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Southgate



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AND THE SUFFERING
OF ANIMALS IN NATURE

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Abstract: This Element concerns itself with a particular aspect of the problem posed to monotheistic religious thought by suffering, namely the suffering of non-human creatures in nature. It makes some comparisons between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and then explores the problem in depth within Christian thought. After clarification of the nature of the problem, the Element considers a range of possible responses, including those based on a fall-event, those based on freedom of process, and those hypothesising a constraint on the possibilities for God as creator. Proposals based on the motif of self-emptying are evaluated. Two other aspects of the question concern God's providential relationship to the evolving creation, and the possibility of resurrection lives for animals. After consideration of the possibility of combining different explanations, the Element ends its discussion by looking at two innovative proposals at the cutting edge of the debate.

Keywords: suffering, animals, theodicy, evolution, Christianity

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Contents

Introduction	1
1 Monotheism and Suffering	3
2 Clarifying the Problem	7
3 Applying Approaches to the Problem of Evil to Animal Suffering	12
4 Theodical Moves in the Christian Tradition, and the Challenge of Darwinism	19
5 Fall-Event-Based Theodicies	23
6 Process Theodicy and Free-Process Arguments	28
7 Only-Way Arguments	33
8 Self-emptying and Cruciform Creation	38
9 Questions of Providence and Divine Co-suffering	42
10 Forms of Redemption and Immortality for Non-human Creatures	48
11 Combining Strategies	52
12 Speculative Proposal I – Influenced by Plato's <i>Timaeus</i>	55
13 Speculative Proposal II – Creaturely Resistance and Angelic Rebellion	57
Conclusion	61
References	62

Introduction

The fact of suffering poses a problem for believers in a good and loving God. This Element concerns itself with a particular aspect of that problem, namely the suffering of non-human creatures, and a particular sub-division of theistic faiths, the great monotheisms. The problem of suffering for theistic faiths is simply expressed, often as a ‘trilemma’:

- (1) God is perfectly good, just and benevolent, and perfectly aware of the state of every creature.
- (2) God has the power to prevent harms and suffering in God’s creatures.
- (3) These harms and sufferings (often called in the literature ‘evils’) nevertheless exist.

This classic tension can be resolved by denying the reality of (3), or by commuting either the benevolence or the power of God, or by presenting an argument as to why a benevolent God might not exercise the power in (2).

We are concerned in this study with non-human suffering. Human beings are animals, but for simplicity I will use ‘animal’ in this Element to refer to ‘non-human animals’, and again as a form of shorthand I include in this category any non-human creature capable of suffering (which might (arguably) include fish, birds, molluscs, etc.¹).

After some initial comments in [Section 1](#) about how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam approach the problem of suffering in their scriptures and tradition, the book focusses on Christian thought. The choice, in the early Christian centuries, to adopt the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, God’s creation of every not-God existent out of absolutely nothing, intensifies God’s apparent responsibility for creaturely suffering and sharpens the problem in view.

[Section 2](#) seeks to clarify the problem, addressing first the objection of neo-Cartésians, who deny the reality of animal suffering. This counter-intuitive claim is examined and set aside. The question as to whether biological extinction is itself an ‘evil’ is explored – this could be argued either way.

[Section 3](#) explores the nature of theodicies, strategies in Christian thought for addressing the problem of suffering. It distinguishes between philosophical arguments addressing the overall plausibility of Christian theism, which aim at an imagined atheist reader, and arguments within the framework of Christian theology, aimed at puzzling out the difficulties for the believer posed by the problem of evil. The emphasis of this Element is on this puzzling out. Many strategies involve a balancing of goods and harms, and we introduce a way of distinguishing three ways of doing this balancing.

¹ On the issue of the possible suffering of fish, see [Mason and Lavery 2022](#).

Section 4 offers a few classic moves in the Christian tradition in respect of the suffering of animals, and then turns to Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. Darwinism sees competition and struggle, with its resultant suffering and extinction, as a driver of the refinement of adaptation in creatures, leading to an intensification of the theological problem, if God has seemed to use suffering as a means to an end. I also consider whether an emphasis on cooperation in evolution might mitigate this problem.

In Sections 5–7 I present the three classic theodical strategies for addressing how God set up the world. Section 5 explores the possibility that some fall-event distorted this set-up and resulted in a world containing both beauty and violence. There are proposals that this fall was of the first humans (which the chronology of suffering in evolution seems to make impossible), of rebellious angels, or of a more mysterious kind. All these proposals suffer from the problem that, scientifically, it is the same processes that give rise to violence, struggle, and suffering that give rise to beauty, ingenuity, and complexity in ecosystems.

Section 6 summarises the possibility of a theodicy based on process metaphysics, derived from Whitehead, and also arguments based on freedom of physical processes and of creatures. In such arguments the 'good' of the freedom is used to balance the harms that arise. Whereas in the 'only-way' argument, evaluated in Section 7, God is constrained, in that evolution, with its inevitable element of struggle and suffering, is seen to be the only way to give rise to a biosphere which develops the types of values we see in this world.

Section 8 explores whether the theological theme of self-emptying, kenosis, can be used to generate an evolutionary theodicy. Section 9 then looks at the somewhat neglected question of God's ongoing, providential involvement with an evolving world. This includes consideration of God's possible co-suffering with the sufferings of animals. Another significant element in many theodicies of animal suffering is some form of redeemed, post-mortem existence for animals, and this is explored in Section 10, both in terms of existence in the mind of God, and various proposals for a resurrected life for animals.

A number of writers want to suggest that only a combination of strategies can result in a cogent account of God in the face of animal suffering, so Section 11 looks at some of these compound theodicies and their different approaches. Finally in Sections 12 and 13 I present two innovative proposals that might take the field forward. The first uses resources from Plato's *Timaeus* to amplify the only-way argument; the second explores whether that argument could be combined with a form of the rebellious-angels fall-based theodicy.

One terminological point: Holmes Rolston introduced the term 'disvalues' to cover the aspects of the natural world that seem to argue against its goodness.