

*Animal Suffering and the Darwinian Problem of Evil*, John R. Schneider, Cambridge University Press, 2020, Cloth, xii + 287pp, 978-1-108-48760-3, £75.

Christopher Southgate

This is very nearly a very good book, on a topic only now receiving the attention it deserves. Dr Schneider, Professor Emeritus at Calvin College, has set himself to provide a theodicy that addresses honestly the problems posed to the Christian theist by myriad instances of suffering in non-human creatures over evolutionary time.

He identifies the chief ways in which Darwinian science made the perception of nature red in tooth and claw yet more profoundly problematic for the theodicy: the recognition of the sheer extent of this suffering over deep evolutionary time; the recognition that 'other worlds' of creatures are long since extinct, and that periodic mass extinctions threaten the coherence of a narrative of evolutionary progress; the 'horrors' of certain mechanisms in parasitic and other predatory organisms; finally, the sense that these evils are 'inscribed' into the creation as the very instruments of its development.

Schneider goes on to dismiss (rightly in my view) objections to the existence and importance of animal suffering from neo-Cartesianism and skeptical theism. He also tackles efforts to park the problem on some version of the Fall. Again, he is right to conclude that these efforts are necessarily unsuccessful. It is refreshing to read an author prepared so resolutely to face the uglinesses as well as the beauty in creation, and accept God's responsibility for all this suffering.

Recent approaches to this type of theodicy have fallen into two camps. The first, informed by analytic philosophy, seeks to establish how the 'bind' that an omniscient, omnipotent God does not prevent all this suffering can be resolved, for instance by showing that balancing moral goods outweigh the 'evils'. Key examples are Michael Murray's *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* (2008) and Trent Dougherty's *The Problem of Animal Pain* (2014). The second is more theological, more exploratory of the character of God, rather than defending the plausibility of theism. Monographs in this area have included my own *The Groaning of Creation* (2008) and Bethany Sollereeder's *God, Evolution and Animal Suffering* (2019). Sadly, there is less cross-over between these approaches than one would like to see.

Schneider is at home in the propositional formulations of the more philosophical camp. Indeed much of his book is in dialogue with Murray and Dougherty. But he also wants to establish what he calls a 'Seeing Condition' – any successful theodical formulation must not merely meet propositional conditions, but restore a sense of God's power and goodness in the face of evolutionary suffering. Schneider also wants to make extensive use of scriptural sources, especially the Book of Job. As well as Sollereeder and myself he draws heavily on Celia Deane-Drummond's *Christ and Evolution*.

To my mind the philosophical material is the more successful. Schneider identifies that a straight theodicy defending God's action on moral grounds is unlikely to succeed. Drawing

on the work of Roderick Chisholm, he finds more promise in a 'Defeat Condition'; God is justified in allowing evil if the overall consequences defeat the evil (as the Resurrection of Christ 'defeats' the sufferings of the Passion). Schneider is also influenced by Marilyn McCord Adams' treatment of horrendous evils, which he is keen to apply to the non-human world. From Chisholm also Schneider derives a sense that a theodicy can be based on God as Artist, rather than as an ethical agent. If the overall artistic composition defeats the specific evils in its detail, then an aesthetic theodicy can be successful.

Reading Job, Philippians 2, and Romans 8-11, Schneider concludes that God has a relationship even with the most chaotic and violent elements of the creation. Also that 'the divine style' as artist is to work through 'kenosis' on the part of certain parties to make possible a redemptive vision that is transformative, and 'defeats' the suffering involved in the 'kenosis'. That is certainly the paradigm provided by the Christ-event. But I am unhappy with the extension of 'kenosis' to the Jewish people as per Romans 9-11, and still more unhappy with its invocation in respect of non-human creatures. The heart of the Passion story is surely Jesus' *voluntary* embrace of humility, victimhood, and suffering for the sins of the world. I see little parallel in these other supposed examples of 'the divine style'.

My other concern with this aesthetic theodicy is that it is, ultimately, question-begging. *Why* should the divine style be to inscribe massive suffering into the creation in order to transform it? Why did God not simply create the eschatological state Schneider outlines in his last chapter? Schneider rejects 'only-way' arguments that suggest that God had no alternative to evolution if God desired the values (aesthetic and otherwise) that emerged in the unfolding creation. He simply sees such arguments as incompatible with omniscience and omnipotence (thereby ignoring those theodicies that question those assumptions). But if God's action as artist was in no way constrained, it seems deeply difficult to *justify* such a divine style, as opposed to accepting it as mystery.

The first seven of the ten chapters, establishing Schneider's method and ruling out unhelpful options, are strong. But I found the justification of his 'messianic', as opposed to 'tragic', reading of the divine speeches in Job unconvincing. I wonder whether without the Joban argument and the dubious invocation of creaturely kenosis, Schneider's position adds up to more than a combination of Augustine's aesthetic theodicy with John Haught's plea that creation is yet unfinished.

The theological sections also suffer from inadequate treatment of recent literature. There is no mention of the useful section of *Finding Ourselves after Darwin* (2018), or yet of the ten papers on this subject in *Zygon* in September 2018. Some of my suggestions since 2008 – for example on cruciform creation and on the atonement – would have resonated helpfully with Schneider's.

Lastly I have to note that the index contains many omissions and is not really to the requisite standard. So an excellent project turns out to have disappointing flaws. It remains an important contribution to this developing exploration.

