

**Trent Dougherty, *The Problem of Animal Pain: A Theodicy for all Creatures Great and Small* (New York & Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan: Palgrave Frontiers in Philosophy of Religion, 2014. Xiii + 197 pp. \$105).**

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*Animal Pain* follows a spate of books attempting to do theodicy within the enlarged moral domain that our awareness of animal pain provides. Theodicies tend to be anthropocentric; however, the suffering and pain of non-human animals demands a thorough overhaul of theodicy, which in turn has serious implications for systematic theology.

The problem of evil is both a philosophical problem and a theological one. Anyone who indwells this problem lives on this unsettled boundary.

Interestingly, Gary Gutting from the University of Notre Dame interviewed himself recently in the "Stone," a philosophical blog in the New York Times, as a conclusion to a series of interviews with philosophers on the subject of God and evil. To summarize this interview, he said that the existence of God and the problem of evil provide endless trails of arguments. Atheistic philosophers are not much interested in the arguments theists make. The fact that it is so hard to counter the problem of evil is some sort of proof of the absence of God to many philosophers. Theologians are reduced to arguing that belief in God is rational. They once argued that it was probable.<sup>1</sup>

Thus theology on the theodicy/apologetics boundary is challenging today. Theology never has been and is still not content to show that belief in God is minimally rational. There must be also a way of showing that God is everywhere, that we are as Schleiermacher said, "absolutely dependent," that the infinite touches everywhere the finite. There must be some way of showing the ubiquity of God, in all forms of revelation. Theology inhabits a space that affirms that God's energy, God's presence, is not just a weak force, barely visible above the line so to speak. It is hidden but everywhere. God emerges from some rationalistic arguments as a weak force. That is hardly any use at all.

Thus this book, *Animal Pain*, is of unusual interest to theologians because unlike many philosophical approaches, Dougherty attempts to show that belief in God is not only minimally rational, but that the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of theism. If viewed from within the right story, this world in which we live is a "finely-tuned" mix of good and evil, just right for the creation of souls—against one's initial expectation that a good God would produce a paradisiacal world.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Gutting, "Debating God: Notes on an Unanswered Question," *New York Times: The Stone*, Oct 13, 2014.

Dougherty undergirds his argument with an elaborate philosophical structure, specifically Bayesian probability. Theism and naturalism (atheism) are at first glance equally likely. The evidence for a random universe would give us naturalism and the persistence of moral goodness is some evidence of God. In circumstances like this a more complicated inquiry is needed. The ratio of the probability of animal pain given theism to the ratio of the probability of animal pain given naturalism is then the preferred (Bayesian) instrument for determining between the two alternatives. Dougherty argues that the probability of this world given theism can be seen to be very high, if we tell an appropriately convincing story.

But how do animals feature in this thinking? Dougherty is seeking a theodicy that takes into account the state of the non-human world and its creatures. To this end his book provides elaborate arguments concerning the very existence of animal pain. Is this just an anthropomorphic projection? How can we enter the mind of the animal? Do animals have higher order thinking? Is some particular level of reflectivity required for real suffering? Is pain an emotion? Dougherty argues against a variety of Neo-Cartesians that animal pain and suffering are in fact real, or at least that we have reason to proceed as though they are real. (We cannot just rely on the rationalistic assumption that Neo-Cartesianism is reasonable given that we can't rule it out.) Dougherty ventures very little into animal science here except that he does recognize that the studies around mirror neurons and the associated sense of self suggest that animals, contrary to the suggestions of the Neo-Cartesian, do suffer. Having established there is a problem—animal pain is by all accounts real and has been for a very long time—he then proceeds to the core of his argument.

## The story

Dougherty needs a story that will make sense of the particular kind of world we find ourselves in. A convincing story might provide a way of covering the evil, or at least accounting for it. This would increase the plausibility of theism, and would therefore at least partially defeat the argument from evil to atheism. The story that does this work, he claims, is the Irenaean salvation narrative, now widely embraced: God comes to earth to recapitulate human life, drawing us to God in every stage and age of human suffering, perfecting us here and in the life to come through union with Christ. In this union evil is defeated by being enfolded into some greater good. In the end “the individual endorses their role in the drama of creation and salvation and is glad to have played it” (147). In the process of this union saints are made (a take on Hick's soul-making). Because virtue is so great a value (to God and to us) the suffering that gives free creatures freedom and the opportunity to develop virtue is a good thing.

Dougherty asks us to imagine a wide spectrum of worlds. There may be some with unmitigated evil at every turn. There may be others that are indeed so paradisiacal that no effort to obtain virtue is required. He argues in what he calls the “fine-tuning theodicy,” that this world is exactly what we might expect given a good God who desires saints (i.e., individuals who freely appropriate moral virtues), and that this happy mix of good and evil is not what one might expect of naturalism.

If one accepts all this, the crunch comes with animals. And strangely, animals are grafted into this theodicy as a special case, rather than being central to its logic. It is widely assumed that animals cannot be perfected by suffering in the same way that humans sometimes can. Nothing prevents perfection happening after death, however. Dougherty argues for animal salvation, for a form of animal deification, for at least some animals becoming persons, surviving death and being perfected—along with humans—in the eschatological new heavens and new earth. This too is argued closely. A good God owes a debt to all sentient creatures this God creates. Only a post-mortem good can come to animals precisely because they have no higher order thinking, no understanding of the passing of time and so on. Moreover, they are, in Dougherty's reading of Genesis 1, made in the image of God. Hence the perfection, indeed deification of animals, must happen after death.

This is achieved most easily if animals have souls. (Dougherty is Roman Catholic and hence souls are still a possibility for him.) But even if they don't have souls, he argues for the coherence of "gappy" existence. The last chapters involve precise post-mortem scenarios for humans and animals that involve movement through four dimensions into an alternative world—that is, wormhole theology.

I should say that this is an immensely challenging, thought-provoking and stimulating book. It is an excellent example of how philosophy of religion can benefit theology. And Dougherty does indeed lighten the burden of his sometimes dense analysis with excellent examples and snappy names for his various theories. I agree with Dougherty that some form of Irenaean salvation solves a great many problems in post-anthropocentric theodicy and soteriology and provides a welcome alternative to more transactional Western models. It rids us of the awkwardness of the Fall and the hints of a paradisiacal past. But here are some of the questions I bring to the overall argument or to parts of it. These questions are mostly a matter of emphasis, and emerge, I would argue, from theological sensitivities rather than philosophical ones.

## Finely tuned world?

Is this really the best *kind* of world for the development of moral virtue? Dougherty describes it thus:

The logically necessary preconditions for the display of the highest virtues are evils of sufficient *intensity* (but not so intense as to destroy the psyche of most of those in the situation) and of sufficient *frequency* to provide multiple opportunities and form habits (but not too frequent so as to yield too high a probability of complete demoralization of the souls of all who go through them: There must be sufficient chance of success for a sufficient number of individuals.) (121).

Evil should not be so intense as to destroy the psyche of most of those in the situation. It should not result in complete demoralizations. One thinks in reaction, however, of the many evils in the last century. Are not the evils of the Western Front of World War I, the gas chambers of Auschwitz, the world of ISIS,

the Killing Fields, the Indian Partition, the Rwandan genocide, or the world of many more atrocities in the last century more extreme than Dougherty's "just right" world? Think of the Western Front in 1916, say. It seared men who survived so deeply that many would not speak of it again. It destroyed their lives, and sometimes those of their children and grandchildren, with emotional absence, anger, despair, social upheaval, the maiming of young life, the loss of faith, and even epigenetic affect. Certainly there were redemptive stories, but there were many more great wells of sadness and despair in which there appeared to be only brokenness. Yet this is our world.

Moreover, even in ordinary prosperous everyday Western life, people leave this world where things are hard but doable for an isolated other world. Consider the parents of a child struck down at the cusp of adulthood, the middle aged man who loses his job and his livelihood and his respect and his meaning suddenly. We might think of the parents of the victims of ISIS, the young woman raped and discarded, or brutally murdered, the parents of an autistic child, whose hopes and love have been thwarted. There are so many situations, even without the great extremes of evil that Western culture has produced, where the pain has gone beyond what can possibly be healed or produce virtue. I find it hard to accept that this is a finely tuned best world, and even harder to think that God might have produced it intentionally.

## **The context of Salvation**

There is a sense of tragedy about the worlds described above that does not fit with *any* "fine-tuning" grammar. And indeed in Scripture we find a thread of tragedy through all the pages of both testaments. The cause of this tragedy is never spelled out, though we have had convincing arguments in the past with the Adamic Fall and other explanations. There is, I would go so far as to say, the threat of annihilation and chaos standing over the biblical worlds. This is what God has come to save us from. It is this lack of tragedy, indeed the normalisation of evil that I find troubling in Dougherty's account. Dougherty does have some sense of the way in which rational argument can sometimes eclipse the truth, but I would argue that he falls into this very trap too often.

And the question arises then, not only whether animals can be saved in the way in which Dougherty supposes, but is the Irenaean schedule sufficient for the problem? After all, in a world in which deification happens before and after death, why have a saviour at all? Our own suffering sanctifies us and at death we will be gathered into God. I think the Incarnation only makes some sense if we add the (also Irenaean) emphasis of Christ resisting and overcoming the powers and principalities, and if "in Christ" we too have the power to resist unmitigated evil in the human world and in the animal/natural domain.

## **Another story**

One of my major questions about this particular theodicy, however, is that for Dougherty it all hinges on a story defeating evil. The story provides the

framework that makes theism more probable than naturalism given this degree of evil. And the presentation of this story is persuasive. But Dougherty ignores the possibility that naturalism may also have a convincing story on the other side. Atheistic/agnostic naturalists are producing stories that make sense of the world just as it is, and in this way they either bracket the truth claims of religion (including the existence of a good God) or they argue for the defeat of theism. So the contemporary naturalist might look at the mix of good and evil traits, of compassion and altruism together with aggression, predation and selfishness, and see it all as exactly the mix one might expect given the constraints of fitness, and evolutionary niches. The combination allows for strong communal bonds in many species together with aggression toward outsiders. Evolution didn't "know" that humans would become lethally aggressive; hence the odd mix of altruism and hatred we have in the world today, and the extreme problems people have with accepting outsiders. The probability of exactly this world given that naturalism is true is quite high if we accept the story. So this puts us back at square one; both naturalism and theism have stories that make sense.

However, the stories are easier to enter into than the logic. Dougherty therefore invites us to look at the kind of stories we find plausible, that meet our deepest inclinations and intuitions. In spite of the possibility of a defeating story, then, *Animal Pain* does advance our understanding in important ways.

## Theological quibbles

There are aspects of *Animal Pain*, however, that a theologian would be less enthusiastic about. Dougherty persists in calling God a person—a person no less for whom the Theory of Mind applies (47)—and he treats God in a somewhat monolithic way. Thus the complexities of the Trinity are side-lined. Yet in Christian theology the nature of God and especially of the work of Christ and of the Spirit is of utmost importance in theodicy. It could not be said that "person" is at all a good approximation for who God is.

The last chapter on four dimensions and "gappy" existence is also interesting, though here too the plausibility of such future life decreases in inverse proportion to the level of detail proffered. This for instance, is a description of death:

From the dying individual's perspective, they just see a swirl before them, as though the world were melting. They are then drawn into the vortex, things go black with flashes of light, then they begin to see a new scene emerging. The next thing they know, they are in another place-time, a 'new world' to them [...]. The body left behind is a shell (169).

And if his knowledge of the after-life were not enough, Dougherty ventures at times into staggering philosophical confidence.

I see no clear reason to think there are kinds of goods of which we are unaware, in any relevant way. This is because we have reason to believe we have a sufficient grasp on human nature. We know what is best for humans – love, friendship, knowledge, virtue, health, etc. But we also have

a grasp, then, on the general goods for sub-human creatures insofar as they approximate the functions of human beings (50).

I would counter that we are notoriously bad at recognizing what is of value to other humans, let alone animals. True, we know that friendship and love are good for humans, but we are self-deceiving animals, operating largely out of unconscious motivations. Surely, then, there is still a great deal to learn about our diverse selves and those of our animal cousins.

Nevertheless I am in sympathy with much of Dougherty's argumentation. I do agree that the persistence of goodness is evidence of a kind for a good God, but not because that gives us a finely-tuned world; rather because the power of evil is so great and so destructive that one might expect it simply to grow and spread. It is remarkable that pockets of stability and prosperity and community still exist and thrive when one thinks of the extent of twentieth century atrocity.

Lastly, Dougherty hints in this book that his detailed scenarios for post-mortem animal deification are related to a personal mystical experience. He gives us no details and no explanations of this experience. A fuller description of the motivation behind the whole book would have added immense value to this very interesting argument.