



It is an undeniable fact that we have a greater understanding of the physical world today than in previous centuries. From this privileged position we can think that many of the difficulties this new understanding raises, whether moral, philosophical, or theological, are unique to our present age. They must be questions that previous ages could not have fathomed with their limited worldview. It can be a surprising discovery to find that we are not so isolated and alone in our struggles and that many of these difficulties are but appearances of age old questions.

Consider the evil of extinction that occurs during evolution. People that thought all living things had existed exactly as they are from the beginning of the world could ignore the fact that whole classes of animals and plants were biological dead ends. From the early days of thought on evolution many saw Tennyson's "nature, red in tooth and claw"<sup>1</sup> as a pithy summary of the violent way that natural selection suggests species try to overpower their competitors. How could God's wise and loving plan include such widespread pain and death? Doesn't the central role that evil plays in evolution contradict the existence of divine providence or, even worse, the goodness of divine providence? Is this not a new difficulty that we have never had to confront before?

Perhaps, if you have been reading through these essays, you will not be surprised to hear that the answer to these last two questions is "no." We do not need the theory of evolution to tell us that the natural world is violent and bloody. Simple observation of the animal kingdom reveals that precious few animals die at peace after a long fulfilling life. Obviously, carnivores only survive by the death of their prey but, further, no predator is without a predator of its own and even the most dominant predator is only safe until a close relative, perhaps its own offspring, is strong enough to overpower it. In

fact, our pre-modern ancestors<sup>2</sup> were more aware, by personal experience, of the violence of nature, than those of us who only interact with wild animals in zoos, nature documentaries and "snake vs. crocodile" YouTube videos.

St. Thomas takes up the question of evil in nature in discussing divine providence. In holding that God's providence extends to every detail of

# *Divine Providence and the Mystery of Evil*

**Br. Thomas Davenport, O.P.**

existence he insists that this universal care does not exclude the possibility of particular defects and evils:

*Since God, then, provides universally for all being, it belongs to His providence to permit certain defects in particular effects, that the perfect good of the universe may not be hindered, for if all evil were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe. A lion would cease to live, if there were no slaying of animals; and there would be no patience of martyrs if there were no tyrannical persecution.<sup>3</sup>*

He begins with an example of physical evil, violence in the animal kingdom, without which there would be no lion or any other carnivore, limiting the expression of God's creative power. This is not to say that God delights in or directly wills suffering for the sake of suffering, but that He allows it for a greater manifestation of His goodness in creation.

The other example Thomas discusses is one of sin or moral evil, the persecution of the martyrs. This might cause one to wonder if the physical evil of animal violence is really just a manifestation of sin, something that was foreign to God's original plan but that He allows for a

time in order to redeem it in the future. In fact, some Fathers of the Church thought exactly this, seeing the bloodiness of nature as a defect resulting from the fall of Adam and claiming that all creatures ate plants in Paradise. Setting aside the question of plant genocide, it is interesting to see that St. Thomas rejects this view, arguing that moral evil has many negative effects, including corrupting human nature, but it does not destroy our nature or the nature of other things. Sin is not powerful enough to change what an animal eats.<sup>4</sup>

The distinction between physical evil and moral evil is important for understanding God's causative role in our imperfect world. First and foremost, God, as goodness itself, directly wills the good in all cases. Second, certain physical evils, although not willed directly, can be said to be caused by God as part of His wise ordering of the whole. Thus the physical evil of violence in the animal kingdom, even though it introduces particular evils, is directly part of God's divine plan for the world and makes room for the greater goodness of the whole of nature. When God willed to create lions as carnivores, He also had to permit their killing of antelopes. Finally, the willed evil of sin, a moral evil, by which we freely choose to act and order our hearts against God's design and our own good, is not caused by God at all but only by our free choice. Thus, while God holds us in existence and gives us the power to choose, when we choose to sin we are acting, by definition, against His will. This is not to say that His providence is in any way frustrated by our sin or that He is caught off guard by our actions or that he cannot bring great good out of our malice, but that the cause of our sinful action is ultimately our own free will.

The problem of evil has vexed men for millennia and the Church has had to address it in many guises from the very beginning of her existence. Despite what can seem like evidence to the contrary, she has confidently proclaimed God's divine providence over all aspects of creation, without claiming to always understand how God's goodness ultimately triumphs over any particular evil, whether physical or moral, that we face. New experiences and new discoveries will surely ask this difficult question again and again in new



semblance. Many of these, like the evil of extinction (which will be looked at more closely in a later essay), may be understandable when considered from the proper perspective. Ultimately, though, the Church's final answer to these problems, whether understandable or incomprehensible, is that Christ has won the victory over sin and death and that God wills to invite His whole creation to participate in that victory. **✠E**

<sup>1</sup> Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H."

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 9.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theologiæ* I.22.2 ad 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Summa Theologiæ* I.96.1 ad 1; *Summa Theologiæ* I-II.85.

**FIND THIS (AND MORE) ON THE WEB:**

<http://www.thomsticevolution.org/disputed-questions/divine-providence-and-the-mystery-of-evil/>