

Reply

Reply to Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2022). Tutuism and the Moral Universe. Comment on “Gasser (2021). Animal Suffering, God and Lessons from the Book of Job. *Religions* 12: 1047”

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Abstract: In this reply, I aim to clarify my ideas presented in a recent paper and to address criticisms that have been raised by Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues regarding my interpretation of (animal) suffering and God.

Keywords: Book of Job; God and the moral order; human suffering; the problem of evil

1. Introduction

Critical objections are a welcome means of removing ambiguities or clarifying implicit assumptions. For this reason, I am very grateful that Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues has written a reply to my paper “Animal Suffering, God and Lessons from the Book of Job” (Gasser 2021). This gives me the opportunity to rethink this topic again and try to present it in a more precise manner. First, I present a brief sketch of my account. Then I address two points of criticism that seem to be based on misunderstandings.

2. The Account Proposed

Central to the problem of evil is the presupposition that God is a morally perfect being. The core of the discussion works with the following principles:

- (a) A morally perfect being eliminates evil as far as it is possible.
- (b) Within the realm of logical possibilities, an omnipotent being has no limits of agency.

With these two principles at hand, one can argue that we should expect that a morally perfect and omnipotent being will eliminate all evils unless it is impossible to do so. Since there are many evils in the world that we are certain it is logically possible to avoid or eliminate, we have very strong evidence that such a being does not exist.

Advocates of theism have mainly responded to this challenge by pointing out that there might exist possible higher goods (e.g., freedom of will, character building, union with God, etc.), which can only be achieved by allowing evils in the world. As a consequence, God is morally justified in permitting these evils as they are necessary and indispensable instruments for bringing about higher goods. Once this instrumental relation between evils and higher goods is not exclusively reserved for human beings but applied to creation in general, then also the suffering of animals can be explained in a similar fashion. Trent Dougherty, for example, develops an expanded soul-making theodicy for animals: Accordingly, God, by being in a caring and loving relationship with all of creation, will enfold the suffering of any creature in a greater good that organically defeats this evil. The most likely way to do this is through some future process of soul-making which requires animal resurrection and deification in the eschaton (Dougherty 2014, pp. 145–46).

In a recent paper (Gasser 2021), I argue that this understanding of God is couched in overly personalistic terms. God is imagined similar to a human person and judged accordingly with the moral standards appropriate for human agents. Without doubt, there



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is this tradition of a personal conception of God; however, it should not be ignored that there is also another powerful tradition, namely that of so-called classical theism, in which personal attributes of God are of secondary importance. This is so because God as creator is not a part of the created world, and therefore God cannot belong to the moral community as humans do. A main problem of the problem of evil is the anthropomorphic understanding that the human–human relationship is the template for all kinds of relationships, including the divine–human one.

Once this view is rejected, the problem of evil changes as the central moral assumptions regarding God ought to be revised. We cannot apply our moral categories to God as these categories belong to the created but not to the transcendent order of being. The idea I am proposing is that God is interested in its creation, but the essential values that shape the divine view are to be explicated less in terms of moral categories than in terms of non-moral goods such as complexity, fecundity, creativity, adaptability, or the will to live. To put it more pointedly, humans might be less central to God’s overall creational purposes than personalistic interpretations of a theistic God generally presuppose. Such a view may seem odd at first glance, but—according to my argumentation, which draws also upon exegetical interpretations such as those of Carol A. Newsom (Newsom 2003) and Steven Chase (Chase 2013)—the divine speeches in the Book of Job can be understood in precisely this way: God teaches Job to expand his focus by opening up the narrow circle of human-oriented moral questions toward the astonishing and mysterious sublimity of natural and cosmic processes where moral categories are non-applicable.

3. Two Perspectives

At this point, it is important to emphasize that I do not defend an anthropocentric view, that is, the view that humans are completely irrelevant to the divine purpose and do not matter to God at all (Mulgan 2019). Rather, humans are one aspect of God’s perspective on creation among those others. We are one but not the only essential part of the creational picture. Accordingly, the divine perspective is related to creation in a twofold way: One perspective understands the human being as a part of the larger universe in which moral categories have no direct point of reference. The other perspective, however, is related to the individual human being as a direct addressee of God as the divine speeches in the book of Job illustrate and, thus, also involves the moral order intrinsically connected to the human life-form.

Both perspectives are separated by the moral sphere as it distinguishes the human and the non-human realm: Responsibility, justice, empathy, or orientation toward moral values are essential coordinates of the human world. These features constitute the human life-form in the first place. When it comes to the world of other living beings or the non-living dimensions of creation, however, these features have no essential role to play. Most scientists consider animals to be a-moral because they lack the cognitive capacities required for (full) moral agency (see, for instance, Tomasello 2019). Accordingly, we do not blame a predator for killing a pray because hunting and killing animals is a central feature of a predator’s life-form, but moral understanding is not.

In the light of this understanding, the divine speeches in the Book of Job highlight both perspectives and the tension that comes with them. Newsom writes: “What Job has just heard in the divine speeches, however, is a devastating undermining of his understanding of the unproblematic moral continuity between himself, the world, and God. It is a profound loss of unity, a recognition of the deeply fractured nature of reality” (Newsom 2003, p. 253).

There is not one perspective from which the world is grasped as unified and well-ordered but a holistic and an individual perspective, each of which is shaped by different normative schemes. To a structurally similar conclusion comes philosopher Wes Morriston: “The Hassidic teacher, Rabbi Bunam, said that ‘A man should carry two stones in his pocket. On one should be inscribed, “I am just dust and ashes”. On the other, “For my sake was the world created”. And he should use each stone as he needs it.’ The experience of the whirlwind has taught Job to use the first stone. But what we need, and what the

book of Job tries, with only partial success, to teach us, is how to use them both together” (Morrison 1996, p. 356).

Both Newsom and Morrison point out that the tension in such an understanding of the God–world relationship cannot be brought to a higher synthesis; rather, it is our lot to endure it. In his encounter with the divine, Job realizes this essential feature of the world and our tragic place in it. If this assessment of the human condition is correct, then it also helps to understand the criticisms that have been raised in Cordeiro-Rodrigues’s reply.

4. Two Criticisms

I briefly address two points of criticism that seem to me particularly worthy of consideration: The first criticism says that the God I am proposing is immoral because God apparently accepts gratuitous (animal) suffering. However, “God as creator is also the father of all existing beings and therefore has stronger duties towards them” (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022, p. 3) than parents have toward their children. The second criticism says that if God as a transcendent being is not subject to moral rules, then either no objective moral standards exist or they are inscrutable for us. In either way, our moral order would be permanently undermined because divine morality does not correspond to ours, and, as a consequence, humans would easily get into situations where they would make the wrong decision and thus be responsible for moral evils (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022, p. 6).

The first criticism presupposes that God ought to be thought of as strictly personal and therefore as a moral subject observing those moral rules that are also applicable to us. Cordeiro-Rodrigues refers to Desmond Tutu’s work for making the point that God cares about right and wrong and, thus, about a moral universe. In analogy to the obvious moral principle that letting someone suffer is only permissible in the light of a higher good attained through it, God has to respect this principle as well.

This interpretation is undoubtedly widespread in current accounts of theodicy. Take, for instance, Eleonore Stump’s remarkable reading of the book of Job in her seminal study *Wandering in Darkness* (Stump 2010). She interprets the divine speeches as expression of God’s providential care which is directed toward intimate second-personal closeness to God. Stump concludes: “Focusing on the second-person account of the divine speeches and the second-person experience of God that Job has while God is speaking to him shows us that there is for Job a second-personal explanation of his suffering [. . .]” (Stump 2010, p. 225).

One has to notice, however, that this line of interpretation faces serious challenges. In her specific account, Stump has to radically reinterpret the many passages of the divine speeches where a wild and untamable nature is presented, which renews itself through the cycle of eating and being eaten. Here the experience of a second-personal and caring relationship of God to creation finds hardly any point of connection.

In more general terms, the question arises to what extent higher-good theodicies can convincingly explain that all the suffering in the world is a necessary and indispensable means for achieving these goods. Stump, for instance, explicitly wants to limit her account to adult and mentally functional humans as she does not know whether it is applicable to the nature of suffering of animals, infants, or cognitively disabled individuals and the possibility of their personal growth of the relationship with God (Stump 2010, p. 4; similarly McCord-Adams 1999, p. 28). A positive evaluation might suggest that there are possibilities of adapting the proposed solution. However, a negative evaluation will interpret this delimitation as a kind of capitulation in front of particularly challenging instances of suffering.

I think we have a strong intuition to assume that if suffering is necessary at all, then less terrible instances of it would do it as well. Daniel Howard-Snyder expresses this idea as follows: “Suppose God had simply prevented us from ever having genocidal thoughts. Would we then have been unable to perceive the hideousness of living unto ourselves? Would we have lacked the requisite incentive to turn to God? [. . .] We each need to answer this question for ourselves, but for my own part, on careful reflection I can’t see how [. . .]

God would be justified in permitting so much horrific evil and suffering rather than a lot less" (Howard-Snyder 2008, p. 340).

In other words, the effort to understand God as a moral being can lead to the idea that this conception must be abandoned, and God ought to be disqualified as immoral. To show that God can have good reasons for allowing terrible suffering does not yet imply that God also has good reasons for permitting any kind of suffering, no matter how horrific. It is precisely the existence of such evils that makes it so difficult to maintain a comprehensive moral order in which God functions as the source and universal guarantor of it. This difficulty is also evident in animal theodicies when additional assumptions about possible future developmental scenarios of animals in the eschaton are proposed for avoiding the impression of gratuitous animal suffering. Thus, the focus on a Tutuist framework for tackling the problem of evil constrains the conceptual resources of the debate considerably because moral standards for human–human relationships are elevated to the general standard for any relationship, including the one between God and humans. The assumption of such a comprehensive moral order of reality entails a considerable argumentative burden, which is often seen as doomed to failure. It seems to me that Cordeiro-Rodrigues did not adequately grasp this point or he considers it to be as too easily solvable.

The image of God outlined in the Book of Job (and what I have sympathies for) places God beyond such a moral order. This does not mean that God has no interest in human beings and their well-being; rather, it says that God wants to liberate human beings from the misleading assumption that the entire cosmos is governed according to a moral order, which guarantees an adequate compensation for all instances of suffering. Such a moral order, to put it bluntly, is an important and worthwhile ideal of human life but, apparently, not of divine creation. With such an understanding of the God–world relationship, the unity of a moral order encompassing God and creation is no longer available. By letting the idea of morality as a leading category for our overall understanding of reality go, the human view is able to open up into a profoundly tragic dimension of our existence. Thus, Newsom draws the following conclusion of her interpretation of the Book of Job: "Like the ostrich, Job, too, brings his children into a dangerous world, where they may well be crushed and trampled. Unlike the ostrich, however, which forgets the dangers to its offspring, it is unlikely that Job can be said to forget their vulnerability" (Newsom 2003, p. 258).

This brings me to the second criticism, which says that if "there is an inscrutable moral code for humans, then [. . .] this would mean that humans can never be held accountable for moral wrongs" (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022, p. 3). Even if there were a divine moral code that is beyond human comprehension, this would not imply that we are bereft of any insight into valid moral principles. Since one can only use what they have got, in such a scenario, we would have to adhere to the moral principles accessible to us thanks to our reason. Take the moral insight that suffering may only be imposed on others if this is the only way to achieve a higher good. This insight is not simply given to us, but we can justify it and argue that it is reasonable. If, therefore, a hidden divine moral code completely different from our moral principles were to exist, then this matter of fact would not further affect us, since any access to this divine order is denied to us.

Note that the view I am proposing is not making any claims in this direction. Rather, the idea is that there are non-moral values such as continuous creativity, remarkable adaptability, prolific life-circles, amazing bio-diversity, etc., whose axiological weight we are able to grasp. If God were to appreciate these values, then we were able to grasp at least certain aspects of this holistic divine perspective on the world.

5. Is This Still a Christian God?

A final point: Is this concept of God proposed still a Christian God? This question shapes the criticisms put forward. I believe this concept of God belongs to the rich biblical tradition which emphasizes that the world as we know it is dangerous. After all, a single misstep in paradise brought humanity into the world as we know it. Against this

background, the crucial question is: Can it ever be reasonable for participants in terrible sufferings like Job to stop seeing this suffering as an obstacle to trusting that God is interested in our well-being and in a relationship with us?

Here is a proposed answer: Those involved in suffering will stop blaming God for it when they accept their lives as they are—even with all the suffering. This, according to the interpretation I follow, is the lesson that the story of Job wants to teach us. We come to accept our lives not when we give up all hope but when we reach a point where participation in terrible situations of suffering no longer threatens the integrity of an individual's personality. Acceptance does not mean letting go of the conviction that suffering was *prima facie* ruinous to one's life, but it does mean letting go of the demand that things should have gone differently. Acceptance does not mean that the painful, wrong, and *prima facie* ruinous events count for nothing or that we should no longer care about them. Rather, these events are no longer capable of destroying our integrity as a human person because we have reached a state where we no longer have to struggle with what has happened and where we no longer try to find a hidden meaning or divine plan where there is none. The aim is to come to a stable understanding of our place in the cosmos that is able to integrate what has happened into a meaningful context.

From a Christian perspective, one can add that the firm trust that God is our secure fundament finds personal involvement in suffering terrifying (think of Jesus in Gethsemane) but achievable as it involves the hope that the creator of this world can at the same time be the re-creator of a better world. Such a view of hope for the next life does neither explain suffering away nor dispose of a grand theory of suffering, but it makes it, at best, bearable.

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