

D. W. D. Shaw memorial lecture 2025

‘For the creation waits with eager longing ...’:

Panpsychism and the problem of evil

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Abstract

This paper was originally delivered as the fourth D. W. D. Shaw memorial Lecture at the University of Glasgow on 12th May 2025. In honour of Professor Shaw’s combined vocation as a churchman and an academic, this paper opens with a short homiletic reflection on Romans 8:17–25, wherein Saint Paul seeks to comfort the persecuted church in Rome by placing their suffering in solidarity, not only with Christ’s and his own experience, but also with the wider creation. In section two, it turns to one of Professor Shaw’s academic interests; namely Process theology and the panpsychist view of consciousness held by this movement. Panpsychism is the view that every creature or created thing is conscious to at least some degree. I provide a brief outline of this view and discuss biblical passages where nature is depicted as praising God or lamenting human sin. Section three explores how panpsychism might seem to make the problem of evil and suffering worse for Christians. Finally, section four then returns to Romans 8, and I suggest that rather than an intellectual theodicy that attempts to justify why God permits evil, panpsychism can be part of the church’s therapeutic or pastoral response to suffering.



Introduction

It is truly a privilege to have been asked to give this lecture in honour of, from all accounts, one of Scotland's leading theologians, D. W. D. Shaw. I never knew Prof Shaw personally, but as a former student and staff member at both New College in Edinburgh and St Mary's in St Andrews, both places where Prof Shaw served as Principal, I am undoubtedly an unwitting beneficiary of his legacy.

In this lecture, I seek to honour Prof Shaw in two ways. The first is to speak in both a scholarly, academic voice, and something closer to a pastoral, homiletic voice than I usually do. Prof Shaw, from all accounts I have read, was in equal parts a scholar and a churchman.¹ As such, the first part of this paper will offer more homiletic-style reflections on Romans 8: 17–25. I've never tried to combine both voices in a single talk before, so apologies if this feels a bit disjunctive.

The second way I will honour Prof Shaw is by considering a topic that is closely connected to one of his academic interests; namely, Process theology.² I am not a Process theologian – in fact, I have published pieces that argue directly against Process theology.³ One of my major concerns regards how Process theology responds to the problem of evil by limiting God's power, and thereby God's ability to both prevent and save creation from sin. However, like Prof Shaw, I can acknowledge the pastoral appeal of this school of thought, and, in so far as I resist its pull, the burden lies upon me to offer an equally pastorally adequate alternative.

Process theology is largely motivated by the concern that traditional Christian theology is unable to adequately respond to the problem of evil. In their attempt to offer an alternative vision for theology, Process theologians draw heavily on the metaphysical system of early twentieth-century philosopher and mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead. This school of thought is identified by the name 'Process' theology because,

¹ See David Fergusson's D. W. D. Shaw Memorial Lecture, "Church and University in Scotland: Challenges and Prospects", *Theology in Scotland* 31, no. 2 (2024): 4–20, <https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v31i2.2802>.

² For an example, see D. W. D. Shaw, "Process Thought and Creation", *Theology* 78, no. 661 (1975): 346–55.

³ See Joanna Leidenhag, "How to Be a Theological Panpsychist, but Not a Process Theologian", *Philosophy, Theology and the Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2020): 10–29, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1628/ptsc-2020-0003>.



according to Whitehead, there are no stable, enduring substances in the world – only momentary events of experience which make up streams of consciousness. Thus, although Process theologians typically prefer the label ‘pan-experientialism’, their metaphysics can also be described as a type, or a near cousin, of the view that I defend: panpsychism. I will explain what ‘panpsychism’ means in section two of this paper.⁴

In section three, I will first explore how panpsychism might seem to make the problem of evil worse. However, by returning to Romans 8 in section four, I argue that a vision of a conscious cosmos participating in the death and resurrection of Christ offers, not a classical theodicy or rational answer to the atheistic challenge, but a therapeutic response. This response to suffering does not aim to justify God but aims at providing Christians with an expanded community of solidarity and an expanded vision of hope, such that we can affirm with Paul that ‘our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.’ (Rom 8:18).



I. A short reflection on Romans 8:17–25

[...] and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole

⁴ For an excellent introduction to Process theology, written by its two leading figures, see John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Christian Journals, 1977). The metaphysical system of Alfred North Whitehead is mostly to be found in the seminal, if extremely obtruse, text *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Cambridge University Press, 1929). The best defence of Process theology’s pan-experientialist view of consciousness that I know of is David Ray Griffin’s *Unsnarling the World Knot: Consciousness, Freedom, and the Mind-body Problem* (University of California Press, 1998).



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creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is no hope at all. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Romans 8:17–25 (ESV)

Have you ever had someone say just exactly the wrong thing, when you've shared bad news with them? Perhaps you've lost something important, and you've received the response that a replacement would be just as good. Perhaps the story you've always told yourself about how your life will go has been irrevocably changed by an unexpected event, and your interlocutor has failed to see the significance of the experience. I'm sure we can all think of our own examples, for the simple reason that, in the face of suffering and struggle, we often need different kinds of responses and help. It is not always even clear to us ourselves what the best response is; until, that is, someone gets it painfully wrong. Sometimes a burden shared is a burden halved, but at other times, the response is so ill-fitting that it becomes a burden increased. In Romans 8, Paul is writing to a church that is facing great persecution and suffering. I don't know whether his letter alleviated their burdens or increased them, but I think this passage offers some lessons on how to help ourselves and others in times of suffering.

Paul starts off this passage by reminding his audience of their close personal relationship to God in Christ. We are children, heirs, co-heirs, and even identified strongly enough with Jesus as to share in his suffering and his glory. He also identifies the suffering of his audience, the persecuted Christian community in Rome, with himself – it is not *their* suffering from which he stands at a distance. These are 'our' sufferings and the glory that will be revealed in 'us'. We know from the narrative of Paul's ministry and likely martyrdom that he had every right to claim such an identification. Paul really did know what it was like for the church in Rome. It is only after he has reminded his readers that they are not alone in their suffering that Paul testifies that he considers 'the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that' awaits us.

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He then makes a more unexpected or perplexing move; he expands this relational basis and solidarity outwards, beyond not only the church community, but even beyond the human community to the whole of creation. Just as Paul encourages his audience that their sufferings are Christ's, and that Paul too shares in these same sufferings, now, in verse 18, Paul includes the wider creation. The creation is depicted as waiting with eager longing for the glory that will be revealed in us, almost like creation is cheering us on from the sidelines of a race, encouraging us that the pain will be worth it in the end. But this cheerleader metaphor is not quite right. As verse 20 clarifies, the creation too is subject to futility. We are not alone in our suffering and frustration because the whole of creation stands in solidarity with us. Not only in suffering but also in hope, for creation waits to obtain the same freedom and glory as the children of God. What a staggering suggestion!

This expansion of the shared community of suffering and hope is reinforced in verses 22–23, where humanity identifies with creation's groaning. First, creation is depicted as 'groaning together in the pains of childbirth,' and then 'not only creation, but we ourselves' wait for our new birth, our adoption and the redemption of our bodies. What we suffer, and what we hope for, is not just for humanity – it is for all of creation. 'This', Paul writes, 'is our hope'. It is the Christian hope for, and indeed with, all creation.

The reason that, as the saying goes, 'a burden shared is a burden halved' is because a substantial part of any experience of suffering and pain is how lonely it can make us feel. Likewise, the reason that a well-meaning but ultimately ill-suited response from a friend can be so painful is that they reaffirm our feelings of isolation – 'they don't really get it. I'm in this alone.' In this passage, Paul communicates to the church in Rome, first, that Jesus 'gets it', second that Paul himself 'gets it', but most intriguingly, that, third, the wider creation 'gets it' too.

Good sermons typically end with practical advice and outworkings of their central message. I'm afraid you will have to wait to the end of this paper for some brief suggestions on what this idea that creation stands with the persecuted church in her sufferings means for us today. Before this, however, we will critically enquire into the metaphysical plausibility and implications of my reading of Romans 8 in a more academic register.



II. Introducing panpsychism and the Bible

Just how seriously should we take Paul's statement that 'creation has been groaning together' (Rom 8:22)? Is creation actively experiencing futility? If so, does creation consciously respond to this experience of futility and bondage? An animal might groan or whimper when mistreated by a human, and a plant can wither if it is not cared for, but what about a stone or a river? These metaphysical questions arise quite naturally from reading this text. They are questions about the scope of consciousness in the natural world.

In philosophical circles, consciousness is often discussed as if human beings are the only conscious organisms. However, finding people who will defend such a narrow view is very difficult. After all, most people care for their pets, giving them treats or tummy rubs, because they believe this makes the animal happy. It is unlikely to be identical to the experience of happiness had by a human being, but the animal clearly experiences something, and something pleasant that it wishes to repeat.

The debate about the scope of consciousness can easily get bogged down in the question: What exactly is meant by consciousness? In contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, Thomas Nagel's definition of a basic subject, something that can have experiences of any kind, is widely taken as authoritative. To describe consciousness, Nagel uses the phrase 'there is something it is like to be' a conscious subject.⁵ So, if there is something it is like *for* a dog to be played with, then dogs are conscious. If there is something *it is like* for the bumble bee who stings me, then the bee is conscious. If there is something *it is like* to be a sunflower, a feeling that accompanies the turning face towards the light and warmth of the sun, then a sunflower is conscious.⁶ If there is not something it is like for the sunflower, if it's just an automatic, unconscious, mechanism – then these organisms are not conscious. In the context of Romans 8 then, if there is

⁵ See Nagel's seminal essay, *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* Fiftieth anniversary edition (Oxford University Press, 2024), 1–30.

⁶ For examples of recent books on the philosophy and science of animal and plant consciousness see, Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016); Lars Chittka, *The Mind of a Bee* (Princeton University Press, 2022); Paco Calvo and Natalie Lawrence, *Planta Sapiens: Unmasking Plant Intelligence* (The Bridge Street Press, 2023).

something it is like for creation to be subject to futility, then creation is conscious.

The view that everything is conscious, or participates in the consciousness of a larger whole, is called ‘panpsychism’. This term, first coined in 1591 by the Renaissance philosopher Francesco Patrizi, combined the two Greek words ‘pan’ (all) and ‘psyche’ (soul or mind). In coining this term, Patrizi was giving name to a view, or a family of views, that are widespread across global philosophy, including in the ancient Greek philosophy that would have been familiar to Saint Paul.

David Skrbina’s excellent book *Panpsychism in the West* has shown that panpsychism can be found in almost every philosophical school and century of Western philosophy. He starts with the pre-Socratics, where he finds a range of panpsychist ideas, such as Thales’ famous statement that ‘all things are full of gods’, and Heraclitus’ that ‘all things are full of souls and spirits’.⁷ Although Plato does not argue for panpsychism in any one place, his world-soul theory, where the cosmos as a single whole possesses a soul, and his attribution of soul to many inanimate things, such as stars and planets, suggests a panpsychist worldview. Aristotle is clear that all living things, even the very simplest plants, are ensouled. Beyond this, Aristotle also sees inanimate things as striving, driven by an internal desire or aspiration by the power of a soul-like *pneuma* that is ubiquitous and penetrates all things. On the basis of his theory of *pneuma*, Aristotle writes, ‘so that in a sense *all things are full of soul*’.⁸ Stoic philosophers seem to have taken ‘Aristotle’s late development of *pneuma* and elevated it to a central cosmic force’ and associated *pneuma* more with an intelligent mind, such that Cicero would state that ‘parts of the cosmos [...] contain the power of sense-perception and reason.’⁹ There is much debate in New Testament studies as to which schools of Jewish and Hellenistic thought are most influential on Saint Paul.¹⁰ My only point is that no matter the answer to this question, Saint Paul was surrounded by different versions of panpsychist thinking from almost all possible influences.

⁷ David Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West* (MIT Press, 2007), 25, 29.

⁸ Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West*, 50.

⁹ Skrbina, 57.

¹⁰ For examples of this literature, see Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); and Abraham J. Malherbe, *Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity: Collected Essays 1959–2012* (Brill, 2013).

Contemporary philosopher Philip Goff helpfully distinguishes between two types of panpsychism: pan-experientialism and pan-cognitivism.¹¹ Pan-cognitivism would be the view that everything has *thoughts*, and perhaps other complex cognitive capacities such as intentions, beliefs, desires, agency, emotions and self-consciousness (i.e., an awareness of its own experiential inner life). By contrast, pan-experientialism is framed as a more minimal view that only experience is ubiquitous, without self-awareness or other cognitive processes. For panpsychists, phenomenal consciousness is ubiquitous, and nothing is entirely lacking consciousness. However, this is not to be confused with a gross anthropomorphism whereby the (adult, able-bodied, awake) human experience is the paradigm for all other conscious subjects. The experiential life of a frog or a tree will be indescribably different to that of a human, but this does not mean that frogs or trees lack experience altogether.

While affirming that consciousness is found throughout the universe to some basic degree, panpsychists often differentiate between living organisms (like animals and plants) and non-living collections of atoms (like tables and chairs) in order to say that, for example, a table *qua* table is not conscious. The table, as an aggregate structure, does not experience anything. Tables and other inanimate structures contain only the same background basic level of consciousness as the vacuum of space. For panpsychists, there is background consciousness everywhere, but only in living things does it organize to form more complex wholes with individual and more complex mental lives.

I am not the first to read Scripture in tandem with panpsychist metaphysics. In 1987, Terence Fretheim argued that when passages such as the Psalms, where nature is frequently depicted as praising God, are dismissed as ‘poetic fancy’, then even the possibility of a richer theology of nature is ruled out without clear justification.¹² This is not to say that passages such as 1 Chronicles 16:33, where we read ‘Let the trees of the

¹¹ Philip Goff, William Seager and Sean Allen-Hermanson, “Panpsychism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/panpsychism/>.

¹² Terence E. Fretheim, “Nature’s Praise of God in the Psalms”, *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987): 16–30, at 21. See also Mark Harris, “‘The Trees of the Field Shall Clap Their Hands’ (Isaiah 55:12): What Does It Mean to Say That a Tree Praises God?” in *Knowing Creation: Perspectives from Theology, Philosophy and Science*, ed. Andrew B. Torrance and Thomas H. McCall (Zondervan, 2018), 287–304.

forest sing, let them sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth' are *not* poetic or metaphorical. Clearly they are, as trees do not have voice boxes. But what if the metaphor of singing is being used to point to something that is really happening? Metaphor and realism are not incompatible. As the Old Testament scholar Howard Wallace writes:

The acceptance of the words of the psalmist as metaphor does not allow us to dismiss them too quickly as simply a feature of the poetry [...]. The metaphor points to a reality embodied within the physical world, one that our contemporary Western minds are not usually trained to comprehend.¹³

Arguably, in Psalm 19:1–4, the Psalmist even acknowledges that the metaphor of speech in reference to nature does not imply an audible voice. Here we read:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. (NRSV)

Importantly, creation does not only praise, but also laments and groans, as for example in Isaiah 24, Habakkuk 2, and in our main passage, Romans 8. As with the non-audible praises of the heavens in Psalm 19, these passages are both metaphorical and real. In Jeremiah 12:4 we read: 'How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither?' The biological process of withering is interpreted to be a responsive act of mourning by the prophet.

Passages that depict negative responses from non-human creatures are particularly helpful when arguing for a panpsychist reading of Scripture because they rule out Richard Bauckham's alternative view that nature's

¹³ Howard N. Wallace, "Jubilate Deo omnis terra: God and Earth in Psalm 65", in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 62–63.

praises in the Psalms are merely poetic statements of creation's protological goodness.¹⁴ For Bauckham, nature neither actively praises God nor consciously experiences God's presence. Instead, the mere existence of creation is sufficient to make sense of these passages. Perhaps this can work for some verses of praise, but it does not work for those passages that depict creation groaning, waiting, or lamenting in response to divine or human activity.¹⁵ There is increasing openness to this more panpsychist reading of Scripture. For example, scholars such as Mari Joerstad now invite us to read the *whole* of the Hebrew Bible, not just these prophetic and poetic texts, through the lens of 'new animism' as a social cosmos, whereby humans are only one type of persons among many.¹⁶



III. Does panpsychism make the problem of evil worse?

So far, we've seen that in the context of a passage primarily concerned with Christian suffering and hope, Romans 8 raises philosophical questions for readers about the scope of consciousness in creation. Panpsychism, the view that consciousness is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of all creation, is one possible answer to these questions. Furthermore, panpsychism is a philosophical position that was available to Saint Paul both through his Jewish and his Hellenistic intellectual contexts. Paul, then, may well have been appealing to panpsychist thinking as part of his overall attempt to encourage and comfort the early church in Rome.

One possible objection to this trajectory of thought is that panpsychism seems to make the problem of evil worse, not better. If that is correct, then it would seem counterproductive both for Paul to be reaching for such a metaphysic in this passage or for Christian theology today to endorse panpsychism. In this section of the paper, I will explore this objection.

The problem of evil is widely taken to refer to the tension between belief in an all-powerful and all-loving creator God, and the existence of

¹⁴ Richard Bauckham, "Joining Nature's Praise of God", *Ecotheology* 7, no. 1 (2002): 45–59.

¹⁵ See Cherryl Hunt, David G. Horrell and Christopher Southgate, "An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8:19–23 and a Modest Proposal for Its Narrative Interpretation", *Journal of Theological Studies* 59, no. 2 (2008): 546–79.

¹⁶ Maria Joerstad, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Nonhumans and the Living Landscape* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).



gratuitous evil and widespread suffering. As many philosophers have pointed out, it is not accurate to use the singular, definite pronoun. As Justin McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Synder correctly state, ‘there is no such thing as *the* problem of evil. Instead, there are many different problems, some more pressing than others.’¹⁷ Some of these problems are what Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Adams call ‘aporetic’ problems of evil, which concern how Christians should make sense of the apparent tension between various doctrine claims that are (at least, initially) both taken to be true.¹⁸ These problems are about resolving tensions within Christian theology; they are not arguments against the existence of the Christian God. For example, the claim that God loves everyone and the claim that God commanded the annihilation of the Canaanites.¹⁹ Another example pertinent to Romans 8 is the claim that, on the one hand, Jesus has won the final victory over sin and death, and, on the other hand, the ongoing experience of Christian suffering and sinfulness. A third relevant tension arises from the seeming injustice that all creation is subject to futility as a result of the sinful actions of one species (humanity). This tension is further compounded by discoveries in evolutionary biology that show that there was life and death on planet earth for millennia prior to the existence of *homo sapiens*.²⁰ If panpsychism is correct, then this third area of tension is increased further still as it stretches the scope of potential suffering beyond what modern biologists consider to be living organisms to perhaps include the so-called inanimate world as well.

¹⁷ Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Synder, “Preface”, in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), i.

¹⁸ Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 2–3.

¹⁹ For a contextualization and survey of responses to this famous problem see Charlie Trimm, *The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eerdmans, 2022).

²⁰ For work dedicated to this question see, Christopher Southgate *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Michael J. Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Nicola Hoggard Creegan, *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2013); and Bethany Sollereder, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering: Theodicy Without a Fall* (Routledge, 2019).

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Other problems that fall under the umbrella of the problems of evil take the shape of objections against God's very existence either because an all-powerful and loving God is taken to be logically incompatible with evil, or the existence of evil functions as evidence against God's existence. In many ways, these atheological versions of the problem of evil can be seen as what can happen when the internal tensions are deemed unresolvable and the cognitive dissonance becomes such that belief in an all-powerful and loving God no longer seems possible. So, panpsychism might be seen as adding fuel to the atheist's fire by increasing the amount of supposed suffering and evil in the world to the maximum degree.

In these theoretical debates, philosophers sometimes distinguish between types of 'evil', from a very general concept to specific instances that are taken to be particularly destructive or unjustified, such as traumatic suffering or the suffering of non-human animals. Philosophers also distinguish between different types of problems, from the sheer quantity of evil to the unjust distribution of evil, and to the type of evil. Plausibly, panpsychism makes all of these kinds of problems of evils worse. By increasing the number of conscious individuals, panpsychism increases the sheer quantity of suffering. By increasing the number of types of conscious individuals, panpsychism increases the number of types of suffering. By moving consciousness down to the fundamental level of reality, panpsychism suggests that suffering could have existed long before the emergence of living organisms and exists across the far reaches of time and space. Panpsychism might then be taken to entail that suffering has a far wider, but no more just, distribution.

In fact, a panpsychist universe might be imagined to also worsen the seeming injustice of how suffering is distributed if it is assumed that most non-human creatures are suffering innocently. Particularly in the case of plant and mineral subjects, suffering would presumably occur in a total absence of either free will or the hope of immortality. If most of the subjects in a panpsychist universe do not have agency, then theistic responses such as the free-will defence, defences based on the capacity of subjects to construct meaning-making narratives, and probably even individualist versions of the soul-making defence, will be undermined.²¹

²¹ The soul-making defence, associated with Irenaeus and John Hick, roughly holds that humans are created immature or imperfect and that God allows suffering because it is the context which allows us to mature and develop virtue. See John

Alternatively, if some level of agency is granted to non-human creatures, as it is in most interpretations of Process thought whereby every ‘actual occasion’ can resist the lure of God towards the good, then this alleviates the apparent injustice of God with regard to innocent suffering or natural evils, but at the expense of maximally increasing the amount of moral evil that God permits to exist.²²

A response to all this might, quite straightforwardly, say that not all experiencing subjects are complex enough to experience suffering. Certainly, I know of no panpsychists who want to attribute the experience of pain, as undergone by humans and most animals, to the wider inanimate subjects of the cosmos. What would it even mean to say that a creature lacking a nervous system experienced pain? This is an important qualification, but it does not get the theistic panpsychist off the hook entirely.²³

It is too common in contemporary discussions of the many problems of evil to elide evil with suffering and suffering with some kind of pain.²⁴ But one authoritative definition of ‘evil’ in the Christian tradition is not reducible to physical or psychological pain but is a broader ontological category of privation, which includes at least some instances of pain. The idea of evil as privation comes to us from Saint Augustine, who states that evil has no positive causal existence parallel to goodness. Instead, evil is

Hick, “An Irenaean Theodicy”, in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (1981; repr. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 38–72.

²² For an excellent overview of how different positions referenced in this paragraph, such as free will defences, soul-making defences, Process theology and others, respond to the problem of animal suffering see Christopher Southgate, *Monotheism and the Suffering of Animals in Nature* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

²³ For an excellent discussion of the question of whether non-human creatures experience pain, and the theological significance thereof, see Christopher Southgate, “Introduction” in *God, Struggle, and Suffering in the Evolution of Life* (T&T Clark, 2025), 2.

²⁴ For example, Neil Messer identifies the problem as one that includes ‘pain, suffering, violence (including predation and parasitism), death and species extinction’, whereas Bethany Sollereder describes a pre-human, *unfallen* world as one that still includes ‘death, extinction, disease, (some) suffering and goodness’: Southgate, *God, Struggle and Suffering*, 23, 40, cf. 2.

always a corruption of some good thing.²⁵ If that is the case, then even stating that finite, non-human subjects are not perfect, whole, or flourishing each to their own maximum degree is sufficient to conclude that panpsychism would worsen the problem of evil. We do not need the phenomenon of pain to be cosmic for the problem of evil to be cosmic.

Here, a new possible path forward appears for the Christian panpsychist. Once ontological privation, as opposed to subjective pain or suffering, is made the central category of ‘evil’, then things shift considerably. The seventeenth-century polymath, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, defended a version of panpsychism on the basis that only a panpsychist universe is the best of all possible worlds, and thus the one that an all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing and perfectly rational God would choose to create.²⁶ His logic, roughly speaking, was that existence that includes conscious experience is more valuable, both to God relationally and in an absolute sense, than non-conscious existence. Thus, the best of all possible worlds would have an infinity of conscious experiencers and no non-conscious creatures. Non-conscious creations, like non-existence more generally, is for Leibniz a privation; to exist without being able to experience the presence of God is to exist in a state of lack, privation or evil. If to exist imperfectly is still a better world than not to exist at all, then likewise to exist as a very minimal conscious subject is better than to exist as a non-conscious subject. All things considered, for Leibniz, God is justified in creating a panpsychist world, thereby maximizing the ontological goods in the universe.

I wouldn’t push this argument very far, but there could be something comparable going on in Paul’s logic that if the whole creation suffers with Christ, then so too will the whole creation share in his glory. But, as I will argue in the final section of this paper, we can also read Paul’s text in a way that implies a different goal to Leibniz and other intellectual theodicies.

²⁵ For a discussion of this see Peter King, “Augustine on Evil”, in *Evil: A History*, ed. Andrew Chignell (Oxford University Press, 2019), 155–93.

²⁶ Leibniz, *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*, trans. Robert Latta (Clarendon Press, 1899), §69, 257. See Joanna Leidenhag, *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation* (T&T Clark, 2021), 95.



IV. Panpsychism, Romans 8, and nature therapy

Whether by Leibniz or Saint Paul, calculations of how much suffering is ‘worth it’, so to speak, do not sit well with many contemporary scholars. The central worry of anti-theodicy thinkers is articulated very well by Bethany Sollereder when she writes that classical theodicies have become ‘an institutionally acceptable way for the rich and powerful to tell those who are lamenting their oppression and suffering to simply “get over it.”’²⁷ Many in the anti-theodicy movement argue that we should not even attempt to answer the intellectual question of why God permits evil or suffering but instead focus entirely on the practical work of alleviating suffering. Sollereder points out, however, the cognitive dissonance and the inability to answer the question ‘Why is this happening to us?’ is itself part of human suffering. Providing a compassionate or therapeutic answer to these questions is part of the practical work that academics and church leaders can and should be doing. Taking a very similar line of argument, Amber Griffioen argues for a ‘therapeutic theodicy’ where, instead of attempting to take up a ‘God’s-eye view’ and imagine God’s reasons for permitting evil, academic theodicies should help people ‘imaginatively tak[e] up the standpoint of *Job* in his concrete suffering’ in order to be ‘*reorientated* with respect to their suffering—whether it be cognitively, affectively, or volitionally.’²⁸ Griffioen here suggests that theologians should help sufferers by engaging people’s imaginations in a way that allows for therapeutically beneficial ways of seeing God, their suffering, their community and the wider world.

I want to suggest that Paul, writing as a pastor and church-planter to a congregation under severe persecution, had a similar goal in mind. In Romans 8, Paul draws on panpsychist ideas, which were widespread in the

²⁷ Bethany N. Sollereder, “Compassionate Theodicy: A Suggested Truce Between Intellectual and Practical Theodicy”, *Modern Theology* 37, no. 2 (2021): 382–95, at 384, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12688>. I recommend Sollereder’s book *Why is There Suffering?: Pick Your Own Theological Expedition* (Zondervan, 2021). It guides readers through different pathways allowing them to make their own decisions regarding which view of God helps them survive and thrive in the midst of their own particular experience of suffering and does not force readers to endure descriptions of horrendous evils from history.

²⁸ Amber L. Griffioen, “Therapeutic Theodicy? Suffering, Struggle, and the Shift from the God’s-Eye View”, *Religions* 9, no. 4 (2018): 99.



ancient world, for the purpose of providing a therapeutic reorientation for his readers. Sollereder argues that the theodist should take the role of a ‘midwife’, who ‘help[s] usher another person’s work into the world.’²⁹ This provides a nice link to Paul’s metaphor of creation groaning *in the pains of childbirth* (v. 18). Paul’s role as a compassionate theodist, might be that of a midwife to the specific kind of therapy and hope that the creation provides. Griffioen invites theodists to imaginatively take up the standpoint of Job, a figure whose therapy is primarily given through a whirlwind and a series of divine speeches that focus his attention on his standing alongside other creatures.

What is today called nature therapy, ecotherapy, green therapy, or ecopsychology is not new. Before the invention of psychotherapy and psychiatric medicines, nature was one of the remedies that physicians could offer for mental illness. Today, a growing body of literature is providing empirical evidence for what many of us already intuitively know in our own lives – that being in nature, smelling the heather, feeling the cold North Sea on your bare feet, and seeing the view from the top of a Munro on a sunny day is deeply healing, to both body and soul.³⁰

Such ideas have sometimes been thought to be outside the bounds of Christianity, largely due to the concern that creation will replace God as the object of Christian worship and trust. Particularly when combined with a view that creation contains non-human, even non-animal consciousness, distant worries about pantheism, polytheism, or paganism can rear their heads. But the reorientation of those in the midst of suffering towards nature, as in Romans 8 and Job 38–41, offers a vision of nature firmly and definitively as created, not divine. Creation is depicted not as the source of our salvation, but as a community that shares in our suffering and hope. Based on interviews I have done, it is likely that it is this feeling of empathy and shared subjectivity without words, excuses, or justifications – without cognition and language – is exactly what many people find so therapeutic about emotional support animals and forest walks.

²⁹ Sollereder, “Compassionate Theodicy”, 390.

³⁰ For example, Chorong Song, Harumi Ikei and Yoshifumi Miyazaki, “Physiological Effects of Nature Therapy: A Review of the Research in Japan”, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13, no. 8 (2016): 781, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph13080781>.



Conclusion

I started this lecture by suggesting that I would honour Prof Shaw in two ways. First, by combining church and academia in my rhetorical style. It turns out that, in regard to the topic of the problem of evil, these very much belong together, for to tackle the problem of evil responsibly demands that we speak in both intellectual and pastoral registers. Second, in terms of Prof Shaw's interest in Process theology, I want to suggest that Process theology's panpsychist or panexperientialist enchantment of nature is a good move. However, when this is combined with a purely classical or intellectual debate regarding the problem of evil, panpsychism seems to only make the problem of evil harder for theists. Many Process theologians avoid this problem by claiming that God is not all-powerful, and for me this results in the unacceptable conclusion that God is not able to guarantee salvation for all creation. Instead, I have sought to offer a middle path, which includes a panpsychist reading of Scripture but does not decrease the level of certain hope that we can have in God's ultimate victory over sin and evil. To do this, I argued that Paul in Romans 8 uses the panpsychist ideas available to him through both his Jewish and Hellenistic intellectual contexts to offer a more therapeutic theodicy, whereby suffering Christians find solace and encouragement through their communion with the wider creation. By locating their suffering as part of a larger cosmic story of redemption, Christians can know that we are not isolated in our pain, either from other creatures or from the God who creates and sustains all things and will bring all things to final union with Godself.

Earlier I suggested that good sermons, unlike most academic articles, end with practical advice. The practical outworking of this panpsychist reading of Romans 8 is the encouragement to try sharing your laments and pain with the non-human world. The idea is not to approach nature in a purely instrumentalist way, looking for medicine that can be quickly extracted, but in a relational act of solidarity in shared pain and shared hope. This not only makes you feel better, but it also motivates a more ethical response from humanity to the suffering and groaning of nature that is, ever-increasingly, enslaved by human sin.

