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## Article

# Animal Suffering, God and Lessons from the Book of Job

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**Abstract:** Nature shows itself to us in ambivalent ways. Breathtaking beauty and cruelty lie close together. A Darwinian image of nature seems to imply that nature is a mere place of violence, cruelty and mercilessness. In this article, I first explore the question of whether such an interpretation of nature is not one-sided by being phrased in overly moral terms. Then, I outline how the problem of animal suffering relates to a specific understanding of God as moral agent. Finally, in the main part of the argumentation, I pursue the question to what extent the problem of animal (and human) suffering does not arise for a concept of God couched in less personalistic terms. If God's perspective towards creation is rather de-anthropocentric, then moral concerns might be of less importance as we generally assume. Such an understanding of the divine is by no means alien to the biblical-theistic tradition. I argue that it finds strong echoes in the divine speeches in the Book of Job: They aim at teaching us to accept both the beauty and the tragic of existence in a creation that seen in its entirety is rather a-moral. Finally, I address the question what such a concept of God could mean for our existence.

**Keywords:** (dis)values in nature; animal theodicy; God in the Book of Job; non-anthropocentric view of God; holistic understanding of creation



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## 1. Introduction

To many modern eyes it seems obvious to describe nature as a place of violence, cruelty and mercilessness. We are aware that life emerges and continues to exist by destroying or displacing other life. We know that mass extinctions are part of natural history, that it is primarily the strongest and best adapted individuals to the environment that survive, that most young animals do not reach adulthood and that a quick death is not the rule but rather the exception (Schneider 2020, chap. 1).

There are no moral principles at work in nature, but the right of the strongest prevails, whose existence is ruthlessly based on the expense of others. Those who describe nature in this way do not normally assume that this is a purely subjective description owed to a human perspective. The claim made generally is stronger: Many natural processes are intrinsic disvalues and, thus, evil per se. For instance, Thomas H. Huxley writes a few decades after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*: "Thus, brought before the tribunal of ethics, the cosmos might well seem to stand condemned. The conscience of man revolted against the moral indifference of nature, and the microscopic atom should have found the illimitable macrocosm guilty" (Huxley 1894, p. 59).

While for centuries imitating nature was considered desirable because it was assumed that nothing happens in nature for no purpose, Huxley identifies a stark contrast between nature and (human) culture in the light of evolutionary theory: Culture is characterised by morality or at least by a striving for it. Nature, instead, is morally indifferent and thus, we find no docking points for moral categories in natural processes.

The influential evolutionary biologist George C. Williams goes even one step further and emphasises that "[m]odern sociobiological insights and studies of organisms in natural settings support Huxley and justify an even more extreme condemnation of nature and an antithesis of the naturalistic fallacy: what is, in the biological world, normally ought

not" (Williams 1988, p. 383). Similarly, the philosopher Mark Sagoff concedes: "The ways in which creatures in nature die are typically violent: predation, starvation, disease, parasitism, cold. The dying animal in the wild does not understand the vast ocean of misery into which it and billions of other animals are born only to drown" (Sagoff 1984, p. 303).

Such a negative understanding appears particularly problematic against a theistic background, since it seems highly questionable how a morally perfect God would allow or even consciously will the existence of a world containing so many evils. In this paper, I address this question by arguing for the following theses:

- An account of widespread disvalue in nature is not persuasive. Rather, we should remain neutral about it as different interpretations of nature suggest a rather ambiguous picture.
- Classical theodicy presupposes a framework that operates with decidedly human moral categories. This framework is by no means the only possible conceptual scheme for dealing with the problem of suffering.
- A non-anthropocentric understanding of God provides a fundamentally different framework for tackling the problem of animal (and human) suffering. Such an understanding of God is not the mere consequence of philosophical speculation but is at least partially rooted in the biblical tradition as the divine speeches in the Book of Job suggest.

In my following considerations, I will address these points in sequence.

## 2. Disvalues in Nature?

Talk about (dis)values in nature needs some preliminary clarification because it involves different normative concepts (McShane 2007). As the term is used here, it basically means that natural facts have intrinsic value, that is, they dispose of properties which make them valuable apart from any relations to other states. Natural facts can be quite different things such as individual living beings, certain eco-systemic relations or untouched natural areas. Often is invoked a supervenience relation for explaining how such things are connected to value: If there is a certain natural fact X, then a normative fact N supervenes upon it. Claiming that X has intrinsic value N says that the value N of X exists prior to any human (or other) conceptualisation and perspective on the world. In other words, the view that X has intrinsic value N involves the claim that X has a normative standing which ought to be taken into consideration in any adequate grasp of X. Thus, we should think of these parts of the natural world as appropriate objects of wonder, awe, admiration, beauty or respect independent from subjective preferences and interests. The same applies to disvalues. If X has intrinsic disvalue, then the appropriate reaction is disgust, horror and moral rejection because X involves objective features which are bad.

A list of possible candidates of disvalues in nature contains a whole range of different phenomena such as predation, parasitism, selfishness, randomness, blindness of natural processes, disaster, indifference, waste, struggle, suffering and death (Rolston 1992; Schneider 2020, chap. 1). I will limit myself to discuss three of the phenomena mentioned: predation, parasitism and disaster. Taking off from environmental ethicist Holmes Rolston III's reasoning, I argue that the thesis of widespread disvalue in nature is questionable at least.

### 2.1. Predation

Obviously, predation is bad for the prey. If a predator catches a prey animal, pain and death are the result. One can consider predation to be lamentable and thus demand that humans should assist animals in preserving their lives when it is within human power to do so. However, from the lion's perspective, a prey animal is a resource that contributes significantly to the lion's good life. The lion must hunt in order to be able to provide food for itself and its offspring, since hunting is without alternative for a lion's survival. Therefore, Rolston argues: "The disvalue to the prey is, however, a value to the predator,

and, with a systematic turn, perspective changes. The violent death of the hunted means life to the hunter. There is no value loss so much as value capture; [ . . . ]. The pains of the prey are matched by the pleasures of the predator" (Rolston 1992, p. 253).

The idea Rolston proposes is not a utilitarian trade-off between the pleasure of the predator and the pain of the hunted animal but rather value supervening upon a complex natural state of affairs. The skillful manifestation of the lion's hunting capacities can be seen as an intrinsic good as well as the successful escape tactics of the zebras. Since older, sick or otherwise impaired animals often fall prey to predators, instrumental value is also involved since successful hunting brings a benefit to the species involved.

Rolston points out that we commonly admire the strength, camouflage, endurance, instinct and hunting skills of predators and flight animals alike. Without predation, these complex skills would never have evolved. Philosopher of science Peter Godfrey-Smith describes how these more complex abilities probably begun to develop in to the so-called "Cambrian explosion" some 540 million years ago and how nature changed subsequently. Before this crucial evolutionary step, animals were rather simple and relatively self-contained beings. With the Cambrian explosion, however, Godfrey-Smith emphasises that "animals became *parts of each other's lives* in a new way, especially through predation. This means that when one kind of organism evolves a little, it changes the environment faced by other organisms, which evolve in response" (Godfrey-Smith 2018, p. 34).

The consequence of this entanglement of one life in another is the evolution of the mind in response to the minds of other animals. The evolution of predators and prey lead to the development of animals with more and more complex perceptual and cognitive capacities. Our own evolution is based on the fact that as omnivores we were also successful hunters. Thus, from a peculiar human perspective of individual suffering, nature appears to be full of disvalues; from a more general systematic evolutionary perspective, instead, it is less clear whether these disvalues are not necessary means for goods, to which we generally assign a high axiological value such as a rich subjective life and a broad array of complex cognitive and agential faculties.

One may consider such axiological value ascriptions as anthropomorphically inspired. However, from the perspective of moral realism one can argue that these natural state of affairs go hand in hand with intrinsic values and that we do well to recognise these features of reality from our specific human perspective as well (for a sophisticated defence of moral realism, see Shafer-Landau 2003). Provided, one is willing to accept this line of reasoning, then one might wonder what to do with parasitism as all skilfulness, elegance and beauty in the behaviour of predation and flight seems to be lost.

## 2.2. Parasitism

Parasitism can be regarded as a form of predation as it infects its host and feeds on it. The problem, however, is that parasites, in stark contrast to "real" predators, have not developed any sophisticated skills for predation; rather, they regressed to degenerative forms of life. Thus, there is nothing to admire when it comes to parasites. The well-known ornithologist Alexander Skutch writes: "The peculiar faculties of animals are the directive senses and the power of locomotion. The host of flukes, tapeworms, cestodes, and other animals that live entirely within the bodies of bigger animals—unpigmented, sightless, deaf, practically devoid of the power of independent locomotion—are parasites of the highest degree" (Skutch 1948, p. 514).

Evil is therefore twofold: On the one hand, we have the degeneration of the parasite, and, on the other hand, it causes pain and destruction in the host. According to this interpretation, parasitism results in a major step backwards in evolutionary development, since the parasite, by adapting to the host, becomes increasingly dependent on it and increasingly loses the abilities for an independent biological existence.

Again, this view is just one side of the coin. It is rarely the case that the ecological system of parasite and host as such degenerates. Rather, the skills lost by the parasite are borrowed from the host. The parasite has lost locomotion because the host moves

for the parasite; the parasite has a reduced spectrum of sense perception because it is sufficient if the host has it. From a biological perspective, such a way of living provides an optimal adaptation to the environment because it increases the survival of the species or the individual. In addition, it involves skilfulness to achieve it. Thus, with parasitism might come more value than would exist in its absence because the value of the life of parasitic creatures themselves and the frequent beneficial impact on hosts could well exceed the disvalues to the creatures parasitised upon (see also [Rolston 1992](#), pp. 255–56). Let us therefore turn to a third point: What about the many natural disasters, which cause so much animal suffering or even the extinction of entire eco-systems?

### 2.3. Disaster

We are all familiar with the destructive forces of nature. Hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes or floods cause much damage and suffering among humans and in nature. However, from a larger perspective, these negative forces are part of a systemic whole that has positive value overall. Rolston writes: “Floods, windstorms lightning storms, and such violence would be more or less like wildfire in ecosystems, a bad thing for individuals burned and in short range, but not really all that bad systemically in long range, given nature’s restless creativity” ([Rolston 1992](#), p. 265).

Analogous to this observation, early environmentalist philosopher and advocate for the preservation of wilderness, John Muir, describes an earthquake in Yosemite in 1872, emphasising not so much its destructive as its creative power: “Nature [ . . . ] then created [ . . . ] a new set of features, simply by giving the mountains a shake—changing not only the high peaks and cliffs, but the streams. As soon as these rock avalanches fell every stream began to sing new songs [ . . . ]. Storms of every sort, torrents, earthquakes, cataclysms, „convulsions of nature“ etc. however mysterious and lawless at first sight they might seem, are only harmonious notes in the song of creation, varied expressions of God’s love” ([Muir \[1912\] 1954](#), p. 169).

Muir reminds us that the positive side of nature’s destructive forces must be taken into account. Forces in nature causing annihilation and death are at the same time those forces that give rise to new life-promoting landscapes. Although Muir’s interpretation of nature may have a romantic tendency, it is ultimately a scientific insight that life quickly returns to landscapes destroyed from earthquakes, floods, fires or volcanic eruptions and that these destructive forces help to create new environments, ecosystems and species in it.

Seen in this light, the view of nature as place of disvalue appears to be increasingly partial. There is no doubt that the aforementioned evils exist, but ecological theory suggests that without them, nature as we know it would probably not exist at all; instead, we would probably be confronted with a planet unable to generate any more complex forms of life. Once we extend our focus away from individual destinies towards a holistic perspective on ecosystems and the place of the species in it, patterns of stability, order and beauty come into view. From a systemic point of view, disvalue can mutate into value. The tragic loss of an individual is the consequence of prolific life-cycles that cannot exhibit their generative forces in a fundamentally different way. Robin Attfield observes: “Certainly nature does not observe social justice or compensate individual sufferers, but the overall system is not one of unalleviated misery, and would seem to embody greater value than would be predictable for any system devoid of suffering” ([Attfield 2000](#), p. 294; see also [Zamulinski 2010](#)).

Someone who is familiar with the relevant ecological details is likely to broaden the parochial perspective from individual destinies to a holistic view of evolutionary processes. This shift in perspective undermines a disvalue-account of nature. First, one has to note that there are goods that could hardly have come into being without the evils under consideration. Reference to these goods, however, is less about a classic higher-goods defence and more about a view of nature in the sense of a complex system, where stable natural forces, evolutionary creativity, the beauty of the living or the adaptation to the most diverse environmental conditions are in the foreground. Second, such a holistic view of

nature promotes non-moral and, thus, non-anthropocentric standards of understanding and, consequently, a picture of nature emerges which is axiologically ambiguous at least. It provides the possibility to consider a natural process as inherently positive even though often not good for an individual creature involved in it. Finally, one should keep in mind that natural processes are often too complex to be captured by a one-sided perspective. Symbiotic relationships, states of equilibrium or even cooperative behaviour are also central evolutionary driving forces that, unlike hostile competitiveness resulting in suffering, can be classified as mainly positive (wide range of philosophical and theological interpretations of natural processes apart from orthodox Darwinian accounts are provided by [Moritz 2014](#)).

### 3. Animal Suffering and Theism

The aim of the argumentation so far has been to show that the view that evil is to be located at the very core of evolution is questionable, at least. Most probably, as in many other philosophical debates, also here is little consensus as to what facts count as values and disvalues, and furthermore, which costs and benefits should be assigned to them. In whatever way this may be categorised, what seems obvious is that a theist faces greater problems in ascribing overall value to nature than a non-theist. For a non-theist, the fact that many animals suffer or most organisms die prematurely may be tragic, but ultimately, this fact can be accepted with a regretful sigh: Nature is apparently a bit clumsy, wasteful and not particularly elegant. However, what should one expect from blind forces of nature?

The picture is radically different for a theist. By a theist, I refer to a person who assumes the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect creator who is part of the moral order. The concept of God involved here may be described as the God of the philosophers in contrast to the God of biblical revelation. However, one has to bear in mind that this concept is not competing with the biblical tradition but is rather based upon it and clarified by philosophical analysis. In the light of such a perfect being in theology, the problem of evil becomes particularly problematic because in a world created by a perfect, not only supreme being, the multitude of suffering and its intensities are phenomena that we do not expect. The claim is not that there should be no evils at all in a world created by such a God, but that there should not be so many terrible evils, since it is difficult to see that possible goals of creation cannot also be realised in an alternative world containing less evil.

Against this background, the problem of animal suffering is a variant of the traditional problem of evil. A particular challenge, however, is that many of the answers developed in the context of human theodicies such as the free will defence or the soul-making theodicy seem less convincing when it comes to animals because they do not possess the cognitive and moral capacities required for these accounts to work. In light of this challenge, Joshua Moritz, for instance, argues that a gradualist account to evolution may be helpful here because “animal choices, though perhaps not as self-conscious, free, or morally culpable as those of humans, are still theologically significant insofar as they influence the degree and specific types of evolutionary suffering that are brought into existence through such choices” ([Moritz 2014](#), p. 373). However, it is questionable what the term “animal choice” is supposed to mean here as the range of possible behaviours in a given situation is quite limited for most animals. Cognitively complex animals can change behaviours through learning within a limited framework, but a (sub-conscious) decision against a behaviour causing suffering that was so far typical for individuals of this species is likely to be too demanding for most animal species. I do not mean to suggest that such an assumption is entirely out of the question or that it cannot be argued for with the help of additional theological assumptions. Rather, the thrust of my argument points to the fact that an extension of a classical free will defence to animals must be supported by significant auxiliary hypotheses coming along with argumentative costs that appear difficult for many to accept.



The same problem applies to the soul-making theodicy, since an inner psycho-moral maturation process or a reorientation of one's own way of life towards the morally better through a process of suffering can hardly be assumed in the animal kingdom. John Hick, for instance, openly admits: "To some, the pain suffered in the animal kingdom beneath the human level has constituted the most baffling aspect of the problem of evil. For the considerations that may lighten the problem as it affects mankind—the positive value of moral freedom despite its risks; and the necessity that a world which is to be the scene of soul-making should contain real challenges, hardships, defeats, and mysteries—do not apply in the case of the lower animals" (Hick 1966, p. 309).

Similarly, McCord Adams excludes (most) animals from her soteriological account to theodicy because they are not cognitively capable of perceiving experienced evils as possible sources of meaning and positive transformation (see also Stump 2010, p. 4). McCord Adams explicates: "If all mammals and perhaps most kinds of birds, reptiles, and fish suffer pain, many naturally lack self-consciousness and the sort of transtemporal psychic unity required to participate in horrors" (McCord-Adams 1999, p. 28).

The idea is that even if God would redeem the suffering experienced in this life by resurrecting animals in a zoological garden of Eden, they would not dispose of the cognitive powers to connect their past experiences with the present ones. Present suffering might enable one to experience future pleasant states in a more conscious and intense way. Since most animals do not have the required psychic unity connecting past with present, they would be unable to realise that God positively transforms past suffering in the resurrected state.

As indicated above, this limited scope of classical theodicies has been responded to by the development of new accounts that explicitly claim to include animals (e.g., Murray 2008; Moritz 2014; Aguti 2017; Dougherty 2014; Crummett 2017). There are a number of suggestions as to why, from a theistic perspective, an eschatological perspective including animals (or at least more complex types of animals) should be welcomed (e.g., section III in Hereth and Timpe 2020).

Of central importance for our considerations is the insight that both classical accounts to theodicy and those that want to include animals presuppose moral categories that are familiar to us: If God is a loving person and morally perfect, then it is hard to imagine that God can simply pass over all these different forms of suffering. Rather, we must assume that suffering is a necessary means to a higher good, and what makes the theodicy problem so intractable for us is that we have great difficulties identifying these higher goods. What is often lost sight of is that this concept of God as a morally perfect agent is by no means the only idea of the God that theism has produced. So called "classical theism" is a powerful alternative tradition that is not oriented towards the concept of God as a person, but at most ascribes certain personal properties to God, which are, however, supplemented by a range of non-personal properties.

#### 4. Beyond Anthropocentrism

Classical theism is often contrasted with personal theism. Personal theism thinks that among God's primary and foremost interests is to enter into a loving relationship with each sentient creature. Proponents of classical theism, instead, point out that classical theism proposes a concept of God that is difficult to connect with our concept of person. John Cooper, for instance, writes: "[C]lassical theism asserts that God is transcendent, self-sufficient, eternal, and immutable in relation to the world; thus he does not change through time and is not affected by his relation to his creatures" (Cooper 2006, p. 14).

As understood here, then, "far more central" to classical theism than the so-called person-like omni-properties omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence are the doctrines of divine transcendence, simplicity, eternity or immutability. These are what mark out classical theism from other versions of theism that think of God more in personal categories. According to Brian Davies, for classical theists, "God is primarily the Creator.

God is [ ... ] causally responsible for the existence of everything other than himself” (Davies 2003, p. 2).

Taking God as the transcendent and sole creator means that everything other than God is radically dependent on God for its very existence. Prioritising God’s role as creator has wide-ranging implications for the question in what sense personal categories can be ascribed to God. For instance, one (metaphysical) implication is that God bears no real relations to creation because no creature can have any kind of impact on God, however minimal this impact might be. Creation is entirely dependent on God but God is in no way dependent on creation. Because becoming related to any created entity would be a change, classical theists maintain that no creature can cause God to change. Thus, radical metaphysical independence implies immutability and existence outside time because existence in time would, again, constitute some form of dependence from it.

It should be apparent that the conceptual scheme of classical theism puts into question the view of God being a moral agent analogous to humans. Accordingly, the overall framework of the problem of evil changes: If God is in no way dependent on the world and cannot be influenced by it, the moral standards obvious to us are hardly applicable to God. Since the problem of evil lives from these standards, evils in the world no longer count as direct counter-evidence to God’s existence as it might be the case that our moral concerns are in no way God’s concerns. Ordinary moral questions have an essential anthropocentric direction which no longer are in place when it comes to God.

Taking such a non-anthropocentric view of God seriously raises the question what alternative possibilities for conceptualising God’s relationship to creation are at hand. In the light of the arguments in the previous sections, one could say that God’s view of creation is similar to the understanding of nature proposed by Rolston or Muir: God takes delight in the creative fecundity, beauty and order of creation, even if the individual suffering of animals and humans is an integral—and most likely unavoidable—part of it. God’s view on creation is primarily holistic whereby such a perspective does not automatically imply that individual suffering is completely overlooked or considered of no further importance.

One can grant that nature clearly has its negative aspects, in particular if the focus is on the individual fate of specific living beings. However, as has been argued, such a view is one-sided, and the positive features ought to be considered as well, which are more likely to come into sight from a more systemic and holistic view. Within a theistic framework, one can presuppose that God has created the universe because the positive sides ultimately prevail and are particularly prominent in God’s perspective. God is less the comforting person-like perfect agent who acts within the world to realise its purposes set by providence. Rather, God is the creator and sustainer of the entire universe, which is a morally deeply ambiguous blend of pleasure and pain.

Perhaps God’s perspective can be expressed with the help of scholastic terminology as follows: God does not want these evils in the antecedent will, but he allows them in the consequent will in order to be able to be creatively active and to realise the goods that come with a universe full of life. The fundamental laws of creation involve a dynamic exchange of matter and energy, determine becoming and decaying and indicate that struggle, competition and death is at the very heart of the living. Moral categories do not have to be completely abolished from this picture, as also classical theism attributes personal characteristics to God, but these categories are no longer at the centre of the problem, or at least they are no longer the sole determinants of it.

The crucial point is the broadening of the perspective from individual instances of suffering to goods that characterise the universe as a whole. In the philosophical tradition, Leibniz, for example, proposed such a view: According to him, the suffering of living beings is less a moral question than the inevitable consequence of creaturely finitude. The intrinsic imperfection of individual living beings is to be related to the more comprehensive perfection of the universe and placed in a corresponding relationship to it. God has to accept the necessity of suffering in nature if he wants to create such a dynamic and creative nature as the one familiar to us. Leibniz writes: “But one must believe that even sufferings



and monstrosities are part of order; and it is well to bear in mind not only that it was better to admit these defects and these monstrosities than to violate general laws [ . . . ] just as sometimes there are appearances of irregularity in mathematics which issue finally in a great order when one has finally got to the bottom of them.” (Leibniz 2009, pp. 276–77).

At this point, one may wonder how the biblical understanding of God fits into this picture. Is it not the case that the biblical God is primarily conceived in personal categories and moral standards related to them? An essential motivation for thinking of God in personal terms is precisely that we can only imagine a personal relationship with such a God as Richard Swinburne, for instance, explains: “If [ . . . ] God were immutable in the strong sense, he would be a very lifeless being. The God of the Hebrew Bible, in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have their roots, is pictured as being in continual interaction with humans [ . . . ]. A totally immutable God is a lifeless God, not a God with whom one can have a personal relationship—as theists have normally claimed that one can have with God” (Swinburne 2016, p. 233).

However, the God of classical theism is not merely a consequence of philosophical reflections opposed to the biblical tradition. Rather, in the biblical tradition itself, references can be found that recoil from an overly personalised and relational God, or so I will argue by referring to the story of Job. Taking off from a line of interpretation to be found, among others, in the work of philosopher Wes Morriston and in the theological commentary of Carol A. Newsom, I argue that the divine speeches to Job draw attention to the fact that God is primarily creator and sustainer of a vast, wild and awesome universe where anthropocentric moral standards do not lead to an adequate understanding of God’s relationship to creation: Creation as a whole is valuable, not only or primarily because of the humans in it. If this line of interpretation is correct and a central message of the story of Job is to shift from an anthropocentric to a non-anthropocentric and holistic view of creation, then this view directly affects the problem of animal suffering. As soon as moral standards fade into the background, a theist is able to assign to suffering—though still existentially challenging—an integral place in creation. This does not mean that the world becomes a better and less tragic place; rather, certain questions we tend to ask, seem misplaced because a change of perspective is needed. This is what the divine speeches call for, and this is the difficult lesson to learn for Job (and for us). I unfold this argument in the following sections.

## 5. The Divine Speeches in the Book of Job

Since the story of Job is well known, I turn directly to the divine speeches. My aim is to argue that they display a concept of God as creator and sustainer of the universe but not as guarantor of moral rules determining the course of history. For this purpose, it suffices to keep in mind that the central theme in the dialogues between Job and his friends is the question of retributive justice. A dispute over justice dominates the unfolding of the story till to the divine speeches. As Job is unable to see any mechanism of divine justice at work in his tragic fate, he desires to confront God directly with this issue. Moreover, God meets Job’s desire but not in the way he had expected: God does not refer to any reasons for Job’s suffering. Instead, God asks Job to answer a series of questions: “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? [ . . . ] Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?” (Job 38,1-2; 4-5a).

As Carol A. Newsom points out, the two divine speeches direct Job’s imagination to the remote points of creation beyond the sphere of human influence: to the foundations of the earth, the horizon, light and darkness, the gates of the underworld, the desert, barren mountains and nature where wild animals live (Newsom 2003, pp. 241–52). The aim of these speeches is to widen Job’s perspective from places of secure boundaries to places where human culture and an ordered universe is put at risk and the “primary symbol of the

chaotic" (Newsom 2003, p. 243) is experienced. God presents creation in all its splendour, wildness and impenetrable complexity (see also McLeish 2020).

With astute biological knowledge is described how lions care for their cubs, young ravens search for food, hinds give birth to their offspring, the ostrich hatches its eggs in the sand or the eagle brings prey into its nest in the rocks. The places and creatures represent the alien other to human culture and domestication. Creation seen in this way evokes wondrous estrangement, attraction and anxiety at the same time. The detailed description of Leviathan as primordial beast that no human can capture and dominate continues this theme. Among the many points one can identify in the divine speeches, Wes Morriston finds three of particular importance (Morriston 1996, pp. 342–43):

First, God is the creator of everything and fully in control of all of creation, which also includes wild and chaotic elements. Even the primordial beasts, which no human can control, are no threat to God.

Second, the theophany contrasts God wisdom and Job's ignorance. The numerous questions in the first speech almost ironically point out that Job cannot give any answers because he has no deeper understanding of the workings of creation.

Third, the theophany celebrates the wisdom of the created order. It offers a "breath-taking vision of the majesty and beauty of the Creator's design" (Morriston 1996, p. 343) and, as Newsom puts it, of "the tragic sublime" (Newsom 2003, p. 251).

## 6. A First Interpretation: Skepticism

A common line of interpretation of the divine speeches focuses on the second point. God has reasons for letting Job suffer, but Job, due to his limited human knowledge, should not expect to have insight in any of these divine reasons. You might call this interpretation a "sceptical theist's account" (Gomarasca 2013). Sceptical theists argue that not being able to imagine what reasons God might have for letting people suffer does not imply that there are not any reasons at all. Due to our limited cognitive capacities, we might simply not be able to see these reasons. This is exactly the case with Job. Although readers of the book are aware of these reasons, Job himself is kept in the dark about them. He is not able to find these reasons and God does not inform him about them. As human being, so this interpretation goes, Job cannot leave the inner-worldly realm, and therefore it is also not possible for him to access any reasons beyond it.

The problem of such a sceptical interpretation is twofold: First, the divine speeches do not point at the possibility of any reasons for the way God treats Job. Questions of morality and justice are not mentioned at all. Thus, a sceptical interpretation has few points of connection in the text itself. Second, the reasons given at the beginning are anything but good. If these are the only reasons, then we are left with the impression that either God's character is of problematic nature or, if divine justice is of any concern here, then it is inscrutable to us. As a consequence, if there is divine justice, then we are confronted with a moral scheme we do not know how to connect in any meaningful way with human moral standards.

## 7. A Second Interpretation: Humble Submission

Another, more literal interpretation of the text is, as Newsom argues, that God draws Job's attention away from the human realm and the question of the moral order of creation. The divine speeches no longer continue the dominant theme of justice but present an image of creation in all its majesty, wildness and violence where human life and culture are present in a marginalised way at best. Job was looking for a creation of order, value and meaning where human experiences make sense and are conducive to a rational explanation. God, however, by presenting Leviathan, highlights the nonmoral and chaotic aspects of creation. Newsom writes: "The face of Leviathan exposes the hubris and the self-deception of the human rage for order" (Newsom 2003, p. 253).

Job's responses after the first and second divine speech are brief and then he falls silent. This attitude deserves particular attention. Some interpreters read this as an expression

of Job's regretful and humble submission in the face of an omnipotent and omniscient God. John E. Hartley, for instance, concludes that Job "humbles himself before God, conceding that he has misstated his case by speaking about things beyond his ability to know" (Hartley 1988, p. 536). According to Hartley, Job's reaction after the divine speeches marks a new direction in his relationship with God because he locates his self-worth not anymore in his own moral-spiritual behaviour and innocence but exclusively in God. The idea is that continuing to pursue justice in this case would eventually distance Job from God because Job would hold on to an image of God that must be overcome. Communion with a mysterious and fascinating God is more important than understanding one's own fate and suffering in terms of merit and justice, and therefore, Job does not reply to the divine speeches anymore.

### 8. A Third Interpretation: Creation beyond Justice

Although the above interpretation does have its merits, I think that we have to go a step further. Job's reaction seems quite unlikely when one considers how steadfastly he held on to his own innocence in the dispute with his friends. He demanded an encounter with God to prove his innocence and now, after a demonstration of God's power, he is supposed to simply back down without having received an answer to his nagging questions?

Morrison proposes another interpretation that seems more appropriate in the light of the celebration of the overall cosmos and wild animal life as put forward in the divine speeches: "[Job] sees that he counts for no more (and of course for no less) in the total scheme of things than, say, the wild ox or the eagle. But while he is deeply moved by the wonder of it all, he is also bewildered. He does not (yet) see how his complaint has been answered, and he doesn't know how to respond to God's demand for a reply" (Morrison 2017, p. 235).

The same goes for Job's reaction after the second speech when he declares: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42: 6). For Morrison, the first line refers to traditional wisdom about God as expressed in Job's and the friend's discussion about divine justice and goodness. What, however, can it mean that now Job sees God? Quoting Rudolph Otto, Morrison thinks that liberated from conventional platitudes about God, Job newly experiences "the downright stupendousness, the well-nigh daemonic and wholly incomprehensible character of the eternal creative power"—a power that "mocks at all conceiving but can yet stir the mind to its depths, fascinate and overbrim the heart" (Morrison 2017, p. 237; quoting Otto 1936, p. 82).

This interpretation is supported by Newsom's suggestion that Job makes the illuminating and at the same time tragic insight that man finds himself in a creation full of tension and fracture. Man must work out structures of order in creation to be able to live according to his rational and moral nature, but at the same time, this creation also contains untamable elements hostile to man, which can have tragic effects on human (and animal) existence. Newsome says: "What Job has just heard in the divine speeches, however, is a devastating undermining of his understanding of the unproblematic moral continuity between himself, the world, and God. It is a profound loss of unity, a recognition of the deeply fractured nature of reality" (Newsom 2003, p. 255).

The idea is, thus, that Job leaves behind his claim to find a moral justification for his suffering, since he has realised that creation does not follow moral principles that commonly apply to the human social realm. As long as Job was searching for a moral order in creation, he could not yet free himself from his overly anthropocentric image of God. The divine speeches widened his focus by directing his attention away from his own fate and question of justice towards the splendour and tragic beauty of all creation.

Accordingly, Job does not receive any new information about the why of his own suffering; rather, his paradigmatic view on creation and the creator radically changes. By no longer holding to the traditional insight that God rewards the just and punishes the unjust, Job is able to accept his own fate and experience God directly as a sublime power in nature who does not rule the world in accordance with a moral order. God is neither just

nor unjust as these categories simply do not apply. Job accepts reality as it is, and in doing so, he sees God's presence in creation.

It should be noted that this insight is different from the sceptical theist's view. As Hartley has also noted, continuing to ask for divine justice makes no sense; the reason for stopping to do so, however, is different. It is less the understanding that we have to renounce all personal claims because they might erect a barrier between us and God. Rather, the idea is that creation is not ordered according to any principles of justice and therefore it makes no sense to demand them. God is the transcendent Other beyond good and evil, and once this is recognised, one is also able to accept that "[t]ragic rupture is the figure at the heart of human existence" (Newsom 2003, p. 257). This acceptance reorders and deepens Job's previous relationship with God. Morriston puts it this way: "He has been liberated from the futile craving for divinely guaranteed moral order that had fueled his rebellion and bound him in misery, and freed for the wild wonder and beauty of what is" (Morriston 2017, p. 240).

This interpretation has clear advantages over the other outlined interpretations. First, it is able to make straightforward sense of the divine speeches without taking it as metaphor for something else. Second, it explains Job's attitude of repentance and silence without having to assume that Job was humbled and silenced by God's superiority and might. Rather, Job's behaviour is in continuity with his previous desire to encounter God for understanding God's behaviour towards him. This desire is met, but Job has to learn that it does not correspond to what he had originally expected. Thus, Job's trials can be seen as a spiritual journey one outcome of which is the insight that creation is a sphere that "carries with it no purely human-centered answers" (Chase 2013, p. 280). This reading, finally, makes sense from a spiritual point of view: When we gain a deeper understanding of our own existence in the experience of the sublime, we may feel a kind of a liberation and joyful peace that takes away any form of anxiety or sorrow related to worldly things, at least for a moment. Worldly trials seem less burdensome than before, as one's entire attention is absorbed by the experience of the sublime. Instead of asking questions concerning one's existence, one simply "is" in the presence of the divine.

## 9. Two Objections and the Outline of a Proposal

No doubt, this reading is controversial and faces various objections. A first objection is that it does not take individual suffering seriously enough because the main focus is on creation in general. A second objection raises the question of the extent to which such a God is worthy of worship.

I reply to these criticisms in turn. First of all, there is a certain tension in monotheistic conceptions of God, as the difference between classical and personal theism indicates. Classical theism sees God as the wholly transcendent creator of everything that exists, as the source of all being that is in no way dependent on anything. Personal theism, instead, highlights that religious experience and the biblical tradition tells us that God aims at entering in a personal relationship with creation and is deeply concerned about the life of every single human being. It seems that the concept of God in the Book of Job oscillates between these two conceptions. On the one hand, God's interests seem to be directed towards the whole of creation, while individual destinies play a subordinate role therein, and on the other hand, God cares about the life of a particular creature such as Job and even speaks to him. This tension is not resolved, and maybe a first lesson is that we have to live with it. Faith goes hand in hand with the demand for justice and compassion, but at the same time, it must also recognise that our world is a place of beauty containing tragic moments of suffering and loss that cannot be adequately captured and explained in the categories of justice and morality.

Newsom proposes how such a reading connects to the happy ending where Job has his fortunes restored. The ending expresses that Job is now able to embrace the goodness of life in all its fragile, vulnerable and tragic dimension: "Read in dialogic relation, the sublimity of the divine speeches and the beauty of the prose epilogue gestures toward the

human incorporation of tragedy into the powerful imperatives of desire: to live and to love" (Newsom 2003, p. 258). Similarly, Steven Chase argues that the explicit statement in the epilogue that the three daughters receive an inheritance along their brothers means a significant departure from the culture of that time. It indicates that within the awareness that there is no guarantee of a life that is just and free from tragic events, for Job, "all things are precious, all things are to be loved" (Chase 2013, p. 275).

Against this background, an answer to the first objection can be given: The story of Job can be seen as a critique of any conception of God with overly anthropocentric interests. God sees all of creation as valuable and human creatures are one, but not the only or central, aspect of this holistic picture of a value-laden nature. God is responsive to values, but these values may not make an exclusive reference to us. Just as Job ends up loving and caring equally for all his children, God considers all life to be precious and is at the same time fully aware that suffering and death are intrinsic parts of the cycle of the living.

Mark Wynn draws attention to the fact that often "our conceptions of value fail to capture certain systematic features of the goodness of the world" (Wynn 1999a, p. 36). Wynn argues that one way to remedy this deficiency is "to have extensive first-hand experience of nature" (Wynn 1999a, p. 36). I take this to mean that certain axiological aspects of creation require a non-anthropocentric view on it. Consider, for instance, the description of the heavy windstorm by John Muir: "Nature was holding high festival, and every fiber of the most rigid giants thrilled with glad excitement. [ . . . ] Even when the grand anthem had swelled to its highest pitch, I could distinctly hear the varying tones of individual trees [ . . . ]. Each was expressing itself in its own way, singing its own song, and making its own peculiar gestures, manifesting a richness of variety to be found in no other forest I have yet seen" (Muir [1912] 1954, pp. 185–86).

John Muir is completely absorbed in this natural spectacle. Experiencing the threatening majesty of nature can contribute towards a significant rethinking of our own concerns. The divine speeches call for a self-transcendence and redirection towards the worth of things in themselves, independent from their instrumental value for specific human purposes. They relativise our natural egocentric perspective and call to complement it with one that assigns an intrinsic value to nature in its beautiful as well as dangerous and violent peculiarities. Job is drawn, so to speak, into a deeper understanding of the very nature of things—into their very dependence from God and "exhibition of divine glory" (Southgate 2014, p. 801).

Such an attitude towards nature does not imply that moral questions are suspended or should no longer have a genuine place in our understanding of reality. It is part of human nature to be endowed with moral capacities, and therefore, this central aspect of our existential constitution cannot be ignored. However, the Book of Job reminds us that this perspective is not the only one with which we should look at the world. The world as such is valuable to God independently of any ultimate moral order. God wants us to live a life immersed in such a world by accepting the beautiful as well as inexplicable tragic dimensions of creation and our existence in it.

This brings me to the second objection whether such a God is worthy of worship. Referring to Mark Wynn's use, worship can be defined as an attitude where "the believer relates herself to the marvel of existence, by placing herself in wonder and adoration before the one in whom all existence is contained" (Wynn 1999b, pp. 151–52). It should be noted that Wynn is not referring here to God as a maximally perfect being but to the ground of all existence. An attitude of reverence and gratitude is appropriate when one comprehends the wonder of one's own existence as of existence in general. Take again Muir's intense experience of the heavy windstorm: Muir feels himself deeply immersed in the marvel of existence, the power of nature, the sublime process of creation and destruction. Muir surely senses admiration and reverence for this spectacle of nature. Whether nature as a non-personal system is also an appropriate object of worship is a matter of dispute but surely an open question (see Cockayne 2020), and many representatives of a pantheistic understanding of reality or a religion of nature are likely to answer it in the affirmative.



God in the Book of Job appears to be worthy of worship because he holds the order of the entire cosmos, including its chaotic elements, in his hands. This cosmos is an ambiguous blend of beauty and suffering. The spiritual calling is to accept the reality of this image of the cosmos and of its creator and sustainer without any delusions. In addition, it has to be kept in mind that this God does not show himself closed to human longing but has a genuine interest that people are able to form an appropriate image of God—even if the grasp of this image entails a profound and painful transformation towards less anthropocentric categories of the divine.

## 10. Conclusions

The view proposed may not be easy to accept. Like Job, we desire a world in which our fundamental moral intuitions are preserved and respected. Perhaps, however, our world cannot meet this demand. I have argued that the story of Job suggests such an interpretation. Such an insight may be disappointing but it can also be liberating: It makes clear why we cannot give a satisfactory answer to the various facets of the problem of evil. It does not make this problem disappear, but it no longer makes us despair in front of a God we try in vain to understand. The crucial categories for looking at nature are less moral than the creativity, richness and fragile beauty of life as such. For philosopher of religion Wesley Wildman, such a view provides relief: “It ends the scourge of incoherent and morally desperate anthropomorphism in God ideas. It dissolves the problem of divine neglect. And it poses a bracing moral challenge to human beings to take responsibility for themselves, for each other, and for the world” (Wildman 2017, p. 225).

Interestingly, in recent debates in the philosophy of religion, one can notice a turning away from personalistic images of God. A central motivation for this is the unresolved problem of evil (see, e.g., Mulgan 2015; Bishop and Perszyk 2017; Wildman 2017). These accounts favor conceptions of the divine responsive to objective values such as existence, life, beauty, creativity, diversity and—in the human case—a striving for goodness. In the light of the considerations proposed here, one could say that such an understanding of the divine is an integral—though rather neglected—strand of traditional theism as the Book of Job makes clear. The exceedingly diverse dimensions of reality, from the moral impenetrability of wild nature and the indifference of the dark cosmos to the fascinating diversity of animal cooperation and human altruistic concerns, cannot be grasped without tension. Taking seriously that God is the creator of all there is implies considering more closely what it would mean for our understanding of God and our religious practice if God were primarily to care for the welfare of all creation and not only or mainly for the manifold sufferings of animals and humans.

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