

EVOLUTION AND A MULTIFACETED CHRISTIAN *TELOS*

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Abstract

Evolution is the process by which God created the universe to travel through time; thus, it must be incorporated in an understanding of the Christian *telos*. Overlap between the evolutionary process and Christian narrative can be found in harmonious relationships. This provides the basis for a state-of-being *telos* – how we exist in the world. Action-oriented *teloi* – how we function in the world – can be broken down for the individual (growing in the image of God), the community (making God’s name great), and humanity (properly worshiping God). An understanding of evolution guides these aspects which drive creation towards the state-of-being *telos*.

Keywords

Telos, Virtue Theory, *Theosis*, Evolution, Purpose of Christianity, Christian Ethics

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore a defined Christian *telos* that both unifies and expands the realm of Christianity. This discussion falls within the bounds of virtue theory, which is primarily concerned with movement towards a *telos* (an end goal/purpose), and the theory of evolution, which is primarily concerned with species survival. Before Christianity can be properly discussed in relation to politics, other religions, and day-to-day lives, a Christian *telos* should be clarified. This paper proposes a bifurcated Christian *telos* divided into an action-oriented *telos* and a state-of-being *telos*. The action-oriented *telos* is further structured into a threefold *telos*.

For an encompassing Christian *telos* to be both accepted and enacted upon, it must be especially poignant. To achieve this, it should embrace an understanding of “sacred secularity.”¹ Sacred secularity is to understand spirituality as intertwined with every aspect of existence because God is found at the very fabric of creation.

The rise of secularization encompassed a differentiation of activities including education, medicine, art, and moral guidance in the form of modern therapy. Similarly, religion came to occupy a sphere of its own, no longer claiming oversight over the full range of human activities, but now drawing on its own lights and resources to specialize in meaning, morality, salvation, and consolation.²

This personalization of religion has robbed religion of its potency in determining the direction of human history. The differentiation of human activities caused by secularization has

¹ Iliia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 93-113.

² Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, 94. While secular has been colloquially used to describe the non-religious, it is better defined as a relegation of the religious to a single aspect of life among many others. After the fall of Christendom, the United States is considered to be in a secular age, yet religion of all types still exists in mass. The change from Christendom to a secular age has not resulted in a removal of religion from society, but a change in focus. Religion has shifted primarily from the public to the private. Using the language of Delio, it has shifted from underlying the full range of human activities to being one of many areas of human activity.

stunted the emergence of any *telos* that is capable of directing the course of human history.

Unifying principles must be regained in order to focus human advancement. Some areas have been proposed through the political realm; topics such as, fighting climate change, ending world hunger, and nuclear disarmament.

While these provide somewhat of a rallying point, their impact remains limited because of their secularization; that is, they remain largely differentiated from each other and other areas of life. Policies for nuclear disarmament have little to no concern for climate change. One can lobby for the ending of world hunger without addressing the role of local businesses or taxation. Crossover only occurs when direct intersections arise, such as the effects of rising temperatures on the global production of food.

One factor that can help unify the fractured landscape of secularism is evolution. Evolution already crosses through many realms including biology, psychology, sociology, and economics. It is a process of being and a function of the universe that pervades all existence. Delio writes that “evolution *is* the story, the meta-narrative of our age. It is not only a scientific explanation for physical reality; it is, rather, the overarching description of reality, the cosmological framework for all contemporary thought.”³ Likewise, Rick Coste ends his book on evolution saying, “everything you see, touch, hear, taste, and smell is part of the same story. It's an old story. The oldest one ever told.”⁴ For Christianity to proclaim a compelling *telos* – and, in

³ Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, xvii.

⁴ Rick Coste, *Evolution Talk: The Who, What, Why, and How Behind the Oldest Story Ever Told*, (Lanham, MD: Prometheus Books, 2022), 240.

conjunction, a compelling metanarrative – it must tap into the very means by which God designed the world to function, that is, evolution.⁵

Because the imprint of evolution can be seen in the philosophy of virtue theory and the theology of *theosis*, evolution can be easily integrated into a Christian *telos*. Virtue theory is a continual growth towards an end goal. This growth begins at one level and continuously evolves to deeper and deeper levels until *telos* is achieved. Like biological evolution, the evolution in virtue theory involves death, new growth, mutations, and increased complexity.

The same can be said for the process of *theosis*. *Theosis* is the process of growing in the likeness of God. That process involves the death of that which hides, distorts, or destroys God’s image, growth into the image of God, and increased complexity of the individual as they strive to image the infinite God. Also like biological evolution, both virtue evolution and *theosis* evolution are driven and shaped by one’s environment, circumstances, and history.

When the Christian *telos* is seen as the consummation of evolution, the Christian *telos* is able to break through the segmentation of secularization so that every part of creation, not just humanity, is moving towards this *telos*. “Evolution is not simply a biological mechanism of gene swapping or environment pressures. It is the unfolding and development of consciousness in which consciousness plays a significant role in the process of convergence and complexification.”⁶

Evolution tells us the story of compounding genesis. First was cosmogenesis, the emergence of creation and the universe. Next was biogenesis, the emergence of life. Then

⁵ This paper focuses on *how* evolution and Christianity should interact and not *if* they should. For a comprehensive reading on *if* evolution and Christianity are compatible, see Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin’s God: A Scientist’s Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution*, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1999).

⁶ Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, 98.

centro-genesis, the emergence of personhood. All along the way was an ever-emerging consciousness. “Throughout the ages life has constructed organisms of ever greater complexity, and with this increase complexity the organism has also shown an increase in consciousness, that is, an increase in intention, of acting with a goal.”⁷ Here the parallel of evolution and virtue theory becomes explicit.

Humanity was not a coincidence or accidental byproduct of evolution. Humanity, in relation to levels of consciousness, was inevitable. Increased consciousness through the process of evolution was destined to produce humanity.⁸ Evolution did not stop at the emergence of humans or our consciousness. Humanity’s consciousness continued to evolve to the point where humanity became aware of evolution. This marked an epignosis-genesis, the emergence of the awareness of the evolutionary process. Epignosis-genesis marks a pivotal development in human existence. It is not the moment humanity became disconnected with evolution, but the moment humanity deepened its relationship with evolution. Humanity now has the awareness to intentionally shape the direction of evolution.

The shaping of evolution is not a novel ability. Since the cultivation of plants and domestication of animals, humanity has shaped the evolutionary paths of life on earth. The novelty is humanity’s consciousness of the process of evolution; shifts in the evolutionary paths of life on earth now can be a conscious decision to be planned and intentionally carried out over generations, more uniquely, including humanity’s own evolutionary path. Humanity’s epignosis-genesis marks an evolution in humanity’s relationship with evolution.

⁷ Thomas M. King, *Teilhard’s Mysticism of Knowing*, (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1981), 33.

⁸ Humanity in the abstract sense of a species with our level of consciousness.

The disdain Christianity has shown evolution over the centuries might prompt some to view this in the negative, as humanity either altering God's path for creation or possibly even humanity becoming gods ourselves. There is a more fruitful lens to view this development through. Epignosis-genesis marks a deeper partnership with creation and with God.

As anthropocentric as humanity's worldview is often, we are not the only part of creation to assert evolutionary control. The evolutionary power humanity enacts upon creation is a two-way street, it is a co-evolutionary process akin to the symbiotic evolution of bees and flowers. As we enforce control over parts of creation by choosing which aspects we want to encourage or discourage, creation influences our choices. Creation itself encourages humanity to prefer some species over others.⁹

Our control over genetics has adjusted this slightly by allowing us to insert changes directly into individual genes instead of controlling the process generationally through breeding techniques. This, again, highlights the importance of a *telos*. Spot change evolutionary adjustments made for temporal *teloi* with little to no concern for an overarching *telos* lays the foundation for a negative and harmful partnership with creation.

Epignosis-genesis is a unique development for humanity to partner with and grow in the image of God, the author and director of the evolutionary process. Thus, it is an important development in both virtue theory and *theosis*. By better understanding the nature of creation (i.e., evolution), humanity has a greater understanding of how God interacts with creation. This allows for a more accurate modeling of God (*theosis*) in order to move more directly towards

⁹ For an in-depth discussion of this co-evolutionary process, see Michael Pollan, *Botany of Desire*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2001).

God's *telos* (virtue theory). As humanity continues to evolve, this potential will become increasingly realized.

The remainder of this paper will first explore evolution's relationship with both theology and purpose. With new understandings of these relationships, the paper will discuss the multifaceted *telos* that accompanies an evolution-centered worldview. First it covers a state-of-being *telos* which defines how creation is intended to exist within the universe. Then it covers the action-oriented *teloi* which define how humanity is intended to function in relation to both the Creator and creation.

Evolution

When asked if evolution can be described as having a goal (beyond survival of the fittest), Professor and Director of Biology Teaching and Learning Dr. Randall Small responded, "the answer to [that] question is absolutely not."¹⁰ Coste also repeatedly makes this point throughout his book *Evolution Talk*.¹¹

From a biological lens, this is completely accurate. Gene mutation "occurs regularly and randomly due to mistakes during the process of DNA replication and/or exposure to environmental phenomena. This is the random part of the process, but the impact of those mutations (Do they hurt the organism? Help the organism? Are they neutral?) is dependent on the context of the organism." The process of evolution is both random and subjective, which makes a unifying *telos* – end goal or purpose – challenging.

¹⁰ Randall Small. "Re: Evolution Ideas." Received by Hunter Maerz, 21 Oct. 2023.

¹¹ Coste, *Evolution Talk*.

Yet, one of the earliest evolution-like models was proposed by the same philosopher who proposed the teleological-centered virtue theory. Although now understood as inaccurate, Aristotle addressed the question of changing organisms with his ladder of life. Aristotle is the prototype for viewing evolution through a teleological lens. This paper seeks to revisit this union using modern understandings of both theories.

The easiest solution is also the most controversial issue: there is a Creator directly involved in the evolutionary process. Throughout the history of evolutionary understanding, there have been proponents for and against this statement. Great thinkers including Aristotle, James Hutton, Patrick Matthew, Robert Chambers, Alfred Russel Wallace, and Mary Annings held space for a Creator working in the evolutionary process. Great thinkers including Titus Lucretius, Benoît de Maillet, Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, Denis Diderot, and Charles Darwin have argued that a Creator is not necessary for evolution.

Regardless of those holding space for a Creator's influence, it was the mere suggestion of a lack-of-necessity for a Creator that the historic Church latched onto with fear, malice, and persecution. Thanks to the historic Church's reaction, discussion of evolution is often strained, if addressed at all, in many Christian atmospheres. This has been detrimental to Christian theology.

Creation is the first great incarnation of the Creator.¹² Scripture is clear that creation tells of the Creator.¹³ Ignoring the process by which creation moves through space and time results in understandings and revelations of God falling on deaf ears and blind eyes.

In this introductory paper, we are faced with two main schisms that must be mended: the schism between evolution and theology and the schism between evolution and purpose. While a

¹² Richard Rohr, "The First Incarnation," Daily Meditations from Center for Action and Contemplation (blog), 21 February 2019, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-first-incarnation-2019-02-21/>.

¹³ C.f. Psalm 19; John 1:1-18; Romans 1:18-20

single paper cannot mend these completely, it will hopefully start us down the right path. The first step to closing these schisms is refocusing our view of evolution.

Our language of natural vs artificial selection hints at a biased, anthropocentric worldview.¹⁴ Specifically, it separates us from nature. Evolution and theology can find common ground in our union with nature. Evolution shows us that all life shares one common ancestor that came from the oceans and thus humans share varying amounts of genetic similarities with all life on earth (i.e., 25% with rice, 70% with sea sponges, 99.4% with chimpanzees).

Although the biological mechanism is off because of the time in which it was written, that idea is akin to Scripture's statement "by the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread, until you return to the ground – because out of it were you taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."¹⁵ Both evolution and the Genesis story communicate our shared origins with the rest of creation.

The language used in Genesis further drives home this point. Genesis 2:7 contains the terms *lenepes hayyah* (a living being) to describe the creation of Adam. This is the same phrase used to describe the beasts of the field and the birds of the air that Adam named in Genesis 2:19. In Genesis 2:7, Adam was animated by *nismat hayyim* (the breath of life). During the flood narrative, animals and humanity are grouped into the same phrase, *nismat ruah hayyim* (the

¹⁴ This dichotomy separates us from nature, or what is "natural," by dubbing humans as artificial, or separate from nature. If we view ourselves as another part of nature instead of the culmination of nature or somehow created separate from nature, then any selection done by humans (i.e., domestication, genetic engineering) is a part of nature shaping another part of nature. Edward Wilson suggested that "we are about to abandon natural selection, the process that created us, in order to direct our own evolution by volitional selection – the process of redesigning our biology and human nature as we wish them to be," (Edward O. Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, (New York, NY: Liveright, 2014), 14.). But humans have been practicing volitional selection on other parts of creation for millennia. Renaming – or at minimum, reframing – artificial selection as volitional selection and natural selection as randomized selection no longer pits humanity against the rest of creation. The question isn't *what is natural?* but becomes *what is intentional or purposeful?*

¹⁵ Genesis 3:19

breath of the spirit of life). Similarities in language and categorical grouping suggest that the creation story does not differentiate humanity and other living beings in relation to each other, only in who the story is addressed to.

In other words, the creation story is addressed to humanity not out of a separate sense of importance from the rest of the living beings, but simply because we are the ones reading it. This is strengthened, and further connected to the evolutionary process, when looking at the charges given to humanity.

1. Be fruitful, increase in number, and fill the earth. (Genesis 1:28)
2. Subdue and rule other living creatures. (Genesis 1:28)
3. Work/cultivate and keep/preserve the land. (Genesis 2:15)

When read in the larger context of Genesis 1 and 2, point 2 and 3 are the same.

Humanity's ruling of creation is to 1) mirror the ruling of the Creator because they have been made in the Creator's image which is a form of ruling that nurtures creation (c.f. Genesis 2:4-9) and 2) not hinder creation's ability to be fruitful, increase in number, and fill the earth because those were charges given from the Creator to creation. Humanity's charge can be simplified to one sentence: Be fruitful, increase in number, and fill the earth, and help other living creatures do the same.

This charge interacts directly with the first two facts of natural selection:¹⁶

1. Organisms reproduce, and this allows for their population to grow.
2. Resources are limited.

Humanity's charge is the first fact of natural selection – reproduce and grow your population. The charge works in relation to the second fact – don't overuse nature's resources;

¹⁶ Coste, *Evolution Talk*, 121.

instead, increase those resources. Between the language used to describe creation and the charges given to creation in Genesis 1 and 2, we see that Scripture and evolution end with similar results – the expanding of life across the earth.

Theology and evolution are united in disrupting an anthropocentric view of creation, replacing it with a communal, interconnected, relational view of all living creatures. This starts us down the road of mending the schism between theology and evolution as well as the schism between evolution and purpose.

Ecocentric views threaten the status quo of many Christian circles because of a desire for human uniqueness. This is what Copernicus and Galileo were up against when introducing and defending the heliocentric theory. The historical church has deep-seated issues with anything that has the potential to change our understanding of humanity's uniqueness. Evolution by the theory of natural selection confronts the anthropocentric view of the historical Church, but, as discussed, so does Scripture.

The new questions that come with an ecocentric view open the door to mending the evolution-purpose schism. Questions like, *Why do we need to be unique?* and *What does our non-uniqueness mean in relation to being human?* open doors that were previously locked and guarded by the historical Church. They are the questions that will aid humanity in understanding what it means to exist and what it means to have purpose. Because, if evolution has no purpose beyond survival of the fittest, and animals' only purpose is to pass along their genes, then humanity's only purpose is to reproduce. But if our evolutionary philosophical views contain a missing link, it would impact the very idea of what it means to be human.

Wilson concisely summarizes the opposing views of religion and science. Religions use the word meaning to imply that “any entity, any process, or definition of any word itself is put

into play as a result of an intended consequence in the mind of the designer.”¹⁷ Science uses the word to imply “there is no advance design, but instead overlapping networks of physical cause and effect.”¹⁸ In other words, “it is that the accidents of history, not the intentions of a designer, are the source of meaning.”¹⁹

This summary also shows the interconnectedness of the evolution-theology and the evolution-purpose schisms. In the current view of science, meaning but not purpose can be found without a Creator. This sentiment is reflected by Coste in his response to Aristotle’s teleological view of existence. “What Aristotle missed, or what he refused to see, is that we do not need purpose to explain complexity. It has nothing to do with intention. It’s a blind experiment of trial and error. An experiment without an experimenter.”²⁰

While it is true that much can be explained without the necessity of a Creator – although there still fails to be an answer to why there is anything in existence to begin with – it does not mean there is not a larger purpose. Modern science looks at evolution as an ultimate cause and the types of selection as proximate causes.

Consider the example of a clock. We understand the telling of time as the ultimate cause and the movement of the parts the proximate cause. But, if someone with no understanding of a clock or our numbering system looked at a watch, they could deduce that the ultimate cause is to move the hands around the clockface and that the proximate cause is the battery powering the gears. Their understanding of each process would be correct, but they would fail to recognize that the clock serves the purpose of telling time.

¹⁷ Wilson, *Meaning of Human Existence*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ Coste, *Evolution Talk*, 13.

It is possible that we have done the same with the evolutionary process. Yes, types of selections are proximate causes. But what if evolution itself is another layer of proximate causes? What if humanity has correctly identified each process but has failed to recognize that evolution serves a larger purpose? It would not discredit scientific understandings of evolution, it would expand them.

To extrapolate this purpose, we must look at the qualities of living creatures. Every living creature on earth has the ability to produce more life. But a utilitarian extrapolation, that the purpose is to maximize life, would seem to fail because every living creature requires the consumption of something living in order for themselves to continue to live. Death is necessary for life.

There is nothing static in existence, even the universe itself is continuously expanding. Here the proximate cause of evolution becomes important. Living creatures have the ability to adapt and evolve in the midst of an ever-changing existence. For what purpose? Evolution as an ultimate cause would claim no purpose. But evolution as a proximate cause points us towards the ultimate cause of dynamic equilibrium within a dynamic system.

Within a dynamic system, a static existence of life leads to death as there will eventually exist a state of the system that the static life cannot survive. The dynamic process of evolution allows life to continue. That continuance of life exists within a system of checks and balances: life requires death.

An imbalance within an environment, unaddressed and unchanged, will lead to the death of the environment as a whole. For example:

Many native wildflower species are also preferred deer foods. These plants are also reduced in abundance or completely eliminated when deer impact is high. With the loss of the understory tree and shrub layer comes a loss in abundance of many other wildlife species.

Numerous species of birds which nest in the shrub layer or on the forest floor are reduced in abundance when deer populations rise beyond what the habitat can support.²¹

Unchecked, the overabundant life of the deer population will result in an overabundant death of other life in the environment. Additionally, as the food for the deer is eliminated from the environment, the deer population itself will die off due to lack of available food. A lack of equilibrium is detrimental for all life within a system. It is why the process of evolution is so important, it helps regain new equilibriums when existing equilibriums are lost. When one population, or part of a population, begins to flourish above and against another, evolution corrects the imbalance to the environment and restores an equilibrium.

At the same time, many of those imbalances are caused by evolution. Traits are gained through randomized gene mutation that allow for the individual, and eventually the species, to flourish above and against other individual and species. This is a byproduct of the necessity of responding to a dynamic system. The dynamic system of the universe is constantly changing the equilibrium of life. Evolution is a proximate cause that allows species to regain a state of equilibrium within an environment.

Imbalances caused by evolution also allow for the resistance of stagnation within an environment. The constant push and pull of evolution in and around the equilibrium allows for great levels of biodiversity within that environment. Greater levels of

²¹ "Issue: Deer Abundance," PennState Department of Ecosystem Science and Management, <https://ecosystems.psu.edu/outreach/youth/sftrc/deer/issue-deer#:~:text=White%2Dtailed%20deer%20directly%20affect,%2C%20or%20over%2Dbrowsed%20woodlands.>

biodiversity provide a greater chance of returning to equilibrium after changes caused by the dynamic system. For example, as climate changes, some species will be able to evolve quickly enough to survive in the new environment, others will not. The more species there were in the environment to begin with, the greater the odds will be for enough species to adapt to the new environment to provide a functioning ecosystem.

While the drive of an individual is to pass along as many genes as possible, and the drive of a species is the survival of the species, the universal drive for creation is to create an equilibrium. An individual cannot pass along enough genes to sustain a species by itself. The overabundance of a species will lead to a decline in the environment which will eventually have negative effects on that species. The life and death of the species must be balanced to maintain the proper equilibrium of the environment as a whole.

Telos

From a theological lens, the evolutionary *telos* – equilibrium – reminds us that history is not anthropocentric. Be fruitful and multiply, or the fact that “organisms reproduce, and this allows for their population growth,”²² is not unique to humanity. Any charge to humanity to rule or subdue is framed within being images of God, the one who created and nurtures creation. Even the charge to nurture and take care of creation is what creation already does without the interference of humanity. That is because humanity is a part of creation, not something set apart from creation.

²² Coste, *Evolution Talk*, 121.

This means that we are not created with a different purpose than the rest of creation. The level of complexity that humanity has come to through the process of evolution means that we have a higher expectation, not a different expectation. The level of expectation corresponds to our higher consciousness and knowledge. Our ability to perceive and understand the system and processes do not put us above them, they task us with creatively existing as a beneficial part of the system.

Two complimentary teleological views can help us understand what it means to be human and how we are to orient ourselves among the rest of creation. These are a state-of-being *telos* and action-oriented *teloi*. The state-of-being *telos* describes the type of existence we are striving towards. The action-oriented *teloi* describe how we should live in order to bring about that existence.

State-of-Being *Telos*

The Christian state-of-being *telos* corresponds to the evolutionary *telos*, a state of equilibrium. This understanding of equilibrium is akin to the biblical understanding of peace – *shalom* in the Tanakh and *eirene* in the New Testament.

Shalom has “the root meaning of ‘soundness,’ ‘completeness,’ and ‘well-being,’”²³ but its usage goes well beyond any specific category. “The usage of the term is thus not restricted to international, intergroup, or interpersonal relations. It signifies a state of prosperity, of blessed harmony, on several levels, physical and spiritual.”²⁴

²³ Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, “Peace,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 666.

²⁴ Aviezer Ravitzky, “Shalom: Peace in Hebrew,” My Jewish Learning, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shalom/>.

Eirene has a similar expansive meaning to *shalom*. The term refers to the right relation of the situation, environment, or relationship, not simply, as the modern use of peace has come to be used, the lack of disturbance or strife. When *eirene* is used in Scripture, “it often is suggested contextually that this harmony or peace is in accordance with the divine pleasure.”²⁵

Harmony, rightness, and balance might be some of the more useful modern American English words to describe the Scriptural notion of peace. A concise example from Scripture that ties together both the Hebrew and Greek term comes from Luke’s description of John the Baptist.

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
 ‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
 make straight paths for him.
 Every valley shall be filled in,
 every mountain and hill made low.
 The crooked roads shall become straight,
 the rough ways smooth.
 And all people will see God’s salvation.”²⁶

With Isaiah’s metaphor of the leveling of mountains and the filling in of valleys, Luke qualifies Jesus’ ministry as one which restores the harmony – or equilibrium – that has been disrupted. This goal of harmony is a return to the equilibrium found within the beginning of the creation story. In Genesis 1 and 2, we see harmonious spiritual (God and creation), social (human and human/self), and somal relationships (humanity and other

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Luke 3:4-6; c.f. Isaiah 40:3-5

living organisms). God walks among and nurtures creation. Humanity cares for creation. Humanity works in union with humanity.

Up to this point, humanity has not been the direct cause of broken harmony. Genesis 3 is a literary description of humanity's disruption of the harmony of each category of relationship. Humanity broke the spiritual relationship by choosing to act outside of the divine pleasure, that is, the way in which God created the world to function. Humanity broke the social relationship by turning against each other instead of working with each other (competition over cooperation). Humanity broke the somal relationship by using creation in a way it was not intended to be used.

With the evolutionary process in mind, one interpretation of humanity's original sin is the exploitation of creation – upsetting the equilibrium and harmony of creation by trying to use creation for our own gain instead of the gain of all of nature. Out of this spiraled Adam's exploitation of Eve and Eve's exploitation of the serpent.

The ancestors of *homo sapiens* co-existed as part of creation, helping nurture creation through evolutionary equilibrium, just as every other living organism does. From a biological and evolutionary lens, Genesis 3 represents the dawn of consciousness within humanity that sets our species as a dominate species. Paradoxically, “the evolutionary innovations that made us dominant over the rest of life also left us sensory cripples. It rendered us largely unaware of almost all the life in the biosphere that we have been so heedlessly destroying.”²⁷

²⁷ Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, 90.

The evolutionary events that led to our enhanced consciousness, and thus our increased ability and subsequent responsibility to understand and support the overarching evolutionary equilibrium, separated us, in our perception but not our biology, from the rest of creation. “This didn’t matter very much in early human history, when humans first spread over Earth,”²⁸ because there was not enough of our species to disrupt the equilibrium on a global scale. That is no longer the case.

Like deer who have become overabundant, the overabundance of humanity coupled with our disregard of and disassociation from other living organisms will lead to the overabundant death of other life in the environment and culminate in our own decline. This is the natural path of disequilibrium.

Using our enhanced consciousness and understanding of the evolutionary process, humanity has the ability to help restore this equilibrium instead of destroying it further. Unlike the rest of creation, for which their participation in the evolutionary equilibrium is unconscious and outside of their ability to change, humanity’s understanding of the evolutionary process and our advanced ability to consciously disrupt the process means that our return to evolutionary equilibrium must be a conscious and dedicated decision as a species.

Under the weight of this responsibility, the importance of the transcendent Scriptural meaning of peace cannot be overstated. A state-of-being that is defined by harmony (or an equilibrium) of all things includes the evolutionary equilibrium.

²⁸ Ibid.

Humanity's understanding of evolution does not diminish or disqualify a Christian state-of-being *telos*, it expands and elevates it. The Christian worldview, defined by its *telos*, should work in alignment with the way God created the world to function. Thus, Christian activity should embrace and support the dedicated return to evolutionary equilibrium as the faithful expression of a life dedicated to the ways of God and the daily growth of a person in the image of the God.

Action-Oriented *Teloi*

The action-oriented *teloi* are comprised of three levels: the individual, the communal, and the human. These exist as localizable guidelines in the movement towards the harmonious state-of-being *telos*. They seek to provide some structure to the subjective nature of existence. Thus, they do not dictate specific actions; instead, they provide a framework to help determine what range of actions in the given circumstances of a specific environment (physical, cultural, historical, etc.) would be beneficial.

Individual *Telos*

The Christian individual *telos* is to properly and faithfully bear our unique image of God. The core identity of Christians on the individual level is that all humans were, and are, created as image-bearers of God.²⁹ While humans are not forced to live into God's image, Scripture issues the charge to hone and grow in this identity.³⁰

The individual *telos* is rooted in *theosis* theology and relies on the formation of a relationship between the individual and God. For humans to live into the individual *telos* requires intentionality from the individual and grace from God. Individuals move most directly towards

²⁹ C.f., Genesis 1:26-27

³⁰ C.f., 1 Corinthians 11:1, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Colossians 3:10,

the individual *telos* when an individual intentionally decides to begin the path of *theosis* and open themselves up to the Holy Spirit which God has sent into their lives to empower the process of *theosis*.

This intentionality is akin to a spiritual epignosis-genesis. *Theosis* does not need awareness to take place any more than evolution does. Just as in evolutionary epignosis-genesis, awareness of the process of *theosis* allows for intentionality and increased partnership. An individual's understanding of the *theosis* process and our advanced ability to consciously assist or disrupt the process means that our growth in the image of God must be a conscious and dedicated decision as an individual.

Similar to heliocentrism, the historic church has been fearful that evolution diminishes our uniqueness; specifically, what it means to be an image-bearer of God. Maintaining earlier claims of this paper, an understanding of evolution can enhance our ability to bear God's image.

Our biology, specifically our genes, creates the building blocks for how we exist in the world. We are born with a specific temperament, but we have the ability to adjust that temperament as our consciousness increases. The individual is a microcosm for the species. Increased consciousness furthers the shift from an external to internal locus of control, although neither the individual nor species can completely free itself from an external locus of control.

Understanding the biological foundation that has come to be through the evolutionary process allows us to emphasize the advantageous aspects and minimize the disadvantageous aspects. Understanding that "within groups selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, but groups of altruists beat groups of selfish individuals,"³¹ as the evolutionary explanation of

³¹ Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, 33.

altruism allows individuals to consciously live more altruistically even if they have a temperament that tends towards selfishness. An understanding of the evolutionary process assists the process of *theosis*.

Communal *Telos*

The Christian communal *telos* is to make God's name great by living as a holy and priestly community. Abraham was chosen by God to father a holy and priestly nation that would end up being called the nation of Israel. By the time of Malachi, Israel has fallen into a pattern of blaspheming the name of God instead of living in a way that makes it great. Mal 1:11 is a snapshot of what should be happening across the world at that moment:

For My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place, incense and pure offerings will be presented in My name, because My name will be great among the nations," says the LORD of Hosts.

Instead of this, Israel "profanes [God's name] by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food 'it is contemptible.'"³² Israel should be partaking in the proclamation of the greatness of God's name; instead, they are profaning it. By calling themselves a nation of Yahweh while living and worshiping in a way which disrespects Yahweh, they are misusing the Lord's name and thus breaking the third commandment. Regardless of any individual *theosis* that has taken place, Israel is failing to live as a community in the way God has called them to live.

In Christ, the communal *telos* is extended to all who proclaim his name; thus, the church also carries the mantle of the communal *telos*. Peter writes to the exiles of the diaspora saying:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, to proclaim the virtues of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light...conduct yourselves with such honor among the Gentiles that, though they slander you

³² Malachi 1:12

as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.³³

The Church, as the body of Christ and a group of individuals who are intentionally partaking in the process of *theosis*, must live in a way that brings glory and honor to God. “God’s dream of literally healing everything through Christ means there is not a molecule, relationship, or system that God does not want to restore to its gloriously created intention. When this healing dream of God is at our center, is our purpose, then the questions of the church begin to make more sense!”³⁴ The life of the body of Christ is only sensible when aligned with the desires of God. The desire to make God’s name great motivates us to participate in God’s mission and to make God’s desires our desires. Communal living in this way aligns life with the divine pleasure of harmonious existence.

The Christian community “must challenge our prideful pretensions as well as provide the skills for the humility necessary for becoming not just good, but holy.”³⁵ The humility of seeking to make God’s name instead of our own name great is necessary for becoming a holy community. It is also the holiness of the community that allows it to make God’s name great among the other nations of the world. “The holiness of God’s people provides both hope and agency in the transformation of the world.”³⁶ This relationship displays the constitutive nature of the communal *telos*. It also provides continuity with the evolutionary process.

Let us repeat the example used in the individual *telos*. “Within groups selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, but groups of altruists beat groups of selfish individuals.”³⁷ Wilson

³³ 1 Peter 2:9, 12

³⁴ Tim Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 11.

³⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, “On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological (1983).” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 73.

³⁶ Elaine A. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 4.

³⁷ Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, 33.

hypothesizes that this conflict between the individual and the community “might be the only way in the entire Universe that human-level intelligence and social organization can evolve.”³⁸ This conflict is not going away; there will always be a need for the individual *telos* and the process of *theosis*.

Yet, humanity’s ability to form altruistic groups, despite the presence of individual selfishness, is a major contributing factor in the success of our social evolution.

The origin of the human condition is best explained by the natural selection for social interaction – the inherited propensities to communicate, recognize, evaluate, bond, cooperate, complete, and from all these the deep warm pleasure of belonging to your own special group. Social intelligence enhanced by group selection made *Homo sapiens* the first fully dominant species in Earth’s history.³⁹

From the Abrahamic promise that “through [his] offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed [God]” to the Deuteronomic command that “you are to love those who are foreigners” to Jesus’ commands to “love your neighbors as yourself” and “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” to Paul’s statement that “all are one in Christ Jesus” and his command to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others,”⁴⁰ Scripture is populated with commands to be an altruistic community.

Altruistic human societies make God’s name great by leading to the state-of-being *telos*. This is seen on intragroup, intergroup, and interspecies levels. “The most complex forms of social organization are made from high levels of cooperation. They are furthered with altruistic acts performed by at least some of the colony members.”⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid, 34.

³⁹ Ibid, 75.

⁴⁰ Genesis 22:18; Deuteronomy 10:19; Mark 12:31; Matthew 5:44; Galatians 3:28; Philippians 2:3-4

⁴¹ Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, 61.

Intragroup and intraspecies altruism is clearly displayed in violent conflicts. In war between nations, it is the selfless acts of individuals in battle that can lead to the advancement of that group. The ultimate altruistic act, both biologically and spiritually (c.f. John 13:15; 1 John 3:16), is the self-sacrifice of one's life. This can mean the difference between the death or survival of the larger group whether it is in a conflict with another group, such as a soldier jumping on a grenade to save the lives of his squad, or with another species, such as a squirrel giving its own position away to issue a warning call.

Communal altruism is a mechanism of evolutionary equilibrium through species. "Chimpanzees share food...dolphins help injured or tired dolphins...[vampire bats] form buddy systems and will regurgitate captured blood to feed sick bats."⁴² These altruistic acts are members of the species "not looking to [their] own interests but each of [them] to the interests of the others."⁴³ Evolutionary equilibrium within a group or species is maintained when there are enough altruistic individuals to overcome the exploitative actions of the selfish individuals.

Interspecies altruism is mostly seen through cooperation of two or more species, also called mutualism, symbiosis, reciprocal altruism, or reciprocity. Basic cooperation is seen in relationships such as cleaner fish cleaning the mouths of larger fish without being eaten. Advanced cooperation is seen in relationships such as crows leading wolves to potential prey or frozen carcasses. Costly cooperation can be seen in relationships such as birds calling out the advancement of a predator so that all bird species in the area are aware. "Cooperation among those of various species benefits each individually."⁴⁴ These cooperative relationships work to

⁴² Coste, *Evolution Talk*, 173.

⁴³ Philippians 2:4

⁴⁴ Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, 33.

maintain the overall evolutionary equilibrium of the entire environment, not just a single group or species.

The human species has shown extreme cases of both interspecies exploitation and cooperation. Our selfishness as a species has led to vast deforestation, negatively impacting every level of the evolutionary equilibrium. Our cooperation, and in some cases true altruism, has led to the recovery of endangered species. Our increased consciousness and understanding of the interconnectedness of all life on earth should propel our species into interspecies altruism.

At bear minimum, our participation in intraspecies and interspecies cooperation will move our species and all living organisms towards the state-of-being *telos*. Our conscious and intentional intraspecies and interspecies altruism will exponentially further that movement. Scripture tells us that altruistic existence makes God's name great; thus, it is how Scripture directs us to live.

Humanity *Telos*

The Christian humanity *telos* is to worship God. While humanity's tendency is to reduce worship to merely words, Scripture makes clear that worship is primarily lifestyle oriented. Many of the prophets of the Tanakh echo the thoughts of Amos when he spoke for God saying, "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me...away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"⁴⁵ The New Testament writers continue this lifestyle orientation with writings such as, "whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Amos 5:21, 23-24

⁴⁶ 1 John 4:20

Humanity's proper worship of God connects us with the state-of-being *telos* and guides our action-oriented *teloi*. When we lose proper worship of God, or worship of God altogether, it replaces our *telos* and improperly reframes our lives.

Word only worship of God jettisons the necessity of the social and somal relationships, and, thus, any need for evolutionary equilibrium. Since the existence of *shalom* is multifaceted, our understanding of how to exist within and towards *shalom* must also be multifaceted. It is why every level of our existence, and every thought, action, and emotion of our lives, must be examined within the framework of the state-of-being *telos*.

Proper worship is intimately related to companionship with God. What we worship and how we worship shows the state of our hearts and orients our lives towards certain actions. In Genesis 4, Abel's and Cain's worship and relationship with God went hand-in-hand with the actions of their lives. Abel brought God the best of his firstborn flocks and God looked upon Abel with favor. Abel's proper worship allowed for a deeper companionship with God and orientation of his life towards *telos*. On the other hand, Cain's improper worship to God drove a wedge between him and God which cumulated in Cain murdering his brother. His improper worship was both a reflection of and a deepening of his improper understanding of humanity's *telos*. A proper relationship with God, as deepened by proper worship of God, is essential for proper action in our lives to move towards *telos*.

Paul writes to the Romans saying, "therefore, I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship."⁴⁷ It is through the alignment of our actions and desires with the actions

⁴⁷ Romans 12:1

and desires of God – taking the mantle of God’s *telos* – that the whole of our lives becomes worship to God.

Worship is pervasive throughout our society and extends into all spheres of society, working as a sacred secularity. “Human gatherings always involve worship, and worship always implicates human gatherings.”⁴⁸ When we gather and/or act as human beings, we are proclaiming that something is worth our time and attention. This is worship and it is formative of our identity as individuals, communities, and humanity as a whole.

Often, the sacred secularity of worship happens unconsciously (i.e., concerts, town hall meetings, jobs). It is experienced whenever people devote attention and resources towards something as an individual or community. An epignosis-genesis of what we worship in our lives brings it from the unconscious to the conscious. Like every level of the action-oriented *teloi*, the consciousness of the process will allow us to take intentional control of this process and use these modes of worship to form us towards the state-of-being *telos*.

“Worship also anticipates the future, particularly through the Eucharist, in which Christians share a meal that anticipates the heavenly banquet.”⁴⁹ In worship we draw near to God and participate in the new creation where “the dwelling place of God is among the people, and he will live with them,”⁵⁰ while we are still in the present creation. Worship anticipates this new creation which contains the tree of life whose leaves, “are for the healing of the nations.”⁵¹ Worship anticipates the time when creation exists within the harmonious state-of-being *telos*.

⁴⁸ Philip Kenneson, “Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 53.

⁴⁹ Hauerwas and Wells, “Christian Ethics as Informed Prayer,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 7.

⁵⁰ Revelation 21:3b

⁵¹ Revelation 22:2b

Since our worship anticipates evolutionary equilibrium, it must be impacted by our understanding of the evolutionary process. The evolutionary process describes the movement of a species through time. As a species, we have gained an unparalleled ability to affect how species (including our own) exist in the present and will move through the future. How we affect these is a form of worship and must be guided by the humanity *telos* and state-of-being *telos*.

The exploitation of humans by other humans is the same improper worship that the prophets of the Tanakh and writers of the New Testament spoke out against. In the Scriptural narrative, it reaches back to the stories of Adam/Eve and Cain/Abel. The human disruption of evolutionary equilibrium across the entire planet via the numerous exploitations of other species is a level of improper worship that the writers of the Scriptures could never have imagined.

To varying degrees, every human functions as an evolutionary biologist. We all partake in worship through impacting the evolutionary process. Highly specialized genetic engineers engage in evolutionary biology as they splice genes to create new, genetically-modified organisms, from plants to, eventually, humans. Farmers engage in evolutionary biology as they redesign landscapes and genocide specific species for the overabundance of others. Construction workers and city planners engage in evolutionary biology as they rapidly change the landscape at speeds slightly below natural disasters. Anyone traveling by the use of fossil fuels engages in evolutionary biology by creating byproducts that change the equilibrium of the environment.

As a species, humanity engages in evolutionary biology in positive and negative ways. The humanity *telos* can help focus this engagement. Unconscious engagement can lead to negative affects – improper worship – such as global warming. Conscious engagement without the proper *telos*, such as introducing a non-native species into an environment to control for a

certain species without regard for the overall environmental impact, can also lead to negative affects.

When we are guided by the humanity *telos* to move in the direction of the evolutionary *telos*, we can engage in evolutionary biology in ways that help reclaim evolutionary equilibrium. Our rapid adaption to a plastic-heavy society has led to the evolution of more than 400 species, 60% of which belong to no known class, that can produce a plastic-digesting enzyme.⁵² Intentional, *telos* guided engagement of evolutionary biology in this case could look like genetically modifying these organisms to break down plastic at a faster rate or using their enzymes as the model for synthetic enzymes that can break down plastic on a larger scale. Both of these options could function as proper worship that helps move the environment back towards an equilibrium that has been decimated by plastic pollution from humans.

Conclusion

The Scriptural narrative begins in Genesis 1 by affirming the goodness of every part of creation. It is why the state-of-being *telos* is concerned about universal harmony and why each level of the action-oriented *teloi* works to bring harmony to multiple levels of relationships.

Humanity's intimate relationship with the rest of creation requires our species to understand our existence through our relationship with other living beings. The evolutionary process is the foundation and blueprint for understanding how living beings relate to each other throughout time. Thus, refusal to incorporate evolution into a Christian *telos* destabilizes that *telos*.

⁵² "Mutant plastic-eating bacteria: sci-fi or plan B against plastic pollution?" The Sea Cleaners, <https://www.theseacleaners.org/news/mutant-plastic-eating-bacteria-sci-fi-or-plan-b-against-plastic-pollution/>.

Using the evolutionary view of equilibrium and the Scriptural view of peace provides humanity with a state-of-being *telos* that is defined as the harmonious, balanced relationship of all living organisms. This is the proper and desired state for the existence of living things in the universe.

Humans have a responsibility to consciously and actively work towards reaching the state-of-being *telos* in the dynamic, everchanging environments and circumstances that we find ourselves in. This means that how we act as an individual, community, and species must be guided by localized *teloi* that point us towards the state-of-being *telos*.

As individuals, properly and faithfully bearing our unique image of God, the creator and sustainer of all life, guides us to interact with all life in a way that sustains it as God sustains it. As communities, making God's name great by living as holy and priestly communities guides us to construct societies that are centered around the state-of-being *telos* of all living organisms, not simply humans or one group of humans. As a species, humanity's proper worship of God guides us to be ecocentric, as God is, instead of anthropocentric so that our existence and growth does not upset the state-of-being *telos*.

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