

Book Review



Special Issue: Atheism, Secularity, and Science

Trent Dougherty, *The Problem of Animal Pain: A Theodicy for All Creatures Great and Small*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 197pp., \$105.00 (hbk), ISBN 9780230368484.

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Abstract | Dougherty provides a theodicy explaining the problem of animal pain insofar as he claims that animal suffering is a logically necessary part of a world that contains the greatest goods--expression of the saintly virtues. He claims that even animal pain will be defeated insofar as animals will be resurrected as persons (think the talking animals of C.S. Lewis's *Narnia*) who will come to embrace their role (including their suffering) in the drama of creation.

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Review

Probably the greatest challenge to theism is the problem of evil (perhaps better understood as the problem of pain and/or suffering): it is difficult to understand why an all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly good being² would allow his creatures to suffer:

“Epicurus’s old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?” (Hume 1993, 100).

There have been many attempts to address the problem of pain and suffering experienced by humans. For example, proponents of the “free will defense” argue that much of the suffering humans experience is at the hand of other humans as a direct result of their free will. Further, a world with free will and all that goes along with it (e.g., salvation in the Christian tradition) is better than a world without. But since evil is a logically necessary result of free will, we would expect God to create a world with significant freedom even given the cost of suffering. A somewhat different approach is John Hick’s Irenaean soul-making (soul-building) theodicy: without the suffering experienced

in this world, we wouldn’t have the chance to develop into moral beings capable of expressing virtues such as courage and generosity. Since a world with these virtues is (much) better than a world without them, we’d expect God to create a world with the suffering necessary to allow for the development of these virtues.

The problem with these “solutions” to the problem of evil is that they don’t (at least on the surface) take into account much of the pain experienced by animals (often even according to the proponents of these views). While the free will defense may account for the suffering of animals caused by free human action, it says nothing about the evils animals encountered before humans existed (millions of years of pain and suffering experienced by millions of creatures)³ or those present evils causally unconnected to human action. While Hick’s soul-making theodicy might work for humans (who have the cognitive capacities to develop a moral sense and a soul more worthy of union with God), it is unlikely (given what we know) that non-human animals have anything like this capacity. So, the problem of animal pain is a special problem of evil, one that has hitherto received less attention than what it deserves.⁴ Dougherty’s book attempts to remedy this situation. In short, he proposes a saint-making

ing theodicy, according to which suffering is the inevitable cost of living in a world in which the saintly virtues are realized. His chief contribution is to argue that non-human animals will be “deified in much the same way that humans will be” (3).

In the first few chapters, he concentrates on defining and defending the problem of animal pain. He is primarily concerned with the lack of psychological and emotional well-being as opposed to simply physical pain, and, following Eleonore Stump, defines the problem as animals’ “failure to flourish” (Chapter 2, Section 2). Additionally, he shifts the focus toward the emotional (as opposed to the physical or causal) aspects of pain.

As a fan of Bayesian epistemology, he defines the problem of animal pain first in intuitive and then in more formalized terms in Chapters 2 and 3. In short, he thinks that the existence of animal pain provides (*prima facie*) evidence against God’s existence: on the assumption that God exists, we are surprised to find the existence of any suffering, including animal suffering (since God wants to, knows how to, and has the power to prevent it). In particular, he argues that the probability of such extensive animal pain, given theism, seems (*prima facie*) much lower than the probability of extensive animal pain, given naturalism.

Dougherty’s way of conceiving of the problem parallels some of the most interesting current work on the topic of the problem of evil (especially Paul Draper’s), and it attempts to avoid searching for what Alvin Plantinga has called “defenses”—broadly logically possible scenarios (models) that show the existence of evil is logically compatible with the existence of God. If the scenarios described in a defense are unlikely, it is not very comforting to those who struggle with the problem: it’s logically possible that I’ll win the lottery—but that doesn’t give the proposition that I will win the lottery very much weight. Thus, Dougherty says that he will “simply defend as best I can the probability of the story I tell...mostly by means of an explication of the idea rather than via direct argument” (53). I think this is a good strategy for “solving” the problem as it exists in the minds of concerned believers and agnostics or atheists whose credence in the existence of God is lowered (sometimes significantly or entirely) because of considerations of pain and suffering. Unfortunately, as I will argue below, I don’t think Dougherty is very successful in this attempt.

In Chapters 4 and 5, he tackles the Neo-Cartesians: those who, following Descartes, argue that the problem of animal pain and suffering isn’t really a problem after all since animals don’t experience any (morally significant) pain or suffering. This view is based on the claims that animals lack consciousness (or awareness of consciousness, or affective considerations of conscious states) and that morally significant pain requires consciousness (or awareness of consciousness, or affective considerations of conscious states, respectively). Dougherty argues against the Neo-Cartesian in several different ways: first, by an appeal to common sense—it just seems obvious that animals suffer; second, by an appeal to scientific consensus—most experts, including the American College of Animal Welfare and various veterinary organizations, all agree that animals suffer in morally significant ways; and finally, by philosophical argument—insofar as his focus is on the emotional aspects of pain, he argues that it is possible for creatures to feel pain without higher-level consciousness.

These chapters are some of Dougherty’s best, especially given his appeal to common-sense epistemology (Aristotle’s method of *Endoxa*). He claims that “the burden of proof is on the individual who contravenes common sense” (58), and proceeds to argue that the fact that animals feel pain is clearly a tenet of common sense. Even without the support of experts and philosophical argument (which he has anyway), he does right by putting the Neo-Cartesians on the defensive.

He thus presents his theodicy as a way to assess “the evidential force the data of animal suffering ha[s] on theism” (17). He claims that if he can show that his theodicy makes the existence of animal pain unsurprising given the existence of God, and if he can show that his theodicy doesn’t reduce the prior probability of God’s existence (by showing that much of his theodicy is actually entailed by bare theism and its entailments (some of which he claims may be “hidden consequences”), then he will “screen off” (his terminology) the disconfirmatory power the existence of evil bears on the existence of God. I question this reasoning below.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Dougherty argues in favor of his theodicy as applied to humans. While his theodicy does have some original components, it is mostly a combination and expansion of some of the most

prominent theodicies in the literature. His explanation of evil most closely tracks John Hick's Irenaean theodicy, according to which the pain and suffering in this world are logically necessary (and thus allowed and even promoted by God) for the greater good of human expression of certain virtues.

Dougherty, however, differs from Hick with respect to the particular goods that make a world great. On Hick's view, the "greater goods" that are fostered by the way God sets up the world include things like courage, fortitude, generosity, kindness, prudence, unselfishness, etc.--the "cardinal virtues." Dougherty instead claims that the best goods are those virtues that we see expressed by saints--united by agape love--including "courage, compassion, kindness, generosity, benevolence, mercy, magnanimity, tolerance, honor, truthfulness, trustworthiness, responsibility, friendship, cooperation, diligence, discipline, helpfulness, gratitude, empathy, and forgiveness" (120).

He explains this change by appealing to the much greater value of saintliness over more mundane (though still good) virtues: "I upped the ante of soul-making to saint-making by noting that (i) evils of this world make available not just generally good moral character, valuable as that is, but true saintliness, the value of which is almost inestimable..." (134). He doesn't, however, provide much of an argument for this value claim. Instead, he appeals in part to his own personal experiences studying the lives of the saints:

The more deeply I became convinced of the value of virtue, especially saintly virtue, and the more deeply I delved into the lives of the saints, the more I recognized so many of the virtues as manifestations of agape love, the more I realized a world which did not offer ample opportunity for sainthood would have no appeal for a being motivated by the greatest goods (126).

Moreover, he attempts to appeal to common sense by noting that saintly virtue is not only highly valued in the Christian tradition, but also "shares widespread secular support" (131).

I find this unconvincing. While there are theological arguments supporting the value of these virtues in the Christian tradition, non-Christians will not be moved by these theological arguments. And though saintly virtue may now be highly valued by many secular peo-

ple, this support may largely be restricted to the Western (Christianized) world and has not always existed, even there. Hume and Nietzsche, to name just two, criticize these values and the saintly virtues do not appear in Plato's catalogue of virtues. Thus, Dougherty cannot simply treat a high evaluation of saintly virtue as a bit of common sense. More importantly, it may be the case that many of the virtues united by agape love are valued only in contexts where (a great deal of very intense) suffering is commonplace. If we lived in a world with less suffering, would we have such high regard for compassion, generosity, mercy, or empathy? If the main reason to value these virtues is because they are appropriate responses to the pain and suffering in the world, then it seems to me that God may not have an *independent* reason to ensure the expression of those virtues (especially given the tremendous costs).

In further describing his theodicy, Dougherty attempts to evade a simplistic greater good defense where God "pays one off" by giving rewards to compensate for one's suffering (e.g., when Job is compensated for the death of his children by having more new children). To avoid this issue, he incorporates the concept of "defeat" introduced by Roderick Chisholm and expanded on by Marilyn McCord Adams. He claims that "what is important is that the *agent herself* eventually comes to have a perspective on her life in which she endorses the events that have constituted her path to virtue" (114). Dougherty argues that a successful theodicy must allow for evil to be defeated in this way: each individual must have the opportunity⁵ to reflect on the evils in their life and accept their suffering in the context of being part of a world that contains such great virtue. He explains:

One paradigmatic way evil may be defeated is through martyrdom, a love-generated...willingness to suffer for the sake of others and to glorify God, to give oneself wholly to God and abandon oneself to his plan. It is my position that rightly oriented souls will, in retrospect, look upon their role in the drama of salvation, embrace their role, and see in their role Gods' goodness to them. This further assumes that God only acts justly toward them, for they must be recognizing and appreciating the *fact* that they were being both justly and lovingly included in important ways by God in ways that were of benefit not only to others, but to them (134).

Dougherty is quick to realize that this may not be possible in every individual's lifetime. Thus, he claims that "it is a part of theism that there will be an afterlife...the afterlife is not an auxiliary hypothesis. For there is no possible world in which creatures suffer and are not given full opportunity for compensation and recovery" (111). He provides inductive evidence that even the most horrendous evils experienced by individuals can possibly be defeated (with enough time, reflection, etc.) by pointing out that sometimes this can occur in this lifetime (e.g., Viktor Frankl's eventual acceptance of his experiences in the Holocaust).

He argues, though, that his view doesn't imply that each particular evil one experiences is compensated for by reference to a logically necessary particular greater good in the individual's life. Instead, following William Hasker, he tends to prefer a more holistic view. He claims that "the way to think about particular evils is as arising from a 'world-ensemble (to borrow a term from the fine tuning argument literature)...'" (99). In short, he argues that particular evils will occur because God must create a "world that provides opportunities for (and, surely, promotes) the best kinds of goods to be realized" (99). But, in order to ensure that the world God creates is the best kind of world--one that exemplifies the best goods, God must create beings with free will and beings that experience suffering. "*Every* world with significant virtue is a world with significant pain. *Every* world without significant pain is a world without significant virtue. Significant good and evil are in this regard a 'package deal.' The evil is not a *means* to the good, but it is a cost of there being good" (107).

Dougherty wavers about whether the good of which animal suffering is a cost must be realized for each suffering creature. He first elects to avoid the question raised by Stump: "whether the greater good must include an appropriate benefit for the very individual who suffers the evil or whether a good accruing to someone else might justly balance off an evil suffered by another" (97). But later he claims that "the requirement that those who suffer must both *themselves* benefit from the goods that impose the cost and be *aware* that this is so requires that non-human animals become persons" (181). That this should be so is important. It is hard for me to believe that a reasonable person would be willing to accept their suffering in the way Dougherty requires if their suffering is not

connected to some personal good. This seems to especially so when considering cases where, for example, the starvation of a child is explained by reference to the virtue of compassion in some other person (an aid worker, for example). While a *saint* may endorse "their role in the drama of creation and salvation and is glad to have played it (which might be different than being glad for it)" (147), even if they or their loved ones receive no benefit, it seems a stretch to say that any reasonable person would do so.

And what about the amount of suffering? Interestingly, Dougherty argues that the profusion of evil we find in our world actually counts in favor of God's existence. Thus, he presents his "Fine-Tuning Argument for Theism from Evil." He claims that "since very near the beginning of human existence, suffering has come with a frequency and intensity which falls into the relatively narrow band with enough magnitude to foster saints but not so much as to widely overwhelm people or make struggle futile" (124). He argues that this constitutes evidence that God in fact exists, as it's more likely that we'd see this arrangement of evils in a theistic world (one where God wants to promote the saintly virtues to ensure the best kind of world) than we would in a world without God.

Now we have his full theodicy, as applied to human suffering: "God wants to create a world where the best goods are realized. The best goods "are the authentic display of agape love-manifesting virtues" and "the authentic display of the highest virtues logically entails the occurrence of very significantly bad states of affairs (but not so bad as to cause widespread, permanent despair)" (130).

After he has explained his theodicy for human pain and suffering, Dougherty proceeds to argue for the following thesis in Chapters 8 and 9:

A class of animals...will not only be resurrected at the eschaton, but will be deified in much the same way that humans will be. That they will become, in the language of Narnia, "talking animals." Language is the characteristic mark of high intelligence. So I am suggesting that they will become full-fledged persons (rational substances) who can look back on their lives--both pre- and post-personal--and form attitudes about what has happened to them and how they fit into God's plan. If God is just and loving, and

if they are rational and of good will, then they will accept, though with no loss of the sense of the gravity of their suffering, that they were an important part of something infinitely valuable, and that in addition to being justly, lavishly rewarded for it, they will embrace their role in creation. In this embrace, evil is defeated. (3)

Because Dougherty thinks that his theodicy is really the only way that evil can be defeated, he claims that something like his story as applied to humans must also apply to animals. If Dougherty is right about the existence of the problem of pain with respect to animals (which I think he is), then some kind of explanation is necessary. For without it, the problem of animal pain, it seems, does significantly reduce the probability of God's existence.

One might reasonably think that Dougherty's theodicy for humans cannot apply to animals since it seems like animals don't possess the requisite cognitive power or the power of free will to achieve resolution. Because (as far as we know), this is true for animals during their time on Earth, Dougherty argues that animals must be allowed a chance to come to terms with their suffering in the afterlife--requiring that animals are resurrected as persons with the capacities necessary to do so.

At this point, something Dougherty says in the first pages of the book becomes salient: "When I saw the call for proposals for this series, I interpret it as, in effect, a call to write down and defend crazy stuff one would otherwise not dare to write...I do not deny for a moment that many of the ideas I will put forward in this book will strike the average reader as a bit far-fetched" (2). But, he actually does a good job of mitigating this problem in several ways. First, he notes that most theists already accept an account of human theosis or deification (in the afterlife), and so, by analogy, "just as humans are reborn from mere personhood to something that will be godlike, so animals will be reborn from sentience to personhood" (144). If humans can be radically transformed, there's no particular reason to think that animals cannot. Second, he argues by analogy from human infants that just because a being is currently lacking certain abilities doesn't mean that they will remain so lacking: "from the fact that a creature *cannot now* carry its past into its future it does not follow that it cannot *gain* the power in the future" (142). Finally, he argues

that his theodicy follows logically from God's goodness: "if justice entails something, then theism entails that thing, for theism entails that justice will be done. What's more, if *being a good person* entails something, then theism entails it, for bare theism entails that God is good to all creatures" (144). And since "the only way God could enfold animal suffering into some greater good is via future soul-making" (145), this is entailed by theism.

He wraps up the book by considering a few objections to animal resurrection that focus on worries about his requirement that the *same* animal has to be deified in the afterlife or his/her evil can't be defeated. Dougherty argues that this is possible, for one, because it's likely that animals have immaterial souls. He cites support from biblical texts (focusing especially on the fact that not only humans but also animals are enlivened with God's breath), major theologians, and philosophical arguments (paralleling some of the arguments for human souls based on qualia and other conscious experience). He also argues that even if resurrected animals are so different from their Earthly selves that they cannot "identify with' their past in a certain psychological way, they can still--knowing how it fits in with the rest of their life and the lives of others--embrace their role in the drama of creation" (153).

Dougherty's critics will likely focus on his so-called "Key Conditional": "If God exists, then animals will be resurrected and deified" (146). I, however, think that this is quite convincing. But, to me, his view, in the end, is more of a defense than a theodicy. Animal deification may be what a 3-O God would have to do, and if God exists, then I suppose animals are resurrected into persons. But I'm not sure that this actually discounts the evidence of animal pain and suffering. Because the fact is, it does seem implausible. If A entails B, then B must be true, but only if A is true. But what if B seems implausible? Doesn't that (by Modus Tollens) give you reason to think that A isn't true?

Dougherty attempts to avoid this line of questioning with his Bayesian approach. He argues that since animal deification is entailed by theism, then this means that the prior probability of theism isn't reduced by adding the hypothesis of animal deification to the hypothesis of theism. This, however, I find hard to believe from the perspective of someone who isn't already convinced of the truth of theism. If you are

quite unsure about the probability of A, and you find out that A entails something that you find quite improbable, then doesn't that give you reason to deny A? the evils that actually occurred to them" (103).

So while I think Dougherty has presented a successful defense against the problem of animal pain, I'm not convinced by it as a theodicy. Still, I think it's a book worth reading both for its important contribution to the problem of human suffering and also as one that sheds light on the significant problem of animal pain.

References

- Hume, David, ed. Gaskin, J.C.A.. 1993. *Principal Writings on Religion including 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion' and 'The Natural History of Religion'*. New York: Oxford.
- Murray, Michael. 2008. *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*. New York: Oxford.

Endnotes

[1] Thanks to Alex Hughes for his helpful comments on an earlier draft.

[2] Dougherty (and I, throughout this review) assume a starting point of "bare theism"--which includes the idea that God is "3-O": omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. When I use the term "God," I intend the traditional 3-O God familiar to philosophers and theologians in the Western tradition.

[3] Of course, this particular problem is not a real worry for, e.g., young earth Creationists; however, many theists accept the view that non-human animals lived for millions of years before humans entered the scene.

[4] This is not to say that there has been no attention paid to the subject. [Michael Murray's](#) *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* is a notable exception. The topic is gaining more recent interest from philosophers and theologians.

[5] Because of free will, it may turn out that not everyone *actually* comes to terms with their suffering. Dougherty is fine with this, so long as they are given enough information and opportunity such that a reasonable person would do so: "God has a way of guaranteeing that in the end, all reasonable creatures think that their ultimate fate was worth God's risking