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Do Animals Suffer?

(and does it matter?)

> In a Tibetan village I noticed a crowd of people standing under a burning tree and looking up into the branches. I came near and discovered in the branches a bird [who] was anxiously flying round a nest full of young ones. The mother bird wanted to save her little ones, but she could not. When the fire reached the nest the people waited breathlessly to see what she would do. No one could climb the tree, no one could help her. Now she could easily have saved her own life by flight, but instead of fleeing she sat down on the nest, covering the little ones carefully with her wings. The fire seized her and burnt her to ashes. She showed her love to her little ones by giving her life for them. If then, this little insignificant creature had such love, how much more must our Heavenly Father love His children, the Creator love His creatures![1]

I love this story from Indian Christian missionary Sadhu Sundar Singh. Singh knew pain and suffering. He was a Saul-like persecutor of Christians at the turn of the twentieth century, a response to the early death of his mother. In deep pain, Singh resolved to kill himself but was instead given a vision of Jesus and became a believer. Singh's remaining family rejected him, but he was embraced by the Christian community and dedicated the rest of his life to service and mission in the name of Christ.

Jesus and Singh both use mother birds to describe God's love.

We humans have a bad habit of saying that anyone who ascribes emotion or intention to nonhuman animals is "anthropomorphizing"[2] them. As

1. Singh, *Wisdom of the Sadhu*, 152–53.
2. Anthropomorphizing originally referred to humans ascribing their own

if human animals have a lock on love, fear, pain, or joy. But our experience tells us that is far from the truth, no? Our dogs are gloriously delighted to see us when we return home, no matter how long we've been gone. Canine devotion has been documented from Homer (the Greek, not the Simpson) to legends of canine companions who stand loyally over their human guardian's graves. We've even got an adjective for it: dogged.

Dogs, of course, are a ready example of easily identifiable emotion. They'd make terrible hipsters, their hearts openly displayed on their fur for all to see. But there are countless tales of nonhuman animals who demonstrate emotional and, yes, moral behavior.[3] A dog who tried desperately to rescue a human infant from a burning home; a mother gorilla who, rather than attack a human child who had fallen into her zoo enclosure, picked the child up and gently deposited him near the cage door; the blind doe who was guided through the forest for years by her mate, the fur on their sides worn from constant contact with one another, their arrangement only discovered after the mate was gunned down by a hunter; rhesus monkeys who, forced to administer an electric shock to another rhesus monkey in order to be given food, choose to go hungry instead. Incidentally, when a similar experiment was done in which humans *thought* they were administering shocks to another human at the behest of an authority figure, an astonishing 65 percent of the subjects chose to repeatedly "shock" another human, simply because they were told to do it.

I won't take on the job of convincing you that animals can feel pain, or that they suffer during and after painful experiences. Nonhuman animals have central nervous systems and pain receptors, and they cry out. Even the derided and underappreciated lobster exhibits the classic signs of suffering when he is thrown alive into a pot of boiling water.[4] Zoologists, biologists,

characteristics to God. That's right: humans are so narcissistic that we are desperate to find ways to distinguish ourselves from literally every other thing, ever. We are *very* invested in being special. Methinks we are dealing with a little species-wide insecurity.

3. Marc Bekoff, professor emeritus of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, has done extensive research and writing on the subjects of animal behavior and cognitive ethology (the study of nonhuman animal minds). Though his work is rooted in scientific method, it is highly accessible to nonscientists, and I strongly recommend picking up a copy of *The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy—and Why They Matter*.

4. Yes, lobsters and crabs feel pain, and they suffer when they are boiled, frozen, steamed, or poorly hacked to death. There are some classic responses to pain, including the shedding of limbs, withdrawal from the pain source, the production of chemicals that mitigate pain, and the presence of receptors for those chemicals, that all indicate the

and ethologists are systematically disproving the age-old assumption that animals are incapable of cognition and moral thought. Donald Griffin, a Harvard zoologist who studied animal consciousness from the 1930s until his death in 2003, points out that "the difference between human consciousness and that of any animal is no doubt enormous, but this difference is probably one of degree rather than kind. Total certainty is not attainable, even when we inquire about the thoughts and feelings of our human companions."[5]

Total certainty is not attainable. At one point, colonial powers weren't sure whether the indigenous humans whose land they stole and whose bodies they dominated were capable of feeling pain. And, sadly, this isn't an old, forgotten problem. Modern research has shown that people of color are less likely to get adequate treatment for their pain, receive fewer pain medicines than light-skinned people in pain, and have a harder time obtaining prescribed medications than light-skinned people. In one study, people (including medical personnel) were shown to assume that light-skinned people felt more pain than darker-skinned people.[6] In other words, there is a gigantic empathy gap from human to human. I'm asking us to do a hard thing: to bridge not only that empathy gap between us and our fellow human creatures, but also the creatures with whom we share less DNA, fewer physical traits, and with whom we can rarely communicate.

The Suffering God

We humans have to ask ourselves whether or not the suffering of our fellow creatures matters. And what role, if any, suffering plays in our relationships to God and to the rest of the created world. Though at least one early church parent—Origen—embraced the theology of a suffering God,[7] the dominant position in the church throughout the centuries, influenced by Platonism,

ability for an organism to experience pain. So, I don't know, if you wouldn't boil a kitten to death, I'm not sure you should subject a lobster to that kind of horror, either.

5. Griffin, "Afterword: What Is It Like?," 472.

6. Silverstein, "I Don't Feel Your Pain."

7. God love my boy Origen, who bucked the third-century trend toward Greek thought and claimed, "God has taken our ways upon himself, just as the Son of God bore our sufferings. The Father himself is not impassible" (*Homilia in Ezechiel*, 228.35–230.49.) I'm not fluent in seven languages or an expert on church history, so I've been grateful for McGrath's *The Christian Theology Reader*, which is an excellent source for an overview of theological writings from across space and time.

has been that God is impassible—set apart from suffering, unmovable. But the doctrine of impassibility has increasingly fallen out of favor. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from prison, noted that "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross . . . The Bible directs [us] to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help."[8]

Can a suffering God still be God? Yes. In his book *The Creative Suffering of God*, Oxford theologian Paul Fiddes shows that ours is "a God who suffers eminently and yet is still God, and a God who suffers universally and yet is still present uniquely and decisively in the sufferings of Christ."[9]

But we don't need theologians to confirm what the scriptures tell us. The earliest chapters of Genesis tell us that God grieves and feels sorrow: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (Gen 6:5–6). We read of God's anger throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. And we begin to anticipate God's suffering in the world and on the cross: "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity . . ." (Isa 53:3).

Elie Wiesel recounts the horrific story of watching a young boy slowly die on the gallows in a Nazi concentration camp. One of the prisoners, forced to watch the boy's suffering, asks, "Where is God now?" Wiesel's answer: "Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows."[10]

Why believe in, much less be encouraged by, a suffering God? Fiddes suggests that we believe in a suffering God because our God is love, who suffered in Christ at the cross. God's bodily torture and death was an act of empathy and solidarity that may help make some sense of human suffering. We also believe in a suffering God because ours is a God who continues to work inside God's created community, a work perfected in the Trinity. In other words, though God is suffering with the boy on the gallows, God is not *only* on the gallows. God moves off of the gallows, through and out of the camp, to suffer with others and to continue to create in and guide us through a broken world.

8. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 360–61.

9. Fiddes, *Creative Suffering of God*, 3. Fiddes' four arguments for the belief in a suffering God are found in the second chapter (pp. 16–45).

10. Wiesel, *Night*, 62.

A New Ethical Framework

To develop an ethical framework that matches our eschatological hope, we need to learn to echo the movement of God, to move from what is to what ought to be, to identify the shortcomings of our is-ness and imagine the freeing possibilities of an ought-ness fraught with love. This isn't just a chapter about the theory of suffering. Theories of suffering and theories of evil are useless without action. "In writing theodicies, individuals detach themselves from the realities of sin and suffering. The purpose of most theodicies is to show why the sufferings which people endure and the sins which they commit do not count against belief in God."[11] We must refuse the urge to detach from suffering, and instead, follow the example of our savior and enter in.

What Is?

When it comes to the suffering of nonhuman animals, what *is* is too legion to thoroughly describe here. For a good overview, take an hour or two and watch *Earthlings*, a documentary that covers an array of the ways in which humans use nonhuman animals. Since it is easy for many humans to recognize and empathize with the suffering of, say, a dog or a cat, I'd like to focus for a few moments on a few nonhuman animals whose ability to feel pain and to suffer are often dismissed out of hand.

Fish

Would you drown a dog? Would you have an ethical problem with someone who did? Even if you decided to kill a dog, I suspect it's not likely that your preferred method would be to drown her. You'd likely take her to a veterinarian or, at worst, dispatch her quickly with a bullet to the brain.[12] Drowning a dog is the equivalent of a bullet gone bad—a slow, painful, and

11. Tilley, *Evils of Theodicy*, 231.

12. Please note, I do not hold these two killing methods on equal footing. A humane euthanasia is a peaceful, controlled way to die and a gift to a suffering animal. Being shot in the head *can* be quick, too, but is more likely to be horrifically cruel, as Kentucky resident Mike Crowe discovered when he taped his local animal control disposing of unwanted dogs by shooting them. The dogs were frequently not killed on the first shot, and were often left to suffer on piles of dead and dying dogs before finally succumbing to their injuries or being shot again. See Gutierrez, "Dog-Pound Killings Caught on Tape."

terrifying experience. Yet when we yank fish out of the water, this is what we force them to endure. We take away their source of oxygen and they suffocate to death. You've seen the Ad Council's asthma commercial where the goldfish flops around to illustrate how horrible it is to not be able to breathe? A bit of an empathy gap there, eh?

In her book *Do Fish Feel Pain?*, biologist Victoria Braithwaite states that "there is as much evidence that fish feel pain and suffer as there is for birds and mammals—and more than there is for human neonates and preterm babies."[13] Even Christians who abstain from other flesh will often justify eating fish flesh and sea animals because of the biblical accounts of Jesus eating fish in first-century Palestine. But let's talk about how fish are farmed and plucked from the sea in our time.

Six billion fish are slaughtered for food each year in the United States. About 40 percent of those fish are factory farmed. Factory fish farms are a lot like factory chicken or pig farms—crowded, filthy, and saturated with drugs and other chemicals to keep animals alive long enough to survive the gross conditions. Salmon, a species of fish who will travel nearly one thousand miles in a single season to spawn, live their entire lives in the space equivalent to a bathtub. Because small fish are in danger of being eaten by larger fish, farms constantly sort fish by dumping them over grates of varying sizes, a distressing and dangerous practice. There are no laws or regulations to protect fish on farms. Reports say as many as 40 percent of fish die on the farm before they are slaughtered.[14]

And how does fish slaughter work? First, farmers stop feeding the fish to reduce the waste that will be produced during shipment. Fish are dumped onto conveyers and then bashed on the head, left to suffocate, packed on ice, or their gills are slit. They are not given the benefit of stunning and are conscious through the entire slow process. Fish are cold-blooded animals and it can take up to fifteen minutes for them to lose consciousness when removed from water or packed on ice.

Fish who are dragged up from the ocean fare no better. While their lives may have been a semblance of the one God intended, their deaths are gruesome and painful. Moreover, commercial fishing is blamed for the endangerment and extinction of countless sea animals—entire species of

13. Braithewaite, *Do Fish Feel Pain?*, 153.

14. See http://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/factory-farming/fish/aquafarming/.

creatures made by God who have been eradicated from the planet because of human greed.

Commercial fishing trawlers are not the boats of Zebedee and Sons Fishery. They are the size of a football field and can stay on the water for months at a time, storing millions of pounds of fish in on-board freezers. There are a few ways that commercial fishing ships capture fish from the depths:

1. Long-lines: many miles of baited and hooked fishing line are released as the ship moves through the water. Fish on these hooks may be left to struggle and bleed for up to four hours before being reeled in.
2. Purse seines: a common method of capturing tuna. It's a giant netted bag to catch fish.
3. Gill nets: gill nets are giant, vertical mesh nets. Fish swim into them and are trapped by their gills (hence the name) and unable to break free. Fish caught in gill nets may suffocate or bleed to death underwater. Those pulled up from the ocean's depths will suffer decompression, their stomachs exploding out of their mouths. On deck, those fish who have survived will be slit open and left to suffocate or bleed to death.
4. Bottom trawlers: these environmental disasters scrape the ocean floor of *all* life, leaving nothing in their considerable wake. Fish in these nets are crushed together, and decompression forces their eyes out of their sockets, pushes their internal organs out through their mouths, and ruptures their swim bladders.

Mice and Rats

Mice and rats certainly aren't the only animals used in laboratory experiments, but more than one hundred million of them are used and killed for experiments every year. Their lives and deaths are afforded not even the small dignity of basic welfare protections. Their suffering is unseen. In fact, the Animal Welfare Act, the single federal law that provides any protection for animals used in labs, *specifically excludes* mice, rats, and birds. Not only is their suffering unseen, but they themselves are invisible—in the eye of the law, they do not exist.

As a result, humans have come up with some particularly creative ways to torment mice and rats. They are deliberately infected with cancer and a host of other diseases, used for human genetic research, inflicted with pain (often using electroshocks on their delicate paws) in order to study their responses, intentionally addicted to cocaine and other drugs, mutilated in surgeries, poisoned to death, forced to inhale cigarette smoke and other toxic substances, starved or bred to be morbidly obese, and subjected to a host of other cruelties, despite the well-documented facts that nonanimal models provide far more effective and accurate data and that many of these experiments are redundant to those previously performed. If mice in labs become sick, they are not given veterinary care. If their miserable lives aren't ended by pain, disease, or mutilation, mice are disposed of like garbage. Their heads are cut off with a guillotine or scissors or they are thrown alive into freezers. Since mice and rats aren't living beings in the eyes of the law, experimenters aren't required to provide them even the most basic pain relief, and no experiment, no matter how needless, painful or cruel, is illegal.

Mice and rats are able to communicate with one another and have nervous systems. They can feel pain, they form emotional attachments, and they are highly social and intelligent creatures, as anyone who has kept mice or rats as companions will tell you.[15] Mice and rats have been shown to express empathy and to care for fellows in need. Rats love to be tickled and will laugh with joy. They love to play, but also have systems for establishing boundaries of fairness and trust.[16]

What Ought to Be: Suffering Outside the Gate

Folks who argue for the use and abuse of nonhuman animals for human benefit claim that nonhuman suffering either doesn't exist or doesn't matter. Despite a reputation for being anti-vivisection, C. S. Lewis actually argued that "a great deal of what appears to be animal suffering need not be suffering in any real sense. It may be we who have invented the 'sufferers' by the 'pathetic fallacy' of reading into the beasts a self for which there is no

15. Though one's ability to communicate or level of intelligence should never determine the measure of empathy, mercy, or grace given.

16. See Bekoff, *Emotional Lives of Animals*, 10–12, 56–57, 93, 95, 99, 130, 138, 140, and 144.

real evidence."[17] Lewis thought it best, bizarrely, to err on the side of cold rationality instead of empathy. This strikes me as an odd stance for a Jesus follower to take, particularly in light of Hebrews 13:

> Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. . . . We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. . . . Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (Heb 13:1–2, 11–14, 16)

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." It sounds like the writer of the epistle knew something about how to handle the uncertainty that Griffin articulated two millennia later: show love. The word translated in the second verse as "hospitality" is the Greek word *philoxenia* or "love of strangers." The writer is telling us not to forget to show love to strangers, including prisoners and those who are being tortured. Showing love to strangers bridges any empathy gap.

In verse 11, we get to a pretty radical idea. An idea even more radical than "love everyone," which is already revolutionary.

There was a lot of hullabaloo in the early church about sacrifices and food regulations.[18] Early Christians weren't sure if they needed to stick with the Jewish food laws or not. They weren't sure how to reconcile their ancient customs, deep tenants of their religious expression, with this new radical concept of loving, fellowshipping with, and showing hospitality to everyone. Sometimes, they'd be offered meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods. Should they eat that? Politely decline? Lecture their host? Feed the offending substance to the dog while no one was looking? A goodly number of passages in the Epistles deal with this issue. It was a big deal.

17. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 137.

18. The modern U.S. church likes to call Jesus the "ultimate sacrifice," and we learn early on in Sunday school that the reason we don't sacrifice animals anymore, even though the Bible tells us to, is that Jesus died. But then we go to a church barbeque. It's all very confusing.

In verses 10–13, the writer of Hebrews is alluding to the practice of making a sin offering on the Day of Atonement, detailed in Leviticus 16. The first seven chapters of Leviticus set out in great detail the processes of various sacrifices. Though fat and blood were not to be consumed, much sacrificed flesh could be eaten, provided some other boxes were checked (the flesh is clean, you're clean, etc.). But on the Day of Atonement, the dead animals (minus their blood and fat) were to be brought outside the gate of the camp and burned. Neither the priests nor the people were to consume the flesh.

Jesus changes everything. The night he was betrayed, he called the broken bread and poured wine his body and blood, the new covenant. Isn't it interesting that through Jesus, blood, which was forbidden, becomes celebratory wine? And that the flesh of the Atonement sacrifice, which was burned, becomes nourishing bread? So the writer of Hebrews goes on to say, "Through [Jesus], then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of the lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (13:15–16). Take a little time and read Leviticus 1–7. Sacrifices of praise, the sweetness of wine? This is an astonishing contrast to the blood-and-guts slaughter described in the law. And we remind ourselves of this sweetness, this new reality where our hands need no longer be sticky with the dark blood of a terrified beast, by sharing, by doing good, by loving everyone.

So what's this got to do with nonhuman suffering? In the face of uncertainty—in the presence of an "other" who we may not understand, like, or respect, and who may not deserve consideration—we are reminded that our Christ, the one who atones, the one who reconciles us to our Creator and to one another, lived and died on the margins. Christ was mocked, maligned, and misunderstood. He communicated in ways that even his closest friends did not understand. And for the more than two thousand years since Christ's death, we have created centers of power and pushed others to the margins. The church has done this. Christ followers have done this.

Nonhuman animals are on the margins. They communicate with one another and with us in ways we don't always understand. We dismiss the idea that they may feel pain or suffer, *even though* we are told over and over and over again to err on the side of empathy, to love and to care for those with whom we cannot relate.

Moving from Is to Ought

United Kingdom lawyer Simon Buckhaven was on vacation in France one year when his son decided he wanted a lobster for his birthday dinner. Simon entered a local shop, chose a lobster, and was horrified to see the shopkeeper prepare to plunge the crustacean into boiling water. Lobsters who are boiled or steamed to death try desperately to escape—they thrash wildly, lose limbs, and vomit. It takes a terrifying and painful seven to ten minutes for lobsters to finally succumb to the heat. When Simon learned that boiling was the go-to method for lobster slaughter in England and the U.S., he got to work trying to invent a more humane way to end a lobster's life. Two years later, the Crustastun was born. The Crustastun delivers an electric shock to lobsters and crabs, rendering them insensible to pain within a second, and dead after ten seconds.[19]

We can't all invent machines to make death a little more humane for the creatures humans insist on eating. But there's something Simon did that *everyone* can imitate. Simon saw suffering, felt empathy, and worked to make that suffering known. Simon saw, and then he acted. Mice, rats, and birds aren't acknowledged as sentient beings by the one law that protects them in labs; fish, chickens, and turkeys aren't afforded protection under the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. Nonhuman animals, created by God with abilities, families, feelings, and the ability to feel pain and to suffer, are waiting outside the gate. Will we go to them? Will we respond to their cries?

19. See http://crustastun.com/.