

## Is Animal Suffering Evil? A Thomistic Perspective

### 1 Introduction

Recently, there has been a growing interest in the problem of God and animal suffering.<sup>1</sup>

Philosophers debate whether God would allow millions of years of animal suffering. Proponents of the problem of animal suffering argue that the amount of pain and suffering found in Earth's natural history make it likely that God does not exist.

Within this debate, it is striking that the nature of pain and suffering are rarely examined. Instead, it is often assumed that pain and suffering are evils that a loving God would not allow without good reason. An illustration of this is William Rowe's argument in "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." He states that

In developing the argument for atheism based on the existence of evil, it will be useful to focus on some particular evil that our world contains in considerable abundance. Intense human and animal suffering, for example, occurs daily and in great plenitude in our world. Such intense suffering is a clear case of evil.<sup>2</sup>

So without argument, Rowe mentions that the human and animal suffering in the world is a "clear case of evil." This leads to his famous fawn-in-the-woods example. He says to

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.<sup>3</sup>

Rowe provides this as an example of what is now commonly referred to as a 'gratuitous evil' or a 'pointless evil'. He says that

So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require

either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse. Nor does there seem to be an equally bad or worse evil so connected to the fawn's suffering that it would have had to occur had the fawn's suffering been prevented.<sup>4</sup>

Again, Rowe seems to assume that the pain and suffering in this example are self-evidently evil.

It is not just the proponents of the problem of animal suffering who assume animal pain and suffering are evil. In one of the most highly regarded treatments of the problem of animal suffering, Michael Murray also discusses animal suffering as an evil that God cannot allow without a good reason. For example, in a chapter titled, 'Neo-Cartesianism', he discusses philosophers who have argued that animals do not phenomenologically experience pain and suffering.<sup>5</sup> Murray discusses these arguments because, as he emphasizes, "if there is no such thing as animal pain and suffering, there is no such thing as an argument *from it* to atheism."<sup>6</sup> Thus, although Murray provides an almost exhaustive treatment of the problem, he never discusses why it would be evil for God to allow animals to undergo pain and suffering.

It seems that as the debate stands, all parties assume that animal pain and suffering are evils that an all-good God should not allow without a good reason. For example, while surveying the problem, Robert Francescotti mentions,

. . .denying the existence of a certain sort of evil rather than explaining why God allows its existence is an effective strategy only when it is clear that the evil does not exist, and there is very good reason to believe that many other animals experience phenomenally distressful states. So it seems that rather than denying the presence of animal suffering, a convincing defense will need to acknowledge its existence and explain why God would allow it.<sup>7</sup>

Yet this is striking because it is evidence that there is a debate within the philosophy of religion that is partly based on an assumption. So this raises the question of whether pain and suffering are evil. In other words, are pain and suffering such that an all-good God should or could never cause them to occur or allow them without a purpose? This is important because if pain and suffering are evil, then theists need to provide reasons why God would allow them. However, if they are not evil, or if there is reason to doubt they are evil, then their existence will not necessarily add to the evidence against God often emphasized by proponents of the problem of evil.

In this paper I will explore the natures of pain and suffering from a Thomistic perspective. First, I will explain how the natures of pain and suffering are crucial regarding the problem of evil and the problem of animal suffering in particular. Next, after briefly discussing Aquinas' concept of evil, I will explain the Thomistic concepts of pain and suffering. I will show that although they are the products of medieval philosophy, Aquinas' concepts of pain and suffering are not contradictory to their contemporary philosophical and scientific counterparts. Afterward, I will determine whether pain and suffering are evils that an all-good God should refrain from causing without reason. I will conclude that pain and suffering are not evil. Pain and suffering are good in that they exist and are exactly what God intends them to be in nonhuman animals. Finally, I will discuss the implications that this conclusion has for the problem of animal suffering.

## **2 Versions of the Problem of Animal Suffering**

The problem of animal suffering is usually categorized as a type of 'evidential' problem of evil. The evidential problem of evil emphasizes, as mentioned above, that there exist instances of

gratuitous evil that God should not allow to occur. However, there actually is a logical basis for the evidential problem as Rowe formulates it:

(1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could

have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. **This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *The Journal of Value Inquiry*. The final authenticated version is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10790-019-09680-x>.**

(2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

(3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>8</sup>

After presenting this argument, Rowe emphasizes that while it is uncertain whether any cases of animal suffering are pointless, it is rational to assume that at least some are pointless given the great amount that occur in the world.<sup>9</sup>

This is said to be an evidential problem because the great number of instances of suffering increases the probability of it being true. There are so many cases of intense suffering that it is believed to be rational to conclude that some of these instances of suffering are pointless (although it is difficult, if not impossible, to know if there is a good reason for each case of intense suffering in the world). The major aspect of this problem lies in premise (2), which states that God should prevent intense suffering unless He has a good reason to allow it. Premise (2) of Rowe's argument serves as the logical basis for his evidential problem of evil. If it is not thought that God should have a morally permissible reason for allowing pain and suffering, then no amount of pain and suffering will pile up to make a strong evidential case against God's existence. If it is logically possible for God to allow pain and suffering, then the evidential problem will dissolve. Moreover, if pain and suffering are not evil, then both premise (1) and (2)

are false. As mentioned above, I believe that Aquinas' concepts of pain and suffering provide the means to avoid the evidential problem of evil.

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Another type of the evidential problem of evil based in animal pain and suffering has been proposed by Paul Draper. Draper does not propose a logical problem for theism (which is ultimately supported by an abundance of evidence) like Rowe but instead argues that the great amount of animal death and floundering can be better explained by indifferent naturalism rather than Christian theism.<sup>10</sup> Draper emphasizes that in our biosphere

many organisms, including many sentient beings, never flourish because they die before maturity, many others barely survive, but languish for most or all of their lives, and those that reach maturity and flourish for much of their lives usually flounder in old age; further, in the case of human beings and very probably some non-human animals as well, floundering or languishing often involves intense and prolonged suffering.<sup>11</sup>

After emphasizing animal floundering, Draper considers that the God of Christian theism should want His creatures to flourish and has the power and knowledge to make this happen. Given the amount of animal floundering and God's desire for animal flourishing, Draper concludes that

not only do we have reasons on CT [Christian theism] that we do not have on IN [indifference naturalism] to be surprised by the condition of life on earth; we also have reasons on IN that we do not have on CT not to be surprised by the condition of life on earth. . . . Therefore, IN is clearly much more accurate than CT is with respect to the relevant facts about the condition of life on earth.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, Draper is saying that the existence of so much animal death and floundering should surprise us given the truth of Christian theism. But the same amount of animal death and flourishing would not be surprising in an indifferent naturalistic world, and in fact, indifference

naturalism predicts such amounts of animal death and floundering. Thus, as Draper concludes, indifference naturalism should be the preferred view.

As with Rowe's argument, Draper's argument heavily relies on the concept that animal pain and suffering is something that God should want to prevent. If animal pain and suffering are not evil, then Draper's argument would be greatly diminished. However, before discussing these

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### 3 The Thomistic Concept of Evil

Aquinas discusses evil in many places in his writings, but probably defines it most clearly in his discussion in the *Summa theologiae* (*ST*): "evil is the absence of the good, which is natural and due to a thing."<sup>13</sup> This is a statement of Aquinas' famous evil as privation theory in which he believes that an evil is the absence of a good that should obtain. An important thing to note is that, according to Aquinas, not all absences of good are evil although all evils are absences of some good. In this regard, he is careful to make a distinction between 'negative' and 'privative' absences of good.<sup>14</sup> Aquinas explains,

Absence of good, taken negatively, is not evil; otherwise, it would follow that what does not exist is evil, and also that everything would be evil, through not having the good belonging to something else. . . for instance, a man would be evil who had not the swiftness of the roe, or the strength of a lion. But the absence of good, taken in a privative sense, is an evil; as, for instance, the privation of sight is called blindness.<sup>15</sup>

As can be seen in Aquinas' definition of evil, an absence of a good is only evil if the absence of good is "natural and due" to a particular subject. For example, it would be an evil for a human to be blind because sight is something humans should possess according to their natures. But it would not be an evil for a rock to be blind as rocks do not naturally possess the ability to see.<sup>16</sup>

The absence of sight in a human is a privation of a natural good and the absence of sight in a rock is merely a negative absence of a good.

Aquinas mentions two main types of evils that correspond to what are referred to today as ‘natural evils’ and ‘moral evils.’<sup>17</sup> For example, he says that

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In one way it [evil] occurs by the subtraction of the form, or of any part required for the integrity of the thing, as blindness is an evil, as also it is an evil to be wanting in any member of the body. In another way evil exists by the withdrawal of the due operation, either because it does not exist, or because it has not its due mode and order. But because good in itself is the object of the will, evil, which is the privation of good, is found in a special way in rational creatures which have a will.<sup>18</sup>

Natural evils include things such as disease and death, which entail “subtractions” of the forms of the organisms they affect. Moral evils are actions that rational creatures choose to do, which are “withdrawals” from the way they ought to act in accord with their natures.

With this in mind, it may be unclear as to how Aquinas would classify pain and suffering. Most would probably assume that he would classify pain and suffering as evils. But a close examination of Aquinas’ writings shows that this is not necessarily the case.

#### **4 The Thomistic Concepts of Pain and Suffering**

Pain and suffering seem to provide an interesting problem for Thomism because of Aquinas’ doctrine that evil is a privation of the good. Pain and suffering are very real and unpleasant experiences that do not qualify as privations in the same way in which do blindness, paralysis, and death. The experiences of pain and suffering are actualized through the physiological processes in humans and animals.

Indeed, philosophers have argued that the existence of pain and suffering show that the privation theory of evil is incorrect. G. Stanley Kane argues that the nature of pain proves the privation theory wrong because pain is an evil, yet not a privation.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Mark Robson argues that types of suffering such as depression and dread provide evidence against the privation theory of evil.<sup>20</sup> **This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *The Journal of Value Inquiry*. The final authenticated version is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10790-019-09680-x>.**

However, Aquinas would disagree with both philosophers. Although they do not directly interact with him, both Kane and Robson argue against the privation theory of evil without taking Aquinas' views on pain and suffering into account. The existence of pain and suffering would not in the least surprise Aquinas because far from forgetting these things, he discusses them extensively in his writings. His discussions regarding pain and suffering clearly show that he did not view them as privations.

In the *ST*, Aquinas commits five questions to the topic of pain and sorrow (*dolor* and *tristitia*).<sup>21</sup> He argues that pain is a type of emotion (*passio animae*).<sup>22</sup> For Aquinas, emotions are passive psychological states that affect the organism in which they subsist.<sup>23</sup> They are passive in that they do not usually arise without some type of cognition. Yet although they are passive, once aroused they can move an organism toward the object of cognition or away from it.

Aquinas refers to pain as a concupiscible emotion in the *ST*.<sup>24</sup> Concupiscible emotions are emotions which either move an organism toward something that is cognized as good, or away from something cognized as evil.<sup>25</sup> Pain moves an organism away from something cognized as evil. If the body perceives something on or in the body as evil, then the organism is averted from that evil.<sup>26</sup>

From this it is clear that Aquinas does not view pain as a privation. He believes that pain is a passive psychological state that affects an organism. This is not the absence of a good. He even argues that there are good aspects of pain. For example, he says that

. . .supposing the presence of something saddening or painful, it is a sign of goodness if a man is in sorrow or pain on account of this present evil. For if he were not to be in sorrow or pain, this could only be either because he feels it not, or because he does not reckon it as something unbecoming, both of which are manifest evils. Consequently it is

a condition of goodness, that, supposing an evil to be present, sorrow or pain should ensue.  
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So Aquinas would definitely not think of pain as a privation. It cannot be an evil because it is a psychological state that is actualized in an organism through cognition. Moreover, without pain to move an organism away from a cognized evil, the evil would remain. Thus, to Aquinas, pain is not the absence of something that ought to be present in organisms, and it also seems to serve a purpose.

Aquinas discusses several types of emotions often associated with suffering. The three pertinent emotions he discusses are sorrow, despair, and fear (*tristitia*, *desperatio*, and *timor*).<sup>28</sup> Aquinas includes sorrow among the concupiscible emotions in the *ST*.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, he believes that sorrow is a different form of pain. He explains that both pain and sorrow are concupiscible emotions that avert an organism from things cognized as evil. However, he says the difference is that pain is cognized through the exterior senses (i.e. hearing, smell, taste, touch, and vision) while sorrow is cognized through the interior senses of the estimative power and the phantasia.<sup>30</sup>

Sorrow is an extension of pain because things cognized through the exterior senses can also be cognized through the interior senses. Pain itself can cause sorrow; yet sorrow is more far

reaching than pain because the thing cognized need not be conjoined with the organism as with the exterior senses. Sorrow arises in an organism when its interior senses cognize something as an evil that could deprive the organism of a good. The sorrow in turn averts the organism from the cognized evil.

Aquinas lists despair and fear among the irascible emotions in the *ST*.<sup>31</sup> Irascible emotions are distinguished from concupiscible emotions through the manner in which something is cognized.<sup>32</sup> Concupiscible emotions either attract or avert an organism when something is cognized as good or evil in itself. Irascible emotions arise in an organism when something is cognized as difficult in relation to the organism.

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For example, hope results when something is cognized as a difficult good, yet attainable because it is attracted somehow to the organism.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, despair results when something is cognized as a difficult good, yet unattainable because it is averted somehow from the organism. In both cases, the organism is already attracted to the good, but the emotion arises through the perception that the good is difficult to obtain and is either attainable or not.

Fear is contrasted with despair in that something is cognized as a difficult evil. For example, fear results when something is cognized as a difficult evil that is unavoidable because it is attracted somehow to the organism. In contrast, confidence results when something is cognized as a difficult evil, yet avoidable because it is averted somehow from the organism.

Similar to pain, Aquinas believes that there are good aspects of sorrow, despair, and fear. As sorrow is an extension of pain, it too is useful for moving organisms away from cognized evils.<sup>34</sup> Aquinas is not as specific in regard to goods that can come from the irascible emotions of despair and fear. However, he does hint at goods that can come from them.

For example, Aquinas mentions that despair can give rise to hope. He says, “Despair threatens danger in war, on account of a certain hope that attaches to it. For they who despair of flight, strive less to fly, but hope to avenge their death: and therefore in this hope they fight the more bravely, and consequently prove dangerous to the foe.”<sup>35</sup> Here he is replying to the objection that despair is good in that it can invoke humans to become more dangerous when threatened. His reply is careful to emphasize that despair is not good in that it directly causes action, but in that it can give rise to hopes that themselves can cause action.

Elsewhere, Aquinas mentions that one of the good aspects of fear is that it can cause good actions. He mentions that “...on the part of the soul, if the fear be moderate, without much disturbance of the reason, it conduces to working well, in so far as it causes a certain solicitude, and makes a man take counsel and work with greater attention.”<sup>36</sup> So fear can add to the good of sorrow or distress in that it can add to the urgency of the aversion to a cognized evil.

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So Aquinas views neither pain nor other emotions attributed to suffering as privations of natural goods. They are all psychological states that have good aspects conducive to the good of the organism in which they arise. Even though Kane and Robson are not directly interacting with Aquinas, they both fail to realize that unpleasant emotions can be good.

## 5 Contemporary Views of Pain and Suffering

Although Aquinas was writing in the 13th century, his concepts of pain and suffering are not obsolete. Of course, there are several different philosophical and scientific theories regarding pain and suffering. However, among these there are a handful that cohere with Aquinas’ understanding of pain and unpleasant emotions.

Today much has been learned about pain through the sciences and philosophy. It is understood that pain is a complex phenomenon that includes three different aspects: nociception,

the sensation of pain, and the unpleasantness of pain.<sup>37</sup> Not all three are required for the experience of pain, but often times most are present when pain is experienced.

Nociception is nerve activity activated by stimulus that is potentially damaging to an organism. It is purely a physiological process, distinguished from the sensation and unpleasantness of pain, because nociception is the name of the nerve activity before it is processed by higher centers of the nervous system.<sup>38</sup> Among other things, nociception is what makes it possible to reflexively move a hand or foot away from hot surfaces before any pain is experienced.

The sensation of pain is the next aspect of pain. This is the subjective experience of an imperative command from the body to protect a certain part of the body.<sup>39</sup> The sensation of pain is thought to be a homeostatic emotion, similar to itching, hunger, and thirst.<sup>40</sup> Pain sensations come in differing qualities and intensities. The quality of a pain sensation can either be aching, burning, stabbing, throbbing, etc. The intensity of the sensation of pain can be anything from mild to severe. The more intense the sensation is, the more motivational force it will have on its

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The third aspect of pain is the unpleasantness of pain. Some might find it odd to distinguish between the sensation and the unpleasantness of pain because many people, including philosophers, think of all pains as unpleasant.<sup>41</sup> However, the distinction is necessary because reflection on the issue will reveal that there are pains that do not hurt and there are also hurtful sensations that are not pains. For example, mild pains, similar to gently moving the tip of a needle across the skin, are not considered unpleasant.<sup>42</sup> Mild pains seem to be neither pleasant nor unpleasant and are merely neutral sensations. Also, sensations such as thirst or hunger can be considered unpleasant although they are not pains.<sup>43</sup>

While the sensation of pain is understood (according to some theories) as an imperative command from the body regarding the protection of a part of the body, some philosophers believe that the unpleasantness of pain is a separate imperative command from the body regarding the sensation of pain itself.<sup>44</sup> An example would be my stepping on a tack with a bare foot. The imperative command from the sensation of pain would be something like, “Protect your foot!” The imperative command from the unpleasantness of the sensation would be similar to, “Don’t have this sensation in your foot!”<sup>45</sup> It is believed that while the sensation of pain motivates an organism to protect its body, the unpleasantness of pain motivates an organism to take action to end the sensation to regain the ability to perform actions naturally.<sup>46</sup>

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Similar to pain, there is a long history of the study of emotions and there are many competing theories of what exactly emotions are. One particular theory of emotions is that they are states evoked by rewarding stimuli and punishing stimuli.<sup>47</sup> A ‘reward’ is anything an organism will work toward and a ‘punisher’ is anything that an organism will seek to avoid.<sup>48</sup> When a stimulus is perceived, it evokes an emotional state that causes an organism to perform a goal-oriented action coinciding with the reward or punisher perceived.<sup>49</sup> For example, fear could be the emotion evoked upon hearing a sound that is associated with electrical shock (punisher).<sup>50</sup> The perception of the punisher evokes the emotion of fear, which results in causing or motivating the organism to avoid the source of the sound.

Theories such as this conceive of emotions as the responses of an organism to its environment that are conducive to physical and social survival. For example, the expression of sorrow or sadness is thought to evoke sympathetic and helping reactions from others in social settings.<sup>51</sup> In addition to the social benefits of sadness, in humans it is known to induce

physiological responses that promote personal reflection.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, it can result in an increase of attention to detail in the decision-making process.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, fear is a reaction to the environment that is necessary for survival. Fear occurs when an organism perceives a threat and is the emotion that promotes avoidance and escape.<sup>54</sup> Fear promotes two specific types of activity: defensive immobility (e.g. freezing and hyper-attentiveness) and defensive action (e.g. fight or flee).<sup>55</sup> In mammals, fear can be triggered not only by perceived physical threats, but also perceived social threats.<sup>56</sup> Thus, fear is not only useful for physical survival, but also for social flourishing.

Even depression and despair are thought to have functions conducive to survival. Several theories abound and no consensus has been reached. However, some have argued that depression promotes behaviors that minimize the risk of the loss of social connections and that also avoid the further loss of friends, family, goods, or opportunities.<sup>57</sup> A different theory is that depression is a defense mechanism that the body uses to promote behavior that protects a depressed person from infectious diseases.<sup>58</sup>

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Given these contemporary theories of pain and suffering alongside Aquinas' understandings of the same, it seems that the evil as privation theory does not face the complications that Kane and Robson emphasize. If pain, distress, fear, and despair are emotional states that are beneficial then they cannot be viewed as evils. This is for at least two reasons. As mentioned above, one reason is that they are physiological processes that occur in animals. According to Thomistic metaphysics, this means that they are good because they are actual, that is, they exist.<sup>59</sup>

A second reason they are not evils is because animals would be worse off without them.<sup>60</sup>

It is no secret that pain is crucial for the well-being of complex organisms. Serge Marchand, neuroscientist and pain expert, explains that

Pain is essential to survival. It plays an extremely important alarm role; in fact, it is our principal means of knowing that one of our organs is sick. For example, if we have appendicitis, the visceral pain becomes unbearable, which leads us to go to the doctor and get the necessary care. Without pain, we would have to wait for external signs such as a bump on the abdomen or even digestive or elimination problems. However, these signs generally come too late, when the infection has already spread throughout the body.

. . . There are clinical cases of children born with a nervous system defect that makes them insensitive to pain (a congenital absence of the C fibers that are responsible for nociceptive transmission). These children, who experience virtually no pain, suffer significant wounds due to repeated injuries to the same area—fractures, joint injuries caused by poor posture when standing or walking, and even injuries to the tongue from biting it while chewing food. These children generally do not live very long, due to the fact that they cannot detect the signs of an internal injury or pathology, which, without treatment, leads to fatal degeneration.<sup>61</sup>

Marchand emphasizes that without pain, even seemingly small things such as failing to shift  
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 when sitting or lying down could cause physical problems.<sup>62</sup>  
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It also seems that emotions usually attributed with suffering are essential as well. Fear is certainly crucial for human and animal survival. Even in these modern times, fear is needed for humans to survive from day to day. But fear was especially needed for ancient humans whose

survival depended on staying cautious in regard to their environment, predators, and other humans. It seems that even sadness and depression would also have increased their chances of survival given the benefits of these emotional states mentioned above.

Thus, emotions such as pain, sorrow, fear, and despair are not only metaphysically good (in that they exist), but they also seem to be “natural and due” to animals. This explains why Aquinas did not view them as privations of the good and why his understanding of emotions coheres with his theory of evil. There is no problem for the evil as privation theory because pain, sorrow, fear, and despair are good processes occurring in animals.

However, this does not mean that there are no privations of the good entailed with unpleasant emotions. Aquinas discusses the privations associated with some of these emotions in his writings. For example, Aquinas mentions that

A thing may be good or evil in two ways: first considered simply and in itself; and thus

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present evil is itself a good because it hinders the response of the appetite in good.<sup>63</sup> Here he is arguing that sorrow is considered an evil because it hinders an organism’s response to its inclinations toward the good. In other words, pain and sadness can have adverse effects on an organism’s ability to recognize and pursue what is good. For example, Aquinas mentions that pain can be so acute that it hinders human concentration and prevents learning.<sup>64</sup> Although unpleasant emotions serve a good purpose, they are involuntary processes that are absent from organisms in their normal state. They also often times hinder the user-control of their subject’s thoughts, bodies, and actions. So the privation of a good regarding the experience of pain and suffering is that it entails an abnormal state of consciousness.<sup>65</sup> The privation of good in this abnormal state lies in that the suffering organism is not able to do things that it usually can do.<sup>66</sup>

This is another area of Aquinas' thought that is similar to contemporary scholarship. For example, Adam Swenson emphasizes that one bad aspect of pain is that it acts as a usurper upon its subject.<sup>67</sup> Pain is not only experienced as an unwelcome invader in the inner life of a subject, but it also seems to have an alien presence that is not a part of its subject.<sup>68</sup> In addition to the possible domination of the inner life of an organism, pain usurps the user-control that organisms have over their thoughts, bodies, and actions.<sup>69</sup> It seems that this usurper concept also applies to unpleasant emotions such as sadness, fear, and depression.

However, it is important to note that although there are absences of the good involved with unpleasant emotions, this does not cause problems for the evil as privation theory. This is because the absence of the good involved with unpleasant emotions is only a privation from the perspective of the subject experiencing the emotions. However, pain and suffering are good because they are natural and due to creatures. God has determined that humans and non-human animals possess these emotions because they are necessary for flourishing.

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So to answer the question, 'Are pain and suffering evils?' the answer is 'no.' Unpleasant emotions are privations in that they place organisms in an unwelcome state to which they are unaccustomed. They are also privations in that they usurp the user-control of their subjects. The alien nature of pain and suffering might seem like an evil from the perspective of the subject experiencing the emotions. This is likely why pain and suffering are often assumed to be evil without qualification. However, pain and suffering are good in that they are actual physiological processes that are beneficial to their subjects and in that they are natural to animals as determined by God. Thus, pain and suffering are good. They are at all times natural and due to creatures. Without them, animals would quickly die because they would not be motivated and/or involuntarily compelled to remove themselves from harm.

## 7 Evil as Privation and the Problem of Animal Suffering

This Thomistic interpretation of the evil as privation theory has drastic implications for the debate regarding the problem of animal suffering. As has been shown, it is often assumed that emotional states such as pain and suffering are evil. Theists themselves often assume that there needs to be an explanation for why God would allow for animals to experience pain and suffering.

A few contemporary theists, labeled neo-Cartesians, have argued it is possible that animals do not phenomenologically experience pain.<sup>70</sup> They do so because it is thought that if animals are unaware of pains, then the problem of animal suffering is a non-starter. Indeed, a large amount of the literature regarding the problem of animal suffering involves the question of whether animals phenomenologically experience pain like humans. However, even if animals are not aware of their pains, there have been objections that neo-Cartesianism still fails to solve the problem of animal suffering.<sup>71</sup> Francescotti argues that

. . .the neo-Cartesian defenses do not satisfy Murray's standard of not conflicting with one's justified acceptances, and it seems that they also fail to meet the standard of not being significantly likely to be false. Another reason for rejecting the neo-Cartesian defenses (a point related to the issue of emotional suffering) is that these accounts focus only on the distress of *pain* while it is clear that there are phenomenally distressful mental states other than pain. Two obvious candidates are *depression* and *grief*, forms of

emotional suffering, which appear to be present in other mammals (seen especially in behavior exhibited at the death of kin).<sup>72</sup>  
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10790-019-09680-x>.

So Francescotti believes that theists need a much stronger answer to the problem of animal suffering than what has been proposed.<sup>73</sup>

However, the above considerations show that animal suffering does not pose the problem that it has been said to cause. Reconsider Rowe's argument. The fawn's suffering is assumed to be an evil that God should prevent unless it somehow brought about an equal or greater good. From a Thomistic perspective, the fawn's suffering is not an evil because it is a metaphysically good physiological process. If pain and suffering are not evil, then they are not things that God should be obligated to prevent without good reason as premises (1) and (2) of Rowe's argument suggest. Rowe's fawn may suffer for four days before it dies, but its suffering is natural and due to it. Without the ability to suffer and feel pain, the fawn may have never survived long enough to be caught in the forest fire. Thus, if pain and suffering are not evil, then God is not obligated to allow them only to bring about a greater good or prevent a lesser evil. There could even be instances of pointless suffering, but it would be wrong to call such cases 'evil'. Without the logical basis for Rowe's argument, the vast amount of animal pain and suffering does nothing to support his conclusion.

Moreover, Aquinas' evil as privation theory significantly diminishes Draper's argument. If animal pain and suffering are not evil, then this eliminates a vast amount of evidence that Draper uses to support his conclusion. It would not be surprising when God does not prevent animal pain and suffering if animal pain and suffering are not evils. The question might remain as to why God allows animal floundering and death, but the existence of pain and suffering are explained in that they are meant by God for promoting the flourishing of His creatures.

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Here it might be objected that although pain and suffering are not evils, it seems that God would not allow animals to experience them in cases in which it seems they are not serving a purpose. For example, someone might object that an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God would ensure that animals quit feeling pain as soon as the pain serves no physiological purpose.

They might say God would not allow Rowe's fawn to suffer after it was burned and injured to the point that it could not recover. Since it could not save itself, there was no need for pain. Objectors might also emphasize the seemingly pointless nature of conditions like chronic pain syndrome in animals. Animals can experience pain related to an injury long after the injury is gone (3-6 months to qualify as chronic pain) and can eventually develop chronic pain syndrome in which they not only experience chronic pain but also pain-related anxiety. Many other seemingly pointless cases exist such as the pain and suffering associated with terminal cancer and other conditions.

At first, these might seem to be cases that leave the 'evil' in 'gratuitous evil' intact. However, it will be good to reemphasize what is in question here. The main question under consideration in this paper is not whether God has a reason for allowing evil (e.g., preventing another evil or bringing about another good) but whether pain and suffering are evil. Specifically, the question here is whether pointless pain and chronic pain syndrome can be understood as natural processes that God intends for animals. Another good thing to emphasize is Rowe's argument is ultimately based in a logical problem. It is not necessary to show that a solution to a logical problem is true. Instead it is only necessary that a solution to a logical problem be logically possible and avoid contradiction.

With these two considerations in mind, it seems that even cases of possibly physiological pointless suffering can qualify as goods in Aquinas' evil as privation theory. First, Aquinas does not believe that God created the universe to make a paradise for animals and even humans. Instead, Aquinas argues that God created the world to communicate His love and perfection to rational creatures.<sup>74</sup> To ensure this purpose is fulfilled, God is logically required to order the universe with physical laws and to guide rational beings with a moral law (physical laws alone

cannot guide beings with immaterial intellects and wills).<sup>75</sup> However, it is not necessary for God to prevent all pain and suffering because God does not create and sustain the universe with the main goal of keeping His creatures from pain and suffering but with the goal of guiding rational creatures to their purpose of knowing and loving God.<sup>76</sup>

Second, Aquinas emphasizes that corruptibility is natural for physical beings.<sup>77</sup> Since only God is pure actuality, only God is infinite being, infinitely perfectly, and exists necessarily. All physical beings are finite form and matter composites and depend upon God for their continued existence at each moment. Thus, non-corruptibility and continued existence in a perfect state are not natural to created beings. In other words, incorruptibility would be a grace that is not owed to naturally corruptible creatures.

Third, Aquinas argues that God cannot create a best possible world. Since only God is pure actuality and infinitely perfect, anything God creates will be finite. This entails that God cannot create a best possible world because, for any world He creates, He could have created a world containing one more good thing.<sup>78</sup> Since anything God creates will be finite and because God cannot create a best possible world, any world that God creates will have a limited amount of resources.

These considerations show why it is logically possible for even physiologically pointless pain and suffering to exist in the world that God created. As mentioned, pain and suffering are physiological processes that exist to help animals survive. These processes are necessary to help corruptible creatures survive in a world with limited resources that is guided by physical laws. So these processes are natural to animals and qualify as good in Aquinas' evil as privation theory.

With the necessity of physical laws and the ability for animals to feel pain in mind, there could be practical reasons why God would not install a "kill switch" system in animals so they

would quit feeling pain. For one, physiological systems do not work as well when animals age. It is logically possible that God does not intend for animals to quit feeling pain when it is unnecessary because a pain kill-switch system might fail in old age and cause older animals to die prematurely. Moreover, the kill-switch would need to activate at particular moments and be set off by particular stimuli. But it is not clear what these would be. Should fawn's quit feeling pain when they experience a large impact such as a tree falling on them? If so, a fawn might stop feeling pain after accidentally ramming into another fawn. Such an incident could cause the fawn that now cannot feel pain to quickly injure itself. Should the fawn quit feeling pain after a certain duration or intensity of pain? If so, a fawn might stop feeling pain when it has a broken leg that takes longer to heal. Yet such an injury would never heal if the fawn quit feeling pain. It seems that any species with any type of physiological pain kill-switch system would be at an evolutionary disadvantage. Animals that prematurely stop feeling pain due to an improper activation of their kill switch or due to an aging or malfunctioning kill switch would die off, leaving only those animals that are constantly able to feel pain. It seems logically possible that God needs animals to feel pain at all times to help them survive in a world with fixed physical laws, especially since animals are guided by instincts and limited animal intelligence.

Additionally, it is possible that God may have a reason for allowing pointless animal suffering. In Gen. 3, the Bible tells a story in which Adam and Eve were kicked out of God's presence in the Garden of Eden and were subjected to several curses including difficulty in having children and difficult labor when working the ground (Gen. 3:14-19). Biblical commentators mention that, in stating these curses, God is emphasizing what will happen to humans and to the land once the humans are banished from His life-giving presence.<sup>79</sup> The curses were intended to emphasize to humans that they are dependent on God for their well-

being and survival and that they cannot be with God in their sinful state because God is holy and just. **This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *The Journal of Value Inquiry*. The final authenticated version is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10790-019-09680-x>.**

It is possible that God could allow physically pointless suffering for reasons similar to the purpose of the curses mentioned in Gen. 3. The fawn's suffering for days could serve to remind humans that the world is better when humans obey God. It could serve as a reminder of the death that disobeying God brings.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the fawn's suffering would not contradict God's purposes because it would help to communicate His perfection (including His inability to die), justice, and holiness to rational creatures. The same could be said for chronic pain disorder, cancer, and other conditions. These all could be meant to remind humans that they rely on God for their existence and their well-being. They could remind humans of God's holiness and justice and how life is better when humans obey God instead of trying to live on their own terms.

Again, the point here is not that chronic or acute pain in animals is an evil that God allows for a good reason. The point is that pain and suffering in animals is perfectly natural even if they do not always aid in survival. It is logically possible that God could intend for pain and suffering to serve a purpose beyond physical survival. Cancer, chronic pain syndrome, and pain and suffering in terminal organisms do not provide examples that contradict Aquinas' evil as privation theory. They might be physiologically pointless, but this does not mean they are completely pointless.

Thus, the problem of animal suffering dissolves or at the least is greatly diminished. If animal pain and suffering are not evil, then premises (1) and (2) of Rowe's argument are false. This entails that no number of cases of animal pain and suffering, even physically pointless animal pain and suffering, will amount to evidence against God. Also, Draper's argument is greatly diminished because the vast amount of animal pain and suffering is good because it

promotes the survival of animals while also communicating God's goodness to humans.<sup>81</sup> The question of animal floundering and death may remain, but the question of animal pain and suffering does not. While I realize that many theists and non-theists will not find this understanding of pain and suffering as a satisfying solution to the problem of animal suffering, I do believe Aquinas' evil as privation theory provides an understanding of the nature of pain and evil that is a logical counterexample to the basis of Rowe's argument and a great diminisher of the evidence for Draper's argument. At the very least, I think that Aquinas' evil as privation theory shows that theists and non-theists ought to give more consideration and discussion to the question of the nature of animal pain and suffering.

## **8 Conclusion**

The millions of years of animal suffering intuitively seems to cause a problem for theism. Philosophers have questioned why the theistic God would allow so many instances of intense and prolonged suffering. Many philosophers have assumed that animal pain and suffering are evil and God cannot allow His creatures to experience them without good reason.

It was emphasized that the most crucial aspect of the problem of animal suffering is the assumption that pain and suffering are evils. If they are not evil, then it is not necessary to morally justify God's allowing animal pain and suffering. After explaining Aquinas' concept of evil, it was argued that unpleasant emotions such as pain, sadness, fear, and despair are not evil according to Aquinas' evil as privation theory. These emotions are good physiological processes that are beneficial for animals and natural to them.

It is also possible that God created the universe to communicate His goodness to rational creatures and not to provide a paradise for contingent beings. Such a universe will be finite and governed by physical laws. As such, it is possible that the a never-ending ability to experience

pain and suffering is necessary to help creatures survive at the species level. Yet, even if they do not aid in survival, pain and suffering could still communicate God's goodness by reminding rational beings that they rely on God's goodness for their existence, guidance, and well-being. **This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *The Journal of Value Inquiry*. The final authenticated version is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10790-019-09680-x>.**

Thus, the problem of animal suffering dissolves or is greatly diminished because pain and suffering are not evils. If they are not evil, then the vast number of instances of animal pain and suffering do not amount to evidence against God's goodness. Pointless suffering could be a reality, and this would still not count as evidence against God. At the very least, this sheds doubt on the assumption that pain and suffering are evil. Proponents and opponents of the the problem of animal suffering will do well to give closer consideration to the natures of pain and suffering.

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#### Notes

1 Recent monographs include Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Michael Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Nicola Hoggard Creegan, *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Trent Dougherty, *The Problem of Animal Pain: A Theodicy for All Creatures Great and Small* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

2 William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no.4 (October 1979): 335.

3 Ibid., 337.

4 Ibid.

5 Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw*, 41-72.

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6 Murray, 42 (emphasis in original).

7 Robert Francescotti, “The Problem of Animal Pain and Suffering,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Somerset: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 125.

8 Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” 336.

9 “The truth is that we are not in a position to prove that (1) is true. We cannot know with certainty that instances of suffering of the sort described in (1) do occur in our world. But it is one thing to know or prove that (1) is true and quite another thing to have rational grounds for believing (1) to be true” (Rowe, 337).

10 Paul Draper, “Christian Theism and Life on Earth,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, ed. J. B. Stump and A. G. Padgett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 306-316.

11 *Ibid.*, 312.

12 *Ibid.*, 315.

13 *ST I*, q. 49, a. 1; all quotes from the *ST* are from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, first complete American ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

14 *ST I*, q. 48, a. 3; see also Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de malo (De Malo)*, q. 1, a. 2.

15 *ST I*, q. 48, a. 3.

16 *ST I*, q. 48, a. 5, ad. 1.

17 *ST I*, q. 48, a. 5; *De Malo*, q. 1, a. 4.

18 *ST I*, q. 48, a. 5; *De Malo*, q. 1, a. 4.

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19 G. Stanley Kane, "Evil and Privation," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 1 (March 1980): 49-51.

20 Mark Ian Thomas Robson, "Evil, Privation, Depression and Dread," *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (September 2013): 558-561.

21 *ST* I-II, q. 35-39.

22 *ST* I-II, q. 35, a. 1.

23 For a brief overview of Aquinas' understanding of the emotions and how they compare to contemporary views on emotions see Peter King, "Emotions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 209-226.

24 *ST* I-II, q. 23, a. 2.

25 *ST* I, q. 81, a. 2.

26 *ST* I-II, q. 36, a. 1.

27 *ST* I-II, q. 23, a. 2.

28 *ST* I-II, q. 35-39; q. 40, a. 4.

29 *ST* I-II, q. 36, a. 1.

30 *ST* I-II, q. 35, a. 2.

31 *ST* I-II, q. 23, a. 2.

32 *ST* I-II, q. 23, a. 1; Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate (De Ver.)*, q. 25, a. 2.

33 I borrow this and the following examples (hope, despair, fear, and confidence) used to explain the irascible emotions from King, "Emotions," 15.

34 *ST* I-II, q. 39, a. 1.

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35 *ST I-II*, q. 40, a. 8, ad. 3.

36 *ST I-II*, q. 44, a. 4.

37 Roughly similar to the four aspects described in J. D. Loeser, “Perspectives on Pain,” in *Clinical Pharmacology & Therapeutics: Proceedings of Plenary Lectures Symposia and Therapeutic Sessions of the First World Conference on Clinical Pharmacology & Therapeutics London, UK, 3-9 August 1980*, eds. P. Turner, C. Padgham, and A. Hedges (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 1980), 313; and Serge Marchand, *The Phenomenon of Pain* (Seattle: IASP Press, 2012), 12.

38 Marchand, *The Phenomenon of Pain*, 12.

39 Colin Klein, *What the Body Commands: The Imperative Theory of Pain* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 57.

40 A. D. Craig, “A New View of Pain as a Homeostatic Emotion,” *Trends in Neurosciences* 26, no. 6 (June 2003): 303-307.

41 For a survey of views entailing that all pains are unpleasant, see Adam Swenson, “Pain and Value” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2006), 18-26.

42 R. M. Hare and P. L. Gardiner, “Pain and Evil,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 38, no. 1 (1964): 97.

43 For examples of arguments supporting the distinction between pain and suffering, see Klein, *What the Body Commands*, 49-55.

44 See Klein, 186-188.

45 Manolo Martinez, “Imperative Content and the Painfulness of Pain,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 10, no. 1 (March 2011): 76.

46 Klein, 188.

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47 Edmund T. Rolls, *Emotion and Decision-Making Explained* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14; See also A.D. Craig, "Interoception and Emotion: A Neuroanatomical Perspective," in *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd ed., eds. Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008), 272-274.

48 Rolls, *Emotion and Decision-Making Explained*, 14.

49 *Ibid.*, 16.

50 *Ibid.*, 15.

51 George A. Bonanno, Laura Goorin, and Karin G. Coifman, "Sadness and Grief," in *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd ed., eds. Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008), 799. See Dacher Keltner and Ann M. Kring, "Emotion, Social Function, and Psychopathology," *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 3 (September 1998): 324.

52 Bonanno, Goorin, and Coifman, "Sadness and Grief," 799. See Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 251.

53 Bonanno, Goorin, and Coifman, 799. See Norbert Schwarz, "Warmer and More Social: Recent Developments in Cognitive Social Psychology," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 245.

54 Arne Öhman and Susan Mineka, "Fears, Phobias, and Preparedness: Toward an Evolved Module of Fear and Fear Learning," *Psychological Review* 108, no. 3 (July 2001): 483.

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55 Peter J. Lang, Michael Davis, and Arne Öhman, "Fear and Anxiety: Animal Models and Human Cognitive Psychophysiology," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 61, no. 3 (December 2000): 139.

56 Öhman and Mineka, "Fears, Phobias, and Preparedness," 486-487.

57 Nicholas B. Allen and Paul B. T. Badcock, "Darwinian Models of Depression: A Review of Evolutionary Accounts of Mood and Mood Disorders," *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology & Biological Psychiatry* 30, no. 5 (July 2006): 819.

58 Sherry Anders, Midori Tanaka, and Dennis K. Kinney, "Depression as an Evolutionary Strategy for Defense Against Infection," *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity* 31 (2013): 9-22.

59 *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1; *De Ver.*, q. 21, a. 2.

60 For example, see Elna M. Nagasako, Anne Louise Oaklander, and Robert H. Dworkin, "Congenital Insensitivity to Pain: An Update," *Pain* 101, no. 3 (February 2003), 213-219.

61 Marchand, 8.

62 *Ibid.*

63 *ST I-II*, q. 39, a. 1.

64 *ST I-II*, q. 37, a. 1.

65 Bill Anglin and Stewart Goetz, "Evil is Privation," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13, no. 1 (March 1982): 5.

66 *Ibid.*, 7.

67 Adam Swenson, "Pain's Evils," *Utilitas* 21, no. 2 (June 2009): 208-216.

68 *Ibid.*, 210-211.

69 *Ibid.*, 208-209.

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70 For examples see Peter Harrison, "Theodicy and Animal Pain," *Philosophy* 64, no. 247 (January 1989): 79-92; Peter Harrison, "Do Animals Feel Pain?" *Philosophy* 66, no. 255 (January 1991): 25-40; and Murray, 41-69.

71 For examples see Robert Wennberg, "Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil," *Christian Scholar's Review* 21, no. 2 (1991): 120-140; Joseph J. Lynch, "Harrison and Hick on God and Animal Pain," *Sophia* 33, no. 3 (November 1994): 63-68; and Francescotti, "The Problem of Animal Pain and Suffering," 117-121.

72 Francescotti, 120 (emphasis in original).

73 *Ibid.*, 126.

74 *ST III*, q. 1, a. 1.

75 *ST I-II*, q. 91, a. 1-2; *SCG III*, c. 114.

76 For a more detailed discussion of Aquinas' writings regarding God's purpose for creating, see B. Kyle Keltz, "God's Purpose for the Universe and the Problem of Animal Suffering," *Sophia* (2017), doi: 10.1007/s11841-017-0611-z.

77 *De Malo*, q. 5, a. 5.

78 *ST I*, q. 25, a. 6, ad 3.

79 For example, see C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2006), 164-165.

80 This is true regardless of whether death existed before Adam and Eve sinned or not.

81 Another objection might be that there were no humans around for millions of years while non-human animals were suffering and this likely included a lot of physiologically pointless pain and suffering. However, the Bible includes passages such as Job 38:7 indicating that angels enjoy viewing God's creation. Thus, physiologically pointless pain

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could still have served a purpose for communicating God's goodness even in times when humans did not exist. This makes it so that it cannot be said that Christian theism precludes a world in which God allows non-human animal pain and suffering before humans exist.