart. In God, he writes, “there is no meaningful ... distinction between freedom and necessity... neither is [the drama of creation and salvation] something external to the divine identity” (Hart 2022, §12, p. 105). He goes on to write that “God is not a finite being in whom the distinction of freedom from necessity has any meaning. Perfect freedom is the unhindered realization of a nature in its proper end; and God’s infinite freedom is the eternal fulfilment of the divine nature in the divine life ... [deliberative liberty] is a condition not of freedom as such, but only of finitude... [and, consequently, since God’s freedom is not finite] creation inevitably follows from who he is” (Hart 2022, §25, 115–16).<sup>6</sup>

It seems, for Hart, that the act of creation, and creation being as it is, could not be otherwise.<sup>7</sup> That is not my own position, but between the perennial interest in Schleiermacher and the recent excoriation by Hart of any rival position, today is certainly a productive time for thinking about an “only way” theodicy in connection to other theological questions and currents.

## NOTES

1. For those wondering about Aquinas replies to this objection, it is to say both that whatever God does is always right and even perfect, but also that this perfection is not constrained to take only one form, since no way of disposing creation, however excellent, would so exhaust the expression of God’s nature as to leave every other action simply less perfect, leaving no other fitting alternatives. There are many incommensurable creaturely expressions of divine excellence. “The divine goodness is an end exceeding created things beyond all proportion. Whence the divine wisdom is not so restricted to any particular order that no other course of events could happen. Wherefore we must simply say that God can do other things than those He has done” (Aquinas, 1912, I.25.5, and see the responses to *obj.* 2 and 3). I have discussed this in Davison (2023).

2. “What must be so because of the reality and nature of some other event, fact, decision, truth, or premise upon which it depends, and from which it necessarily follows” (Wuellner 1966, s.v. “necessity,” p. 80).

3. “The impossibility of being otherwise under all conditions so that even God cannot cause an exception” (Wuellner 1966).

4. Also relevant is Aquinas (1955), I.81.3 and 84.2 (“For it would be foolish to wish the sun to be overhead and yet that it should not be daylight”). Similarly, Aquinas thought that whatever is moved by the Sun must have something of circularity to its own course (1912, supplement, 91.1 *ad* 1), and that if there is a moving body there must be place (Aquinas, 1963b, book 4, lec. 7, ch. 5).

5. Leibnitz’s position is more disputed. For a strongly necessitarian interpretation, see Griffin (2013).

6. See also §11, p. 104, §20, p. 111–12, §28, p. 118.

7. Hart (2022, §20, p. 112) writes that something like the argument above, for divine freedom on the grounds of incommensurable forms of a good creation—albeit presented starkly as “a voluntarist subject arbitrarily selecting among an infinity of possible worlds”—is to be “rejected without remainder.”

## REFERENCES

- Aquinas, Thomas. 1912. *Summa Theologiae*. 2nd ed. 22 vols. London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne.
- . 1955. *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Translated by Anton C. Pegis, James F. Anderson, Vernon J. Bourke, and Charles J. O’Neil. 5 vols. New York: Hanover House.
- . 1963a. *Commentary on Aristotle’s Treatise On the Heavens*. Translated by Fabian R. Larcher and Pierre H. Conway. Columbus, OH: College of St Mary of the Springs.
- . 1963b. *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*. Translated by Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath, and W. Edmund Thirlkel. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Davison, Andrew. 2023. *Astrobiology and Christian Doctrine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Griffin, Michael V. 2013. *Leibniz, God and Necessity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hart, David Bentley. 2022. “The Chiasmus.” In *You Are Gods: On Nature and Supernature*, 97–124. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Hume, David. 2008. “Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.” In *Principle Writings on Religion, Including Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion*, edited by J. C. A. Gaskin, 29–133. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2001. Critique of the Power of Judgment. *Translated by Paul Guyer and Matthews*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kilby, Karen. 2003. “Evil and the Limits of Theology.” *New Blackfriars* 84 (983): 13–29.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. 1999. *The Christian Faith*. Translated by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart. London: T&T Clark.
- Southgate, Christopher. 2018. *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spinoza, Benedictus de. 1996. *Ethics*. Translated by E. M. Curley. London: Penguin Books.
- Surin, Kenneth. 1986. *Theology and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Tilley, Terrence W. 1991. *The Evils of Theodicy*. Washington, DC.: Georgetown University Press.
- Williams, Rowan. 2007. “Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the Defeat of Evil.” In *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, edited by Mike Higton, 255–74. London: SCM Press.
- Wuellner, Bernard. 1966. *A Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*. Second edition. Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Company.