A Challenge to the Moral Argument: The Problem of Animal Suffering

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Abstract: Within contemporary theology, the moral argument is one of the most frequently cited challenges to the naturalist. Andrew Ter Ern Loke offers a new formulation to the argument, framing divine nature as the necessary ontological standard for moral realism. This paper will offer an internal critique of his framework. Under the assumption of an objectively good God, a tension emerges given the pervasive nature of the problem of animal suffering. Suffering for the nonhuman animal is hardwired into the biological obligations of the natural world; under the assumption of a morally perfect personal creator, gratuitous predatory violence intuitively conflicts with our ethical expectations. The framework is then confronted with a dilemma: this deity either follows an entirely separate standard of ethic or directly violates the very nature that is meant to ground the objectivity. Available reconciliatory efforts for the problem are expansive, often utilizing the preexistent theodicies offered for humans such as arguments from free will and soul-making, with both missing the epistemic weight to extend the logic from human to nonhuman animal. This has led to a contemporary approach in neo-Cartesianism—the attribution of moral irrelevance to a lesser conscious status. Yet, the offered cases lack proportionate empirical grounding. Thus, as it stands, it appears a new explanation for the problem of animal suffering is needed to coherently posit the notion of theistic moral realism without an appeal to ignorance. This paper contends that until these tensions are resolved, the moral argument loses its persuasive force against the naturalist.

Introduction

The moral argument is one of the most often invoked arguments against naturalism within contemporary discussions, with C.S. Lewis and William Lane Craig popularizing and formulating variants of the position. The most widely referenced, presented by Craig, goes as follows:[1]

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
2. Objective moral values do exist.

1 William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Crossway, 2008).

3. Therefore, God exists.

More recently, Andrew Ter Ern Loke has offered a new formulation of the argument, with noticeable refinements that distinguish his from the previous variations.[2]

1. A number of objective moral truths exist.
2. These objective moral truths are either metaphysically grounded in an impersonal entity, a non-divine personal entity, or a divine personal entity i.e., God, or they are brute facts.
3. These objective moral truths cannot be metaphysically grounded in an impersonal entity.
4. These objective moral truths cannot be metaphysically grounded in a non-divine personal entity.
5. These objective moral truths can be metaphysically grounded in a divine personal entity i.e., God.
6. These objective moral truths are not brute facts.
7. Therefore, these objective moral truths are metaphysically grounded in a divine personal entity i.e., God (From 2 to 6).
8. Therefore, God exists (From 1 to 7).

While more expansive than Craig's formulation, Loke's logic does not stray far from Craig's, he simply untints the hidden premises, dodging the ambiguity often criticized within the original position. Accordingly, I will utilize Loke's formulation of the moral argument. To summarize, the general idea is that moral truths are inexplicable within a naturalistic worldview and demand some form of metaphysical grounding through a divine entity. Therefore, as moral truths *do* exist, a divine personal entity (e.g., God) exists.

I will offer an indirect critique of the moral argument, examining the ethics of the deity invoked. Assuming the premises, we can infer theistic moral realism: a single standard of morality embedded within the nature of God. As posited by Loke[3]:

> "What is good (e.g., love) is a property of God, thus goodness is not a higher standard of God but is a property of God's nature."

Given this, if a divine personal entity were to deviate from this absolute standard of morality, they would thus be betraying their own nature. I will make the case for an under-discussed form of the problem of evil to demonstrate this variance. However, it is most important to note that any example of such a conclusion would fulfill the same purpose.

Consider the examples: A lion subdues a zebra by puncturing its trachea with its jaws—a necessary process the lion will repeat throughout its lifecycle. A snake injects a venom into its prey, followed by hours of paralysis; a biologically necessary act. Assuming a creator, this system—one built upon mandatory, seemingly gratuitous suffering—was both orchestrated and commanded. However, to the naturalist, this commander does not resemble what we should expect of a morally perfect divine personal entity. As such, the explanatory weight offered as the single best explanation for objective moral values is notably unconvincing. I will evaluate nonhuman animal theodicies and debates on consciousness to assess the coherence of an all-good deity, ultimately demonstrating the problem of animal suffering remains unsolved, highlighting a serious contention for the moral argument.

2 Andrew Ter Ern Loke, "A New Moral Argument for the Existence of God," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 26 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-022-09842-1.

3 Loke, "A New Moral Argument," 34.

Free Will Theodicy

In the discussion of any form of problem of evil, it is most important to attend to the general theodicies emphasized within their respective discourse. While there is an important distinction made between particularly human and nonhuman animal suffering, it is necessary to attempt an extension of the logic from one to the other to emphasize this distinction. The free- will theodicy is one of the most often cited in terms of human suffering, originating from Augustine. The core claim is that suffering acts as a direct consequence of freedom of action as a world containing both libertarian free will and the absence of suffering is incoherent given the current physical state.[4] Assuming the inability to suffer, then, situationally, pulling the trigger of a firearm may either shoot the bullet, or jam the weapon. The physical properties would shift depending upon the state most suitable to prevent suffering within a given scenario. The individual laws in place would thus arbitrarily shift as there is no causal relation that connects one's suffering to the firearm. Also consider whether the individual firing the weapon is really free given they have willed the infliction of suffering. Even under the assumption of an all-powerful deity, the logical difficulty would remain—the shooter cannot retain free will while simultaneously being incapable of inflicting suffering within a world that allows for the physiological ability to suffer. This raises a couple questions; the first is whether an individual's free will is more important than evil,[5] the second is if—and how—Heaven escapes this problem. However, these are outside of the bounds of this paper.

While this theodicy may potentially account for human suffering, it does not coherently extend to nonhuman animals. For the animal, suffering is most often not the byproduct of will, but of a necessity hard-wired into their biology. Though nonhuman animals exhibit signs of agency—as will be discussed further—they do not appear to have much of an incentive or ability to rationalize and communicate the moral implications of predation (i.e., mauling one another limb-from-limb to survive). Moreover, these actions are largely instinctual rather than deliberate. Assuming nonhuman animals possess some form of moral cognition, the theodicy may provide an explanation on an incremental scale. Even so, this answer is insufficient; suffering is not a simple addition to the animal kingdom—it is deeply woven into its structure; a structure that, assuming an omniscient deity, seemingly could have been entirely devoid of predation as vegetarian species exist. Perhaps an unknown reason exists for an all-good God to both permit and command such a pervasive level of torment, but pleading skeptical theism is precarious in this circumstance. Consider the Garden of Eden; biblically referenced as a utopian state of existence. If goodness is contingent on predation and suffering, how could what is considered a pinnacle of creation exist without either? So, to then digress, predatory violence does not appear to be a direct result of free will, but derives from a function within a perceptually cruel natural order. As such, the problem of *gratuitous* animal suffering is completely left unanswered.

Soul-Making Theodicy

C.S. Lewis popularized what is often referenced as the soul-making theodicy, which frames suffering as theologically necessary—a must have for moral and spiritual maturity.[6]

4 Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 2.7. (Original work published ca. 388.)

5 Brandon Robshaw, "A fundamental flaw in the free will defence," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 98 (2025): 107–121, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-025-09962-4.

6 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001; original work published 1940).

The books of Romans and James support a similar position (ESV, 2016, Romans 5:3-5, James 1:2-4), illustrating that faith building and joy are direct consequences of suffering. Despite this, within contemporary theology, the theodicy is quick to be denied to the animal. This includes Lewis, who argues that the capacity for pain in animals ultimately serves no purpose.[7]

Yet, Trent Dougherty denies this, formulating an argument for animal soul-making in his book *The Problem of Animal Pain*. Dougherty posits that a class of animals, much like humans, go through theosis—the process of unifying with God (going as far as to note they will become like 'talking animals' in reference to Narnia). Amidst deification, they will become rational substances, forming attitudes, opinions, and satisfaction through retrospection of their lives.[8] Now, while conceptually whimsical at first glance, Dougherty's argument may have some weight. Assuming animals transcend into Heaven and garner the ability to articulate language, as well as obtain a fundamental understanding of their purpose within the natural order, the blow of animal pain may soften. Nevertheless, Dougherty would first need to demonstrate that this is both probable, as well as solves the problem. I will contend that (i) the biblical narrative does not align with his argument, and (ii) the problem is largely left unresolved assuming the premises.

(i) Dougherty's argument, which he names the transcendental argument for animal deification, consists of 13 premises. Yet, for the sake of brevity, I will summarize the logical structure. Dougherty affirms that animals have sentience, are made in the image of God, and have moral standing. Given that God is perfectly loving, it follows that he would act lovingly and justly towards all living beings. To alleviate the suffering imposed on animals, there would need to be a source of reconciliation or compensation, with the only loving solution being its inclusion within a greater good through soul-making. As appeals to cosmic order fall flat, as well as the preexisting impossibility for soul-making, the only available recourse is *future* soul-making—requiring both animal resurrection and deification. Therefore, if God is just and all-loving, it follows that animals must be resurrected and deified.[9]

Let us first evaluate Dougherty's second premise: "Animals are made in the image of God." Dougherty asserts an extension of Imago Dei unto nonhuman animals using Ecclesiastes 3:18-20, Genesis 1:30, and Psalms 104: 27-30—each mentioning "life" (or in Hebrew, nephesh, נֶפֶשׁ) or "breath" (Ruach, רוּחַ). First, consider his cited Ecclesiastes verse:

> "Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so does the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over the animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from the dust, and to the dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes downward."

The phrases "surely" and "who knows" are curious in regard to Dougherty's position. These are openly uncertain phrases that purposefully emphasize the speaker's ignorance—a stark contrast from a doctrinal affirmation of Imago Dei.

Genesis 1:30 posits that all beasts of the Earth possess the "breath of life." Yet, as Phil Halper distinguishes, this breath—the nefesh or ruach—is falsely interpreted by Dougherty.[10] Halper distinguishes this as a life force given to all things; one given at birth and taken at death, as evidenced through Ecclesiastes 12:7: "and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." Furthermore, the extension of Imago Dei is a profound contrast from Genesis 1:27-28—"So God created man in his own image… and have dominion over every living thing that moves on Earth," establishing a deliberate divine distinction between man and the animal. 2 Peter 2:12 also transcribes a vivid description of animals as "creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed"—another disparity from that of divine equivalence.

(ii) For the sake of argument, let us grant the premise that animals extend into Imago Dei. Be that as it may, noticeable challenges continue to carry a distinguishable weight. First, drawing from Phil Halper's expanded problem of animal suffering, we must ask ourselves; assuming animals undergo theosis, what exactly are they supposed to interpret as so necessary to God's plan?[11] Furthermore, under the umbrella of the old Earth non-literalist, what are the animals meant to glean after deification about their suffering during the vast period in which man did not exist? Does this not deem their Earthly existence, as well as any forgone suffering, largely if not wholly arbitrary?

Second, numerous biblical accounts also exist in which God commands animals to be slaughtered or heavily wounded—seemingly egregiously. Consider God's commands to Joshua: "You shall hamstring their horses, and burn their chariots with fire" (Joshua 11:6, ESV). Hamstringing, the severing of the Achilles tendon, appears disproportionately extreme considering this was meant to serve as punishment to the kings fighting against the Israelites. Also consider the story of Achan; after admission of theft, not only was Achan himself stoned, but his children, oxen, donkeys, and sheep were killed, likely in a similar manner (Joshua 7:24–25, ESV). Furthermore, Job's family and livestock were also burned alive and struck down by God—not as a punishment or form of retribution, but to test character (Job 1:13–19, ESV). The list goes further, yet the point has been illustrated. Given these examples, it is curious as to why God seems to consistently arbitrate either crippling or wholly egregious punishments while less extreme means were available, particularly given the victims were innocent of the relevant offenses.

My challenge to Dougherty is this: What exactly are the animals before man, as well as those egregiously punished by God, meant to rationalize as necessary in the deification process? If anything, the rational being will see an absurdity in demanding such a step to atone for the sin (or test) of another; presumably they would not provide an offer of open-armed forgiveness and enthusiastic growth. It is also important to mention that this logic extends to both man and animal—deification alone does not account for what seems to be arbitrary punishment. Thus, even when granting Dougherty's premises, a coherent solution to the problem of animal suffering has still yet to be provided.

Neo-Cartesianism and Consciousness

As the immediate theodicies appear to fail concerning nonhuman animals, some philosophers appeal to animal automatism and neo-Cartesianism. René Descartes posits the notion that animals are automata—biological machines that fulfill a role, creating the illusion

7 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 123.

8 Trent Dougherty, *The Problem of Animal Pain: A Theodicy for All Creatures Great and Small* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3.

9 Dougherty, *The Problem of Animal Pain*, 145.

10 Phil Halper and Kenneth Williford, "A Soul-Making Theodicy for Animals?," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 97, no. 1 (2024): 45–60, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-024-09943-z.

11 Phil Halper et al. "Neo-Cartesianism and the Expanded Problem of Animal Suffering." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 94, no. 2 (2023): 177–198. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-023-09875-0.

of experience for the observer.[12] Under this view, we could assume a mutilated animal would equate to a malfunctioning robot, however, this position is not taken seriously within contemporary discussion. Through the neo-Cartesian position, however, we find a less extreme version of automatism that still attributes moral irrelevance to the nonhuman animal, but accepts some form of sentience.[13] Now, assuming either position, as animals would not possess moral value, the problem of animal suffering is thereby solved. So let us evaluate whether the position holds much persuasive or epistemic weight.

Multiple versions of the neo-Cartesian position exist, yet I will only mention two relevant variants as they often retain many of the same problematic inferences contradicted by the case I will illustrate within the coming paragraphs. For those seeking an even more in-depth analysis, Phil Halper offers an exhaustive critique of the alternative arguments.[14]

C.S. Lewis introduces the notion of a succession of perceptions—an event A occurs, then B, then C—with the formulation of experience ABC as the consequent.[15] To consciously experience this chronological succession of events, one must be able to stand outside of each individual moment, recognizing the transition between them. Something must retain continuity—a self—to fully interpret the sensations into that of an experience. Lewis defends that this is *potentially* what the nonhuman animal lacks, leaving pain as something that occurs within the animal rather than something the animal is acutely aware of. Interestingly, Lewis concedes that while some higher-order animals may perceive event B, the lack of ability to situate B within a sequence eliminates their experiential continuity, denoting their suffering as morally insignificant.

A second variance of this position derives from Michael Murray, who has articulated an evidential argument for neo-Cartesianism, illustrating a neurological defense for the notion that morally relevant suffering does not extend beyond humans.[16] Murray presents a three-fold hierarchy of pain: (i) nociceptive response to stimuli, (ii) a subjective experience of pain, and (iii) the awareness of the pain. He explains that humans possess higher order mental states dependent upon the integrity of the granular prefrontal cortex. When this region is damaged (e.g., prefrontal lobotomy patients), the cognitive and emotional experience of pain becomes disjointed. Murray understands the paradoxical relation often reported from these individuals, noting that while they are aware of the pain, there is nothing inherently unpleasant about the experience—a blind pain. Note that the pain itself persists, yet the agent lacks a negative emotional response, effectively abolishing any suffering. Murray posits that sentient animals' granular prefrontal cortex is either absent, underdeveloped, or functionally limited, providing reason to deny the third level within nonhuman animals. This is the defense Craig affirms, describing this as "a tremendous comfort" to animal lovers, rendering empathy for Bambi as fallacious.[17]

I believe this is a puzzling formulation. Assuming animals reside within this second order of pain awareness, I have to ask whether this is coherent? Remember, an experience of suffering is the precise issue. A subjective experience of suffering cannot exclude an awareness of pain as the very state of suffering is contingent upon an experience. Without experience, there is no pain, and consequently there is no suffering. I believe Murray's position is confused.

Now, the second issue here is this notion that only humans are self-conscious. I believe this is proportionately unsubstantiated given the nature of the claim. Murray points to the prefrontal cortex, a part of the body either entirely absent from nonhuman animals or underdeveloped within other primates. To give credit where credit is due, this part of the brain, for the human, is a core component to being aware of oneself as an object, as well as thinking about the act of thinking—metacognition. The conclusion that Murray deduces from this, though, is that every animal separate from the human is missing a morally relevant form of sentience. This is a leap that is difficult to disprove by itself, however, I can build an argument for the opposing position. The following section will provide a substantive case for nonhuman animal consciousness.

To assess our current interpretation of any form of conscious state, it is necessary to first define our terms. Due to the inherent mysterious and subjective nature of consciousness, it is nearly impossible to fit into a single definition. Philosophers such as Ned Block and Thomas Nagel noted this difficulty and have developed what I believe to be the most viable notions available.[18] I will defend five proposed notions, each attributing different criteria to a conscious experience. The list goes as follows: (i) wakefulness, (ii) perception and responsiveness, (iii) access consciousness, (iv) phenomenal consciousness, and (v) self-consciousness. To preface, while an organism may not exhibit all five aspects mentioned, the more critical the criteria, the stronger the case to attribute a higher order (or morally relevant in this instance) form of awareness.

(i) Wakefulness is a given for nonhuman animals—making any of my own philosophical inquiry redundant. I will proceed assuming this notion applies.

(ii) Neurobiological evidence suggests that animals do exhibit perception and responsiveness. Take studies with rodents, for instance, which have associated elevated stress hormones such as corticosterone with chronic pain—indicating a neurological response to physical perception.[19] This is not in contention, and as the criteria are fulfilled, I will proceed on the assumption that this notion also applies.

(iii) Access consciousness involves the internal availability of information for deliberate integration and reason. Consider Aesop's fable paradigm: borrowing from "The Crow and the Pitcher," a team of scientists demonstrated that New Caledonian Crows, much like apes, understood water displacement.[20] (Jelbert, 2014). Once being given the task of displacing water within a narrow tube, the crows quickly discriminated between water and sand, heavy and light, and small and large—skills comparable to that of a 5-7-year-old. The crows exhibited

12 René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. Donald A. Cress (Yale University Press, 1996), 26. (Original work published 1641).

13 Halper et al., "Neo-Cartesianism."

14 Phil Halper et al., "Against Neo-Cartesianism: Neurofunctional Resilience and Animal Pain," *Philosophical Psychology* 34, no. 4 (2021): 474–501, https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2021.1914829.

15 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.

16 Michael J. Murray, "Neo-Cartesianism," in *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 41–72, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199237272.003.0003.

17 William Lane Craig, "Does God Exist? The Craig–Law Debate," *Reasonable Faith* (2011), https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/does-god-exist-the-craig-law-debate

18 Colin Allen and Michael Trestman, "Animal Consciousness," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, September 21, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-animal/.

19 Richard L. Spinieli et al., "Persistent Inflammatory Pain Is Linked with Anxiety-like Behaviors, Increased Blood Corticosterone, and Reduced Global DNA Methylation in the Rat Amygdala," *Molecular Pain* 18 (2022): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1177/17448069221121307.

20 Sarah A. Jelbert et al., "Using the Aesop's Fable Paradigm to Investigate Causal Understanding of Water Displacement by New Caledonian Crows," *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 3 (2014): e92895, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0092895.

similar cognitive ability when given the trap-tube task, using natural tools to push or pull food out of a perspex tube. These are deliberate and goal-directed actions that require an internal availability of information—meeting the conditions of access consciousness.

(iv) Phenomenal consciousness, as illustrated by Thomas Nagel, is described as the subjective experience of what it is like to *be* an individual organism.[21] While the problem of other minds limits access to the experiences of others, external consciousness is a reasonable inference. Similar neurobiology and elaborate communication give reliable grounds to reasonably assert that other beings retain a self. While nonhuman animals may possess different behaviors and neurological mechanisms, if these indicators are reliable enough to verify external human minds, it is epistemically consistent to extend this trust to nonhuman animals. Rejecting the phenomenal consciousness of every single external species risks logic akin to solipsism—a logical possibility, yet unreasonably skeptical.

(v) Admittedly, self-consciousness is a loaded and difficult to define term. Definitions include:[22] (a) awareness of one's body as a physical object, (b) bodily self- awareness, and (c) mental self-awareness. I will cover each's respective basis.

> (a) Consider Gallup's mirror test.[23] It is widely understood from the results of his trials that primates use mirrors to inspect their bodies (e.g., dyed markings, surgical implants, and unseen body parts).[24] The full scope of the psychological implications of Gallup's mirror test remains somewhat ambiguous as it is difficult to establish whether the animals interpret the mirrored image as themselves (i.e., the image qua proxy) or merely as another object. This is further complicated by later studies in 2002, which showed that out of 163 chimpanzees tested, only 73 passed the mirror test.[25] However, this does not imply that those who failed the test do not have an agency. Age, social comfort, and prior mirror experience are all variables that likely contributed to the results. Nonetheless, the inference stands: at a minimum, primates are aware of their bodies as physical objects.
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> (b) The limitations of Gallup's classical mirror test are largely a product of the time. Yet, contemporary scientists have more tools than Gallup, as we can now account for the internal mechanisms behind self-awareness—linking it to the secondary somatosensory cortex (SII).[26] In the cited experiment, a macaque monkey was conditioned and habituated to a full-body mirror, developing a stronger sense of self-recognition over time. Through seeing its reflection, multimodal visual and somatosensory activation was observed within the SII, which is entirely separate from the neurological reaction to seeing another primate for instance. This suggests not just full-body recognition, but an understanding that their body is unique—not simple conjoined limbs. Thus, select nonhuman animals exhibit signs of bodily self-awareness.
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> (c) Consider grooming in primates, a both hygienic and social behavior that reinforces group bonds and general social cohesion.[27] Larger groups of primates require reduced grooming time to accommodate increased social demands, and thus what follows is a drop in cohesive and stable grouping patterns, culminating in an eventual group fission. The takeaway from this is that it is reasonable to assume grooming is used as a tool for self-soothing.[28] It is also worth noting that stereotypies (i.e., repetitive, functionless behavioral patterns) are notoriously found in just about every notable large-brained mammalian species. Just as humans twirl their hair, horses crib-bite and weave, pigs chain-chew, and dogs slink away after a lecture—each of which is stress-alleviating, tension-easing behaviors suggesting a form of emotional regulation unexpected in species lacking self-awareness.

To recap, select species release stress hormones in response to physical distress, demonstrate cognitive capabilities comparable to those of young children, exhibit tension-easing behaviors, and display mirror recognition both behaviorally and neurologically. Reflecting on both neo-Cartesian positions, what of the behavior from these animals resembles a being with its sentient lights turned off? Consciousness is not a binary system—it is not either on or off, but a spectrum. So, while a bee's sense of self may be different from that of a primate, it does not mean they are not at all sentient.[29] Thus, deeming an inequivalence enough to disregard moral worth is an unsubstantiated leap. Even if we may not have a definitive answer as to whether or not the phenomenal experience of a bat is equivalent to that of a human, we have left little room for speculation within select species. If we accept such criteria onto humans, it is epistemically inconsistent to not apply it to nonhuman animals. If one were to advocate for automatism or neo-Cartesianism, a heavy burden of proof would lie on them to discount the available evidence.

In terms of Lewis and Murray's respective positions, as per the section above, modern research has shown that animals do not just appear to be in pain; they exhibit neurological responses in a form often nearly indistinguishable from that of humans. Furthermore, animals do not simply appear to perceive events in a linear succession; it has been demonstrated that select nonhuman animals exhibit context-driven emotional responses, requiring a degree of diachronic processing. These behaviors and neurological reactions would be inexplicable assuming Lewis' hypothesis, and extremely unexpected given Murray's hypothesis, especially given the studies that have shown select species can recognize their body as distinctly individual from any other form of being. Thus, the burden of proof has not been met given the proportion to the evidence, which ultimately explains the unpopularity of neo-Cartesianism within the field.[30]

21 Thomas Nagel. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–450.

22 Allen and Trestman, *Animal Consciousness.*

23 Gordon G. Gallup Jr., "Chimpanzees: Self-Recognition," *Science* 167, no. 3914 (1970): 86–87, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.167.3914.86.

24 J. D. Smith, W. E. Shields, and D. A. Washburn, "The Comparative Psychology of Uncertainty Monitoring and Metacognition," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 26, no. 3 (2003): 317–339, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X03000086.

25 Marc Bekoff, Colin Allen, and Gordon M. Burghardt, eds., *The Cognitive Animal: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives on Animal Cognition* (MIT Press, 2002), 337.

26 Rafael Bretas et al., "Neural Evidence of Mirror Self-Recognition in the Secondary Somatosensory Cortex of Macaque: Observations from a Single-Cell Recording Experiment and Implications for Consciousness," *Brain Sciences* 11, no. 2 (2021): 157, https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci11020157.

27 J. Lehmann, A. H. Korstjens, and R. I. M. Dunbar, "Group Size, Grooming and Social Cohesion in Primates," *Animal Behaviour* 74, no. 6 (2007): 1617–1629, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2006.10.025.

28 Corrine K. Lutz, "Stereotypic Behavior in Nonhuman Primates as a Model for the Human Condition," *ILAR Journal* 55, no. 2 (2014): 284–296, https://doi.org/10.1093/ilar/ilu016.

29 Anil Seth, "Explanatory Correlates of Consciousness: Theoretical and Computational Challenges," *Cognitive Computation* 1, no. 1 (2009): 50–63, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12559-009-9007-x.

30 Matthew N. Zipple et al., "Animal Emotions and Consciousness: A Preliminary Assessment of Re-

Theological Implications

I have presented a case highlighting the difficulty in answering the problem of animal suffering. Yet, this is not simply a challenge for the moral argument, but also for the widely accepted notion of classical theism. The implications of affirming the contradictory coexistence of an all-good deity and animal suffering are not a simple threat to a single apologetic strategy, but core theological commitments of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Now the broader question becomes one of salvageability.

A potential response lies in skeptical theism, though it proves admittedly unsatisfying. Presuming the existence of a maximal being, it is an expectation that certain divine intentions are inaccessible through our cognitive understanding[31]—ones that may very well explain away the problem of animal suffering. Perhaps animals are not experiential beings; or if they are, they possess a soul, one in which that positions suffering as necessary to theosis. Yet, the solution is unattainable within the human's cognitive limitations.

Theological safety granted, this move is not satisfying, nor epistemically responsible. An appeal to our cognitive limitations bears a resemblance to a form of blissful ignorance, which is a far cry from what is necessary to reasonably sustain ambiguous apologetics over naturalism. Also note: when we accept an argument from an epistemological hand wave, the lack of space for meaningful discourse eliminates any need for discussion as it becomes an impossible to disprove safety net, ending all discussions in a standstill. To digress, in regard to the classical theist, while the problem of animal suffering may not act as a sweeping defeater, it remains a significant threat that demands further development within contemporary discourse.

As for the moral argument, the formulation becomes restricted to those who presuppose the notion of an all-good deity, perhaps acting as a mere nail in the coffin. For those lacking the presupposition, as the natural world does not appear consistent with such a being's existence, the persuasive power is weak. An appeal to morality in this state becomes a non-sequitur—an indistinguishable state from the God-of-the-gaps, following the formulation:

1. *x* exists (e.g., objective morality).
2. *x* lacks a clear explanation.
3. Therefore, God exists.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a critique of the inference to a perfectly moral deity, which, consequently, undermines the moral argument for the existence of God. William Lane Craig and Andrew Ter Ern Loke infer moral realism, with the nature of a divine personal entity serving as the ultimate standard. Yet, in light of the pandemic and the seemingly gratuitous suffering found within the animal kingdom, it appears the very deity they invoke either does not adhere to these standards, violates their own nature, and/or arbitrarily determines wrongness. As Loke illustrates:

> "any moral imperfection would be contrary to the moral truths which God grounds."[32]

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31 Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 2 (1984): 73–93, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00136567.

32 Loke, "A New Moral Argument."

However, I believe moral imperfection does not begin to capture the depth of the problem of animal suffering. Remember, the problem is not simply that animals suffer—it is the absurd pervasiveness. Why must animals mutilate one another to survive? Attempts at reconciliation are largely speculative, with answers found in animal deification and the rejection of a morally relevant form of agency within the nonhuman animal. These conceptions largely present as ad hoc or disproportionately substantiated in reference to the preexisting evidence. Consequently, for the naturalist, the classical theistic deity increasingly resembles not an objective moral arbiter, but an indifferent creator. A creator who arbitrated a biological system wherein those it inhabits, simply by personal standards and demands are doomed to suffer without clear cause, and without choice. This world does not bear a resemblance to one orchestrated by an objective moral entity, thus arguing that this very divine personal entity is the most viable solution for moral realism does nothing in the form of persuasion. Consequently, the naturalist is not left with clarity, but with a deeper, justifiable skepticism.

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