

EVOLUTION AND SALVATION FOR NON-HUMANS

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Abstract

Evolution teaches us that our brain and mind have developed gradually from animals through various hominids to modern humans. But such a gradual evolution raises some theological questions, like the question of exactly which species will take part in God's salvation plan. Jan-Olav Henriksen discusses this question, and argues that any line we might draw between species will be arbitrary. He therefore suggests that all living beings will be saved. In part one of this article I shall criticize this view. As an alternative, I will in part two of the article explore whether a view that not all will be saved can give non-arbitrary answers to the question of who will be saved and who are created in the image of God.

Part 1: Jan-Olav Henriksen on salvation

In *Studia Theologica*, no 2, 2013, Jan-Olav Henriksen discusses the problem of salvation in light of evolution.¹ Since evolution shows us that there is a gradual difference between animals and humans - where is the borderline between those who are candidates for salvation and those who are not? It seems that any line one tries to draw will be arbitrary, anthropocentric and artificial - especially when we consider also the fact that there are humans that lack all kinds of mental capacities, but who God presumably can save.

The solution Henriksen discusses is «deep incarnation», a concept suggested by Niels Henrik Gregersen.² Deep incarnation is the view that God's incarnation is not just about God becoming human, but about God becoming sarx – an individual body in our universe, which should be understood as including everything from quarks to humans. From the idea of deep incarnation, Henriksen draws the following conclusion about salvation:

all life is in some way or another included in the salvific process. This may also make sense in more ways than already indicated: Given that we see salvation as overcoming estrangement from God (Sin), which in humans comes to a concrete expression in their lack of trust and faith in God, salvation can be seen as a process that God instantiates and fulfils on many levels and in different realms of reality. On the level of other species, it will mean that God eventually will restore their life in a way that brings unambiguous witness to God's goodness and power, whereas in humans, it will

¹ Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Distinct, Unique, or Separate?," *Studia Theologica* 67, no. 2 (2013).

² Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation: Why Evolutionary Continuity Matters in Christology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26, no. 2 (2010).

mean that God provides the opportunities for healing and restoration that lead to the same consequence.³

In part one of this article, I shall criticize Henriksen's solution to the problem of who can be saved. In part two, I shall offer an alternative where not all species will be saved, and try to offer non-arbitrary answers to the questions of who can be saved, and who are made in the image of God.

There is one problem I find particularly acute in Henriksen's proposal, and that is his claim that God in the future will "restore the life" of all living beings that have ever lived. There are many small animals which presumably have no conscious life, since they lack the kind of complex brain that seem required for having a conscious life. In what sense will it then be possible for God to restore the life of a non-conscious animal? The atoms it consisted of have long since been reused many times by other animals. It seems that any recreation of them will be to make a copy of an individual that once lived, and not to restore the life of an individual in the sense of continuing the life of this individual.

Derek Parfit argues well that any meaningful survival after death requires a psychological connectedness in an individual before and after death. Thus, it seems that for any individual to be saved, it requires being capable of experiencing being an individual over time. In the alternative proposal in part two, I suggest that a border should be drawn between those who have this capability and not, since I do not understand how salvation would make sense for those who have no experience of being individuals over time.

This problem is connected to another problem in Henriksen's proposal. He writes that salvation for animals will function as an "unambiguous witness to God's goodness and power". Evolution moves forth by randomness and selection. The randomness means that many individuals unfit for life will die immediately after coming into existence. I cannot see that these individuals contribute to bringing evolution forward towards more complexity. When it comes to non-conscious animals, I cannot see how restoring their life (by making copies of them) will function as an unambiguous witness to the power and goodness of God. Maybe there is an unknown answer to this question, but the proposal would be more coherent if an answer could actually be suggested.

I will mention a final problem, although it is not a big problem. Trying to avoid an unclear border by including all life in salvation, leads to a new unclear border, which is that between life and non-life. The concept of "life" does not have very clear borders. One plausible theory of abiogenesis is presented by the people at Jack Szostak's lab at Harvard.⁴ In their theory, RNA gradually developed and managed to enter fat cells, that managed to divide, and as time went by more advanced copying techniques developed and more advanced cell membranes developed. In such a process it is difficult to pinpoint an exact moment when life occurred.

³ Henriksen, "Distinct, Unique, or Separate?," 179. In the article, Henriksen discusses several similar questions all having to do with delimitation. But one of the questions is "can theology avoid making an arbitrary decision as to who belongs within the sphere of God's salvific activity and who does not?" (ibid., 173.). And the answer in this quote seems to answer the question of which species can be saved and what salvation means for them.

⁴ <http://molbio.mgh.harvard.edu/szostakweb/index.html>

Part two: An alternative view

In the following, I shall try to see whether non-ambiguous answers can be given to the questions of who will be saved and who are created in the image of God, if *not* all animals can be saved. I shall do so by trying to describe a coherent story about evolution and how God may possibly have related to this evolution. The story goes as follows:

I follow Keith Ward in thinking that God wanted to create an independent universe with independent beings for the sake of the unique values that would be brought forth in such a universe. To achieve this, he had to create a law-governed universe with indeterminism in it.⁵ God fine-tuned the universe for life, so that it was very plausible that given enough time, complex and conscious life would arise in it. There is a direction in evolution towards increased complexity, since when a population grows and resources are scarce, evolution will favor more complex animals that can eat the already existing animals.⁶ But when the world is genuinely indeterministic, God does not know exactly what will happen in the future. In order to answer later questions, I need to spend some time first on the evolution of conscious selves and experience of pain. These are questions still being discussed in science, which I do not have space to discuss here, so I have chosen some well-founded theories that I presuppose in this article.

Concerning the evolution of the self, I find the theory of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio to be well supported. He thinks that a protoself first developed which could give rise to a core self, which is a stream of conscious images. In more advanced animals, conscious memories could be stored in an autobiographical self, which is a neural structure that one can become consciously aware of. It contains memories of what has happened to an individual and feelings of what it is like to be that person. The core self evolved before the autobiographical self, and it is possible to have a core self without having an autobiographical self. The core self gives a conscious experience of being an individual here and now, while memories from the autobiographical self gives the feeling of being an individual persisting over time. The autobiographical self evolved gradually.⁷

When it comes to pain, we should distinguish three parts of an experience of pain. First, there is the biological event of signals running through different fibers being interpreted as pain in the brain. Second, there is the conscious experience of being in pain. Third, there is the conscious evaluation of pain as being something negative happening to an individual over time. The third aspect may be divided into several parts as well, but for the purposes of this article these three aspects suffice.

One may think that the three necessarily follow each other, so that one cannot have one without the others. But in fact, we know that these are independent aspects since we know of examples where one occurs without the next. There can be a biological pain event where

⁵ Keith Ward, *Divine Action: Examining God's Role in an Open and Emergent Universe*, 2nd ed.(Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2007).

⁶ *Pascal's Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding*(Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 65.

⁷ Antonio R. Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*(New York: Pantheon Books, 2010).

signals run through the relevant fibers and are interpreted as pain in the brain leading to the relevant action of avoiding pain. When you put your hand on a warm plate, usually your hand has actually been removed before you consciously experience the pain. Further, when pain is consciously experienced, it may nevertheless not be evaluated as negative. This has been seen in certain patients who feel pain, but do not care about it.⁸

Given these biological presuppositions, I am now ready to answer questions about God's relation to the evolving creation. As we know, creation evolves gradually. Being conscious at all may be an either-or-matter, although it may also be degrees of consciousness. The content of what one can be conscious of is very likely to be gradual. Having conscious experiences of sense impressions is different from having conscious experiences of memories, and I do not know which evolved first. But at one point it became possible for core selves to be conscious about memories from the autobiographical self. These would be the first animals capable of having a conscious experience of being an individual persisting over time.

This is relevant for several reasons. First of all, I find it plausible only to speak of survival after death for those individuals who have a structural foundation for a stream of consciousness. I here follow Derek Parfit's understanding of survival after death in *Reasons and Persons*. There, Parfit argues that it is coherent to say that a person survives death if there is psychological connectedness and/or continuity for any causal reason.⁹ I believe that God continuing a person's stream of consciousness after death can fulfill these criteria. What matters for the stream of consciousness to be continuous is not that there are no pauses in it (for there are pauses in our stream of consciousness every night), but that there is a causal chain connecting the structural foundation for the stream of consciousness, which it is if God recreates such a foundation for consciousness based on how it was when a person lived on earth.

I do not know when in evolution animals evolved the capacity for experiencing being selves over time. But I suspect that it may be later than many people think. My reason for that is twofold. The first reason is that neuroscience teaches us that very much behavior can take place non-consciously, so that animal behavior that is usually conscious in our life need not be in animal life. The second reason is that human brain scans show that the areas of the brain that are active when we are conscious, are very complex.¹⁰ Inductively, that suggests that the brain needs a very complex structure before it becomes conscious.

Even if some animals have a conscious experience of being individuals over time, that does not necessarily mean that they will be saved. But many have argued that no theodicy can be plausible if animal pain is not compensated for by salvation for animals.¹¹ That is a moral reason for God to include in salvation animals which have had experiences of being individuals who have suffered, and as seen they fulfill the necessary conditions for being individuals who can have their life restored at all.

⁸ Michael J. Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 48-57.

⁹ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 215.

¹⁰ Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 86-87.

¹¹ See for example Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*(Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1982), 202.

Even if God saves all with a continuous self-identity, that does not mean that he relates in the same way to all, or that they are all created in the image of God. As creatures developed more and more cognitive abilities, they also became more independent. At one point of time creatures were cognitively advanced enough to be conscious of alternatives and choose between one of them by desiring one alternative the most. At one moment of time – and I guess that was quite late in evolution, so that at least it was a hominid – a person was able to consider the alternative of having a relationship with another person or not.

Before this, no animal or human would have had any desire to reject relationship with God. But when it became possible to choose to reject relationship with others, a new scenario was actualized for God to relate to. I understand salvation as eternal relationship with God, but God can have two kinds of relationship with creatures on earth: non-chosen relationship with those who have not chosen relationship with God and self-chosen relationship between those who have chosen relationship with God. The latter kind is a more independent and equal kind of relationship than the first, and I suggest that God created this independent universe with the goal that such creatures should come to exist.

Something new and important happened when people became independent enough to be capable of rejecting relationship with others. One could object that this also happened gradually, for when are you free and independent enough to clearly have made a free choice of rejecting someone else? I grant that this ability also developed gradually, but at one point of time, the first individual actually considered two alternatives – having relationship with individual x or not – and desired not to have relationship with individual x. This is such an advanced mental event that I suspect that it happened somewhere in the hominid evolution. From now on I will refer to those who have such capacities as humans, but if other than humans have the same capacities, they should be included in what I say about humans from now on. In any case, I suggest that from that point on, God related in a new way to such kinds of creatures, presumably humans.

One could object to this, that even if one individual in a species of hominids had the mental capability of choosing to reject a relationship with someone else, that does not mean that all individuals in that species could. That is true, but the point is just to find a non-arbitrary point in time of hominid evolution where God starts to relate differently to them. The major difference in how God relates to the new kind of hominid is that this kind of human will be allowed to reject salvation. Elsewhere I have defended the claim that God will give all humans a real choice of salvation after death if they have not had it in their earthly life.¹²

Here I add that God started doing this when the first person had chosen to reject a relationship. A real choice means that God gives information that makes it possible to understand the consequences of the choice, and only those who are able to say yes or no have a real choice. Presumably, most people will choose salvation, but we can imagine someone who through experiences in life has developed him- or herself into a person who does not want relationship with God, and so rejects it. Such very independent humans will be allowed to reject God and salvation, and chose annihilation instead, but the others will be saved.

¹² Atle Ottesen Søvik and Bjørn Are Davidsen, *Eksisterer Gud? : En Drøfting Av Argumenter for Og Mot* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm akademisk, 2013), chapter ten.

This model of understanding who God saves, is similar to how many people already think about baptism. Small children unable to make a free choice are baptized and saved if they die as young, but when they grow up they become able to reject God. This development in the life of one individual human can be compared to the evolution of abilities in all humans.¹³

To sum up so far, in the history of evolution, there have first evolved living creatures which do not have any conscious experience of being individuals over time. There is no way for God to save these individuals, for a recreation of them would just mean making copies. Later in evolution, new creatures have conscious experiences of being individuals over time, and since these presumably also experience pain, God compensates by including them in salvation. Even later in evolution, mental capacities arise that makes it possible for individuals to consider alternatives. While this happen gradually, at one point the first person considers alternatives and chooses to reject a relationship with another person. At that point, God starts to offer people real choices of salvation or not after death. Presumably, most people will choose salvation, but we can imagine very independent persons rejecting salvation, and God accepts this rejection.

In addition to all these creatures which can be saved, I will add one more kind of creature. There are individuals who may not ever have any conscious experience of being an individual over time. It may for example be people born with serious brain damage, children dying in their mother's womb, or pets that humans love. These individuals may all have been loved in their life, or missed by someone, or at least have a place in the mental life of someone who will be saved, so that it would be good for someone who are saved that these were also saved. God may also recreate in the future all those whose existence will contribute positively for those who are already saved. That may be a child who died early in her mother's womb or a beloved pet, but not animals that nobody had a relation to that would make it good for them to be saved.

At this point, we can also consider what it means that humans are created in the image of God. That God at one point of time in evolution enters into a new kind of relationship to humans, is what it means that God creates humans in his image. Being created in the image of God, means to have a special relationship with God and to have a function.¹⁴ The special relationship is the kind of relationship which is a self-chosen relationship. Of course, at the one point in history where the first human rejects a relationship, is not a point where every individual has this capacity. But this self-chosen relationship should not be understood as a description of every individual human, but as a goal for all humans. And it is a goal that God gave for humans to actualize, when it actually became possible for them to do so because they now have the mental capacities. That people fulfill this goal to various degrees is no problem. Being created in the image of God means both to have a special relationship with God, and that God gives humans a special function. The special function is that God gave humans responsibility to take care of the planet. Responsibility can be given only to those who have an ability to choose, so again it makes sense that this is something God gives to humans at the

¹³ Thanks to Asle Eikrem, who suggested this parallel in a discussion of the topic.

¹⁴ Terje Stordalen, *Støv Og Livspust: Mennesket I Det Gamle Testamente*(Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1994), 59-63.; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Rev. ed., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia,: Westminster Press, 1972), 57-60.

point in evolution when this becomes possible for them to do. Of course, they will be able to live up to this responsibility to different degrees, but that is not a problem, since responsibility also comes in degrees.

This model avoids the objections raised against Henriksen's model above. It may seem intricate, complex and ad-hoc, but there are different elements in the theory that support each other, and the theory is a fine-grained and coherent support for a way of thinking that many people already have in relation to baptism of children.

One may still object that some of the borders are not sharp, but still gradual. Although the borders have been described in quite a precise way, I accept that not all the borders are totally exact. I think our knowledge of human evolution and the evolution of our mental capacities is so limited that human language so far is not precise enough to describe it in detail, and for that reason we lack the words to describe the exact borders. The same problem applies to the concept of life. Since we do not know exactly how life evolved, we do not have the precise words to describe the different stages and what should be counted as life. Concepts in our language often have fuzzy borders because of this, and it is a continuous job to try to make theoretic language more fine-grained and exact. While total clarity is a practically unachievable goal, being as precise as possible is continuously present goal towards which was the goal also for this article.

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