

**Elizabeth A. Johnson. *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. London, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014. xviii+323 pp. \$32.95 (hbk); \$21.99 (paper).**

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In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* Daniel Dennett describes evolution as a universal acid that corrodes "just about every traditional concept." For Dennett that corrosion consists of undermining the credibility not only of traditional theological understandings of nature, but of theism itself. While religious believers rightly resist Dennett's line of reasoning, the insight that evolution has implications for theology deserves serious attention. Into this space steps Elizabeth Johnson's *Ask the Beasts*. The volume constitutes a theological *tour de force*, examining with care and insight the various ways in which evolution impacts our understanding of divine action and providence, the problem of suffering, eschatology, and our intimate connection with the rest of the biological world.

Johnson's treatment is refreshing for at least two reasons. First, it resists the notion that science and theology are domains that are separated in ways that prevent us from being able to draw theological conclusions from empirical theories and data. As she says, reflecting on evolutionary theory and the history of life on earth "allow us to infer indirectly something about the One who creates the world with this dynamism" (172). In an era where natural theology is often shunned or scorned, it is refreshing to see Johnson engaged in a project of this sort. Second, it provides those who are new to the science of evolution with a helpful introduction to the topic.

There is a great deal of provocative and insightful material here. In the most general terms Johnson aims to provide a broad overview of the implications of evolution for our theological understanding of nature. The goal here is not merely to enhance our scientific understanding of creation and the Creator, but to provide us with theoretically informed ways of informing our practices towards it: "the theory of evolution is theologically consequential. How shall we speak of the over-flowing love of the creating, redeeming, re-creating God of life in view of evolution? How shall we act toward the natural world in a way coherent with this understanding" (121)?

The book divides into two major parts beginning, in chapters 1-3, with a tour of the theory of evolution developed largely through the lens of Darwin's discoveries and writing. For theologians without any background in evolutionary theory these chapters provide a slow but careful on ramp to understanding the origins and significance of evolutionary theory. It is worth noting that the theory of evolution has itself evolved over the last century and now includes other components that are equally worthy of theological reflection but which are not developed here. Evolutionary theorists have become increasingly interested in drivers of evolution

aside from variation and individual selection and now consider the importance of cooperation, the role of selection at levels beyond the individual, and elements of what has come to be called the Extended Synthesis.<sup>1</sup> These innovations in evolutionary theory are taken by some to blunt claims that competition or chance and randomness are fundamental to all aspects of evolution. As a result, while Johnson's treatment is a good primer on the subject, theologians should be encouraged to look at other more recent sources when it comes to developing a full orb'd theology of the biological world.<sup>2</sup>

Chapters 4-10 look at specific theological implications of evolutionary theory. Chapter 4 puts the origin and evolution of life in greater cosmic perspective by reflecting on the way in which the cosmos is configured or fine-tuned to support the origin of life and indeed intelligent life. Johnson notes that we should not infer from this that the cosmos was designed inevitably to yield *Homo sapiens in particular*. While the universe is pointed in the direction of the evolution of intelligence, that intelligence might, she claims, have evolved in the form of organisms that are very different from those we are acquainted with. (Indeed, elsewhere in the universe it might have done so already.) In any case, the lesson to be learned she argues, employing a quote from Paul Davies is this: "the stuff of the world has an innate creativity in virtue of which the new continuously emerged through the interplay of law and chance: 'there is no detailed blueprint, only a set of laws with an inbuilt facility for making interesting things happen'" (117).

Chapter 5 considers the implications of an evolving universe for our understanding of God's causal relation to the world. If the world is indeed the random or chance-infused theater that it appears to be, how can we make sense of God's sustaining and providential relationship to it? Johnson specifically explores the implications of three dimensions of God's causal connection to the world: original creation, continuous creation, and creation in the eschaton. While the chapter is wide ranging in scope, the majority share of the narrative is devoted to developing a rich theory of divine conservation. On Johnson's picture, God's sustaining the world in existence is not to be conceived of as the relationship of distinct cause to distinct effect. Instead, in the same way that the persons of the Godhead jointly give being to

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<sup>1</sup> The Extended Synthesis is a conceptual framework for understanding causal factors in evolution that cannot easily be accommodated within the variation and selection model central to the standard evolutionary theory. These factors include the importance of developmental biology (i.e., variations in ways in which organisms develop through gestation and the impact this can have at the phenotypic level and on the ability of organisms to evolve in response to environmental conditions), developmental plasticity (this includes ways in which behavior can be a driver of evolution, and the relationship between genes and environment), different modes of inheritance (including, for example, the role that epigenetics plays in inheritance and speciation), and niche construction theory (which includes factors such as non-random mutations and organisms modifying their environments in ways that modify themselves).

<sup>2</sup> Those who are interested should consider, for example, the chapter by Alan Love in Massimo Pigliucci and Gerd B. Müller, *Evolution, the Extended Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); David Sloan Wilson, *Does Altruism Exist?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); and Martin Nowak and Sarah Coakley, *Evolution, Games, and God*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

divine reality, God confers a share of the divine being on created reality, generating a perpetual dependence in which God is present with, and indeed indwells, all things.

As Johnson notes the account of divine causation and presence described in Chapter 5 might apply as well to a world that is static as it does to one that is evolving. So how does the fact that of an evolving creation enhance our understanding of providence? In Chapter 6 Johnson articulates a position that has been used by a number of others seeking to develop a theology of evolution. On this view, the evolving creation is characterized by two fundamental principles: law and chance, the former providing order and structure, the latter affording spontaneity and novelty. "If all were law, the natural world would ossify; its ordered structure would be rigid, repetitive, deterministic. If all were chance, nature would dissolve into chaos. No new patterns would persist long enough to have an identity" (170-1). On this picture, randomness or chance are not at odds with the notion of a loving, providential Creator, but a consequence of it. As Johnson explains,

The occurrence of chance in the world in its own finite way reflects the infinite creativity of the living God, endless source of fresh possibilities. The indwelling Creator Spirit grounds not only life's regularities but also the novel occurrences that open up the status quo, igniting what is unexpected, interruptive, genuinely uncontrolled, and unimaginably possible. As boundless love at work in the universe, the Spirit embraces the chanciness of random mutations, being the source not only of order but also of the unexpected breaks in order that ensure freshness. Divine creativity is much more closely allied to the outbreak of novelty than our older order-oriented theology ever imagined (173).

Although not a central feature of her account Johnson implies that the freedom of creation also explains at least some of the evils that it contains. One finds hints of this account for example in the reference to the "interruptive," "uncontrolled" elements of nature in the passage above. In addition there are passages like the following that gesture in this direction, where God is described as present to "the evolving world through its history of shaping and breaking apart, birthing and perishing, hitting dead ends and funding new avenues into the future" (157).

In Chapter 7 Johnson addresses the implications of the pain, suffering, death, and predation that attend evolution more directly. She explicitly indicates that what the chapter offers is not a theodicy but rather "a theological inquiry that takes the evolutionary functioning of affliction at face value and seeks to reflect on its workings in view of the God of Love made known in revelation" (187). Johnson does two things here. First, despite the protests against theodicy, she offers explanations for the fact that an evolving creation includes the main constituents of evolutionary evil: pain and death. Pain, she argues, is the mechanism by which embodied organisms avoid harmful stimuli. Death, on the other hand, is necessary in order to make space for new organisms, and as a consequence of or cause of evolutionary novelty (184). However while this might explain the existence and even necessity of these evolutionary evils, it does not explain how a loving God responds to and suffers with those creatures subjected to them. Johnson emphasizes that the incarnation of God

in flesh should not be conceived classically as merely the uniting of divine and human natures, but as uniting of the divine nature with flesh more generally. As a result, through the incarnation God enters into communion with the human species, but also with all living organisms, here borrowing on Neils Gregersen's account of "deep incarnation." Johnson acknowledges that one might puzzle over how deep incarnation speaks to or remedies the evolutionary evils to which creatures are subject. "One might ask," she comments "if the presence of the living God with creatures in their suffering makes any difference. In one sense it does not. Death goes on as before, destroying the individual." However, following Christopher Southgate, Johnson hypothesizes that perhaps even non-human creatures are capable of experiencing the presence of God which "at some deep level takes away the aloneness of the suffering creature's experience" (206).

Chapter 8 looks specifically at eschatological issues that arise when we consider evolution and its implications. Drawing on Paul's affirmations of Christ as the Creator of "all things" in Colossians 1, and of "all creation" as the object of future redemption in Romans 8, Johnson draws what she sees as the inevitable conclusion: "there is warrant for holding that species and even individual creatures are not abandoned in death but taken into communion with the loving God. Nothing is lost. For human beings and other living organisms as well, the promise of final redemption in both a general and particular sense seems fitting in view of the goodness of God whose love treasures every creature" (231). While one might wonder how it could be the case that the eschaton includes all creatures resurrected and redeemed, Johnson affirms that this is not the sort of thing that can be interrogated through a scientific lens but rather through theology which "dares to affirm that the living world with all its members is being drawn toward a blessed future, promised but unknown" (234).

Chapter 9 examines some of the implications of evolution for theological anthropology. Evolutionary theory clearly implies that human beings are descended from, and thus share a familial relationship with, non-human creatures. Indeed if the thesis of common ancestry is correct, all living things are part of the same biological family. Furthermore, many, including Johnson, take evolution to imply that human beings are different from other living creatures in degree rather than in kind. Claims to human exceptionalism or human uniqueness are thus viewed with a skepticism that Johnson shares.

The final chapter specifically draws out the theological implications of the fact that all living things are part of a single biological community. Over many centuries Christian thinkers have conceived of the relationship between human creatures and the rest of the biological world through the lens of dominion. It is often claimed that this "dominion paradigm" fostered a sense of entitlement which afforded human creatures license to treat the rest of creation as merely something for our enjoyment and use. Even recent attempts to conceive of dominion in ways that entail or require the exercise of stewardship are seen by Johnson to miss an important lesson, namely that we are members of a common earthly community. Johnson sees this way of conceiving of our relationship to the rest of creation as humility inspiring. But beyond this she finds it to cohere better with the lessons God discloses to Job in the whirlwind. There God does not position Job as the master of creation but as a common member

of it. “The whirlwind’s vision of creation’s grandeur makes a religious point, namely, that the human place in the scheme of things is not first of all one of supremacy” (272). Seen this way, care for creation involves caring for the members of our common cosmic household, thereby providing a different motivation for ecological concern.

Johnson’s book makes an important contribution to the emerging literature on what one might call the theology of evolution. While there is much for theologians and scientists to learn here, the argumentative arc of the book will raise some questions for philosophical readers. In Chapter 7 Johnson addresses theological challenges and lessons that can be drawn from evolutionary evil. As I note above, Johnson openly avows that she does not intend to provide a “theodicy” for evolutionary evil. But as I also noted, she undertakes, in Chapters 6 and 7, to seemingly offer just such explanations for evil. In Chapter 7, pain and death are explained as essential elements of an evolving creation.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 6, Johnson argues that some of the random or chance events that occur are caused or associated with evolutionary evil are consequences of God producing a creation that is “free” and “empowered.”

One might wonder: what is the source of resistance to explanations of evil (“theodicies”)? Johnson describes the problem as follows:

theodicy attempts to rationalize what is in fact a deep mystery beyond comprehension, with deleterious practical effects. My own sense is that suffering and death are too much of an enigma to submit to such logic. Rather than a theodicy, what is needed is a theological inquiry that takes the evolutionary function of affliction at face value and seeks to reflect on its workings in view of the God of Love made known in revelation (187).

Later Johnson signals that the “deleterious effects” include consequences such as inducing a “tendency to ignore pain” and undercutting our motivations to alleviate it.

This is not an uncommon sentiment among theologians addressing the “problem of evil” but it is one that misunderstands the task of theodicy and has certain negative consequences of its own. While any generalization will fail to do justice to the work that philosophers and theologians undertake when it comes to addressing the reality of evil, the two disciplines are often addressing two different concerns. Philosophers of religion addressing the problem of evil are typically addressing an epistemological problem: how can belief in God be rationally maintained in the face of what looks like strong evidence that no God exists? Work aimed at addressing this problem often takes the form of trying to unearth morally justifying reasons for God permitting evil, where these explanations are true, or probably true, or true for all we

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<sup>3</sup> I will note that I take issue with both of the explanations she offers there. While one might make the case that pain is necessary for complex organisms to resist or withdraw from aversive stimuli the case for this is not obvious. In addition, death is not strictly speaking necessary for evolution or for the emergence of novelty unless available resources are finite. As a result, the reality of death requires some account of why God might elect to create life in environments that are finite such as those we find on earth. There are ways to respond to this question but they are not addressed within the book.

know. There is nothing about that philosophical exercise however that necessarily undercuts our ability to see evil for what it is nor our motivation to address it. Even if God has reasons for structuring the cosmos so that certain bad things can happen, it might still be morally obligatory for us to seek to prevent those things. Perhaps human freedom is required for some great good, and such free will allows us to bring harm to each other. But nothing in that line of reasoning can or should motivate anyone not to prevent people from harming each other.

Of course one might worry that God's ways are so far above our own that we could never hope to describe even possible reasons why God might permit evils to occur. But this is not a conclusion we should draw *a priori*. It is also worth noting that attempting to provide such explanations allows those who believe in God to provide relief to those who simply find the existence of God and evil intellectually irreconcilable. It takes those concerns seriously and gives them the respect they are due. Theologians who wave off the task of considering such explanations have nothing to offer those struggling with these legitimate concerns.

Theologians addressing the existence of evil, on the other hand, are generally engaging a quite different task, namely, helping us to grapple with the question of how we can see, understand, and experience the lovingkindness of God in the face of lived or witnessed evil. This is an important task that not only provides us with a richer understanding of God's nature and activity, but can supply concrete forms of comfort to those victimized by evil. Philosophers often wave off this task because they regard it as merely addressing the "pastoral" or "existential" problem of evil. However, the "pastoral" problem is as real and important as the "epistemic" problem. As a result, philosophers and theologians ought to respect the different challenges raised by evil that are being addressed, and lend their disciplinary resources to addressing both.

With that said, let me also raise some concerns about the theodicies of evil that Johnson in fact offers. As noted above, in Chapter 6 she argues, in line with a number of others, that at least some evil in the cosmos is the result of God conferring a sort of freedom on the natural world itself. Thus, in the same way that God permits human wrongdoing as a consequence of conferring on us the good of free will, God permits at least some natural evil as a consequence of conferring on nature the good of "empowering freedom." There are two serious problems with this line of argument that are not addressed here (nor frankly by other advocates of this argument). The first is that the description of nature as "free" is at best analogous and at worst anthropomorphic. There may be instances of randomness or chance in the laws nature and the trajectory of natural history. But randomness and freedom are simply not the same thing. The good of human freedom consists in the ability to engage in intentional, often morally significant behavior that allows us to follow or rebel against the Creator. But the randomness of quantum events or the indeterminism of evolutionary history involves nothing at all like that. Second, even if one insists that the randomness or indeterminism of nature itself is some sort of good, it strains credibility to think that it is a good that could outweigh, justify, or explain the natural evils that supposedly follow from it. It is hard to see how the good of a random or indeterminate cosmos could justify the permission of genetic defects, cancer,

stillbirths, and other biological evils that would be permitted by such randomness. Just how good are we supposed to take the freedom of nature to be?

These philosophical disagreements, however, do not detract from the importance and significance of this work. Theologians, philosophers, and scientists interested in evolution and its implications will be richly rewarded from lingering over the breadth and insights Johnson provides here.