

2008

# An Ecologist Struggles with the Problem of Evil: Why Aldo Leopold and Baby Meadowlarks Argue against an All-powerful God

Larkin A. Powell

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [lpowell3@unl.edu](mailto:lpowell3@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/natrespapers>

---

Powell, Larkin A., "An Ecologist Struggles with the Problem of Evil: Why Aldo Leopold and Baby Meadowlarks Argue against an All-powerful God" (2008). *Papers in Natural Resources*. 436.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/natrespapers/436>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Natural Resources, School of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers in Natural Resources by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.



## **An Ecologist Struggles with the Problem of Evil: Why Aldo Leopold and Baby Meadowlarks Argue against an All-powerful God**

*Larkin A. Powell*

“A theology squares with validated materials. It cannot do otherwise.”<sup>1</sup>

—R. A. Cheville

I am a wildlife population ecologist; I study factors that cause populations of animals to increase or decrease in number. Ecologists<sup>2</sup> focus their studies on living and nonliving components of ecosystems. In this paper, I describe how my career as a scientist and ecologist has influenced my current theology. And I will describe how my theology has been shaped by my experiences with baby meadowlarks and the writings of Aldo Leopold.

Roy Cheville wrote in a 1971 letter to a “good friend”: “Today people of inquiring mind are wondering about the kind of God they can and do believe in, in the light of the universe and of the history of things as they see things. These people ask, ‘What kind of God can I believe in?’”<sup>3</sup> This question has perplexed me since I began my journey to become an ecologist.

First and foremost, I agree with Cheville’s assertion that a person’s theology must not conflict with facts known to that person. The facts that I am most familiar with are the natural laws and processes of our biological universe. Thus, my theology must square with my most current understanding of those scientific facts.

Second, I come to this discussion with a belief that a theology should guide and inspire one’s daily decisions. Robert McAfee Brown proposed that “. . . any future theology I do must put the welfare of children above the niceties of metaphysics. Any theology that provides for the creative growth of children will make it satisfactorily on all other scores.”<sup>4</sup> As a college student, I was first introduced to this idea by Robert Mesle;<sup>5</sup> the rubric provided me with a valuable starting point to evaluate my growing theology and make it relevant to my world. Even before I had a son of my own, I could see the value of a “child rubric” for theology.

We might find a useful example of this rubric in the decision our nation makes in preparedness for natural disasters. Hurricane Katrina recently caused the suffering and deaths of many people, including children. How do we respond? Should we investigate how our governmental agencies’ plans could be improved, with a goal to reduce death and suffering in a future disaster? Our response reveals something about our theology—perhaps we view the disaster as God’s will. Children suffered for a purpose. Why should we spend tax money to improve future planning and response? Or, perhaps we are

concerned about our children's welfare, and we would respond in ways that will reduce suffering in the future. I believe Brown would argue, with me, that theologies that do not provide for the welfare of children have the potential to be problematic on several counts.

Brown makes an assumption—perhaps unconscious or at least unwritten—in using this rubric: *human* children are the epitome of our concern. Is it possible that this rubric can lead to theologies that are not relevant to challenges facing our world? My central question is: “Are human children more worthy as a theological yardstick than young lions, young salamanders, young baboons, young trout, young eagles, or a section of land?” Here, I extend Brown's rubric, and I will argue that any theology I would consider doing must also provide for the welfare of baby meadowlarks. Mesle has written about approaches to human suffering that are “most likely to make the world better for children *and other living creatures*.”<sup>6</sup> My contribution to this discussion is to reflect on the implications of the additional phrase: “and other living creatures.” I consider the implications very relevant and critical to examine.

### **Theology Should Not Lag behind Facts**

Let me start by describing basic facts that exist in my world. Ecologists and bankers and architects live in the same world, but each profession must pay closer attention to specific portions of our world—or risk losing their jobs. Because of their profession, they are more keenly aware of certain facts. An architect, for example, could easily describe load-bearing ratios for pillars of different widths or made from different materials. A banker is aware of economic facts that would predict upturns or downturns in financial markets. Although these facts are available to me, as an ecologist and scientist, I profess ignorance in pillar design and financial predictions. But my profession has its set of basic principles:

1. *DNA and evolution.* DNA is the basic hereditary building block of life. Evolutionary change occurs and can explain the current diversity of our world, as well as the patterns of diversity found in the fossil record. Humans (*Homo sapiens*), according to fossil evidence, are the result of a long string of evolutionary changes; indeed, for much of hominid history, various forms of hominids existed concurrently. During our species's history, we shared the planet with another hominid species, the Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*). Human theologies tend to be very “*Homo sapien-centric*,” but the facts suggest that any relevant theology should be inclusive—at least to other hominid species that have been a part of our world. *How do our theologies speak, during the appropriate time period, to the welfare of Neanderthal children?*
2. *Life and death.* Death is a part of the natural world, as animals kill to survive. Natural death is a necessary, natural evil; without death, life would not exist. *How do our theologies speak to the welfare of a water buffalo being hunted by a lion?* It is to this question that I will return.
3. *Resilience of systems.* Disturbance and change are integral to ecosystem dynamics. When disturbed, the systems respond in quasi-predictable ways to return to equilibrium—a demonstration of system resilience. Cellular processes (e.g., respiration and photosynthesis), organismal processes (e.g., reproduction), and ecosystem processes (e.g., floral succession after a forest fire) follow natural laws. Scientists can describe accurately how these processes work. But, most importantly, we can also predict that these systems will have an inherent

resilience to disturbance. Body tissues will attempt to repair following an injury, animals have a drive to reproduce (and this drive will often increase following a decrease in population size), and ecosystems will reorganize and achieve equilibrium following a forest fire or other disturbance. *How do our theologies speak to the nature of nature?*

4. *Synergy*. Ecosystems have many components (producers, herbivores, carnivores, detritivores, abiotic nutrients, etc.). Aldo Leopold wrote, in the 1940s, “The outstanding scientific discovery of the twentieth century is not television, or radio, but rather the complexity of the land organism.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the interactions and dynamics (synergies) between components make ecosystems greater than the sum of their parts. These interactions create uncertainty in our predictions for how tissues will repair, how quickly animals will be able to reproduce, or what exact path an ecosystem will follow as it responds to a disturbance. With respect to the latter, a drought, another disturbance, an unexpected loss or abundance of a key nutrient, or the arrival of an invasive species can quickly alter the equilibrium that a system finds. As A. N. Whitehead stated, “It lies in the nature of things that the many enter into complex unity.”<sup>8</sup> *How do our theologies speak to the welfare of invisible synergies in ecosystems?*

I assume other professions are somewhat less familiar with these central facts in ecology, just as I am less familiar with the central principles used on a daily basis by other professionals. The unfamiliarity with basic facts is one source of potential theological conflict between scientists and non-scientists. Most people develop their theology by interacting with family, close friends, and relations. In this manner, theology has a “generation time,” as it is handed down with modifications from one generation to the next. A literal, fundamentalist use of scriptures, which provides insights to understanding of the natural world during a period of time 2000 YBP (New Testament) and earlier (Old Testament) certainly slows, or even prevents, the incorporation of new facts into each generation’s theologies.

A quick look at a timeline of discoveries in biology may exemplify why the average person on our earth may not have reconciled their theology with modern scientific knowledge. It has been only two generations since the structure of DNA was described by Watson and Crick. Only 200 years ago (<10 generations), Lewis and Clarke were expectantly exploring North America with an eye out for unicorns,<sup>9</sup> and during the same 200 years, North Americans started the process of understanding fossil evidence for what it was—long-extinct species, including other hominid species. It has only been 250 years since Darwin described the process of natural selection as an evolutionary force. And, it has only been 400 years since Galileo was fighting for his reputation with the Catholic Church over Copernicus’s newly proven fact that the sun was the center of our solar system—not the earth (Table 1).

It is exceedingly easy to find scriptures in the Bible that do not square with these scientific facts. In truth, the establishment of these facts should cause all theologians to reexamine their theology to be sure that it squares with these facts. At first glance, the cross section of beliefs of current Americans seems to provide evidence that incorporation of scientific facts into theology is a slow process.

Table 1. Timeline of selected important events in science.

<b>Year(s)</b>	<b>Event</b>
500 BC	Greek philosophers propose marine fossils once lived in sea (theory forgotten for centuries)
500 BC	Pythagoras suggests earth is a sphere (theory forgotten for centuries)
1514	Earth revolves around sun (Copernicus)
1546	First adequate fossil description (Agricola)
1605	First description of dinosaurs (Verstegan)
1624	Invention of microscope (Galileo)
1668	Earthquakes, not biblical flood responsible for marine fossils at high altitudes (Hooke)
1787	Unicorn theory debunked (Camper)
1788	First accurate S. American fossil reconstruction (Bru)
1799	First accurate N. American fossil reconstruction (Jefferson)
1803	Lewis and Clarke expedition (Jefferson suggested they might find living mastodons and unicorns)
1859	<i>Origin of Species</i> published (Darwin)
1870	Marsh and Cope rivalry names 130 dinosaur species
1897	Discovery of electrons (Thomson)
1912	Continental Drift theory (Wegener)
1959	DNA described (Watson and Crick)

But perhaps the seeming disregard for facts among religious conservatives is not just because of low rates of knowledge transmission. Perhaps it is because most people are not familiar with available theologies that square scientific facts with theology. Ed Larson writes, “Public-opinion surveys suggest that up to half of adult Americans believe the basic tenets of young-earth creationism, even though it contradicts virtually everything we know about modern physics, astronomy, geology, and biology.”<sup>10</sup> Larson attributes the spread of creationism to the “continuing appeal of religion.” Larson argues, “People aren’t persuaded by creationist arguments and then become religious. Rather, they seek meaning and community in religion and then conclude that young-earth creationism must follow. If forced to choose between God and evolution, most people will choose God.”

My assertion is that there is a current ministerial failure to serve congregations with facts and theological options that square with the facts of our world. I submit that “fact incorporation” and “theology squaring” are processes that all ministers should strive to support, if the theologies of their flock are to be relevant to the modern world. Indeed, Cheville wrote:

The facts of ever so many fields can assist us in constructing our theology. They can serve us in checking our theology. They can save us from building something narrow on one or two fields of experience. A discriminating [person] who sees something of the vastness, the antiquity, and the geologic processes of the earth and of the planets and galaxies and the space around the earth cannot build [their] theology on the idea that the earth was put together instantaneously in 4004 BC. [A person] uses the findings of many sciences in building up [their] picture of the universe and in seeing how it has come to be. As [they see] all this, God becomes more wonderful.<sup>11</sup>

### **Finding Sacredness in Nature**

Some view the universe as a dichotomy, composed of natural and supernatural phenomena. Early humans used the powers of a god to explain the unknown, or supernatural. Under this view, which is still popular, scientific discoveries may appear to threaten theologies. That is, as scientific discoveries continue to be made, the set of unexplainable phenomena becomes smaller and smaller. Rain is no longer seen as a gift from a god, but a result of humid air releasing moisture under precise conditions that can be predicted up to a week in advance with high levels of certainty. Seizures in a child are no longer seen as a demonic influence, but a result of a brain injury that can be identified and corrected through surgery.

If one holds this dichotomous view of the universe, and if one's theology identifies the supernatural as the domain of god(s), then it is easy to see how science is threatening to some theologies. Indeed, under such theologies, science and religion are like oil and water and may never mix. As science advances, theism loses ground. This is an unfortunate view.

I prefer the process worldview,<sup>12</sup> in which no line is drawn between the natural and the supernatural. The natural and supernatural are nature; we can support those who study nature as they seek to find order and answers. New facts provide new questions and new unknowns. As Aldo Leopold wrote: "The ordinary citizen today assumes that science knows what makes the [natural] community clock tick; the scientist is equally sure that he does not. He knows that the biotic mechanism is so complex that its workings may never be fully understood."<sup>13</sup> Thus, the line between known and unknown is blurry at best. The advantage of the non-dichotomous worldview is that sacredness or divinity may be found throughout nature, not only in the unexplainable portions of the universe.

I find sacredness in nature—in the synergies that functionally support ecosystems, and in the resilience of systems to maintain equilibrium, or arrive at an ordered state (if only for a short time). Certainly, I find the twenty-five day growth of a baby meadowlark, from newly formed egg to the fledgling's first attempts at flight, miraculous.<sup>14</sup>

### **Aldo Leopold**

Aldo Leopold is partially responsible for initiating a change in our culture's worldview with regard to the relationship between humans and our natural world. He taught the first course in wildlife management and was a professor at the University of Wisconsin, after serving as a biologist for the U.S. Forest Service for many years. During his university years at Madison, life in the Leopold house meant leaving their family's

Madison home for weekends at “The Shack”—allowing Leopold time to reflect on the land around him. In 1949, Leopold posthumously published *A Sand County Almanac*. It is a collection of personal reflections by Leopold about the world surrounding The Shack in Sand County, Wisconsin. Leopold leads the reader through a year on his land, reflecting on nature’s lessons and clues for sustainable living. The conclusion to the *Almanac* was, for its time, a ground-breaking essay entitled “The Land Ethic.” Leopold’s main thesis is that humans exist in community with the animals and plants and the entire ecosystem around them. Commenting on the 1914 extinction of the passenger pigeon, Leopold wrote:

It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of the species. We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that [we] are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise.

Above all we should, in the century since Darwin, have come to know that [we], while captain of the adventuring ship, [are] hardly the sole object of its quest, and that [our] prior assumptions to this effect arose from the simple necessity of whistling in the dark.

These things, I say, should have come to us. I fear they have not come to many.<sup>15</sup>

Leopold called for a new ethic on our use of the land, an ethic that elevates the land (and associated plants and animals) to equal status with humans: “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, this was a radical change from the admonition in Genesis for humans to use the land for their needs—to have dominion over the land.<sup>17</sup> Leopold’s writing effected change, and his ethic continues to become more relevant with each ecological issue that society faces.

And, Leopold was specific in his writing, regarding the effect that fundamental, traditional theologies can have on the land.<sup>18</sup> Leopold writes: “Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”<sup>19</sup> “Abraham knew exactly what the land was for: it was to drip milk and honey into Abraham’s mouth.”<sup>20</sup>

It appears that Leopold and I agree that some theologies and ethics do not address the welfare of our ecosystems. I submit theology must become relevant to current ecological issues that impact society. As Leopold suggests:

No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial.<sup>21</sup>

How, then, do we incorporate an ethic for the land in our theology? First, we must kneel in the grass and contemplate a nest of baby meadowlarks.

### **Baby Meadowlarks**

My research focus is on birds. For the purposes of this presentation, I will describe one species, the western meadowlark (*Sternella neglecta*). It is a common grassland songbird in western Nebraska.<sup>22</sup> Meadowlarks return from migration to breed in early spring and may raise as many as two broods of young if their luck holds. But, it is rare that their luck holds. In fact, for a given nest of baby meadowlarks, there is a 70 percent chance that a predator or some other calamity will befall the nest, resulting in no offspring from that nest. Thus, it is with the same luck as an extremely effective major league baseball batter (30 percent) that a clutch of meadowlarks survives to leave the nest.

My students have placed video cameras on meadowlark nests, and our research records a shocking array of natural enemies of baby meadowlarks. Nestling meadowlarks are essentially helpless creatures before they leave the nest. They cannot thermoregulate for two to three days and are helpless to defend themselves against predators. Nestlings begin their first day in the nest as immobile and naked; their mobility in twelve days increases so that they have the ability to hop one to two feet. Although their growth and development is amazingly quick, they are no match for predators. Snakes can eat all the nestlings from a nest in about thirty minutes. Death by snake involves, assumedly, some initial pain during capture, and then suffocation inside the snake as the digestive process begins. Small weasels or other carnivores take nestlings from nests and eat them—relatively quick deaths, compared to death by mouse. Our videos have captured small mice at nests, spending twenty-five minutes slowly gnawing on still-live nestlings. Although the predator appears timid to humans, this experience is probably the most drawn out and agonizing of the deaths our cameras have recorded. Other biologists have recorded fire ants swarming into a nest; a similarly gruesome manner of death. Small birds can also be eaten by deer, cattle, and avian predators; they can also drown in floods or bake during droughts.

Clearly, baby meadowlarks often suffer. If we heed the ethic espoused by Aldo Leopold, their suffering is equal in importance to human suffering. If human life expectancy is a valid measure, human suffering may be—from a societal perspective—at its lowest point in history. Advances in medical technology, food availability, and relatively stable economies and governments are to blame for “unnatural” reductions in physical suffering. Certainly suffering still exists locally and individually, with many localized conflicts, diseases, natural disasters, and personal decisions that lead to suffering in others. The twentieth century was labeled by some as the century with the most egregious events of human suffering. That said, a remarkably long series of fortunate events have led me to encounter relatively low levels of personal suffering in my life—thus far. But, meadowlarks do not have police to guard their nests, and they have no acute care centers to heal their injured offspring. As I monitor nests and ponder their mortality levels, meadowlarks remind me that suffering exists. How do our theologies relate to the suffering of meadowlarks? It is in this context that I have struggled with the problem of evil.

## Nature and Evil

Philosophers often distinguish natural evil from moral evil. Definitions are numerous, but essentially *natural* evil is defined as a bad event occurring *without* the intervention of an agent; *moral* evil occurs because of the *intentional* action of an agent. Two points become important. First, because both definitions rely on the designation of a “bad event,” evil of any kind relies on a value judgment. And second, we normally substitute “person” for “agent.” Thus, at the heart of the distinction is the assumption that humans have a special, creative capacity to make conscious decisions, which can potentially result in bad events.

I noted earlier that ecosystems rely on inherently evil natural events. Prey must die for predators to live—by some definitions, these are *natural* evils. But, if we follow Leopold’s call to view humans as an equal participant in nature, our view of human evils as uniquely immoral becomes murky, at best. Male deer often kill other male deer during mating fights: are these deaths less morally evil than a distraught human male who kills his rival? Llamas instinctively protect sheep from coyote predation: is this act of charity less good than a fireman saving a child from a burning building? Your answer to these questions depends on your theology and your evaluation of current knowledge of animal intelligence. But regardless, these examples show that humans are not unique in our behaviors. We are another animal.

I suggest that it is not especially useful to distinguish between natural and moral evil—especially if our purpose is to develop a theology that provides for the welfare of nature. One of the best methods for defining evil that I have read is a rubric suggested by Mesle;<sup>23</sup> that “we judge an event to be evil if we believe we have a *moral* obligation to *prevent* it if we can.”<sup>24</sup> But, even this rubric is stretched by our required “and all living creatures” phrase. Most of us would rescue a nest of meadowlarks from an approaching snake—trying to prevent what we perceive as an impending evil event. But, posting guards at all meadowlark nests would not be a good decision for snakes or the ecosystem. We must be able to find a theology in which bad things happen routinely to people, deer, and meadowlarks.

As a first step toward that theology, let me nominate an alternate rubric—from Leopold—for how we assess good and evil. “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”<sup>25</sup> The strength of this rubric is that it does not depend on a dichotomous view of evil (natural or moral). Human values still play a pivotal role: however, we must ethically decide how do define integrity, stability, and beauty.

## The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil explores a conundrum: if God is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (exists everywhere), and all-loving, why does evil exist?<sup>26</sup> Many philosophers and theologians have wrestled with explanations for why bad things happen to people. But to my knowledge, bears, meadowlarks, and the land have been ignored by many theologians. The problem of evil becomes relevant in a quest for a theology that is relevant to “all living creatures.” I believe that the process God, as described by Whitehead, makes sense in light of all facts. Most critically, the process

paradigm enables me to understand and respond when bad things happen to people and meadowlarks.

*Should we discard reason?* I started this essay with the assertion that theologies must square with facts. I work in a profession that maintains that knowledge and concepts must be based on repeatable observations. Bayle<sup>27</sup> and Calvin<sup>28</sup> suggested that it is not possible to reason when it comes to theology. By Cheville's assertion, I reject the Calvinistic argument. Using reason, let me address some common responses, adding my perspective as an ecologist, to the problem of evil.

*Does evil exist so that good can exist?*<sup>29</sup> Leibniz asserted in the seventeenth century that God surely would have created an evil-free world, if that were preferred. So, what we see is the perfect state that God wanted—the best of all possible worlds. Evil is evidently necessary. This view has supporters today—Stephen Davis writes that “some evil will be used causally by God to help produce the great good of the kingdom of God.”<sup>30</sup> I think Leibniz and Davis make a critical point: evil is a part of the natural world. But, a God that would prefer a world with evil in it does not offer a comforting shoulder to human suffering. And a God that would use evil—even to create eventual good—is not a good role model for anyone. Using that logic, we can legitimize human slavery or forced medical experimentation. Using this logic, we could argue that ethical hunting is not necessary. Or we could argue that any poison or trap (regardless of speed of death or deaths to non-target animals) is acceptable to use to cull coyotes, so long as reduction of coyote numbers will be a good thing for society. We could argue that there is no reason to use ethical standards for research animals; any pain or suffering is legitimate as long as the results improve health or management of natural systems.

*Is suffering the result of free will?* Free will is a fundamental component of many theologies—that evil exists because God gave humans free will. Evil is the result of human decisions, not God's decisions. In a world without evils, no morals or religious virtues would develop. And harkening back to Leibniz, supporters of this theology argue that a world with evils, allowed by God through free will, is preferred to a world without evils—because the process establishes the kingdom of God. Indeed Stephen Davis writes: “...in the kingdom of God, when redemption is complete, all previous sufferings will pale into insignificance next to the glory that is to be revealed to us.”<sup>31</sup> In opposition, I submit that an all-powerful God that would stand by during the slave trade or the Crusades or the Holocaust or the extinction of passenger pigeons is not relevant to individuals who suffered in those events.

I also argue that free will, in the traditional sense, is a deleterious concept to our relationship with our world. That is, free will fuels the notion that humans were hand-designed by God—set apart in a dichotomous manner from other animals with a uniquely human ability to reason and be creative. The free will concept perpetuates the reasoning that humans are somehow more important than other components of ecosystems—because humans have markedly more sophisticated abilities to reason and be creative. In actuality, the animal kingdom is best viewed as a gradient of species with different capacities for neurological function. Humans certainly appear (from our point of view) to be at one end of that spectrum, while sponges, corals, and jellyfish are on the other. But all animals make decisions and many animals can be creative. All animals can cause and

endure suffering; evil is a part of nature. If God values the individual person or meadowlark,<sup>32</sup> the free will argument fails our rubric.

*Does suffering result from sin?*<sup>33</sup> A secondary explanation for evil, following the “free will” argument, is that evil is God’s will as punishment for mistakes made when free-will decisions are made. This argument is, of course, impossible to reconcile with a loving God. Regardless, leading religious conservatives<sup>34</sup> have claimed Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters were the result of human sins. It is comforting to me that the Community of Christ has stated its opposition to this theological response to evil.

God, the Eternal Creator, weeps for the poor, displaced, mistreated, and diseased of the world because of their unnecessary suffering. Such conditions are not God’s will. Open your ears to hear the pleading of mothers and fathers in all nations who desperately seek a future of hope for their children. Do not turn away from them. For in their welfare resides your welfare.<sup>35</sup>

The illuminating vision of a weeping God leads me to my last theological consideration.

*God suffers with us.* Process theism suggests a different concept of divine power. The process God is envisioned as the soul of the world,<sup>36</sup> both influencing and influenced by world events.

Process theology provides a holistic view of nature. Rather than a duality of humanity (with freedoms) and nature (rigidly determined), the world (from atoms to single-celled and multi-celled organisms to humans) is viewed as a series of beings with increasingly greater freedom.<sup>37</sup> With greater freedom comes greater potential for both good and evil; thus, with greater freedom comes greater responsibility.

Freedom by humans and all animals to make decisions is a result of millennia of evolution,<sup>38</sup> each advance a sacred event. Suffering is a part of nature. Snakes kill baby birds. People choose to do bad things. But some baby birds also grow to sing. And some people do wonderful things to help their world. Birds and people make creative decisions. Thus we have power. Divine power, because it is shared power, is not controlling; Divine power is persuasive. This is a different perspective, to be sure—with vast implications. David Ray Griffin writes

Although the two ideas of divine power have coexisted side by side, the idea of coercive omnipotence has been dominant. Persons in our culture have thereby been taught, in countless ways, to equate divine power, and thereby real power, with the power to control, the power to coerce, the power to destroy . . . Given these images and feelings embedded deep in our psyches, it is very difficult to feel that some other kind of power—in particular, the power of suffering, persuasive love—is real power, divine power, power worthy of worship.

The idea of God suggested by process theism can solve the problem of evil, is intellectually satisfying in many other respects, and would have many beneficial psychological and social effects . . . And yet it is widely perceived to be religiously inadequate, because it does not portray God as having the kind of power with which religious awe has been associated from childhood on.<sup>39</sup>

The power of persuasion, to me, seems to resemble the power of nature's synergies and resilience. This type of Divine presence makes sense in an ecosystem of individuals struggling to survive—each called forward by a Divine who can equally love and value predator and prey. I conclude that process theology measures up to the rubric, providing for the welfare of all living creatures—a theology in which all creatures matter, and God acts to persuade all creatures through the eons of evolution.

### **Conclusion: Ethical Extensions**

I conclude by coming back to Leopold's statement of morality—that good things tend to “preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.”<sup>40</sup> This statement of morality should lead us to action. As Mesle has written, we should support “views which place the responsibility firmly on our shoulders to make the world better for children and other living creatures.”<sup>41</sup>

We have also considered Brown's rubric: “Any theology that provides for the creative growth of children will make it satisfactorily on all other scores.”<sup>42</sup> As my arguments suggest, I believe additional clarification is critical here. In the future of our earth, there may be scores of critical decisions that should place the welfare of human children secondary to the welfare of baby meadowlarks or other creatures. Such conflicts—for example, the comparative value of baby salmon and human children—are already being debated and are the hardest of political decisions. But if the welfare of human children is used as the yardstick for the moral decision in each instance—if we optimize our decisions for the benefit of human children—we may end up destroying a portion of the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.

Perhaps you view nature's integrity as important in your theology as well. Indeed, even the musical *Oklahoma!* recognizes that “We know we belong to the land, and the land we belong to is grand!” But I submit that we need to constantly contemplate how our theology serves the welfare of nature. Leopold reflects on another familiar song:

This sounds simple: do we not already sing our love for the obligation of the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter downriver. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species. A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these “resources”, but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state. In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.<sup>43</sup>

What do my thoughts mean for ministry—the focus of this forum? First, we should constantly reevaluate the relevance of our theologies as individuals, congregations, and denominations. The land ethic calls for defensible choices that preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of our planet. Second, we should embrace science. Science-squared theologies, as Cheville encouraged, embolden us to encourage education and welcome new challenges as we explore divinity. Third, we should

celebrate nature. A symbiotic relationship with the land calls us to leave our church sanctuaries behind as we explore sacredness in the world around us.

My purpose, here, has been to describe a call that I believe resonates in nature—a divine call to live as a member of the natural community. A call that urges injured, struggling humans forward to find goodness and fulfill purpose. A call that similarly urges baby meadowlarks forward in their struggle to leave the nest, regardless of the odds.

I hope I have captured Leopold's true feelings—as reflected in his writings. Leopold died in 1948, helping a neighbor fight a grass fire. It was the final, ironic chapter of his life. He died, perhaps painfully, as he lived—preserving the integrity, stability, and beauty of our planet. I find a grand challenge in Leopold's ethic. Responding to this challenge, I argue, necessitates changes in our ethics, our theology, and our lives. These are not easy changes. Leopold acknowledged this struggle: “We shall never achieve harmony with land, any more than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty for people. In these higher aspirations the important thing is not to achieve, but to strive.”<sup>44</sup>

### Notes

1. R. A. Cheville, *The Field of Theology* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1959).
2. “Ecology” is derived from the Greek *oikos* (household); ecology is literally, “study of the household.”
3. M. L. Ritchie, *Roy Cheville: The Patriarch Years* (Lamoni, Iowa: Center for Christian Leadership, Graceland College, 1997).
4. R. M. Brown, “Starting Over: New Beginning Points for Theology,” *Christian Century* 97, no.18 (May 14, 1980): 546.
5. R. Mesle, “Suffering, meaning, and the welfare of children: what do theodicies do?” *The American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (September 2004): 247-264.
6. *Ibid.*, 249.
7. A. Leopold, *Round River: from the journals of Aldo Leopold*, ed. L. B. Leopold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953 [1972]), 146.
8. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: an essay in cosmology*, corrected edition. ed. D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press 1978 [1929]), 21.
9. G. Lantz, “A realm of American originals: three hundred years after the Voyage of Discovery, the findings of Lewis and Clark are still affecting our everyday lives,” *American Forests* (Summer 2003). On-line: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1016/is\\_2\\_109/ai\\_106141723](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1016/is_2_109/ai_106141723) Accessed: 1 January 2008.
10. E. Larson, “New Creationist Museum a Window into Popular Belief”, *ugaresearch Magazine* (Winter 2008) (Athens: University of Georgia), 32-33.
11. R. A. Cheville, 85-86. Gender neutral changes are mine.
12. Whitehead.
13. A. Leopold, “The Land Ethic” in *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948 [1987]), 205.
14. From the Latin *miraculum*: something wonderful.
15. A. Leopold, “On a Monument to the Pigeon” in *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*, 109-110.
16. A. Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” 204.
17. Genesis 1: 26-30 (New Revised Standard Version).
18. A well-written essay on this topic is: C. E. Little, 2007 [on-line]. “Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold: Nature Spirituality and the American Earth Ethic.” [www.earthspirituality.org/archive/little\\_seminar-07-01.htm](http://www.earthspirituality.org/archive/little_seminar-07-01.htm) [accessed 2 January 2008].
19. A. Leopold, “Foreword,” viii.
20. A. Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” 204-205.
21. *Ibid.*, 209-210.

22. The western meadowlark is Nebraska's state bird.
23. I believe Mesle was addressing moral evil.
24. Mesle, 262.
25. A. Leopold, "The Land Ethic," 224-225.
26. David Hume, the eighteenth century philosopher, stated the logical problem of evil when he inquired about God, "Is He willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" W. L. Craig, *No Easy Answers: Finding Hope in Doubt, Failure, and Unanswered Prayer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990).
27. Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) used the evidence of the irrationality of Christianity to emphasize that the basis of Christianity is faith in God. D. R. Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A process theodicy* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Press, 2004), 135.
28. J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2007 reissue (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 117-126.
29. Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) stated: "I do not believe that a world without evil, preferable in order to ours, is possible; otherwise it would have been preferred. It is necessary to believe that the mixture of evil has produced the greatest possible good: otherwise the evil would not have been permitted." D. R. Griffin, 131-149.
30. S. T. Davis, "Free Will and Evil" in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, 2nd edition, S. T. Davis, ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 83-84.
31. Ibid.
32. One of my favorite hymns is written by J. J. Vajda: "God of the sparrow, God of the whale, God of the swirling stars, How does the creature say 'Awe', How does the creature say 'Praise'."
33. P. Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 54-58.
34. Pat Robertson, Hal Lindsey, Charles Colson. <http://mediamatters.org/items/200509130004> .
35. Doctrine and Covenants 163:46.
36. C. Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 59.
37. D. R. Griffin, "Creation and the Problem of Evil" in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, 120.
38. Ibid., 122.
39. D. R. Griffin, *Evil Revisited* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 209-211.
40. A. Leopold, "The Land Ethic," 204-205.
41. Mesle, 249.
42. Brown, 546.
43. A. Leopold, "The Land Ethic," 204.
44. A. Leopold, *Round River: from the journals of Aldo Leopold*, 155.

**Cite this work as:**

Powell, L. A. 2008. An ecologist struggles with the problem of evil: why Aldo Leopold and baby meadowlarks argue against an all-powerful God. *Theology* 16:96-108.