

Animal Suffering and the Darwinian Problem of Evil

John R. Schneider explores the problem that animal suffering, caused by the inherent nature of Darwinian evolution, poses to belief in theism. Examining the aesthetic aspects of this moral problem, Schneider focuses on the three prevailing approaches to it: that the Fall caused animal suffering in nature (Lapsarian Theodicy), that Darwinian evolution was the *only* way for God to create an acceptably good and valuable world (Only Way Theodicy), and that evolution is the source of major, God-justifying beauty (Aesthetic Theodicy). He also uses canonical texts and doctrines from Judaism and Christianity – notably the book of Job, and the doctrines of the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection – to build on insights taken from the non-lapsarian alternative approaches. Schneider thus constructs an original, God-justifying account of God and the evolutionary suffering of animals. His book enables readers to see that the Darwinian configuration of animal suffering unveiled by scientists is not as implausible on Christian theism as commonly supposed.

John R. Schneider is Professor Emeritus of Theology, Calvin College, and currently teaches at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. He is the author of *Philip Melancthon's Rhetorical Construction of Biblical Authority* and *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth*. Most recently, he has published widely debated articles on Darwinism and its implications for Christian faith.

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I am dedicating this book to faithful Labrador “dog friends” *in memoriam*. Julie (1960–1967), Dolly (1967–1981), Magic (1993–2001), Blue (2001–2016), and Buffy (2003–2019) all helped to shape my life through the years. I would not be at all the same person I am without them. Blue and Buffy – who breathed her last breath almost to the day when I finished writing – were always present, lying on my right and left, every morning, to help me write it. Readers will see that I harbor reasons for hope (not mere wishful thinking) that they will greet me again in the next life. If Heaven exists, as promised in the messianic Jewish and Christian traditions, for me at least, it would not be very “heavenly” without them.

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Foreword

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection, expounded in his *Origin of Species* published in 1859, poses major challenges for the Christian religion. Many, the so-called New Atheists particularly, think that it refutes absolutely any pretensions of the Christian to have true understanding of the nature of things. Darwin's ideas have been called, by the Chicago biologist Jerry Coyne, the "greatest scripture killer ever penned." News to many evolutionists! Ronald Fisher, the greatest English evolutionist of the twentieth century, was a sincere Anglican. Theodosius Dobzhansky, the greatest American evolutionist of the twentieth century, was always Russian Orthodox, the religion of the land of his birth.

What cannot be denied, however, is that Darwin's thinking makes for uncomfortable reading in the light of many of the claims made in the name of Christianity. John Schneider, the author of this monograph, knows this only too well. If Darwinism is true, then much of Genesis must be at best metaphorical. There was no Creation in six days, there was no Garden of Eden, there was no original pair, Adam and Eve, who fell and brought sin into the world. Human evolution probably went through bottlenecks, but there were never fewer humans than ten thousand or so, and our ancestors back to and including the apes were like us, sometimes nice and sometimes not so very nice. Yet this puts pressure, shall we say, on the Augustinian account of original sin and the death on the Cross. Adam fell and only through a blood sacrifice by God Himself would his sin, passed on to us all, be erased or counted for naught. No Adam, no sacrificial Lamb.

Schneider's belief in Jesus as the Son of God, through his death on the Cross, the exemplar of perfect love, is in no way diminished. Schneider thinks that, as beloved creatures of the Lord, it is our responsibility to look upon Darwinian evolutionary theory as a challenge and opportunity not a refutation. To do this is truly to show the meaning of being made "in the image of God."

The theme of this book shows this full well. His topic is one of the hardest in the realm of natural theology, especially in light of the theorizing of Darwin whose mechanism of natural selection is brought on by an often-bloody "struggle for existence." How do we account for the suffering of animals in a world created by an all-powerful, all-loving God? Charles Darwin himself worried about this, writing, shortly after the *Origin* was published, to his good friend the Harvard botanist Asa Gray:

I am bewildered. – I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I shd. wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.

Here, more than anywhere, the challenge of Darwinism to the Augustinian is in full view. Can anyone truly believe that the act of a rather naïve man, crunching into an apple long ago, means that a whimpering little rabbit has to suffer the torments of being torn to death in the eyrie of an eagle? If Darwinism is true, this happens again and again and again. That is what evolution is all about.

Schneider's response is both traditional and brilliantly innovative. On the one hand, he follows Christians from the time of Darwin – the great Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example – down to the present – the wonderful Calvinist novelist Marilynne Robinson, for another example – in turning for inspiration to the Book of Job. God there is no softy. He is not going to be cowed by our doubts and ignorances. "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding." This does not mean that God is uncaring or unloving. Just that simplistic answers are not where we are at or should be at.

On the other hand, Schneider turns from direct concern with morality and invites us to look more at things from an aesthetic perspective, showing how often great artists feel the need to portray evil in order to portray love. One thinks of course of the crucifixion, but often the themes

are classical rather than directly religious. Continuing the Jobean theme, Schneider suggests that we must think of the whole issue in an eschatological manner rather than one of direct payoff. To this end, he refers not just to the Hebrew Bible but also to the Bible of the Christians, especially to the thinking of Saint Paul, arguing that in the end we shall see animals as exalted in God's Creation as are we. Prosaically, as an Englishman who loves his Cairn Terriers, even to a non-believer this sounds like pretty convincing theology!

Does John Schneider's theodicy work? In a way, especially to a philosopher like me, that is not really the proper question. Does John Schneider's theodicy break new ground and give thoughtful readers new avenues to explore, new themes to accept or reject, new perspectives on old problems? It does so very much. This is why I am so enthusiastic about this book.

Michael Ruse

Acknowledgments

This book grew from a generous one-year fellowship from the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame in 2011–12. I owe special thanks to the directors, Michael Rea and Samuel Newlands, for supporting the project from the beginning, and also for kindly including me in colloquia on the subject of animal minds that were held at Notre Dame during that year.

Several other people deserve special mention for the parts they played in helping with the gradual evolution of the seminal project into a fully formed book. Solomon Schneider made valuable suggestions on the initial formulation of the project. Michael Ruse has been a constant source of both scholarly and personal encouragement from the book's inception in particularly difficult circumstances. It is most fitting that he has written the Foreword.

I am also grateful to participants at the Animals and the Kingdom of God Faculty Development Workshop on Animal Suffering, Divine Goodness, and Human Ethics, held at Calvin College, June 2015, an event organized by Matt Halteman. Andrew Chignell, Beth Seacord, Trent Dougherty, and – most especially – Marilyn McCord Adams were participants who offered very valuable comments and suggestions. When it was my turn to present a paper at the colloquium, I had the rare privilege (if that's the right word for it) of being interrogated for around ninety minutes by Marilyn McCord Adams. It did not occur to any of us at the workshop that Marilyn's time here on earth would be cut so abruptly short as it was. Her writings on "horrendous" evils played a formative role in my thinking on the suffering of nonhuman innocents in the natural realm. I only wish that I could continue that conversation with Marilyn now.

I also wish to thank peers who generously volunteered to read either all or parts of the manuscript at various stages of its development. Helen De Cruz, Kelly James Clark, and Keith DeRose all offered insightful comments and critical suggestions for improving the work. I should also mention my former colleague (and co-conspirator in things Christian and Darwinian) at Calvin College, Daniel Harlow, whose seminal writings on the Bible and evolution will eventually get the approbation that they deserve.

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