

# Classical Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering

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**Derek Joseph Wiertel**

University of Toronto, Canada

## Abstract

In the Western theological tradition, nonhuman suffering was not perceived as a “live” problem until the early modern period. Constrained by classical theism, the early modern figures of René Descartes, Anne Conway, and G.W. Leibniz developed three distinct approaches to animal theodicy based upon their unique reconceptualization(s) of the world. These three approaches, (1) denial of animal suffering (Descartes); (2) cosmic fall and vale of soul-making (Conway); and (3) necessary suffering of creation (Leibniz), remain the prevailing theodical options with respect to animal suffering in contemporary theological reflection. In light of the limitations of such theodicies, an engagement with the Christian theological narrative provides a framework for revisiting classical theism in relation to animal suffering.

## Keywords

animal suffering, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Sergius Bulgakov, classical theism, Anne Conway, cosmic fall, René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, theodicy

**T**he Christian evaluation of the moral status of animals, which is a prominent topic in contemporary theological discourse, is inextricably shaped by the theological and philosophical convictions of classical Christian theism. Indeed, the reality of animal suffering exemplifies the basic theological predicament that emerged

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## Corresponding author:

Derek Joseph Wiertel, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto, 5 Hoskins Ave., Toronto, ON M5S 1H7, Canada

Email: [derek.wiertel@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:derek.wiertel@mail.utoronto.ca)

within early modern theodical reflection: if the classical conception of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent is presupposed, and the world is perceived as the direct expression of God's creative will, then why is the world filled with so much suffering? Like all theodicies, the problem of animal suffering was shaped by the profound intellectual and cultural shifts that reconfigured Western European perspectives vis-à-vis religion, history, and the natural world (changes that included the discovery of the New World, the fragmentation of Christendom, and the Scientific Revolution). Additionally, along with a general intellectual drift towards descriptive accounts of nature and history, the recognition of nonhuman suffering was also conditioned by the ubiquity of pet-keeping in the early modern period, which effectively reshaped the moral valuation of certain animal species. In response to the recognition of animal suffering, various theodicies were developed that negotiated the constraints of classical theism and the doctrine of creation with the moral status of animals. As with most theodicies of the time, these attempts were constructed around a vision of God's nature that emphasized God's abstract attributes, especially his omnipotence, benevolence, and impassibility. As a consequence, these theodical reflections were strictly limited to the reconceptualization of the created universe in order to account for evil. For this essay, I have selected the early modern figures of René Descartes (1596–1650),<sup>1</sup> Anne Conway (1631–1679), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) as representatives of the three major modern approaches to animal theodicy. These approaches, which are configured according to the constraints of classical theism, can be identified as follows: (1) denial of animal suffering (Descartes); (2) cosmic fall and vale of soul-making (Conway); and (3) necessary suffering of creation (Leibniz). In what follows, I intend to delineate the historical emergence of animal suffering as a problem for Christian theology and explore the benefits and limitations of the three classical theodicies. Accordingly, it is my thesis that the formal structures of these three narratives are the only interpretations available to an abstract philosophical theism. Moreover, I conclude that these theodicies are ultimately limited in their explanatory scope and thus fail to provide a satisfying justification for creaturely suffering. In light of this failure, I conclude the essay with a theological proposal that engages classical theism from within a trinitarian framework to indicate how contemporary theology may approach the problem of animal suffering.

Before proceeding with the analysis of animal theodicy, it is helpful to provide an outline of the overall shape and trajectory of this essay. First, I will articulate the conceptual constraints of classical theism that shape a particular type of theodicy, that is, one that affirms the abstract attributes of God's nature. To this end, I will describe the classical Western approach to God and the animal creation as exemplified in the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas. Second, I will explore the social and cultural

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1. Although René Descartes was not directly interested in the theological problem presented by animal suffering, seeing that he did not explicitly address the issue, he did provide a vision of the world that offered his followers possible apologetic paths to address this issue. See Peter Harrison, "Descartes on Animals," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992): 219–27 at 221–23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2220217>.

conditions that contributed to the emergence of animal suffering as a theological problem in the early modern period, especially as related to pet-keeping. Third, I will describe and analyze how the cosmological visions of René Descartes, Anne Conway, and G. W. Leibniz engage animal suffering and evaluate both the salient features and limits of each approach. As noted above, given a vision of God and creation that corresponds to classical theism, all subsequent theological discourse is limited to the formal elements (however, construed) of these three engagements.

## Classical Christian Theism: God and the Nonhuman Creation

The particular Christian vision of God and the doctrine of creation intrinsically shape early modern philosophical reflection concerning the origin and nature of evil. As such, the Christian worldview manifests a conceptual tension that determines the fundamental insolubility of the problem of evil. To understand how this worldview grounds theodicy (and specifically the problem of animal suffering) it is necessary to trace the specific conceptual distinctions of Western theism that shape theological development. The salient features of Christian theism include: (1) God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, and (2) creation as the undisputed expression of God's creative will (*creatio ex nihilo*).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the second parameter affirms that God absolutely configures the unfolding forms, patterns, and sequences of creation in their manifold historical existence. As a result, the ordering and interactions of all finite beings, which includes the intrinsic violence of the natural world (shaped by competition, scarcity of resources, and animal predation), is not the result of some primordial fall of creation, whether human or cosmic; rather, the world (in both its pre-lapsarian and post-lapsarian form) is exclusively determined by God's power and will and retains an ordering that is intrinsic to God's original intention. It should also be noted that, for the Christian, the conceptual relationship between God and creation is ontologically *asymmetrical*, that is, of the two terms (God and the world) only the created order can be revised to account for the existence of evil. Again, this is due to the specific Christian understanding of the nature of God and the nature of the world

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2. The notion of personhood is another salient feature of Christian theism that deepens the theological problem of associated with the divine attributes and the problem of evil. By characterizing the universe as the freely willed creation of a personal God, who both lovingly and providentially cares for his creatures, the reality of suffering takes on an almost impenetrable opacity. On the other hand, the Christian dogma of a tri-personal God also opens up new interpretive possibilities into the problem of evil and suffering that have been typically overlooked in the rather dry abstractions of classical theism. This is not to claim that such a trinitarian reconfiguration demystifies or solves the problem of evil; rather it possibly reframes how one may look at the relationship between God and the world, which may provide some partial insights into the mystery of evil. Indeed, the constructive proposal at the end of this article depends upon integrating aspects of the prevailing philosophical theodicies of classical theism into a trinitarian framework.

as creature. As a consequence, given these classical affirmations of the ontological status of God and the created order, one's vision of creation (its cosmological shape) becomes the primary theological resource for theodical speculation, that is, how one understands the nature of the world will shape how one accounts for evil.

It may, of course, be argued that the classical understanding of God ought to be revisable, which certainly creates conceptual possibilities for Christian theodical reflection. Indeed, I agree that one of the problematic aspects of classical theism is that it tends to devolve into a rather desiccated and abstruse characterization of God that fails to accord with the living God of Scripture. Moreover, it is notable that the modern period has produced fascinating alternative perspectives on God's character and nature, both Jewish and Christian, that attempted to reconceive God according to scriptural determinations, and not merely according to philosophical abstractions. As the argument goes, a revised understanding of both God's nature and character offer potentially fruitful approaches to theodicy, and by extension, the problem of animal suffering. I am quite sympathetic to the desire to reconceive God's character according to the forms of Scripture, especially because it exposes the "thinness" of what pertains to the classical depiction. However, while I acknowledge the need to recover and express the character of God as determined by scriptural forms, I cannot but affirm that the traditional abstractions of God's nature remain relevant to Christian theological reflection. Furthermore, to revise God's nature away from the traditional attributes (such as immutability and impassibility) does not in and of itself create a more compelling theodicy, unless, of course, such a rendering also involves the revocation of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, and/or the disaffirmation of *creatio ex nihilo*. Such a drastic reconfiguration of God's nature would of course create new possibilities for theodicies (such as presented in process thought); yet, such a rendering creates obvious difficulties for the traditional Christian theist. In the end, I am deeply sympathetic with the theological disposition that aims to render God's character according to scriptural forms;<sup>3</sup> however, it is my conviction that such scriptural determinations must be analogically expressed, lest we form a conceptualization of God that accords with a finite creature, and not the God of unbounded majesty.<sup>4</sup>

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3. By "scripturally determined" I mean that the Christian understanding of God must not be reduced to the desiccated attributes of an abstract theism in order to address theodical concerns. All Christian theological reflection must be determined by the central act of revelation, which is the crucified Son of God. As a consequence, it is possible for the abstract notions of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence to be reconceived within the biblical depictions of God's christologically determined character. One may argue that God's power must be conformed to the image of the crucified Christ, who kenotically empties himself for the life of the world.
  4. For an interesting and helpful discussion of the necessity of metaphysical thinking for a scriptural understanding of God see Matthew Levering's *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 12–39 and 75–110.

As will become clear in the conclusion of this article, I maintain that adherence to the traditional attributes of classical theism does not preclude the possibility of their being reinterpreted within a scriptural framework. Consequently, I differentiate the abandonment of classical theism from its refinement under the auspices of Christian revelation. In fact, one of the primary options in contemporary theological discourse regarding the problem of evil has been to affirm and reconfigure the divine attributes according to Christian revelation, which is grounded upon the implicit theological contours of Scripture. Indeed, if contemporary theodical reflection is to remain tethered to the traditional attributes of classical theism, for which I am an advocate, I maintain that it ought to be thoroughly conditioned by the revelatory content of trinitarian theology, which potentially opens a new vista upon the relationship between God and the creaturely world. However, historically speaking, the traditional Christian approaches to the problem of evil have operated primarily from a strictly philosophical perspective, from which the main theodical approaches to animal suffering derive. In sum, the intellectual resources of trinitarian theology were largely absent from premodern accounts of evil.

### *Aquinas, Augustine, and the Premodern Approach to Animal Suffering*

The dominant Western approach to the problem of evil and suffering in the premodern period is exemplified in the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas, who articulated a comprehensive metaphysical vision that depicted nonhuman suffering as a necessary and morally insignificant feature of the universe. His vision of creation is that of a vast interacting universe of finite substantial beings—a world imbued with formal and final causes that are dynamically ordered by a providential God, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. Out of God's infinite plenitude, God willingly calls into existence a vast community of finite beings, which are determinate participations in God's infinite perfection. Thus, the universe in its vast array represents the undisputed expression of God's creative will. As the pure act of existence (*ipsum esse subsistens*), God cannot, by definition, directly will the existence of evil, which is conceptualized as an absence that is parasitic upon the good of being (*privatio boni*).<sup>5</sup> Thus, evil has no ontological status—it is pure absence of a due good in a substance. Aquinas writes, “Hence it cannot be that evil signifies being, or any form or nature. Therefore it must be that by the name of evil is signified the absence of good.”<sup>6</sup> In describing Aquinas's position, Brian Davies maintains that though evil lacks ontological density, it does not follow that it is either an illusion or unreal; rather, evil manifests itself in a finite being's failure to fulfill its substantial form, in both its entitative and operative dimensions. Davies writes:

The evil in evil suffered is not, thinks Aquinas, something made to exist, something with *esse*. Aquinas does not take it to be an illusion. Nor does he hold that evil suffered does not

5. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 49, a. 2 (hereafter cited as *ST*), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1948; Westminster MD: Christian Classics, 1981), 1:254–55.
6. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 48, a. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1:248–49.

exist *period*. For him, people really do become sick, carnivorous predators really do squeeze the lifeblood out of other animals, and plants fall victim to pests, weather conditions, or a lack of water. But the badness in each of these cases is not, thinks Aquinas, something created by God. Rather, it amounts to a privation or lack of being explicable in terms of a good that is created.<sup>7</sup>

As blindness is the absence of sight in a human person, so is evil understood as the absence of something that ought to be in a particular essence.

With respect to animal suffering, Aquinas's metaphysical system explains creaturely privations as deriving from the multiplicity of substances in the world.<sup>8</sup> Here, he locates the provenance of animal suffering as deriving exclusively from the clashing of finite beings. He writes, "many good things would be taken away if God permitted no evil to exist; for fire would not be generated if air was not corrupted, nor would the life of a lion be preserved unless the ass were killed."<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, God created all beings to fulfill their due form; however, the interaction of these variegated substances inevitably leads to the privation of some. For example, lions are carnivorous animals that by nature consume other animals, such as the gazelle. The ontological good of the gazelle is deprived by the fulfillment of the natural due good of the lion. For Aquinas, the state of nature is not the consequence of the human fall; rather, it is the divinely intended order of things. Aquinas states:

In the opinion of some, those animals which are now fierce and kill others, would, in that state [i.e. the "*unfallen state*"], have been tame, not only in regards to man, but also in regards to animals. But this is quite unreasonable. For the nature of animals was not changed by man's sin.<sup>10</sup>

In this respect, Aquinas follows Augustine's interpretation of the normative status of animal predation.<sup>11</sup> In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine addresses the question, "Why do beasts injure one another, though they neither have any sins, so that this

7. Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas On God and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011), 1.

8. It should be noted that Aquinas focuses primarily on evil as something that occurs to rational human agents under the categories of *malum culpa* (evil committed) and *malum poenae* (evil suffered). Accordingly, these two categories correspond with the traditional Augustinian linkage of suffering with sin. With respect to animal suffering, he addresses animal privations indirectly through his metaphysical system.

9. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 48, a. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1:250.

10. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 96, a. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1:486. This notion that animals were created ordered towards violence vis-à-vis animal predation was eschewed by some Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus. See note 13.

11. In his *Hexaemeron* Basil expresses a similar view to Augustine's in which animals are created as intrinsically ordered to violence; see Homily 9, sec. 5. Like Augustine, he also perceives that animals exist for the sake of humanity, both for consumption and as an example of virtue, e.g., the struggle of animals to survive teaches human beings courage; see Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 3.16.25, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City), 230–31. Within the prevailing tradition there was also a view of an original

kind of thing could be called punishment?" His answer: "For the simple reason of course, that some are the proper diet of others ... All things, you see, as long as they continue to be, have their own proper measures, numbers and destinies."<sup>12</sup> Further, Augustine describes the ongoing predatory–prey relationship among animals as ordered towards the "temporal beauty of the world"<sup>13</sup> which manifests the unfolding potentialities within the created cosmos. Thus, for both Aquinas and Augustine, the created universe consists of a temporal unfolding of natural substances whose interactions manifest privation. Nonetheless, God does not directly will the evil that befalls creatures; rather, God assuredly wills the good of each being, which ineluctably leads to privative suffering.

It is notable that Aquinas's vision of a world conditioned by privative interaction forms a fascinating parallel with contemporary accounts of the universe's development in which thermodynamic change grounds the upward gradient of biological complexity. According to this schema, the fundamental laws of the creative process, which involve the dynamic exchange of matter and energy, indicate that struggle, competition, and death are woven into the very heart of creation.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Aquinas maintains that the goal of a beautiful and diverse universe necessitates intrinsic limitations

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harmony between human beings and animals, and amongst animals themselves. Ephrem the Syrian writes, "[This happened] so that God might make known the wisdom of Adam and the harmony that existed between the animals and Adam before he transgressed the commandment. The animals came to Adam as to a loving shepherd. Without fear they passed before him in an orderly fashion, by kinds and by species. They were neither afraid of him nor were they afraid of each other. A species of predatory animal would pass by with a species of animal that is preyed upon following safely right behind." Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis* 2.9.3, in K. McVey (ed.), *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, trans. by E. G. Mathews and J. P. Amar, Fathers of the Church 91 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America), 67–214 at 103. This perspective is also found in Irenaeus. He writes, "But although this is [true] now with regard to some men coming from various nations to the harmony of the faith, nevertheless in the resurrection of the just [the words shall also apply] to those animals mentioned. For God is rich in all things. And it is right that when the creation is restored, all the animals should obey and be in subjection to man, and revert to the food originally given by God ... that is, the productions of the earth. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.33.4, in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1885), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.vii.xxxiv.html>.

12. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 3.16.25.

13. *Ibid.*

14. The second law of thermodynamics provides a fascinating challenge to the contemporary theological debate. The reality that the exchange of matter and energy grounds the universe's evolution, both cosmic and biological, indicates that death and suffering are properties that contribute significantly to the creation of the world. However, it should be mentioned that the increase of entropy is also conditioned by increasingly ordered patterns in localized systems, hence the emergence of greater biological complexity. Of course, the matter–energy exchange does not necessarily have to bring forth the more grotesque and horrific features we perceive in the natural world (e.g., animal predation)—such things

and interactions that include the inevitability of suffering and death. However, the difficulty with Aquinas's account of evil (as will be evinced in Leibniz's reformulation) is the reality that death and decomposition are not necessary features of a "best possible universe," but contingent choices elected by God for the sake of God's creative act. In essence, privative suffering is the instrumental means through which God chooses to create the world and is not imposed upon God by ontological necessity.

In Aquinas's schema, the accidental interaction of finite beings, as exemplified in animal predation, is not a moral problem. First, God does not directly will the evil suffered; instead, he wills the existence of the multiplicity of forms that interact to bring forth a beautiful and harmonious universe—such is the nature of the world.<sup>15</sup> As Aquinas puts it:

As, therefore, the perfection of the universe requires that there should be not only beings incorruptible, but also corruptible beings; so the perfection of the universe requires that there should be some which can fail in goodness, and thence it follows that sometimes they do fail. Now it is in this that evil consists, namely, in the fact that a thing fails in goodness.<sup>16</sup>

Second, Aquinas, following both philosophical and theological tradition, does not recognize animals as being capable of suffering in the same sense as human persons. As an inheritor of Aristotle's philosophical system, Aquinas adopted the philosopher's division of the forms of life. Whereas plants had a vegetative soul and animals a sensitive soul,<sup>17</sup> the human person possessed a rational soul that indicated its elevated status above both

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are contingent developments—but it certainly indicates that laws and properties that bring forth death and dissolution are there from the start. Unless one were to affirm that such a universe is the only one possible for God to create (as does Christopher Southgate), at least with an aim to such emergent properties of sentience and consciousness, this lends itself to the objection that God's creative activity devolves into a type of utilitarian calculus whereby creaturely suffering is sublimated to a higher teleology. It is within the context of thermodynamic change that contemporary theodical reflection must occur. For a contemporary depiction of the world according to the natural sciences see John Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 1998), 25–48.

15. It does seem that Aquinas describes such interactions as "evil" in that they are determined by a privative interaction, i.e. the due form of a creature is truncated by another form. He uses the example of the interaction of the forms of fire and air as an example of this type of interaction, along with an example of a lion eating an ass. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 48, a. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1:248–49.
16. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 48, a. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1:248–49.
17. Although animal souls had five interior powers, including common sense, phantasy, imagination, estimative, and memorative powers, these properties failed to attain the universal reasoning capacities of the rational soul. Aquinas seems to acknowledge that animals have a form of "particular reason" that enables them to navigate in relation to their natural environment. Further, this type of reason, which included memory and prudence, is distinct from the intellectual capacities of the rational soul because it is unable to recognize universals nor exercise free choice. See Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2005), 126–31. Also See Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 1.1.9–16, trans. John Patrick Rowan (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox, 1995), <http://dhsprpriory.org/thomas/Metaphysics1.htm>.



animals and plants in the great chain of being.<sup>18</sup> According to the classical Western perspective, the sensitive soul of the animal does indeed experience pain; however, animal pain does not constitute a moral problem because it accords with the divine ordering of things, that is, it is through this multiplicity of interactions that God establishes the beauty of the whole. Yet, while acknowledging the sensitive reality of animal existence, Aquinas also affirms that suffering is inextricably linked with the sinfulness of rational creatures, namely, *sub Deo justo, nemo miser nisi* (under a just God, no innocent suffers).<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is striking that Aquinas's schema indicates a somewhat convoluted theological dilemma in which animals suffer; however, such suffering is not a real problem because it is not rationally experienced. This problem could be solved if Aquinas adopted (*pace* Augustine) a participatory ontology that causally links animal suffering with the Adamic sin (e.g. in the theology of Irenaeus and Ephrem the Syrian) and thus sever the direct causal link between sin and suffering. In the end, Aquinas rejects such a participatory perspective and affirms Augustine's vision of the deleterious effects of sin as exclusively reserved for the anthropological realm. Thus, Aquinas's overall metaphysical and theological vision attempts to hold together a tension that both acknowledges animal sentience while denying animal sapience. It is this tension that ultimately grounds the claim that the suffering of sensible creatures is ontologically real but morally insignificant.

Within the overall cosmological perspective of Western Christian theism (which combined elements of Platonism and Aristotelianism within a biblical framework) the moral status of animals was securely fixed beneath the human. As such, the Western Christian vision of the animal world was dominated by anthropocentric concerns—that is, the human person was perceived as the microcosm of the created universe, summing up and embracing all levels of creatures linked within the great hierarchy of being that derives from God's will. This anthropocentric (or microcosmic) vision of humankind was determined by both Aristotelian descriptions of the natural world and the theological implications of the Genesis narrative, which gave the created world over to humanity's dominion. Accordingly, this dominion over creation ultimately meant that humankind had no moral obligations towards animals—instead, animal life existed for the sake of human beings.<sup>20</sup> Aquinas writes:

For animals are ordered to man's use in the natural course of things, according to divine providence. Consequently, man uses them without any injustice, either by killing them or by employing them in any other way. For this reason, God said to Noah: "As the green herbs, I have delivered all flesh to you" (Gen 9:3).<sup>21</sup>

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18. Peter Harrison, "Animal Souls, Metempsychosis, and Theodicy in Seventeenth Century English Thought," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993): 519–44 at 519, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.1993.0081>.
  19. Augustine, *Contra Julianum*, bk. 3, chaps. 3, 5.
  20. Altogether, the prevailing view of animals in the West accorded with a form of instrumentalism whereby animals served some human purpose, whether it be practical, moral or aesthetic. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of Modern Sensibility* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 18–19.
  21. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, a. 112, 12, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Hanover House, 1955–57), <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3b.htm>.

Indeed, as a further illustration of this anthropocentrism, Aquinas maintains that cruelty towards animals ought to be resisted solely for the reason that it might lead to violence against other human beings.<sup>22</sup>

Although the vision of animals as instrumentally related to human persons was the predominant view, this was also accompanied by another religious vision of both animals and plants as symbolic representations of moral and theological truths. In his essay “The Virtues of Animals in Seventeenth-Century Thought,” Peter Harrison notes:

For the church Fathers and their medieval successors, the natural world was a book, a repository of rich and varied symbols which bore important meanings. So it was that whatever properties a creature had—physical characteristics, behaviors, life histories, passions, all potentially taught some moral lesson or signified some eternal verity.<sup>23</sup>

In this respect, the plant and animal kingdoms served a religious function because they operated as a semiotic world of signs (akin to Scripture) that opened toward a world of transcendent meaning. In this capacity, both animals and plants illustrated specific moral or theological principles (whether of virtue or vice) that were either shunned or affirmed. Harrison suggests that the unruly nature of the cosmos, that is, man’s strained relationship with creation, mirrors man’s relationship to his own sinful disposition. He writes, “Just as in the macrocosm the animals rebelled against human dominion following Adam’s lapse, so in the microcosm, human passions rebelled against a wounded reason.”<sup>24</sup> Such a perspective does not envision the natural world as ordered by a cosmic fall; rather, the fall of Adam merely reorders and disrupts humanity’s relationship with God, oneself, and the orders of creation.

Overall, the Western Christian vision of animals, at least until the seventeenth century, was shaped by the notion that animals existed to serve human needs, both physical and spiritual. This view was animated by the predominant philosophical and theological perspectives regarding the nature of God, the role of humanity in the divine

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22. “Indeed, if any statements are found in Sacred Scripture prohibiting the commission of an act of cruelty against brute animals, for instance, that one should not kill a bird accompanied by her young (Deut 22:6), this is said either to turn the mind of man away from cruelty which might be used on other men, lest a person through practicing cruelty on brutes might go on to do the same to men; or because an injurious act committed on animals may lead to a temporal loss for some man, either for the agent or for another man; or there may be another interpretation of the text, as the Apostle (1 Cor 9:9) explains it, in terms of ‘not muzzling the ox that treads the corn’ (Deut 25:4).” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, a. 112, 13, trans. Bourke.

23. Peter Harrison, “The Virtues of Animals in Seventeenth-Century Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (1998): 463–84 at 465–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3653897>. Harrison cites Basil, Ambrose, and the third-century *Physiologus* as evidence of the church father’s perception of creation as a symbolic archive of moral and spiritual truth. It should be noted that the *explicit* articulation of the “two books” trope is specifically developed by Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* 16.

24. Harrison, “The Virtues of Animals,” 467.

economy, and the negligible moral status of animal sentience. Although the dominant strain of animal consideration was reflected by their instrumental usefulness (for food, farming, etc.), animals were also integrated into the moral and spiritual dimensions of human culture. As such, animals served humankind as both sources for sustenance and as symbolic representations of the Christian moral universe.

## The Emergence of the Problem of Animal Suffering

As stated in the introduction, the emergence of the problem of animal suffering can be mapped onto the historical conditions that furnished the development of theodicy in general as a “live problem” in the early modern period. The development of theodical concerns was precipitated by a particular set of social, political, and cultural conditions that reshaped Western Europe’s understanding of the nature of the world. The discovery of the Western hemisphere, the Scientific Revolution, and the fracturing of Christendom created fertile soil for a new picture of the universe.<sup>25</sup> This vision of creation was also accompanied by social and cultural shifts that gave rise to a new understanding and appreciation of animal life and consciousness. In her study, *Looking at Animals in Human History*, Linda Kalof argues that deepening interest in the philosophical discussion of animal life “was fuelled in part by three rapidly spreading trends: the popularity of vivisection in the new experimental science, increasing urbanization and commodification of animals for food and labour, and the widespread availability of print media.”<sup>26</sup> This burgeoning interest in animal sentience raised significant questions with respect to the relationship between humanity and the animal kingdom. Indeed, one example of this growing concern is represented by the sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne,

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25. The new science, represented by Newton and Bacon, sought to understand the nature of physical reality according to its empirical manifestations, not according to a set of abstract concepts. In a gradual shift, the Western intellectual world (both philosophically and culturally) turned its gaze upon the concrete. Arguments for God’s nature and existence, as well as the entire edifice of knowledge about the world, became exclusively oriented towards self-evident mathematical axioms and the manifestation of concrete particulars in nature. No longer was the world conceived according to an abstractive concept of being; instead, the forms of life, with its intrinsic laws, could only be determined by both mathematical and empirical evaluation. This shift dramatically reorients how the Western world understood the relationship of God to the world and provides the context for the emergence of the problem of animal suffering. See Margaret J. Olser, *Reconfiguring the World: Nature, God, and Human Understanding from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2010), 30–60; and Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 113–27.

26. Linda Kalof, *Looking at Animals in Human History* (London: Reaktion, 2007), 96. It should be noted that the emergence of animal suffering as a live problem was anticipated by medieval folk stories that expressed a sense of animal morality (e.g., St Francis’s friendship with the wolf Gubbio). For a description of medieval perspectives on animals see Kalof, *Looking at Animals*, 40–71.

who argued hyperbolically that animals were not only rational, but were, in fact, morally superior to human beings.<sup>27</sup> This growing interest in the moral status of animals, which was indicated by the work of Montaigne and his subsequent followers (so-called theriophilists), corresponded with the emergence of pet-keeping in seventeenth-century European society. Based upon this correspondence, historian Keith Thomas suggests in his *Man and the Natural World* that it was the widespread adoption of pet-keeping among the middle class that dramatically deepened the human appreciation of animal sentience. Thomas writes:

Pet keeping had been fashionable among the well-to-do in the Middle Ages ... But it was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that pets seemed to really establish themselves as normal feature of the middle-class household, especially in towns, where animals were less likely to be functional necessities.<sup>28</sup>

For Thomas, the expansion of pet keeping in this period was accompanied by an elevated appreciation of both animal intelligence and consciousness. Animals were no longer exclusively valued for their functional uses for human life and culture; instead, the recognition of intelligence and emotion in animals began to narrow the qualitative abyss between human and animal life. It should be noted, however, that pet-keeping itself was not entirely new, but was, as described by Michael Mackinnon “a widespread and well-accepted phenomenon in classical antiquity.” Indeed Mackinnon cites as evidence funerary practices, including the special burial of animals, which display what he calls the Greco-Roman “humanization” of animals.<sup>29</sup> The implications of Mackinnon’s study suggest that “pet-keeping” itself, with its inherent recognition of animal personality, cannot be the sole reason for the moral interest in animal life in the early modern period. It is my contention that the growth of pet-keeping during this period, which was much more significant than it was in either the medieval or Renaissance periods, was a significant factor in *deepening* the already growing status of animal life. Accordingly, the appreciation of the moral significance of animals mirrored the growing appreciation of the moral status of the human other. Indeed, Keith Thomas instructively acknowledges the relationship of animal suffering with the growing cultural recognition of human suffering. Thomas writes:

The concern for animal welfare was part of a much wider movement which involved the spread of humane feelings towards previously despised human beings, like the criminal, the insane or

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27. Harrison, “The Virtues of Animals,” 471. Montaigne’s assertion, of course, was grounded in both the traditional use of animals as symbolic representations of human virtue as well as the Stoic principle that “to live rightly is to live in accordance with nature.” It should be noted that the perception of animals as moral exemplars antedates Montaigne’s essay, however. I would argue that Montaigne’s essay served as a type seminal moment in which moral concerns regarding animal treatment were entering the public consciousness of modern European societies.

28. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 110.

29. Michael Mackinnon, “Pets,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, ed. Gordon Lindsay Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014), 270–79 at 270.

the enslaved. It thus became associated with a more general demand for reform, whether the abolition of slavery, flogging and public executions or the reform of schools, prisons and the poor law. The pamphleteer who in 1656 called for a law against cruel sports also denounced torture and pressing to death as barbarous, and condemned hanging, drawing and quartering as an “act of cruelty and too much insulting over a poor fellow creature in misery.”<sup>30</sup>

In sum, it seems that the recognition of animal suffering was part and parcel of a general cultural drift towards a greater recognition of human misery.

Along with the recognition of animal suffering, a concern for the religious experience of animals was also a unique development of the early modern period. As considerations for the humane treatment of animals evolved, serious questions regarding the post-mortem fate of beloved animal companions also became part of early modern religious and philosophical discourse. Indeed, Thomas maintains that it was commonly assumed that certain animals possessed a religious instinct, which was evinced by various popular stories and legends that testified to the religious sensitivity of animals.<sup>31</sup> Of course, as noted by Mackinnon, animals were already associated with religious practices in classical antiquity (funerary rites, burials, etc.), which connected animals with some notion of an afterlife.<sup>32</sup> However, the concern for the post-mortem fate of animals in a Western Christian context seems to be an entirely new phenomenon. Within the early modern period, especially in England, notions of animal immortality became an open possibility for many theologians and philosophers.<sup>33</sup> Thomas writes that “the idea of animal immortality seems to have made more headway in England than anywhere else in this period; and it was undoubtedly to pet-lovers that it made greatest appeal. It was buttressed by arguments from scripture and by observation of the mental capacities of the animals in question.”<sup>34</sup>

According to our account, the recognition of animal intelligence, consciousness, and possible immortality began to reconfigure the moral status of animal life in a Western Christian context. As Peter Harrison holds:

These new relationships between humans and particular animals challenged the view that no duties were owed to animals, and gave rise to further questions about the nature of animals—questions which until this time had only been asked about human subjects: Were animals immortal? Did they go to heaven? Could they have inklings of moral responsibility? These concerns were reinforced by reactions against both the fashionable mechanical conception of nature and the older Aristotelian model.<sup>35</sup>

30. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 184.

31. *Ibid.*, 110–15.

32. Mackinnon, “Pets,” 270.

33. Harrison indicates that many English clergymen of this period speculated about the post-mortem fate of animals. Some persons, such as George Abbot and Thomas Wilson, speculated about the possibility of eschatological redemption of animals. Harrison, “Animal Souls, Metempsychosis,” 528.

34. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 140.

35. Harrison, “Animal Souls, Metempsychosis,” 528.

This recognition of animal intelligence and personality implied that animals were not merely functional chattel to be used for human exploitation, but were, in fact, moral subjects. It is within this new understanding of animal life that the problem of animal misery influenced the theodical concerns of the seventeenth century. This understanding of animal sentience further destabilized the operative Augustinian assumptions regarding the direct relationship of sin and suffering. Indeed, as developed by Susan Neiman in her excellent study, *Evil in Modern Thought*, the traditional linkage of sin and suffering was already distressed due to the developing theodical concerns of the period.<sup>36</sup> In many ways the concern for animals was a profound instantiation of the growing dissatisfaction with the Augustinian perspective. If animals had a subjective “personal existence” that was characterized by suffering, and they were not morally at fault, how was this state of affairs not profoundly unjust? In the third part, I will articulate three philosophical perspectives from the early modern period that attempt to render this moral problem intelligible.

## Early Modern Responses to Animal Suffering

### *The Diminishment of Animal Suffering: Descartes, the Cartesians, and the Animal-Machine*

In the introduction, I asserted that the primary theistic approaches to the problem of animal suffering were shaped by particular conceptualizations of the nature of the world. If it is assumed that the classical understanding of God is entirely un-revisable (as it is for many early modern thinkers), then the world remains the only possible locus for philosophical appropriation and revision. Accordingly, such theodicies are deliberately configured around the picture of the world adopted by the defenders of God’s goodness and power. In line with this principle, René Descartes’s approach to the problem of animal suffering is folded within his cosmological vision.

Descartes (1596–1650) presents a picture of the world that stands in stark contrast to the classical vision of the cosmos that was penetrated by formal and final causes. Although he retains a classical understanding of God, who is “sovereign, eternal, infinite, unchangeable, all-knowing, all-powerful, and universal creator,”<sup>37</sup> he displaces the hierarchical great chain of being with a mechanistic universe of uniform matter. This cosmological vision had profound implications vis-à-vis the ontological status of animals within the created universe. Of course, Descartes’s understanding of animal sentience was not originally envisioned as a theodicy; rather, it was an ancillary development to his overall conceptualization of the world as material extension (*res extensa*). Descartes’s dualistic vision of a created universe constituted by mind and spatial extension was developed in light of his

36. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2002), 23–24.

37. René Descartes, *Discourse On Method and the Meditations*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 119.

epistemic concern to ground all truth in the innate ideas of the mind. As such, he determined that there were only two types of stuff in the world: mind and extensive matter. “To begin this examination, I here remark firstly, that there is a great difference between mind and body, in that body, by its nature, is always divisible and that mind is indivisible.”<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, the properties of mind (so-called mental events), which included both reason and perception, could only be grounded in the existence of an immaterial rational soul. On the other, the existence of matter, which was mechanistically interrelated, displayed none of the properties of mental life; therefore, matter was ontologically distinct from mind. Within this dualistic framework, Descartes regarded animals to be merely extensive matter, that is, they are biological machines devoid of intellect and personality. He writes, “There is nothing which leads feeble minds more readily astray from the straight path of virtue than to imagine that the soul of animals are of the same nature as our own.”<sup>39</sup> This view of soulless animals seemingly goes well beyond the classical perspective of Aristotle and Aquinas, who at least, maintained that animals possessed sensitive souls. The implications of Descartes’s ontology, which suggested that animals lacked both thought and self-consciousness, was embraced by many of his followers, who played up the notion that animals lacked feeling altogether.<sup>40</sup> The most notable Cartesian who explicated the theological implications of Descartes’s understanding of animal pain was Nicolas Malebranche who, in his *De la recherch  de la verita* (1674–75), argued that Descartes’s theoretical depiction of animal automata fittingly corresponded with Augustine’s dictum, *sub Deo justo, nemo miser nisi*.<sup>41</sup> For Malebranche, the moral innocence of animals corresponds with their inability to suffer. Indeed, for him, there is no moral problem when it comes to animal suffering, for such suffering does not, in fact, exist. Here, the traditional causal nexus between sin and suffering is preserved within the Cartesian universe.

Recently, many notable scholars, including Peter Harrison and John Cottingham, have challenged the traditional scholarly assumption that Descartes himself denied animal pain.<sup>42</sup> Most notably, Harrison argues that the traditional interpretation

38. *Ibid.*, 164.

39. Descartes, *Discourse On Method and the Meditations*, 76.

40. In summarizing the Cartesian perspective of animals, Keith Thomas writes, “Animals ... did not feel pain; the cry of a beaten dog was no more evidence of the brute’s suffering than the sound of an organ proof that the instrument felt pain when struck.” Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 33.

41. Harrison, “Animal Souls, Metempsychosis, and Theodicy,” 523–24.

42. See Peter Harrison, “Descartes and Animals,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992): 219–227, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2220217>; John Cottingham, “‘A Brute to the Brutes?’ Descartes’ Treatment of Animals,” *Philosophy* 53 (1978): 551–559, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819100026371>; Justin Leiber, “Descartes: The Smear and Related Miscontruals,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 41 (2011): 365–375, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.2011.00464.x>. For a critique of this revision of Descartes see Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and its Discontents*, chap. 6.

derives from confusion over Descartes's terminology and that, in fact, he was much more agnostic about the possibility of animals possessing feelings.<sup>43</sup> He writes, "Descartes distinguishes between *sentire* (feelings) and passions (passions/feelings). It is only the former which he wishes to deny in animals."<sup>44</sup> Harrison notes that Descartes denies animal feeling (*sentire*) because this form of sensation requires a rationally reflective consciousness, which appears to be absent in animals, whereas the passions did not require rational thought. Thus, for Descartes, animals did suffer, but in a comparatively different manner than human beings. As such, I believe that Harrison effectively demonstrates that Descartes's understanding of animal suffering is more nuanced than typically granted; however, though he did not explicitly deny that animals experienced pain, many of his followers became advocates for such a perspective based upon his particular understanding of the world.

The convenience of the Cartesian depiction of animal life with respect to classical theism was derided by Pierre Bayle in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. Within this seminal work of philosophy, Bayle effectively deconstructs the Cartesian position, which, as he confessed, would have been a great help to the problem of animal misery. Bayle writes, "It's a shame that Descartes's view about this is so hard to maintain and so implausible, because its truth—if it were true—would be a great help to the true faith."<sup>45</sup> For Bayle, the remarkable capacity of Descartes's theory to resolve this theological problem also assures that it was most likely false—especially since the Cartesian perspective failed to cohere with the prevailing experiential accounts of animal intelligence and personality. Additionally, Bayle also points out that Descartes's mind-body dualism, which led Cartesians to deny self-conscious thought to animals, inexorably led (logically speaking) to a type of solipsistic denial of all other minds except for the thinking subject. In other words, if animals, which do not possess a rational soul, are able to imitate those properties and characteristics that appear "rational," how is it not possible to interpret human rational behavior as a form of mechanism? He writes:

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43. As evidence of Descartes's hesitancy to adjudicate the reality of animal feeling, or lack thereof, Harrison cites a letter to Henry More in which Descartes concedes that it is impossible to know if animals had any thought whatsoever. He writes, "though I regard it as established that we cannot prove there is any thought in animals, I do not think it is thereby proved that there is not, since the human mind does not reach into their hearts." Descartes letter to Henry More, 5 February 1649, in Harrison, "Descartes on Animals," 226.

44. Harrison not only highlights the reticence of Descartes in openly declaring how he understood animal sentience, but he also points out that Descartes was a particularly devoted dog owner. Although Harrison is correct to point out that Descartes had an affectionate relationship with his dog, Steiner notes that his affection for his dog did not preclude him from practicing vivisection on other animals. See Harrison, "Descartes and Animals," 224–25, and Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and its Discontents*, 132–52. For another account that makes the case that Descartes practiced animal vivisection, see Andrew Gombay, *Descartes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 43.

45. Pierre Bayle, "Rorarius," in *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam: Leers, 1697).



The Cartesian has no sooner overturned, ruined, and annihilated the opinion of the scholastics on the soul of animals, than he realizes that one can defeat him with his own arms, and show that he proves too much, and that if he reasons consequently, he will renounce his opinions, which he cannot hold on to without exposing himself to the ridicule and admitting obvious absurdities: where is the man who would dare to say that only he thinks, and that all others are machines.<sup>46</sup>

Note well that Bayle draws out a latent aspect of Descartes's ontology that would eventually overcome the radical disjunction between mind and body. For, if what appears as rational activity can be interpreted mechanically, cannot human behavior also be interpreted mechanically?

The Cartesian beast-machine as an interpretation of animal suffering fails in its apologetic value due to its being entirely bound up with a discredited conceptualization of the world—that is, a world of material extension devoid of spirit. Although Descartes's idea of soul-less animal automata exercised considerable influence among many intellectuals, especially because it provided a powerful rationalization for the ways in which humans treated animals, it also presented substantial difficulties, especially because it denied aspects of animal life that were easily perceived (e.g., concrete experiences of animal affection, pain, and “personality”). As noted by Keith Thomas, notable intellectuals, such as Henry More and John Locke, considered the Cartesian position to be a “murderous doctrine” against “all sense of evidence and reason.”<sup>47</sup> The decline of the Cartesian worldview, which held sway with many due to its accord with religious sentiments regarding the disjunction between animals and human beings, was precipitated by the final desacralization of the human person, the last holdout against an encroaching materialism. As Peter Harrison correctly remarks, the radical disjunction between humanity and animals would finally be demolished by the development of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection in the nineteenth century. He concludes:

More than internal philosophical difficulties, however, it was the acceptance of evolutionary theory, which led to the demise of the animal-machine. The evolutionary model, which stresses continuities between human and animal realms, displaced the quasi-religious Cartesian model with its emphasis on the immortal soul and on the privileged position of man in creation.<sup>48</sup>

In spite of the collapse of the Cartesian vision of the world, the basic form of the Cartesian theodicy, that is, the diminishment (or denial) of animal suffering remains a significant apologetic strategy for Christian theological reflection. Indeed, some Christian philosophers and theologians, such as Michael Murray and Peter Harrison, have appropriated the basic Cartesian stance (absent Descartes's ontology) that denies the moral equivalence of animal suffering with human suffering. Accordingly, the contemporary

46. Pierre Bayle, “Rorarius,” quoted in in Dennis Des Chene, “Animal as Category,” in *The Problem of Animal Generation in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Justin E. H. Smith (New York: Cambridge University, 2006), 215–32 at 226.

47. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 35.

48. Peter Harrison, “Theodicy and Animal Pain,” *Philosophy* 64 (1989): 79–92 at 80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819100044053>.

model of this approach highlights the findings of neuroscience, which suggest that most creatures (aside from the higher apes) lack the neurologic features that are necessary for an awareness of pain and suffering.<sup>49</sup> As such, this approach justifies the existence of animal pain within God's creation by reconfiguring the nature of such suffering so that it is no longer theologically problematic. Yet, such approaches are almost inevitably insufficient due to epistemic limitations. First, such an apologetic fails to cohere with our basic phenomenological experience of animal life. Typically, we interpret animals as "experiencing" conscious states, that is, behavioral descriptions of animal life indicate that creatures do indeed experience mental events, including that of pain and suffering. Second, and more significantly, such an approach is problematic due to its epistemic ambiguity. Even with the latest findings of neurological research, the conscious experience of nonhuman creatures remains an inaccessible reality to the human mind. Accordingly, I maintain, as a principle, that a descriptive knowledge regarding physiological (or neurological) phenomena does not logically entail any insight into the perceptive subjectivity of a nonhuman creature. Therefore, we cannot know exactly how nonhuman creatures experience the world outside from our own (human conditioned) imagination. Altogether, in spite of its problems, the formal structure of Descartes's understanding of animal pain remains a possible option in the quest to mitigate the theological problem of nonhuman suffering. Yet, of the three prevailing approaches, I consider it to be the least tenable interpretation afforded by classical theism. Its epistemic limitations and failure to cohere with our day-to-day experience of animal sentience renders it both less convincing and less comforting.

### *The Cosmic Fall and Vale of Soul-Making: Anne Conway and the Moralization of Animal Suffering*

In response to Descartes's radical dualism of matter and spirit, the seventeenth-century English philosopher Anne Conway (1631–1679) articulated a cosmological vision that reaffirmed the traditional scholastic "great chain of being." In her vision, the world is perceived as "one entity or substance in respect to nature or essence," which "varies according to its mode of existence" as it descends from the one eternal God.<sup>50</sup> Conway,

49. Such an approach depends upon certain neurological capacities that are lacking in lower animals. Accordingly, the lack of certain neural pathways indicates that animals may lack an awareness of being in pain. Murray's argument consists of making the claim that most animals do indeed have pain receptors that indicate the physiological capacity to feel pain, yet, this capacity is not matched with subjective awareness of the state of pain. Thus, when an animal is in a state of pain it is not subjectively aware of it. See Michael Murray's *Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011), and Peter Harrison, "Do Animals Feel Pain?" *Philosophy* 66 (1991): 25–40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819100052827>.

50. Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Boston: Cambridge University, 1996), 81.

who was influenced by the ontology of the Cambridge Platonists, set forth a vitalistic vision of the world—based upon her adoption of Platonism, Origenism, and Kabbalism—which offered a creative approach to the problem of evil and suffering. In some respects, Conway’s approach displays a theological disposition that is more characteristic of Eastern Christian perspectives regarding the status of creation vis-à-vis evil and sin: Conway perceives the entire universe in a state of cosmic bondage due to some primordial catastrophe. Although Conway did not directly address animal misery, her ontological vision of the fallen world had significant implications with respect to the moral status of nonhuman creatures. Altogether, Conway’s work represents a perceptive integration of the main conceptual features of Western theism with the reality of animal suffering.<sup>51</sup> Though her theodicy succeeds as an explanatory interpretation because she reaffirms the direct causal nexus between sin and creaturely suffering (as did also Descartes), the result of her theological system, ultimately, depends upon features that fail to cohere with traditional Christian teaching.

The applicability of Conway’s theodicy to animal suffering is, like Descartes’s idea of the beast-machine, based upon her unique cosmology. Unlike Descartes, she rejects a materialistic conception of the world; instead, she views the entire world as one spiritual substance that is diversified according to different modes of existence. As Sarah Hutton notes, Conway perceives that “all things are living organisms, whether they be physical objects like dust and stones, or more complex beings like animals and humans. Every creature and particle in its make-up is capable of life and perception.”<sup>52</sup> For Conway, the Cartesian concept of material extension is ontologically problematic due to its inimical relationship with God’s immaterial nature, that is, as a creature of God the universe must bear a similarity and likeness to God’s nature. She writes, “Since dead matter does not share any of the communicable attributes of God, one must conclude that dead matter is completely non-being, a vain fiction and chimera, and an impossible thing.”<sup>53</sup> The universe, according to Conway, is fully alive with spiritual intellect, which proceeds from the infinite God. Such a conception frames the provenance of evil and suffering.

Within her cosmology, Conway identifies three distinct species that form the “great chain of being”: (1) God, the eternal, immutable, infinite source of all being (much akin to the Neo-Platonic One); (2) Christ who is the mediating *Logos* that bridges the disjunction between the uncreated God and all created forms; (3) the universe, which consists of an infinite collection of substances. God, for Conway, was conceived under the conventional

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51. This “Christian vision of God and the World” is determined by the two principles described at the beginning of the article: (1) God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent; and (2) Creation as the manifestation of God’s will. This is not a fully robust Christian vision; rather, it is a bare philosophical sketch that frames the development of theodicies. A fully Christian vision would be trinitarian and would not necessarily accord with our modern thinkers (esp. Conway).

52. Sarah Hutton, *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 222.

53. Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 45–46.

attributes of classical Christian theism: God is “spirit, light, and life, infinitely wise, good, just, strong, all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful, the creator and maker of all things visible and invisible.”<sup>54</sup> For Conway, God is essentially creator, who creates an infinite amount of creatures that co-extensively exists alongside God’s eternity. She writes, “God was always a creator and will always be a creator because otherwise he would change.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, she also asserts that the universe *eternally* derives from God according to a form of Neo-Platonic emanation, which envisions Christ—the Godman—as the ontological link between the uncreated God and the created world. She writes, “For we cannot imagine that this mediating being existed in time before creatures, but only that he preceded them in the order of nature, so that, strictly speaking, there was no time between creatures and the all-creating power and will of God, which created them.”<sup>56</sup> Although Christ shares in the nature of God, he is also a creature. The composite nature of Christ grounds his mediating role within the cascading emanation of creatures from the eternal one.<sup>57</sup>

Conway’s cosmological vision adopts the kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum* to elucidate the relationship between an infinite God and a finite world. The concept of *tzimtzum* refers to the paradoxical act through which God withdraws the divine presence in order to “make space” for a world characterized by ontological authenticity. “For the sake of his creatures (so that there might be a place for them) he diminished the highest degree of his intense light. Thus a place arose, like an empty circle, a space for worlds.”<sup>58</sup> It is this eternal diminishment in God that she identifies as the soul of the Messiah (*admon kadmon*), which brings forth the final and lowest dimension of reality: non-divine creaturely substances. For Conway, every substance of the eternal universe is *essentially* the same type of creature. Conway writes, “so likewise the creature, or whole creation, is but one only substance or essence in species, although it comprehends many individuals placed in their subordinate species, and indeed in manner, but not in substance or essence distinct one from another.”<sup>59</sup> Further, Conway identifies all creaturely substances as spiritual monads, which are themselves constituted by an *infinite* amount of spiritual monads.<sup>60</sup> The perceived differentiations between various substances (i.e., what makes a human different from a horse or angel) are not essential but

54. *Ibid.*, 9. Conway’s theism shares some interesting features with Leibniz—i.e., Conway’s assertion that God necessarily creates an infinite amount of beings suggests that God is *bound* to create only one such world. Accordingly, this seems to share some affinities with Leibniz’s “best possible world.”

55. *Ibid.*, 13.

56. *Ibid.*, 26.

57. This particular (subordinationist) conception of Christ as the mediating divine principle of reality is indebted to Conway’s adoption of concepts from Lurianic Kabbalism. Following Kabbalism, Conway identifies Christ as the primordial Adam Kadmon, who is the principle through whom God created the universe and the one who communicates God’s life and goodness.

58. *Ibid.*, 10.

59. *Ibid.*, 71–78.

60. The eternal created universe of spiritual “monads” is unlike God, in that the substances are able to change. However, unlike Christ who is able to change only for the better, the created

merely different modal forms of existence. Nothing created is essentially different; all monads share the same nature. Since everything that exists (besides God) shares the same nature all substances share the potency to be transformed into another mode of being. “For there are transmutations of all creatures from one species to another, as from stone to earth, from earth to grass, from grass to sheep, from sheep to human flesh, from human flesh to the lowest spirits of man and from these to the noblest spirits.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, Conway embraced a form of metempsychosis to explain the differentiations in the scale of creaturely being—that is, through successive lifetimes the mutable creature is reconstituted in different modalities. This form of transmutation is both ascending and descending: all creatures are able to ascend or descend to another level of being. Conway describes the transmutation of species through the example of a horse that displays certain degrees of goodness in its existence. Accordingly, if a horse “has performed good services for his master and has done what was and is appropriate for such a creature” then the spirit of the horse will be reconstituted and elevated within the great chain of being.

For example, a horse approaches the species of human being in many ways more than many other creatures. Is human nature therefore infinitely different from the nature of a horse or only finitely? If this distance is finite, the horse will surely change eventually into a human being—to be sure, in respect to its spirit, for in respect to its body, the matter is obvious.<sup>62</sup>

For Conway, the particular mode of each creature is conditioned by its moral merits and demerits. The moral dimension of each lifetime grounds the modal condition of the creature in a subsequent lifetime (as a particular creature, whether man, horse, snail, etc.), while also “causing” the amount of pain and suffering it experiences. Accordingly, Conway affirms that suffering is pedagogical, that is, it afflicts creatures for the sake of their reformation towards a higher estate. Indeed, the particular mode of being (with its concomitant sufferings and evils) is *always* conditioned by the volitional decisions of an individual substance, which is ultimately free. Interestingly, Conway’s cosmological vision effectively ascribes moral duties and responsibilities to nonhuman creatures:

We already see how the justice of God shines so gloriously in this transmutation of one species into another. For it is most certain that a kind of justice operates not only in human beings and angels but also in creatures. Whoever does not see this must be blind. This justice appears as much in the ascent of creatures as in their descent, that is, when they change for better or worse. When they become better, this justice bestows a reward and prize for their good deeds. When they become worse, the same punishes them with fitting penalties

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substances of the universe are able to change for better or worse. The idea that material reality is actually made up by an infinite amount of spiritual “atoms” bears some resemblance to Leibniz’s monadic theory. Indeed, Leibniz’s familiarity with Conway’s thought indicates her influence upon his theory, albeit with some significant differences. For a discussion of Conway and Leibniz’s monadology see Hutton, *Anne Conway*, 232–35.

61. Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 65.

62. *Ibid.*, 33.

according to their nature and degree of their transgression. The same justice imposes a law for all creatures and inscribes it into their very natures.<sup>63</sup>

Accordingly, the entire universe is set up as pedagogical “vale-of-soul-making” (to borrow John Hick’s phrase) by which all created substances are led into an eternal ascension towards the infinite God. Conway writes, “therefore the Divine Power, Goodness, and Wisdom, hath created every creature good; and indeed so, that it might by continual augmentations (in its mutability) be advanced to a greater degree of goodness, ad infinitum.”<sup>64</sup> Although created beings may descend to deeper levels of depravity (and suffering) God never abandons the creature. Furthermore, the orientation and purpose of the world is the eventual ascension of all creaturely substances towards a higher mode of existence. What is not clear in Conway’s cosmology is the initial cause of the dispersion and separation of all substances into a diverse array of different modes of existence. Her overarching cosmological vision indicates that the emanative descent of beings is precipitated by a “certain fall” from the primordial “first state” that was made possible by God’s eternal decision to diminish the divine essence to make space for the created worlds.<sup>65</sup>

Altogether, the cascading universe that emanates from God serves as a divine pedagogue that leads creatures back to their divine source. This vision of the created universe effectively moralizes the problem of animal suffering, for the purported innocence of animals is removed by Conway’s cosmology. Within each successive lifetime of the spiritual creature (which is ensconced in gross matter), the resultant demerits and sins of creatures are what determine its particular mode of existence. Thus, Conway’s theodicy, which is certainly applicable to animal life (since all creatures are essentially the same), addresses the problem of animal suffering through the Augustinian dictum, *sub Deo justo, nemo miser nisi*. All forms of creaturely suffering, whether of humans, animals, or demons, are determined by the volitional acts of each spiritual substance. Further, the evils of each mode of existence are not punitive; rather, the sufferings associated with each mode are intended to chasten, teach, and heal the fallen creature.<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, Conway’s theodicy provides a remarkably creative solution to problem of animal misery. First, she engages the category of cosmic fallenness as an interpretive principle to understand the concrete nature of the world. Second, her cosmic narrative retains the direct causal link between sin and suffering, which provides an explanation that deciphers (and moralizes) the problem of

63. *Ibid.*, 75.

64. *Ibid.*, 32.

65. *Ibid.*, 42. Conway writes, “Hence one can infer that all God’s creatures, which have previously fallen and degenerated from their original goodness, must be changed and restored after a certain time which is not simply as good as that in which they were created, but better.” In the same section, she also notes that the “crassness of visible bodies comes from the fall of spirits from their original state.”

66. For a discussion of the relationship between suffering and pedagogy see Hutton, *Anne Conway*, 179–81; Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 188.

nonhuman suffering, that is, the miseries of nonhuman creatures derive directly from their volitional disobedience to the good. As a result, Conway effectively upholds the notion of God's omnipotence and benevolence while explaining evil and suffering by recourse to the disobedience of all creatures. Yet, her theodical cosmology comes at the cost of Christian orthodoxy: both her essentialist ontology (which qualitatively equates every single creature as an identical spiritual substance) and her adoption of metempsychosis place her outside the confines of traditional Christian teaching.

The formal aspects of Conway's "cosmic fall and vale of soul-making" narrative provides a fruitful heuristic lens by which contemporary theologians and philosophers are able to explain and interpret the intrinsic violence of the natural world. Though the material content of Conway's theodicy is problematic for Christian orthodoxy, especially her essentialism and doctrine of metempsychosis, the overall shape of her cosmic narrative, which envisions a fall of creation from a primordial state, provides a wider Augustinian approach that indirectly links suffering to volitional agents.<sup>67</sup> In contemporary theological discourse, this approach can be found in the writings of C. S. Lewis, E. L. Mascall, and more recently David Bentley Hart, who each articulate some form of the "cosmic fall" narrative in which the world is perceived as enslaved to corruption because of the agency of preternatural cosmic powers.<sup>68</sup> As noted above, the advantage of such an approach resides in its engagement of a cosmic-wide "fallenness" to explain the existence of nonhuman suffering. Accordingly, the characterization of the world as fallen dislocates animal misery from God's antecedent will for the world. Nonhuman suffering is not designed or desired by God in a primary active sense; rather, it derives consequentially from the sin of other creatures. However, the problems of such a cosmic theodicy remain both its highly speculative nature and the fact that it ultimately does not solve the problem of evil, but merely pushes it back ad infinitum. Namely, even though nonhuman misery can be explained by recourse to the rebellion of rational creatures, why does God permit innocent creatures to suffer for the sins of others? Herein lies what I consider to be the most significant difficulty with such a cosmic-theodicy: it requires the abrogation of the direct causal link between sin and suffering, which ultimately renders void the moral intelligibility of the universe. Such a vision of the cosmic fall depends upon a rendering of the moral order created by God wherein innocent creatures suffer punishments because of

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67. By Augustinian, I mean that the causal link between sin and suffering is affirmed through a participatory ontology. The suffering of creation, including animals, is determined by their participation in the cosmic rebellion of preternatural powers against God's vision for creation.

68. Such an approach is found C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), E. L. Mascall, *Christian Theology and the Natural Sciences* (New London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957), and David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). Other advocates include twentieth-century theologians Louis Bouyer and Sergius Bulgakov as well as contemporary theologians Stephen H. Webb and Paul Griffiths.

the transgressions of other beings. It goes without saying that such a “participatory” moral ontology appears to drastically redefine (or transgress?) the requirements of justice.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, such an approach also runs into considerable difficulties with respect to the contemporary account of the universe’s origin that seemingly locates the fecundity of world in the law of thermodynamic change. As mentioned in a previous section, the second law of thermodynamics, which implies the necessity of decomposition and death in empowering the evolutionary conditions of biological diversification, appears as a necessary condition for life. If such is the order of the world, how does one begin to untangle the parts of creation that are divinely ordered with those aspects that are influenced by the fallen powers? For example, is the predatory behavior of the lion (or the domestic house cat) the design of God or is it the result of some type of corrupting influence? How does one adjudicate evolutionary history according to this schema? This is not to say it is impossible for a cosmic-fall approach to narrate a vision of creation that makes value judgments concerning the state of the world, but it certainly makes it much more difficult to articulate what belongs to God and what is the result of fallen influence. To conclude, though the cosmic fall narrative effectively develops a vision of creation that upholds both the world’s ontological goodness and the reality of creaturely suffering, which gives rise to a dualism that removes nonhuman suffering from the antecedent will of God, the narrative does not satisfy the prevailing theological question concerning God’s justice: Why do the innocent suffer under a just God?

### *Leibniz and the Necessary Suffering of Creation*

The seventeenth-century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) developed the most significant and influential theodicy of the early modern period. Like our previous thinkers, Leibniz’s philosophical cosmology is influenced by the specific cultural and intellectual developments that characterize early modern intellectual discourse. Unlike Descartes, Leibniz’s vision is profoundly shaped by the intellectual patrimony of

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69. As mentioned in the text, such a narrative depends upon a participationist ontology whereby creaturely suffering is an indirect result of the sin of rational agents (e.g., animal predation exists because of some prior disruption by one of the angelic principles of the world). This type of schema suffers from the same problems that characterize the Christian vision of original sin that has all human beings (including children) sharing in the results of the actions of Adam and Eve. Is it not unjust that innocents suffer because of what others have done? Accordingly, the “cosmic fall” merely widens this problem beyond the anthropological realm. The nonhuman creation does not incur punishment by their volitional actions, but by the actions of preternatural forces within the created cosmos. In this account, the spiritual powers afflict and victimize the nonhuman biological creation because of God’s permissive will. Consequently, natural evils that characterize all creaturely existence become reducible to the result of moral evil. Again, this account depends upon whether one finds the participatory moral ontology convincing, which is itself the most dubious premise of such an approach.



Aristotelian-Thomistic scholasticism.<sup>70</sup> As a result, Leibniz's conceptualization of the problem of evil shares many significant features of the classical Christian perspective presented in the first part of this article. Although the problem of animal suffering was not the primary object of his theodicy, he was aware of the problem and offered an attempt to account for why creatures suffer. Like Descartes and Conway, Leibniz's approach to the problem of creaturely misery is conditioned by his cosmological vision.

For Leibniz, God is the supremely perfect being whose existence is absolutely necessary. Accordingly, Leibniz's understanding of God corresponds with the traditional attributes of classical Christian theism: God is perceived as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. "The perfections of God are those of our souls, but he possesses them in boundless measure; he is an Ocean, whereof to us only drops have been granted; there is in us some power, some knowledge, some goodness, but in God they are all in their entirety."<sup>71</sup> Further, Leibniz's world is similar to the one conceived by Anne Conway; both are made up of an infinite amount of spiritual monads that form the hierarchical great chain of being.<sup>72</sup> These monads, which are casually inert, express the entirety of the universe through a form of reflection. This act of reflection occurs within each monad to varying degrees of perception, which corresponds with differing qualitative levels of being (more about this below).<sup>73</sup> For Leibniz, all creaturely realities (and dimensions) consist of different conglomerations of indivisible monads that operate according to a pre-established harmony established in the creation of the world. Leibniz writes, "The union of soul and body, and even the operation of one substance on another, consists only in this perfect mutual agreement, purposely established by the order of the first creation."<sup>74</sup> Altogether, Leibniz's God orchestrates the unfolding chain of the monadic universe, which operates according to a pre-established harmony that brings forth the

70. Austin Farrer, introduction to *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, trans. E. M. Huggard (New York: Cosimo, 2009), 12–14. Note that Leibniz, *pace* Descartes, adopted scholastic terms and concepts within his cosmological vision, most notably the term *entelechy*, which was a term for substantial form.

71. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 51.

72. However, Leibniz's monads are fundamentally indivisible and causally inert, whereas, for Conway, monads are infinitely divisible. Furthermore, Leibniz' cosmology also differs in that he is not a substance monist, but conceives of the universe as infinite amount of individual substances. For a discussion of similarities and differences between Conway and Leibniz's monadology see Hutton, *Anne Conway*, 232–35.

73. Leibniz's monadological universe possesses different qualitative levels of being that correspond with Aristotle's traditional division of substantial forms into three categories: vegetative, sensitive, and rational souls. It is notable that Leibniz retrieves and utilizes the scholastic categories of substantial form and *entelechies* to describe the beings of the created universe, which exist and operate according to the traditional notion of the great chain of being. In a way, Leibniz draws together a vitalistic universe with mechanistic science – for at the ontological level the entire universe is monadological (vitalistic), and at the physical level it behaves mechanistically.

74. Leibniz letter to Arnauld March 23, 1690, quoted in Frederick Copelston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 4, *Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Leibniz* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1963), 313.

“best of all possible worlds.” Like Conway, Leibniz’s God is constrained by the divine nature to bring forth only one possible universe. According to Leibniz, “God must needs have chosen the best, since he does nothing without acting in accordance with supreme reason.”<sup>75</sup> Although Leibniz concedes that God could have created another type of universe, absolutely speaking, it was a moral necessity to create a universe replete with the highest perfection possible. Thus, Leibniz’s approach to the problem of evil and suffering is conditioned by his vision of the world as necessarily the best possible.

With respect to differing qualitative levels of being, Leibniz maintains that all substantial beings, which are composed of perceiving monads, are dominated by one single monad that determines its ontological status (whether vegetative, sensitive, or rational). Whereas the dominant monad of a plant possesses only limited confused perceptions that leave the plant in a type of slumber, animals possess a dominant monad with a higher degree of perception, which indicate, therefore, that animals possess both memory and feeling. According to Leibniz,

Memory provides the souls with a sort of consistency which imitates reason but has to be distinguished from it. For we see that animals, perceiving something which impresses them and of which they have previously had a resembling perception, are brought by the representation of their memory to expect what has been associated with this perception in the past and are moved to feelings similar to those they had then. If you show a stick to a dog, for instance, it remembers the pain caused by it and howls or runs away.<sup>76</sup>

The highest level of monadological being are those substances (or souls), that possess a dominant monad that possess both apperception and perception, that is, rational souls. For Leibniz, it is only rational souls that possess a consciousness that *perceives* its own act of *perception*.

Within Leibniz’s cosmological vision there are three distinct forms of evil: moral, physical, and metaphysical.<sup>77</sup> For Leibniz, both moral and physical evil are grounded upon his particular understanding of *metaphysical evil*, which is defined as the

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75. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 128.

76. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology*, 26 in *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, trans. Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 152.

77. In some respects, he adopts the basic Augustinian definition of evil as privation of a due good. Thus, moral evil is conceptualized as the action of a volitional agent that fails to fulfill the agent’s due form. Consequently, Leibniz understands physical evil to be a form of privation that is inflicted upon rational beings only. “Physical good or evil is understood as applying especially to the advantage or disadvantage of intelligent substances.” Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Causa Dei* (A Vindication of God’s Justice Reconciled with His Other Perfections and All His Actions), 31 in *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, 120. Accordingly, physical suffering is something that is only truly experienced by rational agents. Indeed, physical suffering is ultimately a consequence of moral evil. Thus, in this respect, Leibniz affirms the Augustinian link between sin and suffering for rational creatures.

intrinsic limitation of the creature *qua* creature.<sup>78</sup> He writes, “For we must consider that there is an original imperfection in the creature before sin, because the creature is limited in essence.”<sup>79</sup> Since the creature is not God, it is by necessity a limited participation in God, and thus, cannot be perfect. Interestingly, Leibniz perceives creaturely limitation and imperfection as a form of privation, which diverges from the traditional scholastic understanding of evil.<sup>80</sup> Maria Rosa Antognazza suggests that in spite of this divergence Leibniz’s “notion of metaphysical evil is intended to account for something which is firmly within the broadly Augustinian-scholastic tradition, namely the ascription to all creatures of a limitation that stems from their being created *ex nihilo*.”<sup>81</sup> According to this schema, God is responsible for the existence of privation in all finite beings, in that he freely decided to create a world; however, Leibniz defends God’s decision to create by maintaining that the existence of the universe is vastly superior to its non-existence.

According to his cosmic narrative, Leibniz’s God calls into existence a world of creatures that operates according to a pre-established harmony. Within this world, it is the interaction and conflict among finite beings that generates the greater harmony and beauty of the creation. In *Theodicy*, Leibniz remarks that Thomas Burnet (1635–1715), author of *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, was correct to see that the present world was fundamentally shaped by disorder; yet, this disorder ineluctably generates substantial benefits.<sup>82</sup> “But who does not see that these disorders have served to bring things to the point where they now are, that we owe to them our riches and comforts, and that through there agency this globe became fit for cultivation by us. These disorders passed into order.”<sup>83</sup> Unlike Conway, Leibniz’s world-picture effectively removes evil as a moral consequence of some primordial fall. The world as it was created is intrinsically shaped by evil and suffering because it was the only possible way for God to create it:

The question of physical evil, that is, of the origin of sufferings, has difficulties in common with that of the origin of metaphysical evil, examples whereof are furnished by the monstrosities and of other apparent irregularities of the universe. But one must believe that even sufferings and monstrosities are part of order; and it is well to bear in mind not only that it was better to admit these defects and these monstrosities than to violate general laws ...

78. Maria Rosa Antognazza maintains that Leibniz’s notion of metaphysical evil has two dimensions: first, it is what accords with natural evil for the scholastics, i.e., it is lack of due perfection found in certain natures; the second, which is the inner ground of the first, is original limitation of creatures, which establishes the different degrees of perfection of all creatures. Maria Rosa Antognazza, “Metaphysical Evil Revisited,” in *New Essays on Leibniz’s Theodicy*, ed. Larry M. Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014), 113–34 at 122–25.

79. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 135.

80. In Leibniz’s system, metaphysical evil has two aspects: imperfection, which does correspond to the scholastic notion of natural evil; creaturely limitation, which is *not* an evil (or privation) for the scholastic perspective.

81. Antognazza, “Metaphysical Evil Revisited,” 134.

82. Burnet’s cosmology pictured the world as a vast ruin that was shaped by the biblical deluge.

83. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 278.

just as sometimes there are appearances of irregularity in mathematics which issue finally in a great order when one has finally got to the bottom off them.<sup>84</sup>

In line with the classical perspective of Aquinas, Leibniz asserts that though God does not directly will the existence of evil (God's antecedent will) God does permit the existence of evil and destruction in order to bring about a higher good (God's consequent will), that is, the fecundity and beauty of the world.

With respect to animal suffering, Leibniz perceives it to be the inevitable result of creaturely finitude, that is, the intrinsic imperfection of creatures is ordered to the higher perfection of the whole.<sup>85</sup> Unlike Conway, Leibniz's cosmology effectively demoralizes the problem of animal suffering and relegates it as a necessary feature of creation. Furthermore, *pace* the Cartesians, Leibniz recognized that animals were sensitive creatures that felt pain and were not merely biological machines. However, he stressed that animals did not suffer to the same extent as human persons due to the absence of rational reflection (apperception). He states:

One cannot reasonably doubt the existence of pain among animals; but it seems as if their pleasures and their pains are not so keen as they are in man: for animals, since they do not reflect, are susceptible neither to grief that accompanies pain, nor to the joy that accompanies pleasure.<sup>86</sup>

In many respects, Leibniz's understanding of animal life corresponds with the ancient assumptions of Aristotelian-Thomistic scholasticism: animals do possess a sensitive soul, and are subjected to feelings; however, they cannot be subjected to moral duties because they are not rational. The lack of a rational soul indicates an absence of suffering, which is exclusively reserved for rational creatures. In essence, Leibniz's approach to animal suffering is shaped by both cosmological necessity and the diminishment (denial?) of animal pain.

In sum, Leibniz effectively explains away animal suffering by introducing it as a necessary dimension of the act of creation. This approach assumes an overarching moral calculus in which the prodigious suffering of creatures is justified for the sake of the universe's intrinsic fecundity. However, one must ask whether this approach, which instrumentalizes and necessitates suffering, subverts the Christian understanding of God. The main difficulty with Leibniz's theodicy is that it ultimately rejects God's innocence with respect to evil; in fact, it locates evil directly within God's creative purpose and creates a picture of God that seems indifferent to the travails of the animal creation. Moreover, the fundamental problem of Leibniz's theodicy is that it

84. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 276–77.

85. As finite creatures, animals are intrinsically imperfect, which subsequently conditions their state of existence that is shaped by such interactions that bring forth disease, violence, and death. Again, Leibniz's understanding of the conflation and interaction of finite being accords with the scholastic perspective that sees all as ordered to the highest perfection of the universe.

86. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 281.

depends upon an abstract account of evil that effectively avoids its concrete manifestations. Indeed, the tenuous nature of this position is illustrated by the vociferous remonstrations found in Voltaire (1694–1778), who provides a concretely descriptive account of evil to challenge Leibniz’s metaphysical logic.<sup>87</sup> The moral callousness of Leibniz’s approach, and its failure to convince, is profoundly articulated in the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*. Though written in response to the immense human tragedies of the Lisbon earthquake, Voltaire’s incisive poem offers a profound emotive objection to Leibniz’s instrumentalization of creaturely suffering.

In this vast universe, this general frame;  
 All other beings in this world below  
 Condemned like me to lead a life of woe,  
 Subject to laws as rigorous as I,  
 Like me in anguish live and like me die.  
 The vulture urged by an insatiate maw,  
 Its trembling prey tears with relentless claw:  
 This it finds right, endowed with greater powers  
 The bird of Jove the vulture’s self devours.  
 Man lifts his tube, he aims the fatal ball  
 And makes to earth the towering eagle fall;  
 Man in the field with wounds all covered o’er,  
 Midst heaps of dead lies weltering in his gore,  
 While birds of prey the mangled limbs devour,  
 Of Nature’s Lord who boasts his mighty power.  
 Thus the world’s members equal ills sustain,  
 And perish by each other born to pain:  
 Yet in this direful chaos you’d compose  
 A general bliss from individuals’ woes?  
 Oh worthless bliss! in injured reason’s sight,  
 With faltering voice you cry, “What is, is right?”  
 The universe confutes your boasting vain,  
 Your heart retracts the error you maintain.<sup>88</sup>

87. The failure of Leibniz’s theodicy is not grounded on a logical or metaphysical argument; rather, it depends upon descriptions of evil, which dislocates the argument from the abstract into the historically concrete. Here, the affective and moral objection displaces the logical/metaphysical. Voltaire’s poem, which does indeed approach nihilism, does not obtain a properly philosophical objection to Leibniz’s world-picture, but it does provide a moral protest against such a conception of God who would permit a prodigious amount of what appears as unnecessary suffering to further his creative goals. Moreover, Leibniz never assumes the panglossian naiveté that Voltaire derisively attributed to him.

88. Voltaire’s *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*. See William F. Fleming, “Voltaire: The Lisbon Earthquake,” *New England Review* 26 (2005): 183–193 at 188–189, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40245285>.

Overall, Leibniz's cosmological narrative, which suggests that animal suffering is a necessary dimension of God's creative will, accords with the predominant Christian apology for animal suffering in contemporary theology. Indeed, such thinkers like John Haught, Austin Farrer, and Christopher Southgate, among many others, have adopted this type of approach to mitigate the problematic implications of evolutionary theory.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, such a vision describes our evolving cosmos as being intrinsically constricted by a certain set of features, including entropy, predation, and so on, which appear to be necessary for the actual creation of the world. Accordingly, creation depends upon a certain degree of disorder that manifests in the violent interactions of finite beings and forces, which in turn bring forth a vast and beautiful cosmos of diversified creatures. Although few theologians would concede that this is the "best of all possible worlds," their apologetic approach to animal suffering (in an evolving universe) suggests that God was constrained by his nature to create such a world.

### **Conclusion: Beyond Classical Theism: Christian Revelation and the Problem of Animal Suffering**

With respect to contemporary theological discourse, it is clear that the problem of animal suffering has increased in magnitude with the theoretical insights of modern science. In particular, both Darwin's theory of natural selection and the discovery of the thermodynamic law of entropy have deepened the problem of animal suffering in the relation to the claims of classical theism. As a result, the conviction that death and creaturely suffering are necessary and intrinsic aspects of creation animates a profound objection to the goodness and power of God. Yet, even in light of modern science, the formal philosophical structures exemplified by the theodicies of Descartes, Conway, and Leibniz have remained the primary means to rationalize the problem of animal suffering. To summarize, though Descartes's view of animal life was displaced by modern biology, some Christian apologists have adopted Descartes's willingness to question whether animals subjectively experience pain, at least in the same manner as human beings. As noted above, such thinkers like Michael Murray and Peter Harrison contend that the problem of animal suffering is a non-starter, because most animals lack certain neurological structures that are necessary for a subjective awareness of suffering. Nevertheless, such a denial goes against the grain of common observational experience of animal sentience and, consequently, remains unconvincing. The second approach, Anne Conway's notion of a cosmic fall of creation, presents a useful hermeneutic that conceptually locates animal suffering as a divergence from God's creative will. However, a Christian adoption of such an approach falters upon her flattened essentialism that equates all

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89. See John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2008); Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Austin Farrer, *God is Not Dead* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1966). Other notable theologians include Denis Edwards, John Polkinghorne, and Arthur Peacocke.

creatures as the same qualitative substance. When unmoored from Conway's particular construal of creaturely being, which allowed her to preserve the causal nexus between evil and suffering, the formal schema of a cosmic fall runs aground against the problem of an unjust moral ontology: in essence, a moral ontology wherein innocent creatures suffer because of the actions of others appears morally opaque. This leaves us with the most common approach to creaturely suffering among contemporary theologians: Leibniz's view that a world replete with death, violence, and suffering is the only one possible. Such an apologetic approach maintains that God is constrained to bring forth a world that is intrinsically shaped by both disorder and necessity. Yet, even the prevailing "Leibnizian option" suffers from both epistemic limitations and the moral objection that such a construal of creation is morally incongruous with the benevolent characterization of God's nature.

In the final analysis it is my conviction that the theodicies presented in this essay are limited in their explanatory scope and ultimately fail to deliver a satisfying justification for the problem of creaturely suffering. In light of these failures, one may wonder whether the convictions of classical theism can be retained. Indeed, it is not surprising that some theologians have gone so far as to abandon the traditional understanding of God, recasting the divine nature according to some other schema.<sup>90</sup> Ultimately, it is my conviction that classical theism is a necessary dimension of the Christian faith and, thus, should be retained; however, I believe that a classical understanding of God's nature requires significant engagement with the content of Christian revelation, which provides a new framework for interpreting the relationship between God and the creaturely world. In line with this claim, I conclude this article with a set of theological proposals that engage creaturely suffering from a perspective guided by the claims of Christian revelation. It is my conviction that adopting a wider revelatory context provides the intellectual resources to develop a theology that reframes traditional theodical reflection. I stress that my constructive proposal is merely a sketch of how one may approach nonhuman suffering from the viewpoint of classical theism; it is not presented with the pretension that it is either an exhaustive treatment or a "solution." With that admission, I present the following propositions to engender conversation regarding the problem of animal suffering for Christian theology.

*Proposition 1: The divine attributes of classical theism should be interpreted within the revelatory framework of trinitarian theology, wherein the concept of divine kenosis provides a way of apprehending God's relationship with the creaturely world.*

The first proposition asserts that a properly Christian approach to creaturely suffering should not be delimited to the resources of an abstract philosophical theism; rather,

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90. For revisionary forms of theism see Charles Hartshorne, *Existence and Actuality: Conversations with Charles Hartshorne* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) and Jerry D. Korman, *Evolution and Eden: Balancing Original Sin and Contemporary Science* (New York: Paulist, 1998).

the problem should be approached and interpreted from within a robust trinitarian account of God's divine life. In line with this claim, I affirm that a trinitarian theology of divine *kenosis* provides an exceptionally fruitful (albeit speculative) lens for reconceiving God's relationship with the creaturely world.<sup>91</sup> Accordingly, a Christian theology of *kenosis* interprets the economic missions of the Son and Spirit as eternal reflections of the immanent life of God, which unveil the self-emptying form of the divine nature. Moreover, I claim that the form of the divine nature grounds a revision of the divine perfections in relation to the world. What I am proposing resembles the creational theology of Sergius Bulgakov, whose understanding of divine *kenosis* profoundly reshaped how he engaged God's omnipotence and omniscience. He writes, "The relation of the Creator to creation in 'synergism' always remains meek and restrained, the *kenosis* of God in creation. This *kenosis* is determined by the union of God's omniscience and wisdom in relation to the paths of the world, but with the self-limitation of His omnipotence."<sup>92</sup> With respect to the divine nature *in se*, Bulgakov believed that God remained omnipotent and omniscient in unrestricted actuality; however, in relation to the creaturely world *ad extra*, he affirmed that the divine attributes are *freely* circumscribed and redefined by the self-emptying form.

In the revelatory light of the divine *kenosis*, all of God's actions comport with the self-emptying form revealed in and through Christ. Not only the act of redemption but also the act of creation itself is conditioned by a self-limiting love that gives the creaturely world its ontological density. This idea of divine *kenosis* forms a nuptial fit with Anne Conway's kabbalistic notion of a divine "withdrawal" (*tzimtzum*) wherein creation paradoxically emerges as both an act of divine omnipotence and divine self-limitation. This kenotic vision of the divine creative act affirms the substantial reality of the creaturely world, which is endowed with the ontological limitations of the finite. As such, inherent ontological limitations are necessary properties of a non-divine world, which echo Leibniz's notion of "metaphysical evil" in which the entire order of creation is imbued with necessary imperfections. That is to say, the creaturely character of the world is ontologically imperfect because it is not co-extensive with the divine

91. The adoption of divine *kenosis* as way of approaching evolutionary suffering is quite prevalent in contemporary discourse about science and theology; however, not all theologians approach the relation between *kenosis* and traditional divine attributes in the same way. For instance, Jürgen Moltmann, John Haught, and Christopher Southgate affirm a form of divine *kenosis* that involves both the redefinition of divine omnipotence and the abandonment of divine impassibility. This particular type of *kenosis* seems to be imbued with elements of process thought and stands in contradistinction to the kenotic theology that I wish to uphold. As mentioned above, my intention is to affirm all of the traditional attributes, while conditioning them by the revelation of Christ's kenotic life. For some examples of such reconfigurations see Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

92. See Sergius Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 234. For a helpful discussion of Bulgakov's creational theology see Paul L. Gavriluk, "The Kenotic Theology of Sergius Bulgakov," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005): 251–269, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0036930605001390>.



nature. In sum, a theology of divine *kenosis* provides a framework that both affirms and reconceives the classical attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, while conceptually establishing the possible existence of evil and creaturely suffering within the divine “withdrawal.” According to such a perspective, the divine act of creation can only be understood in light of the self-emptying form of Christ in which God sacrificially makes ontological “space” for the authentic life of the world.

*Proposition 2: Creaturely suffering should be integrated into a theological narrative that involves two dramatic movements: (a) the creation of the world in its ontological independence; (b) the deifying union of the creaturely world with God.*

Building on the first proposition that articulates a theology of divine *kenosis*, my second proposition maintains that the problem of creaturely suffering should be interpreted within the narrative arc of Christian soteriology. In light of this claim, the biblical narrative’s movement from creation to new creation can be folded into the traditional philosophical schema of *exitus–reditus*, which begins with the establishment of a finite world, including its inherent ontological limitations, and concludes with the eschatological new creation, that is, the finite world’s deifying union with God.

According to this proposition, the *exitus* of the original creation, which comes forth by means of a divine “withdrawal,” necessitates structures that affirm the world’s ontological independence from God. In other words, the goal of a free and independent world appears to be bound to a form of “metaphysical evil” that includes the intrinsic necessities of creaturely finitude: decay, decomposition, and death. The making of the creaturely world as a non-divine reality depends upon the free interaction of creaturely causes that inexorably bring forth both good and malignant elements.<sup>93</sup> Yet, it should be noted that the first creation, which gives the creaturely world ontological density, is disclosed by Christian revelation to be ordered towards a transcendent horizon wherein the previous elements of the first world are taken up and redefined by the second.

The second movement (*reditus*) of creation’s narrative involves its transformational return to the divine source in the incarnation of Christ through which the antecedent elements of the first world find their ultimate meaning. Indeed, the entire order of the creaturely world, including its manifold of secondary causes, is entirely enveloped and determined by the goal of an eschatological transformation in Christ. This far-reaching claim intimates that creaturely suffering, though a possibility latent in the world’s ontological independence, is not part of God’s antecedent desire for creation, but depends upon a divine concession wherein the non-divine world comes to be. If it is affirmed that Christ’s incarnation is the final cause of creation, which by extension involves the “impossibility” of the creaturely world’s divinization, then the reality of sin and suffering are somehow “deciphered” within that narrative arc.

93. That is not to say that this is the “best of all possible worlds.” The category “best possible” for a non-divine reality appears to be unintelligible because perfection cannot be an intrinsic potency of finitude. By definition, all finite creatures are imperfect. See E. L. Mascall, *He Who Is: A Study in Traditional Theism* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), 103–4.

As a consequence, I maintain that creaturely suffering (in all of its diverse forms) is somehow the result of *both* the inherent ontological limitations that make up a non-divine universe (Leibniz's metaphysical imperfection) *and* the corrupting influence of free creaturely agencies (more about this below). In sum, the usage of the Christian theological narrative serves to clarify the creaturely world's meaning and purpose.

*Proposition 3: The theological concept of the Fall may be deployed as a confessional hermeneutic that interprets creaturely suffering as alien to God's ultimate will for creation.*

The third proposition is grounded upon the revelatory claim that the purpose of creation is summed up in Christ's incarnation, which involves the divinization of the world. If the creaturely world is made for an ontologically peaceful end, whence comes the ferocity of nature? If it is not located in God's will for the world, why does it appear intrinsic to its existence? Thus, we are either left with somehow making creaturely suffering a necessary feature of the establishment of the created order (i.e., God is somehow "bound" by ontological necessity), or we must have recourse to some type of "cosmic fall" to explain its existence. In this respect, I am uncomfortable with the assertion that the violence of the world is somehow an ontological necessity of God's creative will; thus, I have recourse to the category of the Fall as part of my theodical narrative.

Although I maintain that certain ontological limitations (including decay, decomposition, and death) appear as intrinsic features of the world's temporal unfolding (which again, comports with Leibniz's scholastic notion), it does not follow that all of creation exists in accord with God's will. Instead, in line with Anne Conway's formal cosmology, I propose the theory that creation's ontological independence somehow grounds its potentiality to diverge from God's creative desire for the world.<sup>94</sup> It is the realization of this potentiality that illuminates the world of our experience. But how are we to understand creation's potential divergence away from God's will? Interestingly, Celia Deane-Drummond articulates a version of the Fall of creation that is clearly non-hypostatic, that is, it is not linked with the personal willing agencies of the created order. Instead, she argues that God created the world imbued with mysterious potentialities that are open to divergent pathways. According to Deane-Drummond, the divergent pathways of the world's temporal unfolding are metaphorically construed as "the culmination of tendencies already latent in the natural world, rather than a specific work of a mythological figure of Satan."<sup>95</sup> As such, the cosmic fall of the creaturely world is a real departure from God's divine wisdom that ultimately cannot

94. Interestingly, even Teilhard de Chardin conceded that the waste and destruction of the creative process invited speculation regarding the possibility of a primordial catastrophe. See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 309–11.

95. Celia Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution: Wisdom and Wonder* (London: SCM, 2009), 187.

be rationalized or deciphered. Although Deane-Drummond concedes that her approach is largely metaphorical and speculative, it does provide an interesting rehabilitation of cosmic fallen-ness as a category for perceiving the world. Yet, I am concerned that her notion of a non-hypostatic fallen-ness amounts to a mere metaphorical re-description of the basic theodical problem.

Another possibility, *pace* Deane-Drummond, involves the notion that the travails of creation are ontologically located in the aftermath of a hypostatic fall, wherein spiritual principles have altered the temporal unfolding of the world's evolution. Accordingly, this speculative proposal presupposes that such spiritual angelic principles are ontologically real and non-metaphorical, and that such creatures exercise some causal influence and control over the creaturely world.<sup>96</sup> In recent years, this "mythical" construal has garnered greater support among various theologians who have disregarded the rationalistic objections of the modern period and embraced the cosmological idioms of both Scripture and tradition to interpret the terrible aspects of the cosmos. Although I am quite sympathetic to this interpretive maneuver, such recourse to the "mythic fall" has significant problems. First, such a proposal suffers from epistemic difficulties with respect to the discernment of creation's ontological goodness and corruption. Second, the confession of the world's fall does not explain why evil is allowed to exist in first place. Third, such a use of the Fall depends upon a moral ontology wherein innocent creatures are unjustifiably subjugated to suffering. Nonetheless, even though there are significant objections, I maintain that using the spiritual fall of creation as an interpretive lens opens up a way of perceiving the universe that accords phenomenologically with our lived experience; that is, it reflects both the goodness and evil of creation.

Taken together the theological propositions posited can be configured to form a narrative of God's relationship with the world that provides a fruitful way of perceiving the problem of creaturely suffering. Such an integrative narrative may be outlined as follows: In the mystery of God's triune nature, in which the transcendent fullness of divine love is kenotically expressed, the creaturely world emerges as a paradoxical manifestation of absolute divine love. In the mystery of creation, the infinite, incomprehensible God kenotically withdraws "to make space" for that which is not God, in order that the non-divine world, when established, may ultimately be drawn into a deified union with God. Altogether, I maintain that creaturely existence necessitates

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96. One of the primary objections to an angelic fall of creation is grounded in the assertion that angels are relics of a premodern worldview that cannot be countenanced as a real possibility in "the age of science." I wonder, however, if this objection obtains in any meaningful way. Most accounts that gainsay the existence of spiritual principles do not depend upon theological arguments, but are largely dependent upon assumed cultural conventions regarding the nature of reality. Although a secondary matter theologically speaking, the existence of angelic powers is a consistent feature of both Scripture and theological tradition and thus deserves serious engagement. This is not to say that assertions regarding the substantial existence of angelic beings (or spiritual principles) are without difficulties, but it is to urge caution with respect to flippant dismissals that are based upon cultural prejudice and not theological argumentation.

a real *traversal* away from the divine source in its coming-to-be that involves the contingent freedom of secondary realities. In the divine act of creation the creaturely world is endowed with an independent life that, considered under different aspects, is constituted by cosmological, mechanistic, and spiritual principles that determine the world's disposition vis-à-vis God. As a physical and spiritual reality, the creaturely world is intended to receive and unfold according to the creative forms of the divine mind, and yet, because of the world's independent life, which includes hypostatic spiritual principles, the unfolding life of the universe is able to diverge from the temporal realization of creation's *telos*. Thus, what we perceive as the evolutionary history of creation, including both its fecundity and malignancy, is, in fact, a result of the interplay between God's creative intention, which includes the reception of the divine forms in the creaturely world, and those spiritual powers that oppose God. In spite of this discord in the heart of the world, which gives expression to the dark elements of creation, the divine act of creation continues to unfold, taking up and ordering even the rebellious elements. Ultimately, this cosmic narrative finds its completion in the kenotic incarnation of the Son of God, who concretely establishes the deifying union between God and humanity, which eschatologically preserves, heals, and unites the creaturely world with the divine life of God.

In light of the limitations of classical theism previously explored in the article, I maintain that a robust theological narrative of creation, grounded upon revelation, allows one to revisit and uphold the traditional claims of classical theism in relation to the objections furnished by the problem of theodicy. In line with this claim, I believe that the Christian narrative rendering of both the divine attributes and the story of the world's development is more theologically compelling than the alternatives. Ultimately, I aver that the Christian theological story outlined in brief has the benefit of effectively mapping our fragmented experience of creation's drama (its intermixing of good and evil) on a single narrative arc that upholds both the goodness and power of God, whose omnipotent action comports with the self-emptying form of Christ.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this article outlines classical theism's interpretive dilemma vis-à-vis the problem of animal suffering, and offers a way forward that is grounded in Christian revelation. Ultimately, I believe that the problem of creaturely suffering cannot be sufficiently addressed from the conceptual resources of an abstract philosophical theism alone; instead, the problem necessitates an integration of the ontological insights garnered by the Christian theological narrative. Although I concede that my final proposal does not solve the problem of creaturely suffering, I maintain that it potentially reshapes how one understands the relationship between God and the world, which opens up new interpretive possibilities that move beyond the stale categories of traditional theodicy. Accordingly, I believe that the God-world relation should not be characterized by unthinkable magnitudes of power, but instead as a relationship that falls under the revelatory form of the suffering Christ, who empties himself for the salvation of the world. Ultimately my hope for this theodical sketch is not to "justify the

ways of God to man,” as if such a goal were attainable, but it is to articulate a way of approaching the mystery of creaturely suffering that opens out towards a horizon of eschatological hope. A hope that the sufferings of the world will not go unredeemed, but will be somehow taken up and transformed beyond all imagination.

**Author biography**

Derek Joseph Wiertel is an Eastern Catholic doctoral student in systematic and historical theology at the University of Toronto. His theological research focuses primarily on the historical relationship of the Christian doctrine of creation with the problem of evil and suffering, especially as it relates to both philosophical theology and the figural exegesis of Scripture.