

ARTICLES

THE CRUELTY OF NATURE

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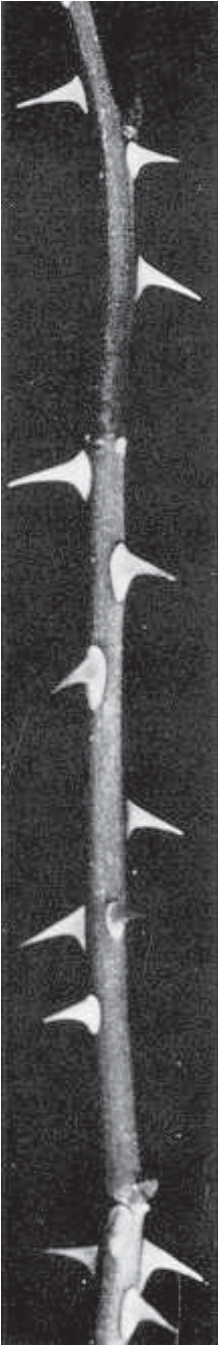
Many who look at suffering in nature find it difficult to believe that an intelligent designer is the creator of life. Some reflections on this conclusion are presented below.

1. The sea wasp, a small, fragile jellyfish of the South Pacific, can kill a human being within seconds after draping its tentacles over his body.
2. The female lobster may carry 97,000 developing embryos on her abdomen. Only 1 out of 5000 will survive long enough to reproduce.
3. The desert locust undergoes a population explosion. The resultant overcrowding triggers the development of wings which enable it to mass migrate. Streaming out of the desert, the insects devastate the plant life in their path, plunging an impoverished nation into a famine.
4. Each year medical researchers frantically race to produce a vaccine for the latest strain of the flu virus. Perhaps before they succeed a new form will have mutated into existence.

Many Christians think of nature as beneficial and beautiful. But as we are all too aware, it has its ugly, cruel, and dangerous side. Mankind dies from accidentally eating toxic plants, suffers the ravages of epidemics, and struggles to protect his food crops from disease and plant and animal pests. The Christian — particularly the Christian scientist — has to explain such things within the context of his world model, his Christian conceptual framework.

The conservative Christian believes that God created the universe and its basic life forms. According to Scripture,

FIGURE 1. Prickles — (often called thorns) — one of the many examples of the cruelty of nature.



when God originally made life, He considered it “good” (Gen 1:25). Did God judge the goodness of His creation by a different standard, or has something happened to it in the meantime?

Christians have grappled with the problem of evil in nature in various ways. Some have suggested that God established evil to emphasize and favorably contrast with His goodness. Others have seen nature’s harshness as a divine punishment on fallen man. Thus, for example, William Kirby wrote in one of the famous *Bridgewater Treatises* on natural theology that God created fleas, lice, and intestinal parasites after the fall of Adam and Eve to torment sinners.¹

The existence of evil in a nature created by a good God has always been a real problem to Christianity. An incident in the life of Charles Darwin illustrates the kind of struggle it puts people through. He once wrote to his botanist friend Dr. Asa Gray about his declining religious faith:

I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see so plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.²

Darwin found one solution to his dilemma by concluding that living things were evolving to higher levels through the operation of simple laws of matter and energy. The apparent cruelty and suffering was just an unfortunate result of organisms adjusting to their environments. In the 1844 draft of what eventually became *The Origin of Species*, he concluded:

It is derogatory that the Creator of countless Universes should have made by individual acts of His will the myriads of creeping parasites and worms, which since the earliest dawn of life have swarmed over the land and in the depths of the ocean.³

By adopting the concept of evolution, he thought:

We cease to be astonished that a group of animals should have been formed to lay their eggs in the bowels and flesh of other sensitive beings; that some animals should live by and even delight in cruelty; that animals should be led away by false instincts; that annually there should be an incalculable waste of the pollen, eggs, and immature beings...⁴

The problem is real — we cannot ignore it without reaping the consequences. But the Scriptural model does have an explanation of the evil in nature.

The Bible indicates that the perfect state God established on earth did not last long. When the first man and woman disobeyed their Creator’s simple prohibition against sampling the fruit growing on the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil, they rejected God and alienated themselves from Him. He had placed them in a perfect world, but they had demonstrated that they were no longer spiritually and psychologically capable of handling such. They needed a place more suitable for their fallen, weakened characters. After God led them to admit their changed condition by asking where they were — thus forcing them to admit why they were hiding — He revealed the kind of earth they would from then on have to cope with (Gen 3:14-19). “Cursed is the ground because of you,” He declared to Adam, “in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field” (Gen 3:17, 18).

Adam and Eve now faced a world quite different from the one they had known until then. Growing food would be more difficult. Fruit had grown bountifully about them in the Garden of Eden (Gens 1:29; 2:9, 16). But now they would have to depend more on the harder-to-cultivate field plants (Gen 3:18). The phrase “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” suggests what Adam would have to contend with as he grew food. Apparently plants needed attention from men even in paradise. God had put Adam “in the garden of Eden to till and keep it” (Gen 2:15). Now vegetation would get out of hand much more quickly and on a larger scale. Weeds are nothing more than plants that compete strongly against cultivated ones.

After Cain murdered his brother Abel, he found it still more difficult to raise crops. God told him, “When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength” (Gen 4:12).

In the beginning God created a balanced nature with every organism completing its strand of the intricate web of life. But after man’s fall, new forces started to tatter that web. Environmental conditions deteriorated. Reflecting man’s declining moral and religious life, chaos also crept into the physical world. Another crisis marred the earth’s ecology when, because of man’s actions, God sent a global catastrophe to devastate the earth’s biosphere.⁵ The geological disaster of the flood upset the whole balance of nature. The world around us today is reconstructed from the pieces and debris surviving the flood. We may never fully know its impact on living things and their ecological relationships.

With the passage of time the effects of the fall have accumulated. The physical world had so altered by the time of the early Christian church that the apostle Paul, anticipating Christ’s return, wrote that “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been

groaning in travail together until now” (Rom 8:21, 22). Employing the symbol of childbirth, Paul tells of a world seeking and needing restoration.

Scripture recognizes the existence of evil and suffering in nature, but at first glance it almost seems as if God Himself is responsible for it. Genesis 3 relates several curses God placed on the serpent, on Eve, and on nature. In Genesis 4:11 God curses the ground because of Cain’s crime. Since the Bible declares that God set a curse on the physical world, does that make Him responsible for the poisonous stings of scorpions, bacterial infections, and the reign of tooth and claw?

Before jumping to any conclusions, however, we must see how Scripture defines a divine curse.

After Cain killed his brother, God called down evil on the first murderer. In response, Cain complained, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou has driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden” (Gen 4:13, 14). That God had withdrawn Himself and left Cain to take care of more of his own affairs upset him. He realized that the soil would no longer produce as well for him as it had done before his crime. Cain knew that God would cease to as actively insure good crops. A fundamental premise of the Biblical world model is that nature does not operate independently of God. Nature is under His direction (Neh 9:6) and, left to itself, would break down and perish.

We see in the book of Job an illustration of what happens when God lessens or removes His active protection and control. God asked Satan what he thought of Job’s loyalty and character (Job 1:8). Satan discredited the patriarch’s allegiance, charging that Job worshipped and obeyed God only to insure His protection and material support (v 9, 10). To prove his allegation, Satan urged God to remove His protection and then see how Job would act. God did so, permitting Satan to attack him.

The book of Job clearly demonstrates the source of Job’s difficulties. It shows what results when God withholds His control of events on our planet. Order breaks down, and Satan does everything he can to push things to chaos.

The authors of the Bible understood and feared lest God in any way lessen or abdicate His rulership, whether in the spiritual or physical realm. “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,” Isaiah announced, “and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear” (Isa 59:2). All Scriptural models of nature must take into account the historical reality of the fall and the consequences of sin. Sin is a state of alienation from God. Man, when he fell spiritually, cut himself off from God. To keep from immediately destroying a race now by nature

antagonistic to Him, God stepped back. No longer did He participate as directly in events on earth. And each time He placed a curse on our planet, He loosened His divine reins on nature a little more. And as humanity persisted in their rebellion, their behavior forced Him to let nature increasingly break down.

When Israel prepared to enter Canaan, God set before them the choice of a curse or a blessing (Deut 11:26-29). If they would follow His leading, He would insure them ample rain for their crops and pastures. But if they worshipped nonexistent gods, the land would receive no rain (see v 13-17). The two rainy seasons of Palestine would no longer continue. God had made them happen. If the Hebrews chose the curse, He would not always cause the rains to occur. Their actions prevented Him from blessing nature as much as He would like.

The Hebrews often reminded themselves that if they did not reject God, He would not be forced to spurn them. If they thwarted God so He could not be their Protector and Sustainer, they would find themselves not at the mercy of a God of order, but in the power of Satan, the originator of chaos, ruin, and decay. Many times the Hebrews feared that God would separate Himself from them — or even that He actually had. “How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?” David pleaded in Psalm 13:1. “O Lord, why dost thou cast me off?” (Psa 88:14).⁶ Through the prophet Isaiah, God told Israel that because of their behavior, “When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood” (Isa 1:15).

Because of man’s rebellion God has had to limit His guidance of the natural world. And Satan, as we have seen in the case of Job, immediately steps in to fill the vacuum. Here we come to the core of any Scriptural model which attempts to explain imperfection in a world created perfect. The Bible documents a universal conflict between good and evil. Satan has questioned God’s right to rule the universe and seeks to usurp His place. Instead of quelling Satan’s rebellion through force, God has decided to vindicate His right to authority and power by letting Satan demonstrate on a limited scale the consequences of his rule. The earth has become the arena where Satan reveals his inability to govern. Satan not only seeks to control humanity, but also the earth’s life forms and physical forces.⁷

Christ, in His parable comparing the gospel’s impact on individual minds, explained the existence of the unconverted in the church through the symbolism of tares or weeds growing among wheat. When asked where the tares came from, He said, “An enemy has done this” (Matt 13:28). Perhaps here we can find an analogy or symbol for the

origin of poisonous plants and animals and the carnage and decay we find throughout nature. God has to let the universe witness and be convinced of Satan's true character. The best way to reveal another person's motives and nature is to permit him to expose himself. It is a painful process for both God and man, but it is the only way God can forever immunize the universe against the principle of sin. Satan must condemn himself, and does so as much by the way he abuses and distorts nature as what he does with human lives.

The devil was once an especially honored angel (see Isa 14:12-15). He has intelligence and experimental knowledge far beyond that of human science. As man's increasing rejection of God forced Him to withdraw His protection over nature, Satan has turned the earth into a laboratory of destruction. He is systematically trying to destroy God's creation.⁸

The overwhelming majority of scientists would be aghast if someone suggested they consider the role Satan plays in nature. As a fundamental tenet of modern science they rule out of their study and theories anything relating to the supernatural. Instead their whole approach to nature involves explaining everything in it on the basis of physically demonstrable forces. But the Christian who centers his world view around a Biblical model considers such an approach as incomplete and inadequate. He also regards the distinction between the natural and supernatural as in many ways artificial. He believes that the scientist is leaving out of his world view other forces which also influence nature. In the case of Satan one can keep an eye out in the laboratory or field for destructive or degenerative forces. Although science cannot treat supernatural powers as it does other forces, it can include them in its paradigms and mental constructs just as it does other unverifiable assumptions. The Christian scientist should operate on the assumption that God and Satan are as much a part of total reality as any physical, chemical, or biological law.

To study nature without taking into account the impact Satan has on it is like examining ecology while ignoring man's influence because he has a highly developed conscious intelligence and the rest of life apparently does not. Yet man has always played a major role in fashioning the balance of nature we see today. The Scripturally oriented Christian believes that we should also recognize Satan's twisting and reweaving of the fabric of life. To understand reality, we must take into account everything in it — including nature, man, God, and Satan.

Few would deny the existence of evil. Through Scripture we discover Satan as its source. The very nature of evil is to distort and corrupt. As God has withdrawn His protection and control over nature, Satan has set

out to destroy. That God's decreasing guidance would lead to nature's breaking down on its own was not enough for him. The vast knowledge and intelligence which he retained even after his expulsion from heaven he has — according to the Biblical model — turned against God's physical creation.

As God lifted His sustaining hand from the natural world, a number of things started happening. How Satan has attacked nature, what processes he used, we have no exact way of knowing. As with so many other things, Scripture does not supply details. But we can draw some conclusions from the apparent results, and we can develop analogies from how man affects or manipulates nature. Though it would horrify most scientists to hear it said, we are moving from the known to the unknown in a manner similar to the way one uses some more widely accepted explanations of nature.

First, from Genesis 3:18 we know that God specifically said thorns and thistles would appear. Thorns are modified stems in which the growth process has gone awry. The apical meristem usually functions only briefly, after which it either sloughs off or matures into tough, thick-walled cells. Drought conditions will stimulate some plants into developing thorns. In this case God may have more directly caused thorns and thistles to arise since He mentioned them beforehand. But more likely they followed the pattern of Satan's other interference with nature.⁹ If the latter is the case, Satan would have quickly learned which factors would alter a terminal bud into a thorn instead of a regular stem. Then he would see to it that as many plants as possible with the tendency toward modified stems passed the trait on. He would make sure that thorns became a part of the plant's genetic makeup. Spines — modified leaves — would follow a similar pattern.

Delving into biochemistry, Satan could discover how to transform a harmless substance into a poisonous one. A change of 2 out of the 574 units of the protein part of hemoglobin results in sickle-cell anemia.

Factors from different parts of the same organism will interact to produce a deadly combination. The tobacco plant forms nicotine when chemicals manufactured in the leaves and roots act upon each other. A tobacco plant grafted onto a tomato root has no nicotine. Just as man can breed living things to enhance or eliminate a particular physical characteristic — including toxicity — so can a highly intelligent being like Satan. He has a whole world of life-forms at his disposal to experiment on, plus the assistance of the other fallen angels.¹⁰ Consider another analogy. Man has bred chickens with greatly increased egg-laying ability. Here is an

accomplishment differing only in magnitude from what I believe Satan could have done to the reproductive rates of countless other organisms.

Sometimes an organism will become dangerous by simply getting out of its normal habitat. Bacteria of the gastro-intestinal tract are very specific where they live. If they stay there, they do not harm the host. But if they accidentally get into another area they may cause malabsorption, interfere with fat absorption, or even synthesize proteins or other metabolic products which cause diarrhea.¹¹

Genetic material has an inherent, though limited, ability to mutate. As God lessened His control on nature after the entrance of sin, DNA and other genetic material apparently became more unstable. Satan, in his search for destructive agents, could take advantage of the fact. This seems particularly illustrated in the development of disease organisms.

A perfect world would have no pathogenic organisms. Bacteria, for example, would play only beneficial roles in the ecology of a paradise. Even Eden had refuse. Flower petals and discarded fruit parts would litter the ground unless something broke them down into useful organic matter. Bacteria would have done the job then as they still do now. Cattle cannot digest the cellulose of grass without the help of microorganisms. In addition, bacteria fix nitrogen in legumes. Other varieties aid in digestion and secrete vitamins as the B complex group. *Escherichia coli* produces vitamin K. *Bifido-bacterium bifidus* protects breast-fed infants against the dysentery bacillus and other intestinal pathogens. Bacteria mutate and reproduce rapidly. Satan could take advantage of such capacity by selecting strains that secreted toxic substances.

The same situation would happen to protozoa and fungi. At first they were solely beneficial, helping to decompose organic matter. The protozoa inhabiting the intestinal tract of termites break down the tough fibers of cellulose. But under Satan's intervention, such organisms probably began to prey on living things. Fungi turned from their necessary task of decomposing dead plant parts to parasitizing live tissues. Insects that originally consumed dead organic matter have also gotten out of hand.

Parasitism is a graphic illustration of nature's degeneration. Both plants and animals now attack other living organisms. Some animals discarded everything but their digestive and reproductive powers. Tapeworms are little more than digestive and sex organs. *Sacculina*, a parasite of crabs, has no digestive system of its own. Yet its larval form is still a free-swimming nauplius, the first developmental stage of a crustacean after it leaves the egg. Instead of maturing into a normal barnacle, it becomes only a mass of filaments spreading through the crab's tissues.

Just as the reign of sin produced thorns and toxins in plants, animals developed their deadly changes. The bee's stinger, for example, is a modified ovipositor. In bees and wasps the ovipositor no longer aids in laying eggs, but has been greatly altered into a weapon. Some animals began secreting deadly substances. The venom of poisonous fish apparently derived from a secretion produced by the glands which coat most fish with a protective slime. The spines that deliver it are modified fin rays.

After man's fall animals began to prey on each other. Those with the right digestive systems, teeth, and claws could kill and devour other animals — provided their behavior changed in that direction. Being a carnivore is as much psychological as it is physiological. Parrots are mostly vegetarians even though they have the beaks and claws of a carnivore. The kea parrots of New Zealand ordinarily grub up roots. But a dwindling food supply will goad them into attacking sheep. The parrots rip open their backs and feed on the kidney fat.

Man can breed animals for particular behavioral traits — for example, Tennessee walking horses and sheepherding dogs. In nature the forces of evil selected destructive behavioral patterns just as man has selectively developed dogs with savage dispositions.

Space does not permit discussion of sin's other channel of impact on nature — fallen man¹² — but we can see that Scripture contains an adequate model to explain our present world. God did not create the evil and suffering we find in nature. The Bible clearly indicates its true source. Scripture gives the Christian scientist a foundation from which to begin his exploration of how the forces of evil reshaped a world created perfect.

ENDNOTES

1. Kirby W. 1835. On the power, wisdom, and goodness of God as manifested in the creation of animals, and in their history, habits, and instincts. London, p 7-9.
2. Darwin C. 1958. The autobiography of Charles Darwin and selected letters. NY: Dover Publications, p 249.
3. Darwin C. 1963, The essay of 1844. In: Darwin for Today: the Essence of His Works. NY: The Viking Press, p 222.
4. Ibid.
5. "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth'" (Gen 6:11-13). One wonders what biological implications the phrase "all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth" might have.
6. See similar laments and appeals in Job 13:24; Psalms 10:1; 22:1; 27:8, 9; 30:7; 43:2; 44:9, 24; 89:46; Lamentations 5:20.

7. Satan's use of physical forces we see illustrated in the book of Job where he employed "fire" from the sky and a great wind against Job's possessions and family (Job 1:16, 19). Ellen G. White alludes to his manipulation of natural phenomena (White: EG. 1950. *The great controversy between Christ and Satan*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, p 589, 590).
8. Ellen G. White writes, "He (Satan) has studied the secrets of the laboratories of nature, and he uses all his power to control the elements as far as God allows" (Ibid., p 589).
9. Ellen White comments that "He (God) never made a thorn, a thistle, or a tare. These are Satan's work, the result of degeneration, introduced by him among the precious things..." (White EG. 1948. *Testimonies for the church*, vol. 6. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, p 186).
10. For a recent non-technical discussion of how man is learning to modify or develop new types of plants on the genetic and molecular level, see: Galston AW. 1974. Bios: molding new plants. *Natural History* 83(9):94-96.
11. Keusch GT. 1974. Ecology of the intestinal tract. *Natural History* 83(9):70-77.
12. The author explores this theme and God's role in counteracting disruptive forces in nature in a forthcoming book, *Who Put the Worm in the Apple?* Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association.