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GOD AND ANIMAL MINDS

A RESPONSE TO LYNCH

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In a recent *Sophia* article 'Harrison and Hick on God and Animal Pain',¹ Joseph Lynch draws our attention to the difficulties generated for the theist by the suffering of animals, and argues that the responses of John Hick and myself to this problem are inadequate.² Although he does not offer any alternative account of how the apparent suffering of creatures might be reconciled with the existence of an all-good and all-powerful Deity, Lynch nonetheless concludes that '[T]heists must find a way to confront the reality of animal pain, rather than fleeing from it' (p. 72). In this response I shall consider some alternatives to the solutions put forward by Hick and myself, before concluding that the best response theists can offer to the problem of the suffering of lower creatures remains either the denial of animal pain, or the denial that animal pain constitutes a major evil. First, however, I shall consider two arguments which Lynch directs specifically against my position.

I

Lynch's chief objections to my theodicy are these:

- (1) My arguments against animal pain could yield the conclusion that other humans do not feel pain either.

- (2) While I have successfully shown that no single argument to the conclusion that animals feel pain is effective, such arguments considered together 'provide strong support for the thesis.'
- (3) My thesis is logically possible, but implausible, and therefore it fails. Let us consider Lynch's first two objections.

It is true, to a degree, that any scepticism about the mental lives of animals might also be applied to other human beings, for we only infer by analogy that our fellows, or most of them at least, have conscious experiences something like our own. This problem, however, is not unique to those who deny that animals have mental lives, for it is a subset of the more general problem of the point at which this argument from analogy breaks down. In the present case, the issue is to decide that level of biological complexity at which we believe consciousness to emerge in the animal kingdom. It seems to me that even the most charitable extension of consciousness to the 'lower' end of the animal kingdom will stop somewhere, if not, say, at invertebrates, then perhaps at segmented worms, if not there, then perhaps at protozoa. Once this line is drawn, the same objection can be brought into play: why does the argument from analogy no longer apply below the proposed cut-off point for consciousness? The champion of the mental lives of, say, worms could reasonably complain of one who was sceptical of worm consciousness, yet wished to attribute mental states to ants, that the same arguments employed to deny the experiences of the one could almost as easily apply to the other. Such is the nature of

argument by analogy. The issue here is surely whether there are any discontinuities in the hierarchy of biological entities which might justify drawing the line somewhere. My position is that the most radical discontinuity in the scale of living things comes, not between myself and other human beings, but between human beings as a class and other living creatures, and hence this seems the most logical place to draw such line.³ The challenge faced by those who would ascribe mental states to other creatures is to determine which of them will be denied mental lives, and why, bearing in mind that the drawing of any dividing line could feasibly attract the same criticism. The dividing line which I have drawn is, I believe, more defensible than any other.

The argument from analogy is, in any case, strengthened by the fact that symbolic behaviour (for example, speech), which is lacking in other species, is also commonly taken to provide good evidence for the presence of mental states, and even of their specific nature.

Lynch's second objection need not occupy us for long. Lynch agrees that none of the standard arguments for animal pain '*individually establishes* that animals have pain', yet wants to maintain that '*cumulatively they provide very strong support for the thesis*'. I find this a curious argument, for it is not clear, on the face of it, how three flawed arguments might together establish that which singly they could not – as if the sheer weight of numbers might win the day. After all, three blind men pooling their visual talents will not see any better than one. Certainly, if three independent arguments provide some positive probability that a particular conclusion is likely, then together they will indeed have some

cumulative force. However, this is not the situation here. Rather we have three arguments, each of which fails in some significant way to establish its conclusion. Two of the arguments, in any case, are not truly independent, for they ultimately rely, in one way or another, on some presumed link between neural structure and conscious experience.

II

The main point I wish to make in this response concerns the 'plausibility' of the case I have made against animal pain. Lynch states: 'It is clearly possible, logically possible, that animals do not feel pain. But is it plausible? No it is not. And if it is not, Harrison's theodicy fails' (p. 66). I am not at all sure about this. Certainly, I have not denied that my conclusions about the mental states of animals are counter-intuitive. If my thesis appears to be implausible, it is so because it runs counter to a number of common, yet false, assumptions about the mental experiences of animals. However, in the final analysis, the plausibility of a hypothesis is not to do with whether prospective adherents find it attractive or intuitively obvious. To be plausible, a hypothesis need meet only two conditions: first, it cannot be obviously false; second, it must be at least as likely an explanation as any competing hypothesis. Lynch concedes that my thesis satisfies the first condition, for he admits animal insensitivity as a possibility. However he makes no attempt to demonstrate how my thesis might fail the second criterion, for he does not seem to have in mind any alternative hypothesis which will do the job here (except that of Hick, which he also rejects). This is unfortunate, for the strength of my position lies in the

fact that for the theist, animal insensitivity is the least implausible of a range of alternatives. In order to establish this, these alternatives need to be considered. After such consideration has been made, the onus then lies with critics of my position, or that of Hick, to show which alternative they believe to be more plausible.

The range of options available to the theodocist regarding the suffering of animals is as follows:

1. There is no all-powerful and all-good Deity.
2. Animals make wrong moral choices and their suffering is warranted.
3. The suffering of animals contributes in some way to their moral development.
4. Animals suffer as a result of human transgressions.
5. Animals will be compensated for their suffering in some future life.
6. Animals suffer as a result of the transgressions of super-human beings.
7. The suffering of animals contributes in some way to a greater good.
8. Animal pain is not an evil.
9. Animals neither suffer, nor are the subjects of painful experiences.

I will assume that theodocists will be reluctant to take up option (1) *There is no all-powerful and all-good Deity*. However it is worth pointing out that if all the alternatives fail, it would have to be conceded that the suffering of animals counts against the existence of God. Whether decisively so would depend on how much

weight was placed on animal suffering, in view of other considerations. Interestingly, as Lynch has indicated, Charles Darwin was one who thought that such suffering constituted an insuperable obstacle to belief in the traditional Deity.⁴ Options (8) and (9) are those of Hick and myself, respectively, and I shall not be discussing them further. The solutions (2) – (7) have all been proposed at various times, either singly, or in combination. I will briefly treat each one.

(2) *Animals are moral agents.* The most celebrated version of this hypothesis is that attributed to Origen, who believed that the souls of living things pre-existed, and that their embodiment was the result of some 'fall'. The kind of terrestrial body in which a soul found itself imprisoned was directly related to the severity of the transgression committed by the soul in its pre-existing state.⁵ Thus, animals which underwent suffering, or even humans born into barbarous conditions, could be assumed to have warranted their pains. This hypothesis conveniently accounted for the diversity of animal life, and indeed for the variety of conditions in which human beings find themselves. No living creature, in Origen's scheme of things, could be said to suffer unjustly. All suffering is just desert. Origen's view, which takes as its point of departure Plato's speculations about metempsychosis, was revived in the early modern period by the English Platonists.⁶ As far as I know, it has no contemporary supporters, although it bears more than a passing resemblance to Hindu conceptions of transmigration.

(3) *The suffering of animals contributes in some way towards their moral development.* Like (2), with which it is frequently combined, this view entails the notion that

animals are moral agents. If this were true, the 'soul-making theodicy' could be extended to apply to animals as well as to humans. However, whether this view can seriously be entertained without at the same time some commitment to metempsychosis or pre-existence is doubtful. Indeed the whole problem which animal suffering generates for the theodicy is premised upon a rejection of the notion that animals are capable of moral improvement.⁷

(4) *Animals suffer as a result of human transgressions.* The biblical account of the human fall suggests that when Adam and Eve sinned, the whole created order began to degenerate. Briars and brambles, odious creatures generated of slime and filth, the carnivorous appetites of beasts, indeed all that is not bright and beautiful in the world were an unfortunate consequence of the human fall. The suffering of creatures then, is part of the curse under which the earth labours as a result of the fall of our first parents. The authority of St. Paul added weight to this explanation, for according to the apostle, 'the creature was made subject to vanity not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope', thus, 'the whole creation groans and travails in pain'.⁸ Throughout Western history, this has by far been the most popular explanation of the miserable plight of animals, and while it seems to rely on a rather literal reading of the Genesis account of the Fall, and runs contrary to the requirements of distributive justice, the severity of this gloomy view is mitigated somewhat by the fact that it is usually held in conjunction with a belief in the final restoration of all things, including, presumably, animals. Of course, the theory of

evolution, which proposes that animals lived on the earth for millions of years before the appearance of humans, creates some difficulties for this view.

(5) *Animals will be compensated for their suffering in some future life.* If the fate of the earth and its creatures was linked to that of the human race, creatures too, might participate in the future renovation of human beings. Again, this was implied by St. Paul: 'For the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God'.⁹ The view that animals might go to heaven has attracted a number of supporters throughout history, including Origen (who thought that all beings, including Satan and his minions, would eventually be reconciled to God) and a number of early-modern writers including John Wesley.¹⁰ In our own times Keith Ward has made tentative proposals of this kind.¹¹ The chief difficulty here lies in determining which creatures would get to heaven, and what they would do once they got there.¹²

(6) *Animals suffer as the result of the activities of super-human agents.* This is the hypothesis that demons make animals suffer. I have been unable to find many supporters for this view, although given a belief in malevolent spiritual agents, it is not implausible. The episode of the Gadarine swine recorded in the gospels gives some kind of biblical warrant for this view.¹³ In the seventeenth century, Thomas Wilson thought that the creatures were 'forced to do service unto the devils which range in the air. William Cowper agreed that the devil 'accounts a beast his prey'.¹⁴ In the eighteenth century, Père Bougeant proposed a variation of this view – animals are actually embodied demons – but I suspect that this hypothesis was designed more to lampoon the

sophistry of Bourgeant's Jesuit colleagues, than as a serious theodicy.¹⁵ This view has more recently been given qualified support by Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga.¹⁶

(7) *The suffering of animals contributes to the some greater good.* In its weakest form, this argument amounts to the view that animals have been placed in the world for the benefit of humans, and in the larger scheme of things their suffering is inconsequential.¹⁷ This unsatisfactory view, while it has proved popular over the centuries, presupposes that animals have no claims to claims to just treatment, or that the divine justice differs qualitatively from our own. But if this is true, the whole business of constructing theodicies becomes rather pointless. According to a more sympathetic approach, implicit in that neoplatonic tradition which culminates in the theodicy of Leibniz, the suffering of creatures is an inevitable consequence of their lack of perfection. All finite creatures lack certain of the perfections which are to be found in their maker, and because there is variation between living things, creatures lack perfection in varying degrees. The suffering of creatures is the result of their lack of perfection, which in turn is inevitable given the logical constraints placed on the creator. All in all, the universe could not be better than it is, for it has been designed to maximize good. All temporal evils, including the suffering of animals thus contribute to some general good.¹⁸

III

What I hope to have shown in this brief survey is that there are few options available to theist who is faced with the problem of accounting for animal pain. For the most part, the responses which we have considered rely upon

metaphysical commitments to which few now subscribe – pre-existent or transmigrating souls, the principle of plenitude and the great chain of being, havoc-wreaking demons, a cosmic fall, imputed guilt.¹⁹ In light of this, the thesis of animal insensitivity, while undeniably unfashionable and counter-intuitive, still seems to me the least implausible of available alternatives, and one which can be shown to be consistent with the way in which we now view the world. There may yet be life in some of these more traditional responses, but they have as yet to be incorporated into a credible theodicy. Thus while Lynch has concluded with the hope that a more promising path for theodicy lies in theists' 'confronting the reality of animal pain, rather than fleeing from it', it seems to me that this path will still lead a thinking person, as it led Darwin, to a denial of the goodness of God.

ENDNOTES

1. *Sophia* Vol 33 No. 3 (1994), pp. 63-73.
2. The arguments which Lynch addresses may be found in 'Theodicy and Animal Pain', *Philosophy* 64 (1989) pp. 79-92, 'Do Animals Feel Pain?', *Philosophy* 66 (1991) pp. 25-40; John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966) pp. 345-53.
3. This radical discontinuity is not of course a physical one. What I am pointing to here is the vast difference between the products of the conscious human mind, and those of other living things. This discontinuity is thus in keeping with my general claim that it is mental and not physical criteria which count.

4. John Stuart Mill was another. See *Three Essays on Religion*, 3rd edn. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1874), p. 58.
5. Origen, *De principiis* I.viii; II.ix. Cf. Plotinus, IV.iii. 12-16.
6. Plato, *Timaeus*, 91e-92c. For a discussion of the views of the English Platonists, see Peter Harrison, 'Animal Souls, Metempsychosis, and Theodicy in Seventeenth-Century English Thought', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 31 (1993) pp. 519-44.
7. Thus Darwin: 'But the number of men in the world is as nothing compared with that of all other sentient beings, and these often suffer greatly without any moral improvement.' quoted in Lynch, 'Harrison and Hick on Animal Pain', p. 62.
8. Romans 8.20, 22.
9. Romans 9.21.
10. John Wesley, 'The General Deliverance', Sermon LX, in *Works*, 11th edn. (London: John Mason, 1856) VI, pp. 226-37.
11. Thus Ward: 'If there is any sentient being which suffers pain, that being – whatever it is and however it is manifested – must find that pain transfigured by a greater joy. I am quite agnostic about how this is to happen.' *The Concept of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974) p. 223. Cf. Charles Gore, *Belief in God* (London: John Murray, 1921), p. 161.
12. As earlier critics of this view have pointed out. See, e.g., G.H. Gent, *The Grand Prerogative of Human Nature* (London, 1653) p. 110.
13. Mark 5.13 and parallels.
14. Thomas Wilson, *A Commentarie upon the most Diuine Epistle of S. Paul to the Romanes*, (London, 1614), p. 587; William Cowper, *Heaven Opened*, in *Works*, 2nd edn. (London, 1629) p. 116.

15. Père Bougeant, *Amusement philosophique sur le langage des bestes* (Paris, 1739).
16. Richard Swinburne; 'The Problem of Evil', *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. S. Cahn and D. Shatz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 12f.; Alvin Plantinga, *God and other Minds* (Ithaco: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 149f.
17. See, e.g. Augustine, *City of God*, XII.iv; Plotinus, III.ii.15.
18. Charles Journet has proposed a similar view. *The Meaning of Evil*, tr. Michael Barry, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963), pp. 139f.
19. Such commitments may be categorised broadly as either Platonic/Neoplatonic, (2), (3), (5), (7); or traditional Judaeo-Christian (4), (5), (6).