

## BETWEEN THE SPECIES

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# Theodicy and Animals

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It is widely acknowledged among those philosophers and theologians who have given the matter much thought that the fact of animal suffering challenges Theism in a distinctive way. Standard attempts to reconcile human suffering with a perfectly powerful and benevolent deity don't seem to apply easily to the case of animals. Animals can hardly be said to deserve their suffering or be morally improved by it, nor is it generally supposed that animals will be compensated for their pain in an afterlife. On the face of it, then, animal pain appears to be a bothersome evil still left over when all the theodicy work is done. I would like to consider some of the attempts to deal with animal suffering in theodicy, showing why each ultimately fails. Rather than attempting to provide the successful theodicy myself, I will try to show what the theodicies reveal about the relationship between Theism and moral attitudes toward animals.

### **I. The “Corrupted Creation” Thesis:**

One way to try to avoid the problem altogether is to connect the problem of animal suffering with that of natural evil generally in the following way. Suppose there are angelic beings with free will who rebel against God and as a result of their fall, corrupt the natural order in such a way as to cause animal pain. C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup> and many others endorse this view, contending that the evil of predation is a direct result of this angelic fall. The idea that nature was thus perverted in this way goes back at least to John Calvin<sup>2</sup> and has been supported more recently by Alvin Plantinga.<sup>3</sup> The virtue of this approach is that both animal and human suffering can be held to be the result of the abuse of freedom of the will—whether by angels or people.

I don't want to discuss the Corrupted Creation thesis at length because its weaknesses seem apparent enough. Many of those who embrace the thesis situate it in a context of a larger theodicy. The thesis is rejected by some for largely theological reasons, but there are other very basic reasons to be suspicious. First, evolution provides a very strong explanation for the existence of predation. There just is no evidence for a different, kinder and gentler natural order that preceded the one we have. Second, an omnipotent deity presumably could have prevented animal suffering even if the natural order were corrupted. The creator could hardly escape responsibility for animal suffering because it

was caused by other creatures under the creator's power. Third, from the standpoint of the arguer from evil, the problem of animal pain is a fact that counts against the existence of God. It would be odd indeed to defend the thesis that God exists by appealing to angels or other creatures whose existence is intrinsically even more doubtful. Fourth, and this is somewhat *ad hominem*, while not all Theists endorse the design argument for the existence of God, most want to say that God is nevertheless revealed in nature: as the Psalmist said, "The heavens declare the glory of God. The firmament sheweth his handiwork."<sup>4</sup> It's just hard to see how nature can provide evidence both for the existence of God while blaming fallen angels for all that went wrong. Fifth, it is unfair for innocent creatures to suffer for the crimes of others. An angelic fall could hardly reconcile the fact of animal suffering with a perfectly powerful and just God.

The Corrupted Creation thesis, then, appears to be a false trail. There is no positive reason to accept it. Nevertheless, this approach does something that most of the other theodicies don't: it recognizes animal pain as a very serious evil. A Theist might well take the human moral relationship to animals seriously and offer this theodicy to explain God's tolerance of animal suffering. While the Corrupted Creation thesis falls short of such an explanation, our animal-loving Theist does at least have a consistent position. But the price of consistency is implausibility.

## II. The "Animals Are Non-Conscious" Thesis

Suppose we had good reasons for thinking that animals do not actually *feel* pain, that their pain behavior is not supported by genuine unpleasant conscious mental states. Clearly, if pain is non-conscious, it would not be an intrinsic evil, and thus the argument from animal pain loses most of its force. At most, one might argue that *apparent* animal pain provides some evidence against theism but perhaps not much. The deeply troubling features of animal pain disappear if it can be shown that their "pain" is actually non-conscious. However, the evidence in favor of genuinely conscious animal pain appears to be strong indeed. Nevertheless, Peter Harrison argues that we do have good reason to think that animals do not feel pain.<sup>5</sup>

That animals are conscious of their pain states might appear to be overwhelmingly obvious, but Harrison insists this evidence is inconclusive. For example, animal *behavior* provides grounds for believing that animals genuinely feel their pains, since many animals behave much in the same way as humans do when we are in pain. However, while the analogy between humans and animals seems persuasive, Harrison cites evidence pointing to a quite different conclusion. Pain-behavior by itself does not decisively demonstrate that animals have conscious pain states; after all, a non-conscious robot could be designed that simulated pain-behavior when damaged, as Harrison correctly points out. In addition, animals commonly fake injury and often do not exhibit pain-behavior when they are injured. In the first sort of case, presumably all agree that there is no genuine conscious pain state that leads to the relevant behavior—the pain behavior is, after all, faked. In the second type of case, the principal indicator of a conscious pain-state (i.e., the pain-behavior) is absent. This point, of course, is that behavior is no reliable guide to the actual mental state in question.

Pain-behavior may not imply conscious pain, but another reason to think that animals actually feel their pain is the similarity between human and infrahuman *neurological* structure. In this case, Harrison questions the inference from the physical to the mental. It does not *logically* follow that a certain physical state must give rise to a certain mental state. While the connection between many mental and brain states seems fairly well established, there are, as Harrison is quick to point out, many exceptions. He cites the case of a human who was able to see even though he had no visual cortex. Similarly, some birds are capable of vision without the help of a visual cortex. Thus, the subjective state seems to occur without its supposed neurological cause. Harrison also invokes Nagel's, "What's It Like To Be a Bat?"<sup>6</sup> to support his contention that knowledge of animal neurological structure does not provide knowledge of animal experience. But it is the animal *experience* of pain that is supposed to count against the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent deity.

So far Harrison has argued that neither behavior nor neurological structure is sufficient evidence for animal consciousness of pain, but what about evolutionary evidence? Pain tends to reinforce behavior that promotes survival and well-being and discourage behavior that does not for both humans and animals. However, Harrison contends that this functional role can be satisfied without the phenomenal quality of pain. All that is required is pain-behavior in the presence of noxious stimuli. We simply have no reason to assume on the basis of evolution that animal experience of pain is anything like that of humans. Indeed, Harrison urges we have reason to think that animals do not and cannot experience pain in this way.

While the functional purposes of pain-behavior do not require that a subject actually feel the pain, rational behavior can and does make use of the experience of pain. For a rational agent, the experience of pain can count as a *reason for* or against certain courses of action. Harrison contends that animals cannot be agents in this sense, so there is no question of them experiencing pain. The experience of pain for them would be superfluous. Furthermore, humans' higher cognitive capacity enables them to have a continuity of experience through which they can "own" their pain. Animals lack this ability, so animals lack the awareness of pain.

If Harrison's arguments had succeeded, the need to work out a theodicy for animal pain would all but disappear. True animal pain would not exist, and hence could not count against the power or goodness of God. But his argument is not successful. His strategy was to take up the considerations in favor of animal pain one by one and show that none implies that animals really feel their pains. Then he tries to offer an account of pain consciousness that would preclude the possibility of conscious animal pain. While none of the arguments he considers *individually* establishes that animals experience pain, Harrison overlooks the fact that *cumulatively* they provide very strong support for that thesis. Behavioral and neurological evidence together with arguments from evolution are persuasive indeed. And normally in human cases, we do not require more.

The best evidence that any human other than oneself can experience pain is the same sort

of behavioral and neurological evidence that we have for animals. And the evidence provides as much support for animal pain as it does for human pain. Of course, humans can engage in linguistic behavior as well, providing further evidence of being in pain. You can say, but your dog cannot, “I am in pain.” But linguistic behavior is just more behavior, and the sorts of Cartesian doubts that applied to less sophisticated forms of pain-behavior apply here as well. Normally we don’t take such doubts seriously in the human case, and, contrary to Harrison’s contention, there appears to be little reason to take them seriously in the case of animals. Indeed, a linguistic report of one’s pain is, at Wittgenstein observed, a special *learned* pain-behavior. And this learned pain-behavior is unintelligible apart from the nonlearned varieties. Both sorts of behavior seem to provide expression to a normally conscious state.

Harrison wants to deny that animal learning requires conscious pain. But at least some forms of learning are inexplicable except on the assumption that the organism feels pain. While it’s pain-behavior, not pain itself, that’s adaptive, it’s hard to understand how the adaptive pain-behavior can be reinforced, unless an organism can experience pain. Harrison attempts to make sense of such learning by describing it as acquired adaptive pain-behavior in the presence of noxious stimuli. But how is the adaptive pain-behavior acquired? Harrison allows that the answer must be through sensation, but the sensation of noxious stimuli is a part of what we mean by a conscious pain state.

Since many animals can learn from the experience of pain, it is evident, contrary to Harrison’s assertions, that these animals have sufficient continuity of experience. While pain is a sensory experience, it does, to be sure, have a cognitive element, although it clearly need not involve so much cognitive complexity as to exclude the possibility of an animal pain.

Perhaps the existence of animal pain can in the end be reconciled with a good and powerful deity. But it is hard to see that such a *reconciliation* can be achieved based on the denial of animal pain. The denial would render theodicy superfluous, and while it remains logically possible that animals (as well as other humans) are not conscious of their pains, it is hardly plausible. Animal pain remains a brute fact, and the challenge to theism remains open.

### III. The “Animal Pain Isn’t As Bad As It Seems” Thesis

While the outright denial of the existence of animal pain does not seem to be a promising path for theodicy, perhaps there are considerations about the nature of that pain that might soften its impact against the truth of theism. This seems to be the view of John Hick.<sup>7</sup> Actually Hick advances three related theses concerning the issue of animal pain. The first idea is that pain and pleasure are relative; the second distinguishes pain from suffering, and the third offers that the purpose of animal existence is to be understood in terms of God’s salvic design.

I want to start with the second idea. Hick contends that while there is ample evidence that pain is widespread in nature, suffering is a distinct and distinctively human experience.

Suffering, on this view, appears to involve a more complex cognitive awareness than Hick believes is reasonably attributable to animals. Pain may be intrinsically evil, though Hick is quick to emphasize its instrumental value, but it is a relatively simple mental state when compared to suffering. To suffer, one must have certain mental attitudes. One must have beliefs and desires and be able to conceptualize one's experience, etc. Pain states presumably do not require anything so sophisticated; pain is a kind of immediate sensory awareness. In this way suffering is a second-order experience. You may be in pain, but the attitudes you have *about your* pain can transform simple pain into suffering. Also, a being could suffer even when physical pain is absent. Accordingly, a being who is capable of pain experiences, but incapable of suffering, is presumably better off than a being that can experience pain *and* suffer.

Insofar as suffering and pain are to be distinguished, then, much suffering might be regarded as involving higher-order intentional states about one's pains: one not only *has* the pain but is also distressed *because* of the pain.<sup>8</sup> In addition, suffering may also be directed toward one's general condition even if pain is absent: the loss of a loved one may not cause any straightforward physical discomfort. In these sorts of cases, suffering appears to involve higher-order attitudes about matters other than one's own pain. Hick maintains that suffering seems to require a fairly sophisticated cognitive capacity of the sort only humans can possess.

According to Hick, then, suffering is the greater evil, and animals do not suffer because of their relative cognitive poverty. And, while it is intrinsically evil, animal pain is instrumentally good, since it contributes to the survival of the organism by warning of various dangers, etc. Without the capacity to feel pain, animals would not really be animals at all. Thus, Hick follows Augustine in claiming that to ask why God permits animal pain is equivalent to asking why God creates animals in the first place. Hick's answer is to relate it to God's salvic purposes regarding humanity. In this context, Hick speaks of animals as serving the human apex by being a part of the background in which God is kept at epistemic distance from humanity.<sup>9</sup>

I have noted that Hick's animal theodicy seems to have several elements. First, there is the claim that suffering provides the greater challenge to theism, and since animals don't suffer, they cannot be said to be a part of that challenge. Second is the contention that pain is a necessary feature of animal existence because of its instrumental value for animal life. And third, there is the assertion that animal existence is best understood in terms of God's purposes for humanity. The latter two features might well be challenged,<sup>10</sup> but they play their roles in Hick's overall argument only if he succeeds in establishing that animals do not genuinely suffer and that suffering is worse than mere pain. Hick is not successful in this endeavor.

There is the important question of evidence. What sort of evidence should count against or in favor of a creature's being capable of suffering or other more complex psychological states? Precisely how much cognitive complexity is required for being a candidate for suffering? Hick's answers are suggestive at best; indeed, as far as I can tell, he offers no real evidence beyond the mere assertion that animals lack such a capacity. I

won't pursue these issues now; instead, let's focus on his contention that the possession of higher order mental states makes a bad situation worse.

The central idea is that higher cognitive capacity may increase the negative quality of some experiences. However, such higher-order thinking about one's unpleasant states can also potentially *reduce the* negative aspects of pain. If, for instance, an individual is cognizant of the fact that a painful medical treatment is necessary and the pain temporary, the negative quality of the experience is likely to be reduced. But such reasons offer no comfort to creatures incapable of understanding them, as anyone who has tried to comfort an injured pet knows.

Higher cognitive powers may have other benefits with respect to pain as well. Daniel Dennett observes that various meditative techniques of pain-reduction seem to be available only to humans.<sup>11</sup> The success of these practices for treating human pain does not consist in providing reasons for the pain but in the fact that these "pain reducing" techniques are available only for individuals with a fairly complex cognitive organization.<sup>12</sup>

Rationalizing pain and sophisticated pain-reducing techniques thus mitigate the unpleasant experiences of adult human beings but apparently not animals. If they only could conceptualize their pains, the experience might not be so bad. Indeed, it seems that the best way to describe the situation with animals is to say that they do sometimes suffer mental anguish on account of their pain because of fear and other intentional states, but their inability to be aware fully of the situation prevents them from reducing either their suffering or their pain.

Even if Hick is right about the complexity of mentality required for suffering, he has *not* shown that such complexity necessarily yields a worse hedonic result. Sometimes complex intentionality makes matters better and sometimes worse. There can be little doubt that *some* states of suffering are cognitive and intentional: it is *about* one's pain or one's general condition, etc. But it is far from clear that a creature's cognitive capacities must be as complex as those typical of humans in order to have the genuine ability to suffer. First of all, not all suffering need involve cognitive prowess at all. It makes perfect sense to say that one has euthanized an animal so as to end its suffering, even if the animal in question was incapable of having intentional states about its condition in any way. I suppose that the point of torturing animals, for those who engage in such activities, is precisely to bring about *suffering* in the tortured creature. But the unfortunate beast need not have second-order states in order to suffer in this way. It's an odd stipulation to restrict suffering to beings with more sophisticated cognitive powers.

Suppose it is allowed that at least *some* suffering must involve more cognitive complexity, thus modifying Hick's claim a bit. Still, suffering, in this sense, need not be too cognitively sophisticated in order to play the sort of role that Hick has in mind. That is to say, while a sense of future and past can play a role—both negatively and positively—in some suffering, such suffering remains a possibility for creatures who can have beliefs or desires. There are gradations of pain and suffering (as well as more



desirable states), and cognitive development seems to be a factor in the kinds of aversive states one can experience. Nevertheless, the possibility of animal suffering, even in Hick's oddly restricted sense, remains open as long as it is plausible to hold that animals have, in addition to sentience, at least some of the intentional states that play a role in suffering. It seems plausible that animals have at least some such states, and I see nothing in Hick that demonstrates that they do not. And as long as many animals suffer without hope of enjoying unlimited good in the afterlife, their suffering counts rather severely against either the goodness or power of God.

Inasmuch as Hick's theodicy relies upon the distinction between pain and suffering, it does not adequately reconcile the fact of animal pain and suffering with a benevolent, omnipotent deity. Even if animals only experienced pain and not suffering, the fact of animal pain itself is evidence against theism. But they seem not only to feel but also to suffer, even though the kind of suffering animals endure differs from typical human varieties of suffering. The negative character of animal experience is reduced, but not sufficiently to block the argument from the evil of animal pain.

#### IV. The "God Just Doesn't Care" Thesis

Is it possible to maintain animal pain and suffering as genuinely evil while holding that a perfectly good God simply is not particularly concerned with the plight of animals? This is the surprising conclusion of Peter Geach.<sup>13</sup> Geach begins making his case along teleological lines. If we can infer the existence of God from the majesty of the natural world, we should also observe that the evidence does not indicate a divine attempt to minimize animal pain. Indeed, a cursory examination of events in the natural world appears to confirm the thesis that God cares little about animal suffering. Geach explicitly rejects the Corrupted Creation thesis, and yet he is willing to defend the compatibility of the absolute goodness of God with God's apparent lack of concern for animal suffering.

God, Geach observes, is a noncorporeal being and as such does not have a physical nature. God cannot be either chaste or brave, because as an omnipotent spirit being he cannot be sexually tempted or endangered in any way. But the fact that God cannot be called chaste or brave does not imply that he can be labeled unchaste or cowardly. Similarly, sympathy on matters involving physical pain can hardly be said to be a virtue properly attributed to God. The fact that God does not care about animal suffering, therefore, takes nothing away from God's goodness or power. However, humans *do have a physical nature*, just as animals do. So, we can and do have sympathies toward animals, and this is the basis for our obligations to them. These considerations, however, simply cannot apply to God, according to Geach.

There are two distinct claims in Geach's argument. One is that moral action—at least that moral action directed toward animals—must be grounded in sympathy. The other claim is that it's not possible for God to have the requisite sympathy. Against the latter claim, one might object that sympathy doesn't require that God actually be a physical being, since God is omniscient. God's omniscience is a sufficient and suitable basis for sympathy toward animals. Surely an all-knowing God is aware that *both humans and animals*

suffer. Why isn't that enough for divine sympathy? Geach might well reply that even the property of omniscience has its limits. To be all-knowing, God must be able to know everything that, logically, *God* can know. But God is not a physical being, so there must be features of physical existence that are not knowable by God.<sup>14</sup>

It would seem that God is in a situation somewhat similar to Mary, the fictional color scientist of Frank Jackson.<sup>15</sup> Mary knows everything there is to know about color but, confined to a black and white room, has never had the experience of color herself. The controversy over Mary is over whether or not there is some *knowledge* she lacks. Similarly, one might wonder whether Geach's God can be truly omniscient, being so limited by his non-corporeal nature. I hope it is clear that, at least for Geach, it does not matter how this question is answered. Either God lacks some special experience-based knowledge or not. If what God lacks is not knowledge, then God's omniscience is not impugned. If what God lacks is knowledge, it is not the sort of knowledge that, logically, *God* can have. So, once again, God's omniscience is not impugned. And since sympathy seems plainly to require that a being identify with the plight of another, God cannot have sympathy toward the physical plight of nonhuman animals.

Suppose Geach's claim about divine sympathy is granted. Perhaps there is knowledge that can only be had by beings with a physical nature. Perhaps it is permissible to describe a being as omniscient even if the being lacks this sort of knowledge. And perhaps such a being is incapable of genuine sympathy for another being's physical suffering. Even so, sympathy is not required as a source for moral action even in many ordinary human cases. Indeed, it would be rare to excuse a sadist of cruelty to another on the grounds that it just wasn't possible for the sadist to feel sympathy for his or her victims. The sadist should know better. Thus, the first of the claims in Geach's argument—sympathy is required for a moral relationship with animals—is dubious. While an omnipotent spirit being may be incapable of having the experiences upon which some types of knowledge are based, God can still know *that physical beings suffer*. And a perfectly good being should care about physical pain and suffering very much, even though God cannot, perhaps, know what it is like to feel pain.

Imagine extraterrestrials with an entirely different make up than ours were to visit us. They may have little or no sympathy for our experience of pain if there is nothing analogous in their constitution. But, if they could be made to understand that the experience of pain is regarded as intrinsically bad *by us*, they would surely have a reason to refrain from causing us pain. If they refused, we would be justified in calling them cruel, not because they lacked a natural sympathy but rather because they refused to take the pain of others as a reason not to hurt them. Sympathy is helpful in motivating moral action, but not necessary even for finite creatures—still less for God. So, if God is capable of eliminating animal suffering, even while being incapable of sympathy with it, and yet does nothing, God cannot be perfectly good after all, in spite of Geach's claims to the contrary.

## V. Theodicy, Ethics, and Animals



The point of my exploration into theism and animal pain has not been to mount an argument against the truth of theism. The fact of animal pain, as far as I can tell, cannot be proven to be logically inconsistent with the existence of a perfectly benevolent and powerful God. The existence of any natural evil, including animal pain, is evidence against theism, but it is doubtful that the evidence is decisive by itself. Still, the fact of animal suffering seems to cry out for explanation and reconciliation with God's goodness and power. But, in the theodicies examined here, animal pain and suffering were either denied or trivialized, and when finally firmly recognized, God's benevolence was called into serious question.

When one embraces theism, one typically embraces much more than adherence to a theological belief-system. For most theists, moral life is but a part of one's religious life. But while sympathies of many theists may lead them to moral concern for animals, the examination of theodicy and animal pain shows that animals do not fit neatly into the theistic moral world view. Conversely, the moral view that takes animals very seriously seems to be at odds with the morality of theism. It may be very hard to show that the fact of animal pain is incompatible with theism, but the theist who takes animal suffering seriously comes dangerously close to holding incompatible moral positions.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Animal Pain* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, referenced in John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978, p. 315).

<sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Psalms 19: 1.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Harrison, "Theodicy and Animal Pain," *Philosophy* 64, 1989. My arguments against Harrison's position are developed in somewhat greater detail in my "Harrison and Hick on God and Animal Pain," *Sophia* 33, 1994, and my "Is Animal Pain Conscious?" *Between the Species*, Spring, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Nagel, "What's It Like To Be a Bat," in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, chapters xiv and xv. I discuss some aspects of Hick's theodicy with respect to animals in "Harrison and Hick on God and Animal Pain," *Sophia* 33, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Some might regard the distress as an essential feature of the pain itself. For a discussion of this intuition, see Dennett's "Why You Can't Build a Robot That Feels Pain," in his *Brainstorms* (Montgomery, VT: MIT Press 1978, 190-229).

<sup>9</sup> Hick, p. 313.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Hume convincingly urged in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* that animals might have been sufficiently motivated to avoid dangers, etc., by the attraction of pleasure alone.

<sup>11</sup> Dennett, p. 216.

<sup>12</sup> See Dennett, pp. 206ff.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, chapter four.

<sup>14</sup> Geach's position here may have problematic implications for the Christian doctrine of incarnation as well as other aspects of theology. See R.W.R. Patterson's "Animal Pain, God and Professor Geach," *Philosophy* 59, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Jackson, "What Mary Didn't Know," *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXXIII, 5, (May 1986).