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Fault Lines and Praxis: Natural Evil and the Modern Split Between Natural and Moral Evils

RICHARD RAWLS

A philosophical and theological reflection on the damage that nature inflicts upon the world's inhabitants seems like a logical inclusion for a journal issue devoted to the environment. If we want to think about how humanity has been molded by its relationship with the environment, then one of the greatest topics of investigation ought to be natural evil. Indeed, natural evil or the suffering that afflicts people at nature's "hands" and ranges from hurricanes, earthquakes, and famines to cancer, illness, and other forms of biological harm, has shaped and vexed humanity throughout history. The record of these impingements surfaces in the earliest literature, and it continues to trouble theologians from all of the world's religious traditions. Complicating our reflection is the fact that the changing understanding of nature and how it operates has over time altered how humans have thought about the issues that natural evils raise.

Since human thinking about the problem of evil has developed over time, this essay will first explore the problem of natural evil prior to the rise of science. The essay then examines how the rise of science generated new understandings of nature, optimism about the natural world, confidence in human abilities to control nature, and sanguinity about nature's ability to testify to God's existence. This confidence remained short-lived when an earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 ruined optimism. In exploring the back and forth between the *philosophes* of Voltaire (1694-1778) and Rousseau (1712-1778) over the quake, the essay suggests some "fault lines" in modern thinking about natural evil, particularly with the idea that natural and moral evils are easily separated. These fault lines lead to a final section where nine suggestions are offered to help Christian theory and praxis find a *modus vivendi*.

Pre-Modern Terror About Natural Evil

The world's oldest literature reflects human uncertainty regarding the intentions of the divine because of the suffering that nature inflicts upon the world's inhabitants. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, parts of which predated the ear-

liest strata of the Old Testament by centuries if not a millennium, portrayed a legendary king experiencing emotional anguish at the death of his friend, Enkidu. Gilgamesh fled the city, returned to nature by dressing in animal skins, sought out the Mesopotamian Noah figure named Utnapishtim, and finally came across a plant capable of restoring his youth before losing the plant to a serpent. Despite this odyssey, Gilgamesh received the same advice from a cast of characters: the gods had allocated death to humanity. He could find joy in his children, the embrace of his wife, the comfort of food, and pride in civic achievement, but ultimately the natural world would claim him just as it had the corpses he saw floating down the river.¹ This viewpoint reflected the Mesopotamian reality perfectly. The “land between the rivers” Tigris and Euphrates experienced prolonged droughts, occasional flooding, the shifting course of the rivers (leaving some formerly riverfront towns high and dry), and complete unpredictability. It is little wonder that Mesopotamians developed a pessimistic view of life on earth and a suspicious attitude about the intentions of the gods. Whatever their intentions, the gods were apparently not disposed to human happiness.

The Old Testament book of *Job* similarly exposed human terror at the afflictions Job experienced. The assumption that humans inhabit a moral universe nourished by a God who structured the world to reward its morally good citizens received a challenge by one man who maintained his innocence in the face of physical suffering. Job’s friends reflected the worldview of the ancients in general when they insisted that Job must have done something to deserve his fate. The ancient mind scarcely differentiated between natural and moral evils. They were intertwined. It seemed self-evident to Job’s comrades that God harbored a purpose: either Job had committed a morally reprehensible evil and was suffering his due or God used nature to discipline Job for a mysterious reason that might be revealed at some later time. Natural evil, to the prescientific mind, had its own *principle of sufficient reason*: it had to have a reason for its existence. Of course, the book of *Job* challenges such viewpoints.

People from millennia ago understood—as do we moderns—that nature could harm people in multiple ways: earthquakes, various weather-related phenomena, fatal illnesses, maladies leaving people crippled and debilitated, starvation, senseless suffering, et cetera. They, like us, accordingly found it difficult to reconcile belief in an omnipotent, benevolent, and omniscient deity with the existence of evils, natural or moral. The Hellenistic philosopher

Epicurus (341-270 BCE) stated it best: “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?”²

The early church similarly puzzled over the problems posed by evil. St. Augustine’s (354-430 CE) famous “free will” defense can, according to many, still exonerate God for moral evils. Although contemporary philosophers do not consider it applicable to natural evils, Augustine’s conceptualization of the problem did provide an answer in his time. Augustine’s argument (in paraphrase) that God created the world good (including humans), that humans initially sinned not by choosing something inherently evil, but rather by choosing a lesser good over a higher good, and that a good God could not create anything evil, seemed to exculpate the Divine. The problem therefore rested not with the created order but with human and even angelic selfishness.³ Augustine’s argument remained popular throughout the Middle Ages. The Augustinian position allowed people to deny that any evil was initially natural. As long as one could maintain this position, one could use the free-will defense to cover both moral and natural evil. Plagues, epidemics, earthquakes, and pestilences could all be considered as the by-products of sinful moral agents such as demons, fallen angels, or as punishment for sin. Despite the problems with the Augustinian free-will defense of God, it remains the most popular Western Christian explanation for moral evils, finding advocates in the likes of modern philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne.⁴

The evolution in the Medieval understanding of the cosmos, combined with centuries of reflection and greater contact with the non-Christian world, began to cause late-Medieval Christians to raise anew the uncomfortable questions posed by nature’s disorders. For example, Alfonso X (known as “Alfonso the Wise”), who ruled Castile from 1252-1284, summoned learned Christians, Jews, and probably Moslems to instruct him on astronomy, cosmology, and related fields. After several years of instruction, Alfonso reportedly commented that the world would have been better ordered if God had taken his counsel at the beginning of creation.⁵ Alfonso’s comment, or some variation of it, provoked wrath and condemnation from the usual suspects for centuries, but it may not have been as arrogant as it sounded. It may have signified his frustration—which would only increase over time—with Ptolemaic astronomy. Or, depending upon the emphasis, it might have been intended to insult the decrepit state of science at the time. Whatever its intentions, Alfonso’s declaration certainly recognized that the cosmos—and by

extension the natural world—seemed disordered to a pious Medieval king. As Susan Neiman observed, “In uttering the remark that made him famous, there was no wish to blaspheme, just to point out the truth: an ordinary, hardworking Spanish king could design a better world than the one received wisdom ascribed to an omnipotent Creator.”⁶

The Rise of Science and New Understandings

The “Scientific Revolution” beginning in the seventeenth century, coupled with the utter astonishment and revulsion at the carnage caused by the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and the Wars of Religion, brought a renewed optimism about God’s intentions. Scholars started scratching beneath nature’s complexities and found a world that was intricate, accessible, and open to those with an intellect and patience for the scientific method. In the giddy days of what became known as “Natural Religion,” it seemed as if God had revealed the divine self through the natural world. The mechanistic sciences opened up new vistas of scientific and religious understanding. There was no more need of fighting over the revealed religion of the Bible, for God had made God’s self accessible via nature. One of the most popular arguments for God’s existence relied upon syllogistical reasoning comparing the world and universe to a machine. It ran as follows:

The world and universe seem like a well-ordered machine
We know from experience that machines have designers
Therefore, the world and universe have a designer.

The “Book of Nature” became as authoritative as the “Book of Scripture.”

The idea that God could be inferred from nature through analogical reasoning also appealed because it made God accessible to everyone, not just Jews and Christians. Diogenes Allen describes the attitude of the time, “What we need to know about God, therefore, can be found solely from the book of nature because that source of knowledge is accessible to people everywhere.”⁷ Scholars and preachers throughout Europe began publishing and researching natural history. People also began categorizing evils in new ways. As we have seen, moral and natural evils were often viewed as related, but that changed dramatically. Susan Neiman suggests that, “Radically separating what earlier ages called natural from moral evils was thus part of the meaning of modernity.”⁸

Many of the adherents to Natural Religion were Deists, who compared God to a clockmaker. Once God set the clock in motion, God stepped back from creation. This image may puzzle many twenty-first century Christians, who view God as the dispenser of therapeutic good feelings. Deism and its remote God nonetheless appealed for over a century. The thought of a personal God intimately involved in creation can form a comforting proposition, but it can also provoke moments of angst by raising troubling questions: what if we are wrong in our interpretation of revealed religion? Will God punish us? What does such punishment say about a deity who will punish humans for exercising their divinely-given reason? Is it right for God to condemn humanity to an eternity of hell for a finite transgression? Because of these and other questions, Deists thought it safer to worship God as disclosed through the Book of Nature. This book revealed God too, albeit a God more distant and safely numinous than the biblical God.

Natural religion's optimism soon faded, and for a number of reasons. First, other philosophers began pointing out the logical flaws in the analogies. David Hume (1711-1776) represented many when he observed that we have experience only of this world and this universe. We would need to have experience of multiple worlds and universes in order to say truly whether this one was well ordered.⁹ Moreover, the principle of design as an analogy might be less accurate than, say, comparing the universe to vegetation.¹⁰ Hume's most devastating critique of the design argument (in my opinion) was that nature's disorders suggest either utter chaos or perhaps, worse, a deity we had not anticipated. Natural disasters might suggest a God, Hume cautioned, but it might not be one that religious conservatives could accept. He advised that if we reason from nature and its disorders to God's existence, then we must admit the possibilities of a juvenile deity who failed in the task of world creation, a team of incompetent tradesmen, or a senile deity who abandoned the world after discovering that he or she had botched the job.¹¹ Second, many well-intentioned Christians posited God as the explanation for gaps in scientific knowledge. Where science later produced an explanation, it seemed as if God were being pushed out of the universe.¹² This was bad theology and bad science since it makes God, who transcends the physical world, a member of it subject to scientific scrutiny.¹³ Finally, an earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1755 caused many philosophers and people of faith to reevaluate their understanding of the problem of natural evil.

The Lisbon Earthquake

On the morning of November 1, 1755, an earthquake reportedly approaching 9.0 on the Richter scale, coming in three distinct waves, and totaling ten minutes of duration (a long time for an earthquake!) struck Portugal's capital city.¹⁴ Buildings collapsed, burying inhabitants in the rubble and sending debris and dust skyward. Fires spread wildly throughout the city, consuming survivors, storehouses full of commercial supplies, art, and other valuables that people had managed to drag out of damaged structures.¹⁵ Even worse, tidal waves claimed hundreds of victims, structures along the coast, and boats anchored in and around the city. It takes little for the contemporary imagination to think of tidal waves in proportion to those smashing into Indonesia, earthquakes claiming cities around the Pacific Rim, and forest fires in Southern California all combining into one terrible conflagration. These still produce, to quote a phrase from another context, "shock and awe" among a world's population increasingly inured to such catastrophes. To a Europe gripped with speculation about human moral progress and engrossed in understanding the world of nature in which God's harmony, justice, and self-disclosure were thought to lie, the earthquake challenged an entire century's *Weltanschauung*.

Clergy of various religious commitments and denominations resorted to the usual theme of "disaster as punishment for sin," but their responses matter little, if at all, to the topic at hand. Those entrusted with cultic maintenance have always viewed disaster as punishment for sin, irrespective of religious background or commitment. The events of September 11, 2001, serve as a reminder of this tendency within multiple religious perspectives. Besides, such a view, from both philosophical and theological perspectives, unnecessarily and erroneously reduces God to being a type of machine whose volition is limited to dispensing goodies to the morally upright and punishment to the wicked. The book of *Job* is itself a rejection of this viewpoint. What matters instead is the back and forth between Rousseau and Voltaire as representative of the Enlightenment shift in thinking about natural evil. To the nascent atheists such as Diderot—and even Christians willing to forego the world's existence (and by extension, nature) as a ground for belief in God—the earthquake posed no problem. It was, as Leo Damrosch suggests, "nothing more than a random geological event with no meaning of any kind."¹⁶ Both Voltaire and Rousseau considered themselves Deists, however, and like some biblicist Christians, they needed to believe in a universe "where natural phenomena confirmed a benevolent deity."¹⁷ The car-

nage wrought by the earthquake rendered such beliefs nearly impossible. I intend to argue in this section that both Voltaire and Rousseau were usually correct about their own positions despite their deep differences, but that their disagreement illuminated the difficulty in radically separating natural from moral evils. If one, as a religious person, is to make sense of natural evils, then one must keep both of their perspectives in tension.

Shortly after the quake, Voltaire composed a poem entitled, “*Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, literally “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster” but usually translated into English as “Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake.” He expressed multiple emotions, including shock, theological confusion, and disagreement with other Deists, through a series of inquiries: Was not Paris more decadent than Lisbon, and thus why was Paris spared? Can infants who perished in the quake be said to have committed a sinful deed? Where was divine mercy during the quake? Voltaire summed up his objection to the theological affirmations espoused by Pope and Leibniz before him, that *All that is, is best*, in the opening of the poem:

If ‘tis presumption that makes mortals cry,
 Heaven on our sufferings cast a pitying eye.
 All’s right, you answer, the eternal cause
 Rules not by partial, but general laws.
 Say what advantage can result to all
 From wretched Lisbon’s lamentable fall?
 Are you then sure, the power which could create
 The universe and fix the laws of fate,
 Could not have found a proper place,
 But that earthquakes must destroy the human race?
 Will you thus limit the Divine mind?
 Should not our God to mercy be inclined?¹⁸

Alfred Owen Aldridge reminds us that Deists at the time had two options. Either they could accept natural disasters as part of the nature of things, or they could object to the idea that the universe exhibited any particular order, including natural justice.¹⁹ This represented a bitter pill for people committed to the notion of a well ordered nature. Surely nature represented more than the raw impact of matter upon matter. A system like this suggested a God lacking compassion. Voltaire therefore chose a selective sympathy with the victims and a rejection of any possible understanding of divine purpose.

Even if God had a purpose, the capacity to understand it surpassed the limits of human reason. Submission and possibly fideism were therefore called for. Aldridge argues that, on this point, all Deists agreed: “But while Pope describes this condition of things as right, Voltaire insists it is wrong.”²⁰ Indeed, Voltaire, more so than most *philosophes*, tended to err on the side of compassion over and against fideism. He frequently exhibited the admirable quality of being sympathetic to those whom he despised, in spite of himself. Disapproving of Protestants, Voltaire almost always helped them. When others advised a stoic resignation to the evils we cannot understand, indeed to the human condition itself, Voltaire objected. He sought, as one scholar argued, to replace “optimism with meliorism.”²¹ If the human condition were to get better—even in the face of nature’s evils—humans would have to do something to mitigate the suffering and better understand what transpired. Humans might not understand God or the divine purpose (if any existed), but humans could respond compassionately. To the question of the best of all possible worlds, Voltaire scoffed near the end of his poem:

*Un jour tout sera bien, voilà notre espérance
 Tout est bien aujourd’ hui, voilà l’illusion.
 [One day all will be well, that is our hope
 All is well today, that is the illusion.]*²²

Most scholars agree that Rousseau admired Voltaire for a while, but Rousseau found Voltaire’s poem on Lisbon disturbing. In a lengthy missive dated August 18, 1756, Rousseau challenged Voltaire on a number of points. Specifically, Rousseau observed that Lisbon had been haphazardly constructed in such a way that the earthquake’s consequences intensified. Buildings were erected close together. Nature, Rousseau argued, did not force the Portuguese to build twenty thousand houses of six or seven stories.²³ Fires could spread easily, which, in fact, they did. He wondered why the Portuguese elected to live in cities that they knew were prone to quakes.

Rousseau must be read with caution because he comes close to blaming the victims for their misfortune. Rousseau sounds heartless, but he had a point. We may have all wondered, for example, why people living near San Francisco or Los Angeles deliberately build and live in domiciles erected right over fault lines. To paraphrase Rousseau in a way that is far more crass than he would have stated his own opinion, *one ought not to blame God for human stupidity*. True, Lisbon represented a natural evil, but it also signi-

fied a moral one. Rousseau came close to accepting, without recognizing *per se*, Augustine's argument that moral evils originated in humans themselves. Natural evils were a part of existence, Rousseau readily admitted, but most natural evils either originated from humanity or were exacerbated by human action. Rousseau did not further expand upon or follow up his insight that moral and natural evils could be intertwined. For an Enlightenment world busily pushing at the boundaries of the natural world, this represented a chance to explore new philosophical and theological terrain or—at minimum—to take up older ruminations and give them new interpretations. Rousseau unfortunately overlooked the opportunity.

Rousseau instead attempted to defend God and divine providence in opposition to Voltaire, but he ironically took more responsibility and power out of God's hands. Rousseau's God was like that of the Deists who set everything in motion and stepped back. Rousseau thought that people learn from the consequences of their actions. One person's misfortunes might be unfortunate, but ultimately providential if they benefited humanity. Susan Neiman suggests Rousseau's motives and interests:

Pain is as providential as any earlier theodicy could wish. Indeed, it may be more so. Rousseau's account asserts suffering to be part of a natural order finer and vaster than earlier theologians had dreamed....The question of why free rational beings make immoral choices still occupies ethics and moral psychology today, devoid of all connection to the question it was developed to solve.²⁴

Rousseau thus conceptualized the pain nature inflicted as intended to benefit the species as a whole. Such pain was "nothing personal" on the part of God. Since the divine providence looked after the whole, a few unfortunates might get caught in the suffering.

Well before modern psychology and theology, Rousseau probed into "glass half- empty, glass half-full" questions. He recognized that some people suffer misfortune but are content (himself) whereas others remain blessed by providence but are malcontents (Voltaire).²⁵ Although he confessed to not knowing how or why people viewed things as they did, he suggested elsewhere that people are responsible for their misfortunes. God has providentially arranged nature in such a way that moral lessons can be discovered and future mistakes avoided. With his intimations of psychology, theology, and other forces at work in humanity, Rousseau had thus come close to recognizing

ing new connections between natural and moral evils.

Rousseau maintained two additional points that will be important later in this essay. First, he recognized that humans constitute part of a larger network of interconnected natural processes. Nature nourishes us, but at some point it destroys us. He suggested that this was not entirely bad or evil:

That the corpse of a man nourishes some worms, some wolves, or some plants is not, I admit, a compensation for the death of this man; but if, in the system of the universe, it is necessary for the conservation of the human race that there be a circulation of substance among men, animals and vegetables, then the particular ill of an individual contributes to the general good. I die, I am eaten by worms; but my children, my brothers will live as I have lived, and I do, by the order of nature...²⁶

Voltaire blamed God for the demise of individuals whereas Rousseau envisioned Providence as concerned with the universal supervision of the divine creation, not with individual vicissitudes.²⁷ Rousseau therefore remained optimistic about the whole despite the unfortunate demise of a few.

Second, and closely related, Rousseau challenged Voltaire's assumption that death was a negative thing for all who perished. Voltaire could not possibly have known the condition of those who perished. Rousseau observed, "Of so many men crushed under the ruins of Lisbon, several, undoubtedly, have evaded some greater misfortunes."²⁸ In recognizing that death awaits us all at some point in our lives, Rousseau did not justify what happened in Lisbon, but he nonetheless applied a ruthless philosophical skepticism against Voltaire's own meliorism: "It is not certain, that a single one of these unfortunates has suffered more than if, in accordance with the ordinary course of things, he had awaited in drawn-out anguish the death that overtook him by surprise."²⁹ How could things be made better if death were the most merciful outcome? Voltaire, meanwhile, questioned, as did Kant later, the human capacity to speculate at all regarding divine intentions.

Natural Evils in the Contemporary World

Voltaire and Rousseau remained locked within their own categories regarding evil. Although Rousseau touched on some important directions diverging away from modern thought, he never followed them to their logical conclusion. Namely, natural and moral evils are not as easily separated as

one might anticipate. Indeed, it is extremely important to recognize the connection between natural and moral evils.

Global warming is one example of the connection between the two evils. We do not yet know the full extent of the damage we are doing to our environment through pollution and greenhouse gases. While some argue over the degree for which humans are responsible, most scientists concur that human activity has significantly impacted our global weather patterns. If some are correct, droughts in formerly fertile areas, floods, and other maladies may follow as a consequence. People, “innocent people,” may starve, perish in floods, and meet other unfortunate demises. This would be an instance of human moral evils (harming the environment) occasioning natural evil.

A more hypothetical instance further illustrates the point. Let us imagine a village in a non-Western nation. The villagers are poor and have been increasingly squeezed by the local, greedy landowners. The villagers have resorted to stripping the hills above them of trees and vegetation for both cooking fuel and for room to grow a few crops. Despite warnings even from the usually absent government officials, the villagers have few options since formerly collective lands have been usurped by the wealthy. Then, one day, torrential rains fall. The hillside, stripped of the types of flora holding its soil and the hill itself together, collapses upon the village, burying the unfortunate residents in a gigantic mudslide. Clearly, this is a natural evil exacerbated if not occasioned by moral evils.

Both Rousseau and Voltaire would have had something to say about this example. Voltaire would have railed at God over a world seemingly devoid of compassion. He might have asseverated that human reason remains incapable of understanding God’s reasons for permitting such a horrendous accident. Rousseau’s stance would have blamed people. He would have cautioned Voltaire about leaping to conclusions about God’s benevolence. Both would have been right in a way. Both make us uncomfortable. The discomfort we feel about their stances signifies the inability of our categories since the Enlightenment to describe the causes and consequences of natural evil. For example, both assumed, like their Christian counterparts, that God’s benevolence, not to mention his existence, was principally revealed and encountered in nature. Few believe this today. If these two thinkers at the start of the “modern world” held such contradictory and yet complementary views, then what ought we to think about natural evil, and how might natural evils inform Christian belief, praxis, and theology today?

Natural Evil and Christian Thought and Praxis

Recognizing anew that moral and natural evils are frequently linked does not make us premodern in our thinking. Premodern peoples saw natural evils as punishment for sin or as the calculating intention of god(s) to enact the divine plan. The rise of science has helped Christians understand that nature operates according to a set of principles that we call laws. Christians affirm that this order is intended by God, and most recognize that nature remains indifferent to human aspirations. In keeping the tensions between Rousseau and Voltaire in mind, we shall not be able to provide a rationale or theodicy for why God created the world as it is. However, we shall arrive at a more mature understanding of the impact of nature's operation upon us, and we shall be able to take account of some of the ways that nature can expose contradictions in our thinking and lives that may be reconciled through a higher level of understanding. The nine points I mention below are not intended to be exhaustive, but lurking in the background is the reminder of the tensions raised by Voltaire and Rousseau.

First, whatever else God intends for us, it is ultimately neither physical health nor physical longevity in its present form. Assuming divine omnipotence, then if the good that God desired for us were physical, our ancestors would still be alive and living with us. From the Christian perspective, physical-well being is not the ultimate good that God intends. One might further observe that Jesus healed people of physical maladies in the Gospels, but he did not heal them of their humanity. That is, they retained their finitude. The question may hinge on how people interpret and live with this fact.

Second, nature remains limited in terms of what it can give to humanity and how it can satisfy human needs, and this raises important theological questions. The human capacity to seek more and more, coupled with population pressures, creates a scarcity of natural resources. This fact poses uncomfortable questions for the world as a whole. Collectively, the world's citizens may have to agree upon an equitable distribution of resources or, conversely, they may fight over them. If people either choose or are forced by governments to limit their demands upon the world's resources, then they suffer the frustration of unachieved ambition and unquenched desires. If people fight, many die or experience the horrors of displacement and refugee status. Either course of action leads to suffering. The scarcity of the world's resources therefore forces a theological question: is this world all that there is? God has seemingly put us into a world where nature's incapacity to satisfy human wishes and demands creates suffering as individuals are compelled by

necessity to curtail some of their desires. This suffering can be horrible, perhaps more psychologically than physically in the Western world, but it can be redemptive too. It can lead one to a new reality where one must reconcile extremes (limits on desires vs. limitless wishes) or find a *modus vivendi*. Diogenes Allen suggests:

The need to direct and order our lives because of the number of goals and the irreconcilability of some of them makes the issue inescapable... We have to decide whether to reduce our aspirations and deny some of our needs and desires because the world cannot satisfy them.... Their reduction or denial is not easily accomplished. If we find that the universe is *not* the highest reality, perhaps many of them can be met.³⁰

Accepting this world as all that there is remains a possible option but not a popular one. What cannot be denied is that nature forces us all to make decisions about ultimate realities and how we shall live according to those realities. Nature's very limitations therefore serve as a type of witness by forcing us to ask questions.

A third consideration relates to the prior two, and it asks us to consider seriously the human relationship with nature. We remain rooted in nature, incapable of escaping our biology. We become tired, hungry, ill, vulnerable, et cetera. Nature, which supplies us with our food, our sources of medicine, and in effect the things that help us to extricate ourselves from nature's exertions upon us as biological organisms, also ignores human volition. To some degree, nature is indiscriminate. But nature also is the source of innumerable goods. Many of its members must die in order for me to live. For instance, the squash I ate with lunch was a living organism. So too was the cow that became the hamburger I consumed two nights ago. I share a literal biosphere with them called the "earth." Even if I lived only to sixty years of age, I would have consumed innumerable amounts of what Austin Farrer might call physical or biological activity "systems."³¹ In such a condition as this, I too am susceptible to nature's activities, including viruses, colds, earthquakes, and other maladies. I consume things. Viruses, bacteria, perhaps my own genetic makeup, eat away at me. Rousseau recognized this fact.³² The Gospel of Matthew (5:45) records Jesus stating that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. If, on the balance of things, you are glad that you exist, then you have to accept that you simultaneously destroy biological organisms and are in turn destroyed by biological and physical forces.

Fourth, this may be of limited consolation to the toddler suffering cancer or the thirty five year old expiring from a painful case of Huntington's chorea, but most Westerners consume far more than perhaps they are entitled to. While we have lived relatively well and really have little to complain about, how many millions have starved in Africa, Asia, and Latin America? It seems to me that if anyone has the right to criticize God, it is the malnourished non-Westerner. Yet few complaints against God are heard from any of the religious traditions in the non-Western world. There is a cry for justice, especially social justice, but not much of an accusing finger wagged in God's direction. Suffering can remove us from our ethnocentrism, egotism, and compel us to relate to other people, the planet, and ourselves in new ways.

Fifth, we maintain an unrealistic anticipation of the goods that life (read nature) can deliver to us in the West, and perhaps the contradiction inherent in our existence and death can help us live this life better. The religious right in the United States has made a fetish out of life, forgetting that death is just as much a part of life as is living. In fact, half of all conceptions never come to term, and one in five pregnancies results in miscarriage. Is this a remarkable inefficiency on God's part or nature (as intended by God) doing its work? Furthermore, none of us can know what other horrible things might await us if we live longer. Rousseau's point carries some weight: "It is not certain that a single one of these unfortunates has suffered more than if, in accordance with the ordinary course of things, he had awaited in drawn-out anguish the death..."³³ Death, nature's limits, life's imperfections, our own finitude, force the issue anew: is this all that there is? The contradiction is that our wanting to experience the good in this life runs straight into the condition whereby we recognize that it is not possible. This contradiction sometimes destroys people, but it leads others to God and causes them to have a conversion, a *metanoia* not just in religious terms but also in terms of social justice and environmental responsibility. Either we accept the fact that this life is all that there is, or we must reconcile our understanding of God's goodness and the demands God makes of us.

Sixth, it seems logically impossible for God to create morally free agents (humans and possibly animals) in a world that provides no impediments to the choices we make. Alvin Plantinga has already argued persuasively that humans could not possibly be morally free agents and not choose to do wrong. Contrary to those who have argued that God could have created a world in which humans have the freedom to choose wrongly but always choose correctly, Plantinga countered that predetermining the outcome violated human freedom.³⁴ To be truly free—and human freedom is to be highly

valued—humans would inevitably have to be free to make morally wrong decisions. This has ramifications for natural evil. If the world never frustrated human desire, if it provided perfectly and abundantly for humans so that they never needed to order their priorities, then moral choice would constitute a moot point. Bruce Reichenbach argued:

Since a world with free persons making choices between moral good and evil and choosing a significant amount of moral good is better than a world without free persons and moral good and evil, God in creating had to create a world which operated according to natural laws to achieve their higher good. Thus, his action of creation of a natural world and a natural order, along with the resulting pain and pleasure which we experience, is justified.³⁵

The problem is that since this natural world is indifferent to individual desires, wishes, and aspirations, it causes pain and what we call “evils.” But, natural evils are frequently, as Reichenbach intimates, the operations of nature’s members upon each other. As members of the natural world, we cannot escape these operations.

Seventh, as goal-seeking, priority-making beings, we must exercise some responsibility over our choices. It probably would not be wise to live in an old building constructed upon an earthquake fault line. Rousseau’s observations remind us that there are things we can do to avoid becoming a victim and victimizing others. For instance, people should stop smoking, exercise, lose weight, and follow the advice of their physicians. Women should avoid drinking alcohol while pregnant in order to avoid fetal alcohol syndrome. We ought to drive with greater sanity and less speed. We ought to wash our hands more. We ought to press our governments for stricter food-safety laws, better protective technologies in vehicles, and innumerable other things that we remain capable of doing now. The problem becomes political, of course, but it is penny-wise and pound-foolish to resist paying higher taxes or prices for devices safety measures that might protect us from some rather nasty outcomes. Moral free agency does not apparently make us wise, but it raises another political question: how much safety ought to be imposed?

Eighth, we must, like Voltaire, neither forget about the victims of natural evils nor create victims. Compassion, if for no other reason than that we share a common plight in the face of nature’s destructiveness, must factor into our judgments. Jesus’ exhortation to love our neighbors as ourselves implicitly calls upon us to help those whom nature’s processes have harmed, to

resist doing harm to others, and to have compassion. Such compassion might take the form of supporting disaster relief, cancer research, a change in behavioral patterns, burning less energy-consuming materials devices, promoting environmental responsibility, or creating solutions to new problems. Of course, we ought also to avoid becoming a victim by refusing to engage in needlessly risky activities.

Ninth, our rootedness in nature compels us to accept the fact that we all succumb to nature sooner or later. Part of the drama of being human is that we ought to do everything in our power to avoid death, or what Austin Farrer called the “accidents” of a physical universe, but at some point we have to accept the situation. We can complain and rail against the injustice of being subject to nature’s caprices, but sooner or later we recognize that we inhabit a world where “accidents” are built into the structure of things. Farrer’s insight that we live in a system of mutually interfering physical systems is helpful because it helps to explain the “flaw.” He admits that God might have been able to prevent one type of physical accident, but only at the expense of altering circumstances. “But the alteration of circumstances would have made other accidents,” he counseled, and therefore, “Accidentality [sic] is inseparable from our universe.”³⁶

It takes enormous courage to maintain the compassion of Voltaire while simultaneously holding Rousseau’s conviction that natural evils might have providential purpose. To say yes to nature’s inexorable grind on our bodies may therefore constitute our first act of genuine worship and our last act on the earth. Comprehension of the reasons “why” is apparently not requisite for worship, but do not ask me to tell that to the parents of a four-year-old who just died of leukemia.

NOTES

¹ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 72.

² Quoted in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), part 10, p. 63. Actually, this quote does not survive in the fragments of Epicurus’ writings. It is reported by Lactantius *On the Wrath of God* 13, and by Lucretius, and Hume later found it in their writings.

³ St. Augustine. *City of God* 11. 17-18, 21-22; 12. 3, and *Confessions* 7. 3, 5, 12-20.

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 12-49, and Richard Swinburne, “Natural Evil,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (October 1978): 295-301.

⁵ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

- ⁷ Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 36.
- ⁸ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 4.
- ⁹ David Hume, *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), part 2, pp. 13-22.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, part 7, pp. 44ff.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, part 5, pp. 36-38.
- ¹² Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, pp. 45-47.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-49.
- ¹⁴ National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, University of California, Berkeley: <http://nisee.berkeley.edu/lisbon/>
- ¹⁵ T. D. Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Company, 1957), pp. 45-70.
- ¹⁶ Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), p. 267.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Voltaire, *The Lisbon Earthquake*, trans. William Fleming, in *The Works of Voltaire*, vol. 36 (Paris: E. R. DuMont, 1901), p. 9-10.
- ¹⁹ Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Voltaire and the Century of Light* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 232.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 233.
- ²¹ Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 397.
- ²² Voltaire, *Lisbon Earthquake*, p. 18.
- ²³ Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Letter to Mr. de Voltaire II," in *Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 3, trans. J. Bush, C. Kelly, et. al. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), p. 110.
- ²⁴ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 54-55.
- ²⁵ Rousseau, "Letter to Mr. de Voltaire II," p. 120.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115
- ²⁷ Kendrick, *Lisbon Earthquake*, p. 196.
- ²⁸ Rousseau, "Letter to Mr. de Voltaire, II," p. 110.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, pp. 86-87.
- ³¹ Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1961), pp. 48-57.
- ³² Rousseau, "Letter to Mr. de Voltaire II," p. 115.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ³⁴ See John Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200-212, and Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 12-49, for Mackie's argument and Plantinga's counterargument, which is a restatement of the Free Will Defense.
- ³⁵ Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press), pp. 101-02.
- ³⁶ Farrer, *Love Almighty*, pp. 69-70.