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THEODICY FOR ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Review of Trent DOUGHERTY, *The Problem of Animal Pain:
a Theodicy for All Creatures Great and Small*
(New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014)

An able young analytic philosopher comes forth with his first book-length work. Trent Dougherty, having distinguished himself by his papers in epistemology and philosophy of religion, now gives us a book on theodicy that makes special reference to animal pain. The book is charmingly dedicated to the many pets that Dougherty and his family have had over the years.

But this book is not only important for what it says about animal pain. Even before Dougherty deals with animals he makes some significant contributions to the theodical question regarding human pain and suffering. He takes up the idea of St. Irenaeus as developed in our time by John Hick, namely the idea that our earthly existence is meant to be a setting in which our souls, created in the image of God, grow into the full likeness with God. Of particular importance for Dougherty is the idea that we grow in likeness with God through our encounter with pain and suffering. “*Every world with significant virtue is a world with significant pain. Every world without significant pain is a world without significant virtue*” (107).

Dougherty takes it for granted that it is incomparably more important to grow in virtue than to live a comfortable pain-free existence. If we can grow in virtue through the way we endure pain, then the pain, terrible as it may be, is “justified” as a result of serving the highest possible accomplishment of a person, namely growth in the virtue and holiness by which we become like

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God. Dougherty is deeply impressed by the way Viktor Frankl conducted himself in Auschwitz. Frankl stood in solidarity with his fellow inmates. He faced the hellishness of Auschwitz in such a way as to let his heart expand, and presumably expand in a measure that would have been impossible in more placid times, when pain and suffering were more “under control.” Of course, Frankl did not become like God just by the fact of suffering in Auschwitz; he could have rebelled, he could have acted as if his rights had been violated by having to suffer so much, he could have become bitter and cynical, could have cursed his lot in Auschwitz. But instead he chose to persevere in believing in the authority of the good, in living in the service of the good. Thus his solidarity with his fellow inmates was a free act, a free choice for the good in the midst of darkness, and for that very reason it had the power to defeat the evil of Frankl’s suffering.

The bearing on theodicy is laid out especially in chapter 6, which seems to me the richest chapter in the book. Drawing on the work of Hick, Chisholm, and Marilyn Adams, Dougherty argues that the pain and suffering in our world does not discredit theism, for insofar as God permits pain and suffering with a view to our growth in goodness and holiness, He acts in a manner that entirely befits God. The evil He allows is “absorbed” and defeated by the good that grows in those who resist evil. The evil, without ceasing to be evil, functions as the basis for an exercise of goodness that would hardly be possible in a merely comfortable world. Of course, not every instance of suffering will be defeated by the goodness of the one who faces it and resists it; some people will despair, some will rebel, some will be ground down by what they suffer. The faithfulness to the good in the midst of suffering is a free act, as was just said, and so it is not surprising if not everyone chooses to be faithful. But this faithfulness is so great a good, it so lights up the world, that we can say that God has ordered His world wisely by making it to be a world in which such faithfulness is possible.

In developing this idea in his own original way Dougherty stresses that whoever suffers has to acknowledge that his suffering is justified. It is not enough for the sufferer to be objectively benefitted by growth in goodness and holiness; he has to take this benefit into his subjectivity by acknowledging that he has been blessed by his suffering and that he would not want his life to be without it. Only this “owning” of his suffering makes for the full defeat of it. Dougherty thinks that the process of owning our suffering is hardly ever completed in this life, but extends into the next life. He concludes that if God allows suffering with a view to this full defeat of it, then

the suffering that He allows creates no scandal for belief in God, on the contrary, it shows forth the wisdom of God.

In fact, Dougherty advances in chapter 7 a kind of argument for the existence of God based on the possibility of us defeating suffering in this way. He argues that our world is fine-tuned for our growth in virtue and holiness. If we lived in a hedonistic paradise in which our every wish and whim was gratified, we would never be challenged to grow morally. But if we lived in a world of overwhelming suffering, of suffering far in excess of what we can bear, of suffering without any respite, then the fury of suffering would prevent us from growing morally through it. It is a definite “measure” of suffering that makes possible the defeat of it, and thus makes possible our growth in holiness. From here Dougherty argues in the following probabilistic way. On a naturalistic view of the world, there is no force at work in the world tending to establish the right measure of suffering; the world that emerges in a random way could perfectly well miss the measure, whether by excess or defect. It would be only a lucky accident if the measure of suffering turns out to subserve soul-making and moral growth. But on a theistic view of the world, there is a reason for our world favoring the highest possible growth of the human person: the divine wisdom is at work in the world. If God existed, He would will something like that measure of suffering that we in fact find in the world. The theistic view is therefore more probable than the naturalistic view.

One sees readily the parallel with the fine-tuning argument that is often made in a cosmological setting: all kinds of cosmological facts, beginning with the rate of the universe’s expansion, and extending to the rate of the earth’s rotation on its axis, are just right for life to appear on earth; change any of these cosmological facts, and life does not have a chance. The naturalistic account has to rely on a random concatenation of random events; the theistic account is vastly more believable, since it makes the fine-tuning intelligible. Perhaps we could say that Dougherty has discerned the theistic implications of fine-tuning not only in the physical universe but in the moral universe as well.

But what about animal suffering, which is the main focus of the book? In chapters 4 and 5 Dougherty deals with the “neo-Cartesian” position that animals have no morally relevant suffering. This is not the hard-core Cartesian position that animals are really just machines and are devoid of feeling altogether. The neo-Cartesian position is rather that animals have indeed “negative sensations” that cannot be mechanistically explained, but that

these negative sensations do not really amount to morally relevant pain without some factor of rational reflection that only human beings have. Thus only human beings have morally relevant pain. It follows that animal “pain” is not the kind of thing we have to worry about in theodicy; it does not put in question the goodness of the God who created the animals. Only human pain and suffering are a real issue in theodicy.

Against all the neo-Cartesians Dougherty argues that we have to avoid an overly intellectualized view of pain. He argues that the higher animals, especially the non-human primates, even if they cannot bring reflection into their pain just like human beings do, nevertheless have enough mental capacity to suffer morally relevant pain. I am not sure I follow all of his arguments for this conclusion, but the conclusion itself seems to me absolutely right. (In particular, I am not sure that, as Dougherty seems to assume, a sensation becomes fully conscious pain by being made an object of the suffering person’s attention. The role of reflexive consciousness in the constitution of pain seems to be different from objectifying a sensation; the sensation seems to become real pain by being *lived from within*, not by being objectified.) It follows that animal pain is indeed a problem in theodicy, and that we should indeed be troubled by the fact that there is so much animal pain in a world created by God. I would just distance myself from Dougherty in one respect: the fact that human persons have an entirely different time consciousness from the higher animals would seem to make their suffering different in kind from that of the animals. For example, the intensification of pain that comes from anticipating it, or that comes from its apparent meaninglessness, are dimensions of pain available only to human persons and not to any animal. It would seem to follow that animal pain is not as weighty a problem in theodicy as human pain is.

Once we take animal pain as a real concern of theodicy, as we must, our first impulse is to explain it along the same lines that we explained human pain and suffering, namely to explain it in terms of soul-formation and growth in holiness. But we are immediately stopped in our tracks, because conscious animals are obviously not capable of enduring suffering in a way that forms character in them. They do not seem to be capable of the choice between acceptance and despair that as we saw stands at the root of virtue. It seems that we need some entirely different way to make theological sense of animal suffering.

But Dougherty does not look for a different way. He tries—and this is the novelty of his book—he tries to use for animal suffering the same pattern of

soul-formation that he used so fruitfully for human suffering. He does this in chapters 8 and 9 by assuming an afterlife in which the higher conscious animals are given enhanced powers of reflection and of understanding and of free choice. He goes so far as to postulate that the higher animals, and in any case all the non-human primates, will be raised to the level of persons, so that they can appropriate and “own” the sufferings they experienced in this life, thus defeating the evil in their lives just like we humans can defeat the evil in our lives, and thus achieving some of the theosis or deification that we human persons hope for. “God will do justly and lovingly by animals. That is...he will see to it that their existences are on the whole quite good...and that any suffering can be defeated within the context of their lives” (145). Since this defeat of suffering within the context of their lives does not take place in this earthly life, we have to assume an animal afterlife in which it become possible.

Dougherty is aware of some of the objections he will face, including this one, which I think is the most formidable of the objections: “numerical identity cannot be tracked across a career spanning both a stage as, for example a newt, and a stage as a very high functioning person. In virtue of what would we say this this latter being with superhuman cognitive capacities was *the same individual* as the lowly creature?” (148) Dougherty offers two responses, neither of which seems to me at all convincing.

First, he says that Scotus may be right in teaching that each soul, whether animal or human, “has the same capacities, but each soul’s functioning is limited by the matter to which it is wed” (148). He then offers an analogy with electricity: “The same current entering a house can ‘animate’ a toaster or a television. The latter has much more complex functions...because of the material structure and circuitry into which it flows” (148). I don’t see that Dougherty offers any reasons to think that this “Scotistic” teaching is true. He doesn’t really get beyond saying that if it were true it would lend support to his position. But let us grant it for the moment. The argument of Dougherty would prove far too much. For it would prove that newts and other animals *are persons*. When they are empowered in the afterlife to act as persons, they would merely be achieving a functioning for which they have always had the capacity. But it is the capacity and not the functioning that makes the person. We say that the human infant is a person long before he or she functions as a person. If it is only the present material makeup of the newt that temporarily inhibits it from acting like a person, then the newt is just like a human infant *in being a person who does yet act as a person*.

But if the newt already now *is* a person, are we not obliged to treat it as a person? Do we not have to stop buying and selling animals? Do we not have to show from now on the same care for animals that we show for our infants? Do we not have to say that the same scientific experiments that we would never subject our infants to, should also not be performed on animals? But there is more. Why are Christians not baptizing newts and other animals in the same way that they baptize human infants? What sense do Christians make of the dominion that God has given man over the plants and animals? If human and non-human animals are all persons, how is it that some persons exercise a dominion over other persons, a dominion extending even to the eating of the other persons? In his eagerness to make theological sense of animal suffering, Dougherty seems to me to have created huge new problems, namely a prodigious proliferation of persons where none had ever been suspected, and a levelling of hierarchical relations in nature the recognition of which is deeply embedded in the common sense of mankind.

Let me hasten to add that though I protest against the claim that all living beings are in fact persons, I do not thereby imply that as non-persons they are mere things, fit only to be used by us in a purely instrumental way for our human purposes. I am edified by the prayer of St. Basil, quoted by Dougherty (158-9): “O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals... May we realize that they live, not for us alone, but for themselves and for thee...” Thus I reject the anthropocentric view of animals according to which they exist only for the sake of serving human beings. I reject the anthropocentric idea that it is only wrong for us to treat animals brutally because we are thereby more inclined to treat human beings brutally. I think instead that animals have a being of their own and hence command a certain respect in their own right as animals. Thus I accept what Dougherty calls the AIT, the Animal Independence Thesis, which says that “non-human animals have a direct relationship to God apart from their relationship to humans” (139). But in order to say all of this I do not have to turn animals into persons, nor do I have to invest them with the dignity and inviolability that is proper to persons.

In his second response to the objection, Dougherty invokes the Scotist *haeccitas*, saying “This *thisness* is a non-qualitative property that individuates individuals. No matter what changes an individual were to undergo, their *thisness* ‘follows’ them” (149). The argument is that however different the newt is in this life from its theosis in the afterlife, the *thisness* of the newt holds the newt together as one being; and that it is therefore possible

for the newt in theosis to own the pain suffered by the newt in this life and thus to defeat it.

But Dougherty cannot possibly think that just *any* change that is ascribed to an individual can be comprised within the unity of the individual thanks to the power of *haeccitas*. Suppose I say that an individual who is Socrates has now become Plato and that I invoke *haeccitas* in order to assure you that the change of persons does not involve any change in the individual. You will, I hope, respond that not even the omnipotence of God can bring it about that Plato and Socrates are the same individual. Two persons are two individuals. It is a matter of essential necessity that an individual cannot change from being this person to being another person while remaining the same individual. It follows that thisness does not always have the effect, as Dougherty seems to assume, of making a being “comprehensive” with regard to all that it can become while remaining the same being. Thisness, and especially the thisness proper to persons, can also have the effect of making a being “exclusive” in the sense of establishing the impossibility of certain changes in the being.

Here is another such impossibility: being a person cannot be just a phase in the life of an individual. An individual cannot at one time be a person and at another not a person, while remaining the same individual throughout the change. Thus a newt that is not a person cannot become a person; it can only be replaced by a person with a newt body. But clearly the newt-person that in the afterlife replaces the earthly newt cannot defeat the earthly suffering of the earthly newt, since the newt-person is not the one who suffered. It can only defeat the evil that it as newt-person might suffer in the afterlife.

Dougherty seems to deny this in various places, as when he speaks of the ethical question of “how to appropriately treat *animals that have stages as persons during stages when they are not persons*” (181; my italics). Here he treats personal selfhood as one of those qualitative features that can come and go in a being that remains the same. Perhaps he is identifying “being a person” with “acting in a personal way,” or as we put it above, with “functioning as a person.” On the basis of this identification, being a person could plausibly be taken to be a phase in the life of an individual being. But in fact “being a person” does not express any qualitative attribute or any level of functioning; it rather expresses a radical, incommunicable thisness such that, if you lose your identity as this person you lose your individuality altogether. Dougherty is playing with fire when he appeals to individual thisness, for he thereby brings into the discussion an idea that, once thought through, undermines rather than supports his view of animal theosis.

I could sum up my problem with Dougherty's signature proposal by presenting him with a dilemma. Either the animals that undergo theosis have always been persons and must be treated, even in the present life, as persons; or else they are not yet persons but become persons in the afterlife. The first horn of the dilemma leads to the immense proliferation of persons that we have already discussed, as well as to the levelling of hierarchical differences in nature. The second horn of the dilemma leads to an impossibility; a non-personal animal cannot become a person while remaining the same animal. The closest we can get to what Dougherty wants is this, that earthly animals are replaced in the afterlife by persons who look like them. But this is of no use for Dougherty's theodicy, since these newly created persons can, as we just saw, do nothing to defeat the evil suffered by the earthly animals.

Perhaps the single greatest weakness of this original and fascinating book is the failure of the author to bring sufficient clarity to the concept of person. He does not seem to be aware of the dilemma just mentioned. Sometimes he speaks as if animals were persons from the beginning, but sometimes he speaks as if they became persons along the way. He seems to swing between the two positions of the dilemma without being aware of swinging. In virtue of claiming that animals are raised in the afterlife *to the level of persons*, the concept of person became central to his discourse, and it became incumbent on him to give an unambiguous account of the person and of personal identity. His future work on animals and humans would, I think, be greatly enhanced by a closer attention to the personalist issues I have raised.

The reader may ask how, then, I would make theological sense of animal suffering. If I cannot agree with Dougherty, then how do I keep from being scandalized by the fact of animal suffering? I suppose I could develop the idea, more Augustinian than Irenaean, that the violence that animals inflict on each other is a fruit of sin. When a cheetah attacks and tears apart a terrified antelope, it is very hard to think that this is the way these creatures came forth from the hand of God. The cheetah, red in tooth and claw, seems to have on it a certain sign of sin. Not indeed its own sin, but the sin of man and of the fallen angels, a sin which has a mysterious power to infect and to corrupt, even beyond the person of the sinner. If there is any merit to this thought, then we can say that God's respect for creaturely freedom and for the consequences of creaturely freedom throws some light on how the violence that animals inflict on each other can find a place in a world created by a good God. That would be one way in which one might approach animal pain. But I could also try to take a more appealing approach to it by arguing

that it can be made to serve greater goods, rather like Dougherty argues that a person's suffering can be made to serve the moral growth and the holiness of that person. Perhaps the suffering of animals is in part allowed by God with a view to human beings showing kindness and care to animals. Perhaps a world in which some animal suffering is relieved by human kindness is a better world than one in which animals never suffer at all and in which there is no call for humans to show them kindness. The evil of animal pain would in this approach be defeated not by moral virtue growing in the animal on the basis of its pain, but rather by the kindness elicited from human beings by animal pain. But why shouldn't evil be defeated in this way too, and not only in the way of Dougherty? It would of course belong to another paper to develop these arguments and to test their worth, but at least one can see from these hints that there are other approaches to animal pain that can be explored by theists who cannot see their way to accepting the novel proposal of Dougherty.

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