The Problem of "Natural Evil" and the Role of Chance in Biological Evolution:

How the Urantia Revelation Solves a Theological Predicament

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G. K. Chesterton once quipped that "original sin is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved." This ancient doctrine, he declared, "is as practical as potatoes."[1] Jesus's apostles and disciples were, of course, ignorant of the details of Urantia's tragic pre-history, but their experience of the horrific execution of their Master especially taught them all about "the potatoes of sin."[2] Several centuries later it fell to St. Augustine, a world-class religious genius, to systemize this awareness by contrasting it with beauties of the Gospel message and the truth of the incarnation of Christ.

Augustine reasoned that sinful tendencies must somehow be biologically propagated, and his abiding pessimism about human nature eventually led him to coin the doctrine of *original sin*. Moral depravity is intrinsic, he thought, for otherwise how else could one explain the ubiquity of evil and sin in all sectors of society and throughout history? Augustine concluded that radical evil was a manifestation of errant free-will—a notion that became the key premise of the first influential Christian *theodicy*.[3] God's creatures (humans and angels) and *not* the Creator himself were responsible for the pervasiveness of evildoing.

Today we define the discipline of theodicy as the attempt to explain how an all-loving and all-powerful God could "allow" for so much moral evil and chaos here on earth, including horrendous evils such as disastrous world wars and racial genocide. Augustine's work on this problem is still at the core of many theodicies to this day. He famously taught that the corruption of our free will took origin from the primal disobedience of Adam and Eve, the first humans on earth; he followed Paul in declaring that the "second Adam," Jesus Christ, brought us salvation from the stain of original sin and the challenge of *moral evil*.[4]

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[1] "The ancient masters of religion . . . began with the fact of sin—a fact as practical as potatoes. . . Certain new

[2] St. Paul wrote that Christians were in a death struggle with "the rulers of the darkness of this world [and against] spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph 6:12). The apostles had endured the appallingly evil crime of the execution of Jesus and also knew Jesus had been "tempted" by Satan, "the God of this world" (2 Cor 4:4). The early Christian community (and of course all Jews of this era) were exceedingly aware of the injustices of Roman rule. They were soon to endure even more sinful treatment: the murderous persecution at the hands of the Jewish rulers that drove them from Palestine, after which many apostles were killed or crucified. In the next few centuries, many thousands of their followers were martyred. As a result, awareness of the sinful and demonic dimension of human life was strong in the early church.

[3] The technical term "theodicy" was coined in the seventeenth century and generally reflects the influence of Enlightenment rationalism applied to Christian theology. Earlier efforts were less systematic, with the exception of thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas. Augustine's theodicy further states that men were created "good" by a perfectly good God but entered the path of sin by their own choice alone.

[4] The initiatory ceremony of baptism and lifelong participation in the sacramental life of the church provided the only sure exit from *moral evil*—the biological curse (according to Augustine) of evil, sin, and iniquity lurking in the heart of humanity.

Significantly, later theologians added a distinction between all forms of moral evil and the suffering caused by so-called *natural evil*. This concept refers to the *natural* (not behavioral) causes of suffering that are experienced by both animals and humans; it results from the exigencies of biological evolution, especially problem of predation and near-inevitable species extinctions (99 percent of all species that have appeared on earth), as well as unearned suffering from earthquakes, plagues, droughts, floods, and hurricanes. In this essay we will narrow the focus to *natural evils associated with biological evolution as well as the issue of the role of chance and purpose in the course of evolution.*

But note well: Early Christians linked these "natural" maladies with the fall of Adam and Eve (see Genesis 3:17), and the *UB* does not deny a connection between the double default and certain of these natural evils. For example, a Life Carrier makes this blanket statement: "It was a source of regret to the Life Carriers that our special efforts to modify intelligent life on Urantia should have been so handicapped by tragic perversions beyond our control: the Caligastia betrayal and the Adamic default" (65:5.1).

Four Major Perspectives on the Predicament

At least four major views have emerged about the philosophic problem of evil, especially with reference to our chosen focus on the mysteries of natural evil and cosmic evolution. These four options break into two sets: The first set is derived mainly from Christian theological reflection; it tends to split between the optimists and "realists." And, a second set of two other options have arisen more recently that are *based on theological reflection informed by science, and conversely science informed by theology*. In other words, there are four perspectives on the "potatoes" of evil, and again, it happens that the first two break out into a split between conservatives and liberals:

1. *Optimism*: Liberal Protestant Christian theologians of the last few centuries, including many of those who are counted as human sources for the *UB*, were more positive about human nature than traditional Catholic and Orthodox Christians. These liberals, informed for the first time by the new evolutionary theories of Darwin and others, saw that human nature as fundamentally good and improving itself over time, but embattled in various ways; the "progressives" among them more often pointed to the problem of *social sin*, which arises because of corrupt economic and political structures. In general, all of these liberal Christian modernists and social-gospel preachers doubted that our condition is biologically blighted.

2. *Realism:* Today many modern Catholic, Orthodox, and fundamentalist Christians still teach that "primal sin" is biologically rooted or somehow pre-given; in addition, moral evil may also be attributed to really existing demonic powers.

The exciting discoveries of modern evolutionary biology have led to two more variants:

3. *Theological naturalism*: Many leading Christian thinkers are deeply engaged with today's sciences in an effort to construct new theologies based on advanced scientific cosmology; many who are also focused on theodicy have innovated by creating what may be called evolutionary theodicy, such as philosopher John Hick's theory of soul-making. Often known as *evolutionary theists* or *evolutionary theologians*, these writers offer explanations of the problem of evil based on "grace-filled naturalism."

4. *Revelatory theological naturalism*—a phrase I have coined to refer to the *UB*'s teachings on these topics. A not dissimilar blend of evolutionary science and theology also characterizes much of the *UB*'s own view of the problem of evil and the role of chance and purpose; but this convenient overlap soon gives way when we add to the equation those startling facts and assertions only found in the Urantia text. I believe these unique revelations add greater explanatory power for the overall dilemma we are examining.

The labor of uncovering the scientific and moral sources of radical evil belongs to the modern mission of theodicy. Unfortunately, traditional Christian theodicy has long been handicapped because of its birth from within the static cosmology of the ancient world. Even the reformers of the sixteenth century, still blithely unaware of evolution, went so far as to *heighten* the old emphasis on inherent human wickedness. Both Luther and Calvin, as followers of Augustine, intensified their theological focus on Adam's fall from a fixed and perfect Paradise.

In modern times, influential conservatives theologians such as Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr brought the potatoes home once again. They rehabilitated the old idea of pervasive sin in their attacks on liberal Protestant "optimism" and social-gospel theology, which according to Niebuhr "grievously overestimated human virtue" because of its misreading of the trajectory of human evolution. Niebuhr's "realist" Christianity modernized the idea of original sin by reclaiming the existential content of the ancient doctrine but rejecting the outdated "etiology of evil" contained in the Edenic myth.

In light of this controversy, how should we reframe our religious concepts of evil and sin, and the role of chance in evolution, in the light of today's advancing scientific findings, including genetics, biology, anthropology, and cosmology?

And what of vital interest does the *UB* have to say about theses issues, especially given its unique teachings about biological evolution as well as the "wild card" factor of the Lucifer Rebellion?

The *UB*'s Cosmic Architecture of "Managed Evolution"

We'll turn back to the *UB* shortly, but we will first look for help from the scientific legacy of the "selfish gene" hypothesis. Originally associated with Oxford University biologist Richard Dawkins, this is the once-popular idea that genes induce a host organism to become a "survival machine" so that they, *the genes*, will survive.[5] On my reading, Dawkins' mechanistic approach was a step toward the more nuanced idea of a biologically based *original selfishness*, the idea that intensely self-interested and self-preserving behavior is necessarily embedded in the genomes of all species and is a central feature of the legacy of a billions years of biological evolution. This more recent hypothesis, which has been advanced by an academic biologist turned theologian named Daryl Domning, points us toward a scientifically informed "etiology of evil." And, I believe it should inform any future theodicy that is scientifically literate and that addresses the problem of natural evil. We'll then turn to the *UB* for a possible affirmation of this thesis while we also look for entirely novel distinctions provided in its revelatory disclosures.

[5] In *The Selfish Gene* (1976) Hawkins argues that that natural selection not so much about making the species or a subset of the species secure, but rather about making the individual secure, and the individual is merely a vehicle for its genes.

Any examination of evolutionary biology raises the prominent issue of the role of randomness and contingency in the Darwinian concept of *gradual evolution*, versus the possibility that evolution is purposive and "punctuated" (i.e., so-called *punctuated equilibrium* or the sudden "pre-programmed" appearances of species often referred to in the Urantia revelation). We'll seek out solutions to this dilemma that have been generated from today's extensive dialogue of biology and theology.

Our focus in this essay on theodicy and the proper description of the role of chance in biological evolution gives rise to these salient questions:
(1) If God is our all-loving and all-powerful Creator, why does the divine design of evolution require millions of years of "natural evil," i.e., predation, animal suffering, and species extinction, including the current possibility of human extinction?
(2) Are these eons of apparent natural evil somehow ordained by divine design? Was this tumultuous process, dominated as it is by "blood on the tracks," the only way to bring about the progressive evolution that leads to human flourishing?
(3) Stated another way: Does the omnipotent and transcendent God of love "permit" millennia of such pain and death for the sake of some greater good?
(4) And why, in this equation, is there so much room for apparent randomness, and such a huge role for unpredictable mutations—or chance events of natural evil like the giant asteroid that likely destroyed the dinosaurs 66 million years ago[6]? Again, was there no other conceivable way for an infinite Deity to proceed with the forward evolution of life?
(5) Finally, along strictly theological lines, does the Creator somehow identify with and experience the inevitable suffering and death of his lowly creatures through these billions of years of evolution, as well as that of humans?

In this essay, my thesis and general reply to such questions is as follows: Biological evolution is a fitful but also lawful blend of contingent *and* programmed phenomena. It provides for entirely random mutations that, once they are naturally selected, stabilize themselves long enough to get "punctuated" by foreordained mutations that reflect divine purpose (i.e., "punctuated equilibrium" according to scientists); unseen divine intent is submerged as embedded potentials that eventually manifest themselves on occasion (for example) as mutations of entire new species that represent progress. The distressing problem of natural evil that results from this tumultuous process (i.e., the misfortune and suffering of God's creatures along the way, including species extinctions) is itself also *encompassed* by a divine design. The *UB* reveals a grand architecture of "managed evolution" that allows for wild cards (random genetic mutation, the vicissitudes of Darwinian natural selection, and even planetary angelic rebellions) and builds progress and growth upon these events. But the

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[6] Current science seems to have conclusively determined that all of the dinosaurs and many other classes of life—about three quarters of the plant and animal species on the planet—went extinct about 66 million years ago, an event which marked the termination of the Cretaceous Period. The *UB*, by contrast, states that the Cretaceous closed 50 million years ago and that the dinosaurs slowly died out by about 35 million years ago—which was also the general view among paleontologists at the time of the book's writing. Today, science has considered three competing theories for the great mass extinction 65 million years ago:
1. A 4-to-9-mile-wide meteor struck the Earth creating a long-lasting dust cloud that blocked out sunlight worldwide. This event had a catastrophic affect on plant growth and thus on most other living species, and is known as the Alvarez hypothesis. The very likely location of such a meteor strike is near the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, at Chicxulub.
2. Climate change dropped the temperature, killing many plants and consequently the dinosaurs.
3. Massive volcanic activity caused the demise of the dinosaurs, as *The Urantia Book* and other early sources have stated.

architecture makes full provision for overcoming every possible contingency and nurturing positive mutations for the sake of harvesting greater goods—all in due time, or I should say, in *divine time*.

From the Eden Myth to the "Selfish Gene"

By the early nineteenth century, a number of factors dealt a death-blow to literal belief in *monogenism*, the ancient idea that a primeval couple propagated their sin (in the form of corrupted free will) to subsequent generations through a single line of biological descent. Perhaps chief among the intellectual factors that overturned this archaic belief are the evolution-saturated philosophies of G.W.F. Hegel and his many followers, as well as Darwin's mid-century discovery of the relationship of natural selection and mutation—that is, the radically novel idea that random mutations spontaneously occur and that natural selection continually acts on the surviving mutations, leading to slight improvements and changes in species over time. In this essay our main focus is on Darwin, who conclusively showed how variations that favor survival will tend to (statistically) spread more quickly in a population than less adaptive mutations.

As so we have two remarkable new narratives—the general law of evolutionary progress in all spheres, and Darwin's theory of biological evolution. Once these were accepted later in the nineteenth century, the old doctrine of "monogenism" lost it explanatory power.[7] Thus, instead of the old legend of a descent from Paradise perfection into a transmissible state of sin, liberal Protestants (and soon after many modernizing Catholics)—and ultimately the Urantia Revelation itself—now envisioned a steady evolutionary *ascent* toward the human species itself and its prospect of creating a high civilization.[8] (Soon we'll learn how this advance becomes the foundation for the more advanced concept of "punctuated evolution.")

These updated theologies gave up on the biblical sin-and-redemption paradigm altogether in favor of forward evolution, we've noted that there are two variants that arise in the twentieth century:

1. The "realist" view about a stubbornly persistent dark side of human nature that persists alongside slow and irregular evolutionary progress.
2. The general trend of liberal Christian optimism, especially the social gospel progenitors of liberation theology who were at first led by activist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch. If sin was not so much inherent but was in fact socially and culturally transmitted, it could be re-engineered by a mighty human reform effort that was motivated by a worldwide clarion call to a new gospel of social justice, best exemplified in the life work of Martin Luther King.[9]

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[7] Driving this point home, theologian Roger Haight, SJ, declares that original sin "is not an explanation of anything, but a confession of something that is recognizable by all: human existence is sinful." Haight also evokes the critique of St. Augustine by Pelagius, who argued that it defies logic and common sense to assign "sin" to a newborn infant. See *Faith and Evolution: A Grace-Filled Naturalism* (Orbis, 2019), chapter 4.

[8] This view echoes the ancient "Irenaean" developmental theodicy, the minority Christian view that was eclipsed by the ascent of Augustinianism. St. Irenaeus of Lyons generally regarded moral evil as a result of God's creation of man as an incomplete creature, thus requiring a long process of moral and spiritual development.

[9] The original founder of the social gospel movement, Walter Rauschenbusch, argued that ancient Christianity had ignored the massive social evils that pervaded the Roman world in favor of being "obsessed over small legalisms pertaining to personal habits." Traditional theology understood the diabolical power of sin, he acknowledged, but it also offloaded responsibility for sins to transcendent forces such as Adam or the devil, thus making believers relatively helpless in the face of social sin. As a result, Rauschenbusch argued, traditional theology has always turned its face away from condemning the wicked social environments that oppressed the

In this essay I favor the realist approach, the hot-potato idea that the classic doctrine of sin got *something* right. It pointed to the wrong cause (i.e., the myth of the Edenic fall) for the right outcome: a biologically based animal-origin tendency that some call "natural evil," amplified as it is by the tragic repercussions of the Lucifer Rebellion. Evolution is indeed moving forward in fits and starts, but the *correct* cause for our sometimes benighted condition must be factored in. I suggest its cause is twofold:

1. *We carry in us the "selfish genes" of our evolutionary forebears, who prevailed in the only way possible*, that is, by sometimes predatory behavior and by other amoral methods of succeeding in the struggle for survival. In each case of success in the struggle, the surviving individual, group, or species lived on to mate and produce progeny, who thereupon pass these "selfish" genetic traits down to us. (Later in this essay we discuss the hypothesis that some animal groups display apparent altruistic behavior.)

2. *The "moral" and genetic consequences of the double default:* "The Caligastia upheaval," states the *UB*, "precipitated world-wide confusion and **robbed all subsequent generations of the moral assistance** which a well-ordered society would have provided. But even more disastrous was the Adamic default in that it **deprived the races of that superior type of physical nature** which would have been more consonant with spiritual aspirations" (34:7.4). [Emphasis added.]

We are told that life implantation occurred 550 million years ago on Urantia. The half-billion years of restless striving that followed accrued those genetic predispositions that were necessary for the survival of victorious species through eons of often deadly competition. This legacy extends down through the course of hominid evolution, and this same urge (now conditioned by all seven adjutant mind-spirits) also made possible the early epochs of human adjustment to a forbidding environment. And yet, the moderating influence of the "moral assistance" (provided by supermortals) for overcoming our animal-origin traits—as well as the gift of the genetic up-stepping of particular racial deficits that is the unique gift of a Material Son and Daughter—*both* were denied us because of the Caligastia betrayal.

Ironically, primitive man was not only warlike and ruthless because of natural inheritance; this result was also supported by Life Carrier plans, or at least anticipated by it. Recall for example the *UB*'s matter-of-fact narration about the "incessant and relentless wars of extermination as were waged by the red, green, and orange men" (64:7.7). In other words, such early racial genocide was something they expected and had the effect of selecting out the more resilient strains in each surviving racial group.

And in addition, Life Carrier design also fostered hardiness and fierceness in highly purposive ways, leading to what the revelators call a "tremendous survival endowment." This was a result of their ongoing "overcontrol of evolution," as we can see from this startling

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poor. In Rauschenbusch's last book, *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), he offered a final exposition of his ideas about social Christianity soon before his death in the midst of WWI in 1918. He was not shy about supernatural forces, arguing that "supra-personal entities" victimized humankind in the form of evil forces that infected socio-economic and political institutions. These forces flourished in a psychical dimension of sorts that Rauschenbusch called "the kingdom of evil." Of course, this wasn't the ancient mythic notion of a personal devil and fallen angels who victimized helpless humankind. But evil was nonetheless a powerful and pervasive reality that had much the same effect; it was energetically real, and it bound unsuspecting victims together in its yoke of darkness.

statement in Paper 65:

> In this way the life that was planted on Urantia evolved until the ice age, when man himself first appeared and began his eventful planetary career. And this appearance of primitive man on earth during the ice age was not just an accident; it was by design. The rigors and climatic severity of the glacial era were in every way adapted to the purpose of fostering the production of a hardy type of human being with **tremendous survival endowment** (65:2.15). [Emphasis added.]

These are among the fascinating revelatory teachings we find about biological and later hominid evolution, beginning with Paper 58, "Life Establishment on Urantia," and continuing through the marine-life era, the early land-life ages, the mammalian era, the era of the dawn races, and on down to the sometimes unsettling assertions made in Paper 65, "The Overcontrol of Evolution."

The upshot may be as follows: Because we were robbed of "moral assistance" and genetic uplift, evolving human societies have (at least in my view) failed to rid themselves of much of the "natural evil" that results from their animal inheritance, and this legacy shows up today in the moral evils we too often see around us.

In this connection it is noteworthy that the revelation makes of point of stating in Paper 68:0-1 ("The Dawn of Civilization") that "civilization . . . is not biologically inherent" and "co-operation is not a natural trait of man." And further: "Group hostility, personal suspicion, and other highly antisocial traits [are] characteristic of all primitive races." Again, this is the inheritance of natural evil that survives to become what religionists call moral evil.

The Spirit of Life and the Impulse of Evolution

But what explains the urge behind the *forward motion* of evolution through eons of what were often cruel life vicissitudes, including the extinction of more than 99 percent of all the species that had appeared along the way? What energizing factor makes all these dramatic events possible?

Theologian Roger Haight, a mentor of mine at Union Theological Seminary, coined the concept of "grace-filled naturalism" to describe it. Evolutionary theologians such as Haight are translating classic Christian conceptions of divinity, including ancient creation theologies, with a goal of updating them in the light of current evolutionary biology and genomics.

Haight argues that God's Spirit is both the *primal cause* of the original creation and the "creative cause" or sustainer of ongoing natural and human evolution (in Latin known as *creatio continua*). Haight writes: "Creative causality, even though it is unimaginable . . . supplies the power of being and, as Presence, sustains and energizes the evolutionary process."[10] Haight calls this process "unimaginable," but we will soon see how revelation dispels some of this mystery.

This immanent Presence, Haight argues, is the not only the ground of "created being" but is somehow "causal" in relation to stellar and geologic evolution, the origin of life on a virgin world and the harsh vicissitudes of environmental adjustment, and the rise and

[10] Haight, p. 130.

disappearance of thousands of species that entails eons of creature suffering and death—but which also constitutes progress.

Along similar lines, Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman taught that God infuses evolution with the unfathomable spirit of "serendipitous creativity," a dynamic divine energy that undergirds the surprising novelty that results from spontaneously occurring genetic variation and all this entails for creature life.

In a comparable vein, renowned Catholic theologian Karl Rahner turned to a classic Hebrew term, arguing that God infuses creation as its *shekinah* that "pressures it from within to evolve."[11] *Shekinah* classically refers to the "manifested glory of God's indwelling presence," and this immanent God necessarily embraces the sometimes lethal evolutionary contingencies described by science.

Evolutionary theologian Ted Peters goes further, declaring that the God who through Christ is omnipresent during the entire course of evolution should be understood as the co-suffering God who feels the pain and death of all species, absorbing their suffering and cries into the divine life in each moment. This same God, acting from the future, draws all creatures forward into universal salvation and orchestrates the promised end of sin and suffering.

It is also worth noting the insights of paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin in this connection: He believed he found evidence in the fossil record that a purposive "radial" energy operated on evolution directly, moving it forward toward an Omega Point, albeit sometimes "jerkily," as he put it.

The Urantia revelation comports with many of these notions, but as usual goes far beyond the purview of even the most advanced ideas found in contemporary evolutionary biology or theology.

The *UB* generally agrees with the contemporary discipline of evolutionary theology that God is present to biological evolution through *immanence* (i.e., energetically indwelling, infusing, or "pressuring" of natural processes toward progressive change, as stated above by contemporary theologians). But the Urantia text corrects and supersedes vague notions such as "unimaginable creative causality" and "serendipitous creativity." We discover that Deity is not just "a dynamic divine energy" (as Kaufman teaches for example), but is *operationally engaged* in specific, detailed, and divinely ordained ways with primitive planetary environments (or what the *UB* calls "premind life"), acting "on the ground" though subordinate beings and agencies. This point is a stupendous revelation in my estimate that helps us reframe the many issues we are considering in terms of the architecture of managed evolution.

This special action is creative in the broadest sense, and is at first carried out by previously unrevealed celestial agencies, specifically through the "co-ordinate function" of three intelligent and purposeful celestial agencies, as summarized in this statement: "Basic evolutionary material life—premind life—is the formulation of the Master Physical Controllers and the life-impartation ministry of the Seven Master Spirits in conjunction with the active ministration of the ordained Life Carriers" (65:0.1).

In Orvonton at least, the Seventh Master Spirit infuses the gift of life itself (through the person of the Universe Mother Spirit). It pours the life-spark into the bio-chemical patterns of organic matter that are formulated by the Life Carriers, all under the direction of Christ

[11] Quoted in Haight, p. 17.

Michael in our case, the creator of the master patterns of life. We are told that Urantia's Life Carriers selected the best single formula from a "half million" that were devised in their labs (65:4.4) and then planted it here at discrete locations. At 58:4.2 we read that all planetary life "had its origin in our three original, identical, and simultaneous marine-life implantations."[12] Residing in this DNA endowment is a divinely ordained potential for gradual (Darwinian) evolution *along with* an additional potential for "punctuations" that show up as sudden periods of much more advanced speciation.

The Spirit accomplishes this superb feat (at first) not only in cooperation with the Life Carriers, but also under the aegis of the physical controllers, who we are told are in charge of "the mechanical-nonteachable levels" of life (65:0.3), that is, the very first phase of life on Urantia.

Then, presumably, the Spirit energizes the next step of primitive evolutionary process, such that "there develops organismal capacity for mind" (65:0.3).

As primal mind begins to appear, the *first* of the seven adjutant mind-spirits (mindal influences which are a subordinate agency of the Master Spirit and the local universe Mother Spirit) "turns on" and begins to carry out its specialized mission. It will "activate and regulate . . . those response mechanisms of organisms capable of learning from experience" (65:0.3).

As we know, the Life Carriers oversee or actually do the hands-on field work on each planet (and in their laboratories) that makes all this possible on the ground.

What happens next? Evolutionary biologists and theologians have observed how the whole subsequent process is sustained by a ruthless and sometimes ravenous "urge of life." Remarkably, the *UB* describes the big picture behind this impulse in terms of Creator intent, therefore offering us more idealistic terminology:

> There is original endowment of adaptation in living things and beings. In every *living* plant or animal cell, in every *living* organism—material or spiritual—there is **an insatiable craving** for the attainment of ever-increasing perfection of environmental adjustment, organismal adaptation, and augmented life realization. These interminable efforts of all living things evidence the existence within them of an **innate striving for perfection**. (65:6.2) [Emphasis added.]

The evolutionary urge is one of "insatiable craving," we are told above. And the scientific evidence tells us that this impulse is ruthless and amoral at first. To my mind, the tale of evolution told in Papers definitely ratifies what we know about the "gene selfishness." But revelation *also* tells us that this hard-scrabble story of street-fighting animal heroism is also infused with a very benign *telos*: ultimate perfection. The urge of life itself is *teleological* and infused with divine purpose regardless of its early trappings of apparent natural evil.

We now return to our earlier discussion of contemporary biology in relation to postmodern theology, which will lead us to additional observations about the *UB*'s revelatory teachings about evolution.

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[12] It should be noted here that he Nobel prize winner Francis Crick, co-discoverer of the DNA double helix, at one point proposed that life may have been purposely spread by an advanced extraterrestrial civilization. This was a modern version of the old theory of *panspermia*, first proposed in the 5th century BC by the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras.

From Original Sin to Original Selfishness

To get beyond the old static doctrine of sin while yet preserving its core inner truths, it helps to begin with the previously noted modern realist view that ancient Christianity was "existentially correct" about original sin.

Toward this end, Daryl Domning offers the idea that our sinful nature is biologically rooted in what he calls *original selfishness*.[13] A distinguished comparative biologist turned Catholic theologian, Domning asserts that primal selfishness has its origin "in the farthest depths of evolutionary time and in the mechanics of the evolutionary process itself."[14]

In making this argument, Domning cleaves somewhat to the framework of paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, who declared that "the idea of a fall is an attempt to explain evil in a fixed universe. . . . The problem of evil, insoluble in the case of a static universe, no longer arises in the case of an evolutive universe . . . It is strange that so simple a truth should still be so little perceived and stated."[15]

Darwinian theory solved the age-old problem of why each living thing seems to have an uncanny fit to its niche. After Darwin we now know that a species' suitability to its given niche results from the lengthy and painful process of *adaptive evolution*. Each surviving creature undergoes an apparently haphazard and uneven but ultimately incremental process of adjusting itself to immediate environmental challenges. As noted, what makes this possible are gene variations that spontaneously occur in random individuals, and we know that this occurs either because of a "copy error" in DNA replication or the breaking of bonds in the DNA strand because of accidents, radiation, or environmental poisons.

Further, members of a species may appear identical, almost as if they display a God-given essence—as the ancients believed and as creationists still preach; but since Darwin we know that the inherited genetic make-up (or "genotype") of each individual in any population definitely *varies*. Every one differs slightly from its fellows. The laws of adaptive evolution favor those specific individuals whose unique genetic profile, served up by "serendipitous mutations" (as evolutionary theologian Gordon Kaufman might put it), makes them the best fit to their immediate circumstances. But again, their biological fitness evolves by pure *happenstance* according to the Darwinian model. Such chance occurrences make them slightly more competitive than others in the daily scramble for scarce resources, allowing them to persevere long enough to attract mates and pass their more suitable genes on to a new generation. The enterprise of evolution selects for individuals who by serendipity find a better genetic pathway to express their insatiable craving for life, and if they are lucky and aggressive enough culminates in successful mating.

Original Selfishness Expressed in Instinctive Behavior

Both theory and empirical evidence tells us that nature "selects" for species that preserve themselves "by any means necessary."

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[13] Accoding to Domning, well-known primate biologist Frans de Wall prefers to call this phenomenon "self-promoting genes."

[14] Daryl P. Domning, "Sin, Suffering, and Salvation: What Does Evolution Have to Say About Them?" (PDF transcript from the Conference on Primate Ethics and Human Morality, Topic III, November 10, 2012), 8.

[15] Daryl P. Domning, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution* (Ashgate, 2006), 5.

Primatologists such as Jane Goodall have become increasingly impressed by the fact that apes' actions, even within their own species, resemble the worst traits of humans, including aggression and bullying, theft, status-seeking, and vendettas. She and her colleagues have observed premeditated murder, infanticide, and even organized warfare—in some sense the evolutionary foreshadowing of human sin.

Of course, we don't impute actual sin to nonhuman species, but we may rightly characterize their aggressive behavior as a universally *selfish* drive for survival. Following Domning, we might even call this *the law of original selfishness*: all individuals *must* strive to maximize their own lifespan, thereby allowing them to propagate copies of themselves to their progeny. As Domning puts it:

> Amorally *selfish* behavior . . . is necessarily the most basic behavior of any living system. Life must always sustain it*self* by acquiring materials and energy, if necessary at the expense of other life, through competition and self-interested cooperation. This behavior is *necessarily* reinforced by natural selection: if you don't do it, you don't long survive, much less evolve.[16]

But the process is complex, Domning reminds us. For, even *if* you (or your immediate kin) engage in grossly self-interested behavior in your particular generation, there is another requirement. As stated, the determining factor over the long arc of evolution is the chance appearance of a minor improvement in your genotype—provided you survive to embody it through such grossly self-interested behavior! In other words, aggressive selfishness is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for natural selection to work; random mutation is the other driver, and natural selection works upon and with this raw material.

Today no one doubts that evolutionary adaptation occurs because of *natural selection* and *genetic mutation*, at a minimum. The general concept of forward biological evolution had been accepted before Darwin, but natural selection now offered a plausible mechanism for evolutionary adaptation, while the occurrence of random genetic mutations across a large population over eons of time could be identified as the engine of change.[17] Biologists now know exactly how and why chance alterations in genetic materials occur,[18] and we also know that *the environment itself* naturally selects for survival those individuals best able to compete for its limited resources based on a given mutation. The ultimate outcome is *self-perpetuation*—that is, successful mating and self-propagation—for the winning individuals with the hardiest and most "selfishly adaptive" behaviors. But again is pure serendipity the *only* way beneficial mutations can take place?

Evolutionary Contingency and Divine Action

[16] Domning, "Sin, Suffering, and Salvation," p. 7. Also quoted in Haight, p. 131.

[17] It should be well-noted that Mendelian genetics and knowledge of the precise mechanisms of mutation date from advances made after Darwin's death.

[18] Mutations can occur in chromosomes, DNA, RNA, and epigenetic elements because of accidental damage to these materials attributable to "entropy," or from tiny mistakes made in the copying of genetic code during cell reproduction. In some species, the process can be incredibly rapid: a single cell of the "staph" bacterium can multiply fast enough to create a colony of a million bacteria in ten hours, spontaneously generating 300 mutations during that time. At some point, the process of natural selection guarantees that some one mutation will render the bug resistant to antibiotics.

This over-simplified summary of some of the findings of evolutionary biology according to the Darwinists raises a complex set of questions about the role of a Creator God, sub-absolute Deities, and presiding celestials in such unforgiving and painful natural processes. Or at least this is one way of defining the quest for a suitable theodicy that is informed by the current theology and ultimately the Urantia revelation.

Most notably, if genetic mutations only occur by chance, and if the novel result of natural selection acting on such mutations is only a matter of serendipity, does this mean that random factors predominate in God's evolving creation across all universes? And, as stated before, if this exacting process of adaptive evolution entails eons of inescapable suffering, predation, and extinction in a amoral struggle for survival in which most species perish, is God responsible for such natural evils? Inevitably, the universal struggle to prevail also means considerable suffering, pain, death, and apparent waste during the entire lethal process, including wholesale extinctions of innumerable species. Theologian Ted Peters puts it this way: "The fact that hungry predators must devour their prey while in the service of natural selection leading to the extinction of entire species is loathsome to the compassionate human heart. . . .Who is to blame for this wretched situation?" [19]

Meanwhile, we may be cheered by the inference that life appears to move forward inexorably toward increasing complexity and consciousness, as Teilhard de Chardin proposed. He observed that evolution slowly but surely progresses in a long line ranging from simple single-celled life to the emergence of thousands upon thousands of increasingly complex and unique species, finally leading up to the appearance of humans with free will and highly versatile brains capable of making meaning of the grand process. Following in these footsteps, prominent Catholic evolutionary theorist John Haught even celebrates the variable course of evolutionary vicissitudes "as the embodiment of a promise yet to be fulfilled in the divinizing and consummating power of the Holy Spirit."[20]

But however some theologians may construe the findings of science in relation to divine action, their work remains a highly speculative endeavor that entails an adventurous dialogue between radically different disciplines. How is a rapprochement even possible between the idea of the God of eternity and a biological process apparently marked by random chance, pervasive suffering, and risk of failure?

Of course, we know that the *UB* also points to a happy ending, one that is more plausible and sophisticated than that offered even seventy years later by the contemporary thinkers at the leading edge of the dialogue of cosmology and theology. Consider also the fact that some better adapted species, such as dolphins or beetles, do maintain an abiding prevalence in certain niches over eons of time. And we are told in the *UB* that on advanced planets, the

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[19] Ted Peters, "Extinction, Natural Evil, and the Cosmic Cross" *Zygon*, 9/2018 (Volume: 53, Issue: 3), p. 699. Here are more questions suggested by Peters' work that amplifies the issue: What is God's "rationale" for the sometimes destructive power of the insatiable craving that, as we have noted, both constitutes and drives animal evolution and acts as a powerful inherited drive in humans? Has God created a world in which untold eons of violence and suffering are the means by which God's higher purposes are attained? Conceivably, the human species itself—or a large portion of it—could fail through some combination of environmental and manmade calamities. How then is the guiding hand of a loving Creator to be found amidst such harassing adversities, painful vicissitudes, and scenes of species die-off?

[20] John Haught, "Cosmology and Creation," p. 108; chapter 7 in *Christianity and Science: Toward a Theology of Nature* (Orbis Books, 2007).

human species finally settles down into its planet-wide niche, and remains intact for an unlimited future known as the Era of Light and Life.

Contingency, Divine Infinitude, and the Urantia Revelation

Today many of these same evolutionary theists have begun to envisage a God who ordains an evolving physical universe that is well-nigh infinite in scale, both in its predominant temporal feature of very slow unfolding and in its unbelievably vast cosmic setting. Our telescopes now reveal a universe of more than two trillion galaxies that must, according to current science, contain many millions of planets capable of hosting life. Accordingly, in today's postmodern evolutionary theologies—as these are now revised in light of today's cosmology—God's scope and potential for creativity through the vehicle of natural evolution is far more rich than any previous conception. For example, in reflecting on Karl Rahner's theology, John Haught highlights the idea that "the infinite mystery of God pours itself out unreservedly into creation [and] the Infinite cannot be received by a finite creation in any single instant."[21] Indeed, according to Haught, the evolution of God's creation is still in its infancy.

This far wider picture, in turn, allows God's creatures an astonishing latitude in their tentative, groping, and instinctive efforts to adapt to life conditions on a vast multitude of worlds with exceedingly diverse ecosystems. And this notion may entail a radical expansion of our concept of God's creative and sustaining action—or even God's purposive engagement—in the light of the indeterminate nature of evolution. An omniscient, all-powerful, and loving Christian God could initiate life on any one of millions of worlds in space, setting into motion some form of Darwinian evolution with all of its accidental and unpredictable qualities, but still be confident that, as evolutionary theologian Ernan McMullin puts it: Some form of life will evolve on rare occasions on some worlds because one can expect "the swamping of contingency" as a virtual mathematical certainty.

McMullin explains: "Might it not be said that such spaces populated by billions of galaxies that have developed over billions of years may have been needed in order that in a natural way the cosmos might give birth somewhere within it to human life one time or maybe multiple times? The contingency of the single evolutionary line might thus overcome the immensity of the cosmic scale."[22]

In other words, because of the massive role of chance and radical contingency, the *particular* forms of life that end up surviving on any one of millions of inhabitable spheres may *appear* to be nothing but arbitrary—assuming that a given world among these spheres is ultimately successful. But at the near-infinite scale upon which God must operate given today's vast cosmological extent in space and time, the surviving lines of evolution on one or another alien world may well illustrate what some believe God's purpose could be with

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[21] Quoted in Domning, *Original Selfishness*, p. 53.

[22] Ernan McMullin, "Evolutionary Contingency and Cosmic Purpose," p. 153; chapter 9 in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley, SJ* (Crossroads Publishing, 1996). McMullin continues: "Parenthetically, these ideas link us to theologies of salvation history. From one point of view, the Spirit saves us in the sense that it is the source of the impulse of evolution—and it is this inner drive that brings intelligent humans into being over billions of years despite the harsh vicissitudes of random mutation and natural selection. The Spirit also saves us if understood as *creatio continua*. That's because its unifying and animating powers, if we would only open to them, can profoundly heal us—just as these same powers give life and being to all things in the cosmos, perhaps even being the guarantor of life everlasting."

regard to creation: to confer deep meaning on creature life, including human life, due to the exhilarating challenge to *adapt* in the context of a nearly unlimited set of "local" ecosystem scenarios, all of which is subject to random mutation and other chance factors. According to this challenge, eventual success *is* possible and the painful challenges and great risks along the way *are* vindicated by the occasional victory of unique forms of well-adapted species, including self-aware humanoid citizens of the universe—each one a child of God.

These ideas may represent the flower of current thought, but consider the fact that the Urantia revelation entirely reframes the problem of chance and contingency in evolution.

In Paper 49 on "The Inhabited Worlds," we are told that "cosmic evolution may not always be understandable (predictable), but it is strictly nonaccidental. . . . The Life Carriers are always the living catalyzers who initiate the primordial reactions of material life; they are the instigators of the energy circuits of living matter . . . These beings [the Life Carriers] are neither capricious or whimsical; the universes are conducted in accordance with law and order" (49:1-3).

According to the revelators (and the Christian tradition itself), life itself and the gift of personality are bestowed by a divine Creator Parent. Creature life does not and cannot spontaneously arise from organic matter. Instead, we noted that an intricate three-fold process undertaken by diverse orders of divine beings, in liaison with Paradise-origin Creators, is deployed on suitable worlds for the purpose of initiating life and for managing its early phases of evolution. We are further told just how well-ordered this process must be on each planet that gets selected for life implantation: "There is a precise system, a universal law, which determines the unfolding of the planetary life plan on the spheres of space" (49:1.6).

And thus, almost as if in a reply to evolutionary theists like McMullin, we read: "Time and the production of large numbers of a species are not the controlling influences" (49:1.6). In other words, the "swamping of contingency" is not required in this scheme of managed evolution described in the *UB*; the universe government is in charge each step along the way, and this includes a wide berth for apparently chance factors that, by the way, result in tremendous biodiversity across billions of inhabited worlds. There is a subtle flexibility in the *UB*'s paradigm of cosmic evolution; it is not strictly deterministic, because numerous unpredictable factors may at times bend or even break the laws of evolution. Lucifer and his cohorts were law-breakers according to this definition. The asteroid that may have destroyed 75 percent of life on earth 66 million years ago was another wild card that set back managed evolution for a very long time. To repeat: evolution is (somehow) both unpredictable and strictly nonaccidental!

Consider: We find that, on one hand, there are divinely ordained goals accompanying every life implantation, chiefly *the eventual appearance and evolution of will creatures*; yet, on the other hand, a large allowance for chance occurrences is also present that may frustrate divine aims for eons of time. Such contingencies certainly do evoke the factor of time in one sense: "Sometimes evolutionary progress is temporarily delayed by the destruction of certain favorable lines of life plasm carried in a selected species. It often requires ages upon ages to recoup the damage occasioned by the loss of a single superior strain of human heredity" (49:1.7).

Why then, according to the *UB*, is there so much provision for the occurrence of such adverse events as well as for their remediation?

A short answer is: All along the line we find that contingencies, unforeseeable accidents, and even planetary disasters or system-wide rebellions are and *can be* permitted. I believe

these factors are accommodated precisely because the overarching "superstructure" of cosmic evolution (or its cosmic architecture) is so lawful and orderly. The endowment of freedom of will upon "humans and angels," the most important wild card in this cosmic equation, is of course a potentially dangerous or disastrous factor that will frequently require tremendous remediation measures—up to and even including emergency incarnations of Paradise-origin beings.

Because of these ordained features (and others not covered here), one doesn't always have to wait upon chance factors, such as random mutation or serendipitous accidents of place or time (such as the chance occurrence of favorable climate). And again, according to the revelators, we don't need a nearly infinite scale of time and space in order to be able to "swamp contingency."

Punctuated Evolution and Genetic Leaping

The first of these divinely ordained features is a crucial resource that enables "genetic leaps." This factor is a capacity of life that is evidently built-in to the bio-chemical formulas that are so carefully designed in the labs of the Life Carriers. It provides for qualitative "jumps" in evolution—or what some evolutionary biologists call the factor of "higher-order emergence" or "emergent properties" of evolution, a concept borrowed from contemporary systems theory.

The Life Carrier who authored Paper 65 states, for example, that "all of the vast kingdom of life has evolved" from very primitive organisms such as bacteria and fungi (65:2.3). From this rudimentary platform of early life, "the higher protozoan type of animal life soon appeared, and appeared *suddenly*."

As may be obvious for those who have read Papers 58-64, there are many such leaps, the most important of which are summarized in Paper 65. Perhaps the "greatest single leap," we are told, "was executed when the reptile became a bird" (65:2.5). And sudden leaps go on from there, for example, from reptile to mammal: "It was from an agile little reptilian dinosaur of carnivorous habits but having a comparatively large brain that the placental mammals *suddenly* sprang" (65:2.10). And, of course, Andon and Fonta represent such a leap much later on, and half a million years after their far-distant progeny had migrated to the ends of the earth, a couple in the highlands of India "began *suddenly* to produce a family of unusually intelligent children. This was the *Sangik family,* the ancestors of all of the six colored races of Urantia" (64:5.2).

Something similar to this capacity to leap was identified about 15 years after the publication of *The Urantia Book*, and is mainly credited to biologist Stephen Jay Gould. This empirically observed phenomenon is known to evolutionary biologists as *punctuated equilibrium*—the theory that evolution is marked by isolated and sometimes spectacular and highly progressive episodes of rapid "speciation" occurring between long periods of little or no change.

Unfortunately, it turns out that Gould had entirely missed the teleological import of his own discovery. Since he announced his theory in 1972, he has come to believe that rapid speciation reveals no discernible purpose or direction to animal evolution. He arrived at this surprising conclusion, perhaps because he was unaware of a second crucial piece revealed only in the *UB*, which might be called "speciation management." This factor is epitomized by the Life Carrier's remarkable statement about the lowly frog:

> You have been informed that Urantia mortals evolved by way of primitive frog development, and that this ascending strain, carried in potential in a single frog, narrowly escaped extinction on a certain occasion. But it should not be inferred that the evolution of mankind would have been terminated by an accident at this juncture. **At that very moment we were observing and fostering no less than one thousand different and remotely situated mutating strains of life which could have been directed** into various different patterns of prehuman development. This particular ancestral frog represented our third selection, the two prior life strains having perished in spite of all our efforts toward their conservation. (65:3.3)

Here then is another way that Life Carriers can overcome the factor of chance. Note well: Our intrepid Life Carrier corps was "observing and fostering" hundreds of strains of frogs "which could have been directed" in beneficial ways. On my reading of this and other related passages, the versatile Life Carriers are celestial directors of biological evolution and presumably, are true masters of the management of speciation. This capacity is a second critical feature in the evolutionary superstructure that neither Gould nor any evolutionary theologian could have ever envisioned—for it must be revealed!

Salvation from the Traits of Original Selfishness

We've noted that many evolutionary theists generally believe that natural evolution is upheld by the Creator's sustaining presence and even underlies the radical contingencies of mutation and natural selection. But they also recognize that the rise of self-aware humans was a game-changer in regard to God's role. The advent of humans seems to necessitate a new technique of divine ministry to the natural world. In other words, *Homo sapiens* poses a special case that will require an exclusive form of divine engagement with evolution.

How indeed might God intervene to "manage" the essential trait of original selfishness that was passed down to humans and that infects their free-will choices even to this day?

One simple principle can get us started, according to Domning.

All races and ethnicities have inherited the imprint of primal selfishness from common primate ancestors; therefore, the first principle of any specialized divine ministry on their behalf is that programs for "salvation from original selfishness" must be proffered *universally* for all members of the human species.

In ages past, original sin was the premise behind infant baptism; based on the present theory, we can rightly attribute *original selfishness* to newborns. Domning puts it this way: "Infants are innocent of sin but unquestionably self-centered from birth. Baptism initiates them into a Christian community, in which they will ideally learn Christ-like, selfless behavior, in opposition to the evolutionary selfishness otherwise inculcated by the world. [Children must be] shown an alternative in the teachings of Jesus and how he lived his life."[23]

One conclusion of this line of thought is that deliverance from the destructive power of original selfishness *must be produced by special divine action*. Christ appears on Earth to teach us to modify our stubborn selfishness for the sake of higher values, that is, to choose

[23] Domning, "Sin, Suffering, and Salvation," p. 12.

good over evil and truth over falsity. We need to be *saved* from "the selfish way of life that natural selection enforces," as Domning puts it. Numerous Gospel passages repeat the theme that "we are no longer to favor the strong over the weak, kin over non-kin, and self above all others; we must defy it outright by following the selfless example of Jesus."[24]

Ultimately, *we are called by Jesus to defy the laws of Darwinian evolution* and the very natural process that allowed us to "take dominion" over the Earth in the first place. We must evolve from the selfishness that allowed us, and our animal forbears, to survive in a hostile and demanding environment, moving on beyond it to a higher destiny in partnership with the Creator, in fellowship with one another, and in stewardship of the Earth itself.

And I submit that it is not difficult to harmonize this picture with Jesus's teachings about salvation as provided in the Urantia revelation.

Natural Evil and God's Co-suffering Presence

In modern evolutionary theism as well as in the teachings of *The Urantia Book*, our Creator's engagement with evolution is broad and capacious. First, it encompasses those contingencies of geologic and genomic evolution that slowly give way to the flourishing of plant and animal species (—and in the case of the *UB*, this process is managed but also wide open to chance and accidents). And second, God enters by special action into human history to act as the merciful lead partner in the unsteady effort to advance human evolution beyond our inherited animal-origin traits: especially that ruthless selfishness that no longer serves.

Meanwhile, however, the original "background" problem remains: the immeasurable ocean of creaturely suffering over deep time, including the trauma experienced by still-immature human creatures who even today victimize one another (and the natural world itself) to gain dominance, sometimes doing so with sinful intent.

Crucial questions follow that have been broached before. What do we make of a life-giving process that seems to gratuitously destroy almost every primitive species it produces, only to threaten the human species as well? How can it possibly be God's intent that "the whole of creation groans" (Rom 8:22), trapped in the apparent futility of inescapable suffering and death, including mass die-offs? Did God as Creator inscribe such negatives into the evolutionary process because it was an unavoidable means to some barely fathomable divine end?

Traditional Christians could easily exonerate God from responsibility for these maladies; they could blame Adam and Eve for deranging an otherwise paradisiacal creation and even causing the animal world to fall in into suffering, dysfunction, and death along with them (see Gen. 3:17). But then evolutionary biology comes along and forces us to pin responsibility on the Creator God who set it all into motion from the Big Bang forward. One cannot help but ask: How could God *not* have foreknown the violence and victimization that would result from ages of natural selection?

As hinted before, one obvious escape from this predicament is to isolate the *positives* of evolution and summon heartfelt gratitude for them. For example, some evolutionary theists have been moved to commend "nature's God" for producing the care, cooperation, and altruism that have sometimes been observed in many animal groups (and of course in modern humans). Unfortunately, *more recent biological research seems to derail this worthy sentiment as it applies to animals*.

[24] Ibid, p. 13.

For, according to Domning and many other close observers, there is no evidence that evolution's production of cooperative altruism removes the net quantity of violence caused by natural selection. No case has yet been found, he explains, of pure animal altruism. In other words, no trait or behavior has been discovered in any species that does not at the same time *confer some net benefit to its carrier*.

Darwin framed the issue starkly in *The Origin of Species* (1859): "If it could be proved that . . . any one species had been formed for the exclusive good of another species, this would annihilate my theory, for such could not have been produced by natural selection."[25] Since Darwin issued this challenge, numerous cases of *apparent* animal altruism have been found, but a closer look reveals that these instances involve "kin selection." For example, lions cooperate in hunting and rearing their young, but this behavior always involves close relatives who carry their genes. The same principle holds for cases of observed "reciprocal altruism" in animal groups. Biologists have solved this puzzle, states Domning, by working out the genetic and mathematical principles of kinship selection.

To clarify the point, Domning defines true altruism as "a benefit rendered to another at some net cost to the agent's inclusive fitness."[26] But, he avers, we only find such pure selflessness in those more or lesson saintly humans who have devoted their lives to service and charity. And we've seen that fulfilling their commitment to such unselfish ministry requires instruction and training that runs *counter* to our animal legacy of original selfishness. And again, I have found nothing in the *UB* that contradicts this picture.

Professor Ted Peters, cofounder of UC Berkeley's Center for Theology and Natural Science, encapsulates this lesson in his extended theological reflection on the issue: "Cooperative altruism purportedly evolves in service of the survival of the fittest groups. [But] cooperative altruism is intra-tribal, whereas war and violence still characterizes extra-tribal competition. . . In sum, creaturely suffering is ubiquitous, unchanged by the development of cooperative altruism."[27]

Other theodicists have sought a more speculative path out of our conundrum. According to the so-called "Only Way" argument, no other method for evolving higher forms of life is conceivable other than a sacrificial exchange in which suffering is the guaranteed byproduct of the competition for limited resources. Millions of years of animal predation and death are, in effect, the cosmic purchase-price for the acquisition of a much greater good: the evolution of a genetically robust a psychologically resilient human civilization. To make this result possible, they point out, God had to endow nature with the rudiments of real freedom, known by biologists as *autopoiesis* (self-creating power). This relative freedom to self-create, again, "by any means necessary," makes it possible for natural selection to reward the most adaptive mutations in each generation, regardless of its effects on neighboring species. In other words, the outcomes must be indeterminate and the means must be *amoral*; chance and randomness, and thus significant creature pain and loss, must be built in. We might infer that God somehow deemed this steep cost to be worth it.

One way to playfully characterize this approach might be called "God's *laissez faire*

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[25] Domning, *Original Selfishness*, p 48.

[26] Ibid, p 49.

[27] Ted Peters, "Extinction, Natural Evil, and the Cosmic Cross" *Zygon*, 9/2018 (Volume: 53, Issue: 3), p. 699.

package deal for creatures" (known in theological parlance as "Free-Process Theodicy"). God's goal is to evolve a universe teaming with a rich and unpredictable diversity of planetary biospheres, thereby opening up unique and even unforeseeable niches that could eventually produce intelligent human life. To get there, the only choice available was for God to host something like unregulated free-enterprise zones for the evolving creatures, knowing all the while that their choices must often be destructive. Each zone would be populated with players who could freely experiment and innovate as long as they "accept" the hard knocks of anarchy, predation, and likely extinction. Yet, this divine package deal always had an upside. It allowed for the achievement of a big positive (i.e., humans able love one another and love God) in exchange for a huge negative: the side effects of untold animal suffering *as well as* the shadow side of human psychology and original selfishness that results from our animal origins. But certain species (animal or human) would eventually achieve "victory" in the free-wheeling divine marketplace!

"What the Creation Feels, the Creator Feels."

Undergirding such an approach, explains Peters, are the earmarks of *kenosis theology*. Divine kenosis classically refers to an all-powerful God's deliberate letting-go of omnipotence, a partial but benign withdrawl from the created order. In line with the Free-Process Defense, God's act of kenosis enables a wide berth for creature freedom, not unlike parents who withdraw into an adjoining room to provide the children with sufficient space for independent experience as they face a limited set of dangers. Such divine absence creates a metaphysical opening for creatures to express themselves creatively in the cosmos, to truly self-create outside of any possibility of special divine action. Once again, John Haught puts it beautifully: "God's gift of allowing the world to 'become itself' . . . renders plausible evolution's experimental winding through an endless field of potentialities, its random groping for relevant new forms of being, and the autonomous creativity in the life-process set forth by evolutionary science."[28]

Haught builds his own theology of evolution based on a touching and sophisticated interpretation of the classic argument for kenosis: Ours is a God who empties himself, in selflessness, so that evolving species can thrive unhindered. Genuine divine love is that self-humiliation and forbearance that allows the creature to become wholly *other*. God therefore lovingly renounces God's own attribute of omnipotence in support of human freedom and dignity.

Haught believes this description points us to the biblical Son of God, who emptied himself to become the servant of all (Phil 2:7), and argues that "this image of a self-emptying God lies at the heart of Christian revelation and the doctrine of the Trinity."[29] Haught turns to renowned theologian Jurgen Moltmann for support, stating that "The same withdrawl of God that, according to Moltmann's interpretation, makes creation initially possible (*creatio originalis*) also allows for the ongoing creation (*creatio continua*) of the world through evolution."[30]

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[28] Haught, *The John Haught Reader*, p. 139.

[29] Ibid, p. 133.

[30] Ibid, p. 135.

Unfortunately, such an arrangement seems to minimize a foundational premise. According to a key tenet of contemporary creation theology examined in this essay, God maintains a consistent, loving, and sustaining *presence* to all of the vagaries of evolution, and is in fact its primary cause at each moment. Such a God is not operating *in absentia* to the natural process. And, for a certainty, the God of the Urantia revelation is not only a powerful energetic presence that sustains evolution, but also offers hands-on "evolution management" in accord with ordained laws of development.

Peters rejects the kenosis model on this basis and on other grounds. He offers instead the alternative of a *proleptic* approach to theodicy based on what he calls the "the divine promise of eschatological redemption." First, let's listen to his argument with kenosis:

> There is no warrant, in my judgment, for a theologian to apply kenosis to God the Creator. . . Jesus' historical incarnation has the net effect of increased divine presence in the world, not absence. This is because the finitude and humanity of Jesus becomes present within the divine *perichoresis*. Neither here nor anywhere else in Holy Scripture do we find God withdrawing from creation. To the contrary, we find repeated testimony of God engaging creation with divine presence. [31]

To unpack this passage, we note that *perichoresis* in this context refers to an idea that has become almost universal in theology since the Holocaust: the poignant notion of the "suffering God" (Moltmann's phrase describing the theological import of the crucifixion). After the atrocities and genocides of the twentieth century, there is every reason for theodicy to turn to a *theology of the cross*—a phrase originated by Martin Luther. The second person of the Trinity emptied himself to become human, and his horrendous death becomes a fact of history. Yet this event was not walled off from the divine life; it was taken up and absorbed into the living reality of the eternal Trinity itself, by virtue of the human incarnation of this very Eternal Son of God. Martin Luther had in mind Christ's willingness to drink deeply the cup of human suffering and death, and Peters (following Moltmann and Luther) emphasizes how this willingness exemplifies the fullest participation of the Trinity in the human predicament.

But Peters and evolutionary theists who follow him put the idea to use in a far broader way. God through Christ suffers with humanity through the cross, but the Trinity also participates in the pain and death of *all* species on Earth.

> We perceive the presence of God as God in the suffering and despair of God's creatures everywhere. What Jesus experienced as an individual on the cross is a paradigm or, better, a specific representative incarnation of God's ubiquitous presence in the psyches of all creatures victimized by predation, injustice, or despair. Even the death of creatures is a death that takes place in God, so to speak. God is no stranger to death, because death takes place within God's trinitarian *perichoresis*.[32]

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[31] Peters, p. 705.
[32] Peters, p. 707.

God identifies with the suffering and death of *every* creature, not just with those species that rise to the top in the evolutionary struggle. Here we encounter Ted Peters' cosmological reframing of traditional cruciform theology into what he calls the *theology of the cosmic cross*. God doesn't just "root" for the fittest human survivors of natural selection. The God revealed by Christ also turns with divine empathy to evolution's *victims*—at the furthest extreme, those species that went extinct as well as human groups wiped out in famine, plagues, war, and genocide. The omniscient God is not only aware of the fact of the suffering and death of such victims; this empathic Deity experiences their experiences and feels their feelings.[33]

Evolution's Victims and the Theology of the Cosmic Cross

In its broadest sense, this perspective points to a radical turning point in the vast panorama of animal and human suffering over billions of years. As Peters puts it, "Once God became incarnate in the life, passion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the biological world became open to transcendence. Evolutionary history was opened up to the divine promise of redemption."[34] Of course, from the perspective of the *UB,* this promise was offered not just to our world, but to all the worlds in the local universe of Nebadon—those "sheep of another fold" living on Nebadon's six million other inhabited planets.

Here Peters points to an even more encompassing dimension—the promise of a future redemption that he calls *cosmic resurrection*.

From this perspective, God is not only a sustaining *first cause* that sets creation in motion at every moment and who is always present to sustain forward evolution. The teleological God of the resurrected Jesus also reveals that God is *acting from the future*, or what may be called *retroactive divine causation*.

This striking conception generally conforms to Aristotles's definition of a *final cause*. In this light, Peters offers us a *futuristic ontology*. In other words, the attainment of the future "omega" in the mind of God may be remote in time, but in each moment it has retroactive *causal* power, even reaching into the past.

And this conception harmonizes well with the cosmology of *The Urantia Book,* in that the Deities of the eternal future—God the Supreme, God the Ultimate, and God the Absolute—are even now emergent properties of cosmic evolution that are able to reflect back on present realities in the grand universe. But such a complex comparison calls for more research along these lines in the future.

According to theologian Carol R. Jacobsen, retroactive divine causation can also be seen as "downward": "The downward causation of Peter's retroactive ontology emphasizes the 'whole'—the promised future that God realizes at omega . . . [This is] God's final future, given to the whole cosmos at its creation. . . Peter's retroactive ontology recognizes

[33] Peters explains that those of us who identify with the cosmic cross participate with God in this cosmic empathy: "The individual in whom Christ dwells will, like God, feel the feelings of all creatures who suffer. The person of faith does not suffer solely due to his or her own wounds, but also due to the wounds of all creatures of all times and all places. He or she co-suffers, just as God co-suffers. This compassion, this suffering with others, adheres to the cross even in faith." p. 704.

[34] Peters, p. 706.

both the importance of understanding our future by looking backwards from God's future, and the importance of living forward into that future proleptically."[35]

It is notable in this connection that Peters has encountered graduate students who were *Urantia Book* students over may years (including myself). Ted was also guest speaker at a 2014 Urantia conference I convened in 2014 in Northern California called "Evolutionary Revelation." (A video with his talk, as well as my later interview with Peters, can be found at my Youtube channel, "Evolving Souls Community.")

The biblical prophets promised a redeeming future—a future of healing, restoration, and amazement. The fulfillment of their vision began with the resurrection that followed Christ's crucifixion, both as the supreme symbol and as the most powerful exemplar of our promised destiny.

One can envisage God's engagement with creature suffering, and such a perception of a co-suffering God may allow us to find a deeper sense of peace as we realize the unity of creature life with God's life. But this experience alone does not heal the wounds and the tears of sin, suffering, and death. In other words, the promise of "God with us in our suffering that results from evil and sin, including natural evil" may not be the final word in theodicy.

And again, this is because *creation has not yet been completed*, declares John Haught. We are still living in the *pre-created* world, and the story of our universe is far from finished. And finally, what does this mean for a biologically informed theodicy? Peters incorporates insights from Haught, and puts it this way:

> The theodicist need not reconcile God's omnibenevolence to creation as it appears to us today, because this cosmos is not yet the creation God intends it to be. The completion of creation requires eschatological redemption before it can become truly God's creation. . . Today we must look beyond not only Good Friday but also Easter Sunday to the coming transformation of creation into the new creation, to the fulfillment of all that God had intended when calling into the void and bringing being out of non-being.[36]

This discussion has taken us on a brief journey into the impact of evolutionary biology on academic theology—and all of this was considered with special reference to the roles of chance and purpose in evolution, as well as the problem of evil and sin, including the issue of how "natural evil" infuses biological evolution. I've offered tentative comparisons of these cutting edge ideas with the teachings of the Urantia revelation on topics within evolutionary biology, philosophy, theology, and theodicy. We've also noted that, following Darwin and his successors, and also by virtue of locating ourselves within a realist view of human nature, we've been able to replace the archaic idea of original sin with the biological imperative of instinctive selfishness—a key motivating force for the evolutionary success of any species and an idea well-established by observation of animal

[35] "Eschatology and retroactive ontology: Will God save the world or not? Prolepsis, open theism, and the world's future," p. 100-102; chaper 6, Carol R. Jacobson and Adam W. Pryor, ed*., Anticipating God's New Creation: Essays in Honor of Ted Peters* (Lutheran University Press, 2015).

[36] Peters, p. 706.

and even human behavior. We've confronted the issue of chance and contingency in natural evolution, and found ways to reconcile that scientific data with divine infinitude as well as with God's sustaining presence to the "serendipitous" unfolding of life in a vast universe; we've seen also that the *UB* makes startlingly original but plausible additions to these conceptions, especially with its notions of life implantation and "managed evolution" that resolves the tension between random mutation and immanent divine purpose. We have also suggested how, by special divine action, the eternal God looks upon us in love from the standpoint of the future promised both in Christian scripture and in the Urantia revelation, and as exemplified in the life, teachings, passion, and resurrection of Christ, thereby pointing us to a life of altruistic love far beyond our burden of original selfishness. This God also draws us forward in a manner that heals and redeems the pain and death of natural evolution. In sum, our God, through Jesus Christ or Christ Michael, acts as a co-suffering partner with intelligent creatures, points us beyond our self-centered and too often sinful behavior, and ushers us toward a higher goal of perfection that beckons to an unrevealed destiny for humanity, one that lies far beyond the present scenes of evil and suffering on our world. That's at least how evolutionary theists might see it, but the Urantia revelation fills in many vital missing gaps along the way that make crucial contributions to any future discussion of cosmic origin, history, and destiny.

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