

Animal Suffering: Neither Horrendous nor Merely Sustaining Animal Evolution

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Abstract: Regarding animal suffering –a theological problem that relatively recent developments intensify–, I propose two points. (1) For human holiness to be able to emerge, we humans must possess a double inheritance. On the one hand, in our immediate evolutionary past we acquired two immensely adaptive capacities –firstly, the ability to grasp others’ mental contents, and, later, the self-directed speech, which enhances the self-control that had previously emerged at protecting and improving one’s own reputation, i.e., one’s own social interests. On the other hand, we inherit from an enormously long evolutionary process the pleasure–pain pair. This pair, which serves as a guide for behavior, is essential for both animals and humans; yet at times it obscures the knowledge that we, unlike non-human animals, possess of another person’s mental contents. Thus, a conflict arises between pursuing my physical and social interests, prompted by my pleasure/pain, or, by contrast, recognizing that the needs of another person are also important. Consequently, since this conflict makes human holiness possible, we can say that the progressive evolution of animal suffering was one of the causes that made human holiness possible. (2) The horrendous nature of human suffering need not be attributed to the suffering of animals. In moments of pain or danger, animals focus solely on the immediate future as framed by their goal of escaping. This is the only adaptive animal behavior in such situations. By contrast, humans additionally deploy their capacity to evoke past experiences, non-immediate futures, or even states they have already realized are impossible to attain, all of which can at times be useful in the attempt to creatively find a way to escape, but, when they are not, greatly amplify pain.

Keywords: holiness, pleasure/pain pair, the other's mental content.

Contribution: The double movement of my proposal – on the one hand, downgrading animal pain, and, on the other, elevating the role of one's own pleasure and pain to the point of rendering them necessary for human holiness– may be relevant to discussions of sub-optimal divine design.

Use of AI: I have not used AI-assisted technologies in creating this article.

Introduction

The suffering of animals has become a significant problem in recent theodicy. Must we accept that God is not omnipotent? Or, conversely, that He is not wholly good?

I shall develop two points. First, I propose that the pleasure/pain pair, which has developed throughout the entire course of animal evolution, is necessary for the emergence of the most demanding moral capacity, and, consequently, for the possibility of human holiness. Secondly, the differences between human and non-human capacities suggest that the horrendous nature of human suffering should not necessarily be attributed to animal suffering.

Section 1 will present the two causes (the exponential growth of pets, and the theory of evolution) that have highlighted this problem in recent theodicy. Section 2 will briefly review the attempts at resolving it. In Section 3, I propose that humans could not attain holiness if evolution had not endowed us with the pleasure/pain pair that guides the behavior of all sentient animals, and which, in holiness, must be overcome by the uniquely human capacity to apprehend the resemblance between one's own interiority and that of another. If we accept this proposal, we may see that pleasure and pain are not only necessary for the course of evolution, but also for something more central to the Creator God's project—namely, the possibility for humans to imitate Jesus Christ and to partake in the divine nature. Finally, in Section 4, I will attempt to temper the now widespread view that regards animal suffering as “horrendous.”

Certainly, such suffering exists, just as the death of every individual and the extinction of species do. However, given the differences between human and non-human capacities, it is very probable that the differences between human and animal pain are significant.

1. Causes of the Emergence of this Problem

Human suffering has been addressed within Christian Theology from its very inception. Human beings are destined for eternal life, where our condition as children of God and participants in the divine nature will be fully revealed. Furthermore, until that time comes, the love between them will be a source of consolation amid the persecutions (Mark 10: 30). By contrast, there is no similarly well-established theodicy for animal suffering. Moreover, relatively recent causes have strongly emphasized the suffering of animals.

One cause is the theory of evolution. An interpretation of this causal relationship is as follows: Given that animals existed for millions of years before human beings appeared, it must be inferred –Deane-Drummond 2018, 798– that “trying to force the sin of an original pair as responsible for all the ills and sufferings of the world prior to humankind does not make much sense”. This idea is echoed by nearly all authors who have addressed the issue: e.g., Southgate 2008, 28; Peters 2018, 694; Ramage 2021, 1. However, Wahlberg 2024, 109 offers a compelling critique: “If the existence of animals that suffer is not a good thing, then it does not matter whether they have been around for a short or a long time, since a good God should not have created them at all”.

My focus, however, will be on a relatively different interpretation of that causal relationship. Evolution involves the mechanism of natural selection of the best-adapted individuals and, correspondingly, the elimination of the less adapted. It is true that the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis –unlike the previous Modern Synthesis (about the debate between them, see Sham 2024)– recognizes additional factors, as Epigenetics, Niche Construction Theory and others: See Kasser et al. 2025.

Yet no one denies that natural selection still plays a crucial role. Thus, since natural selection pivots on the failure of the weakest, it must be acknowledged that animal suffering is essentially entangled in evolution.

Another cause lies in the growing prevalence of pet ownership. “Why do most humans feel entitled to kill pests but not pets?”—this question, found in Conradie 2017, 5, is highly revealing. The growth of pets began in relatively recent times, when the bourgeoisie began to fulfill the two conditions that made it feasible. On the one hand, unlike earlier rural or urban laborers, the bourgeois could afford to feed an animal that was not a working animal. On the other hand, in their homes—unlike what occurred in the palaces of kings, aristocrats, or successful entrepreneurs—the care of the animal was not entrusted to servants but was undertaken by the homeowners themselves. This led to a degree of anthropomorphization of individual animals. (By contrast, ancient fables featuring humanized animals expressed traits attributed to entire species.) Consider, for instance, the characteristically human eyes in Walt Disney’s animals—a remarkable intuition that sets him above earlier attempts such as Beatrix Potter’s drawings (1866–1943). Or consider the way dogs are treated in Enid Blyton’s Famous Five and Secret Seven series (published in the 1940s and 1950s). More generally, the statistics provided by Amici et al. 2025 make it clear that pet ownership and virtual encounters with animals in the media are today the determining factors of anthropomorphism.

2. The solutions proposed by different authors

Certainly, throughout the centuries there have been theologians who have focused on animal suffering. Thus, Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, First Part of the Second Part, Question 102, Article 6) proposes that animals suffer to cultivate the capacity for compassion in humans. However, I begin with a quotation from Lewis 1940 (which started the current debate): “The problem of animal suffering is appalling, because the Christian explanation of human pain cannot be extended to animal pain. So far as

we know, beasts are incapable either of sin or virtue: therefore, they can neither deserve pain nor be improved by it". Apparently, the problem can only be resolved by diminishing either the omnipotence or the goodness of God.

The most significant proposed solutions found in the literature are as follows.

- i. The evil found in nature is attributed to "powers and principalities" not necessarily aligned with God. These powers are sometimes understood as demonic (Lewis 1940; Hoggard Creegan 2018, 814; Lloyd 2018 about the Fall of the Angels). At other times, however, this line of thought appears in the writings of process theologians (e.g., Hartshorne 1984), who claim that every level of the cosmos has some degree of freedom to resist God: Earthquakes, violence and death exist because of creaturely freedom, not divine sovereignty.

However, all this "accords more power to a force opposed to God than the Scriptures and the Christian tradition are willing to accede" (Southgate 2014, 785), a criticism with which I agree.

- ii. Southgate appeals to a composite solution, whose central claim is: Evolution —despite the disvalue represented by prematurely discarded individuals or by species extinctions— is "the only way" to bring about the richness and beauty of animated evolution. Or, as Hoggard Creegan 2018, 7 concretely remembers: "When the wolf has been reintroduced into Yellowstone, the ecosystem has been restored". (I will comment on the other components of Southgate's proposal in iii and iv.)

However, many authors remain unconvinced. Thus, Robert John Russell (2018: 717, 719) —a theologian coming from the field of physics rather than biology— suggests that if God had chosen different principles of physics, perhaps biology would have offered alternative pathways. Or, as he more generally puts it: scientists describe the principles of science, but this does not necessarily amount to a consecration of those principles as the only possible ones. But most of these authors are repelled by the so-called 'horrendous animal suffering'.

- iii. Some voices have invoked the ‘kenosis’ of the hymn in Philippians. Thus, Southgate 2008, 105 says: “God is a suffering God on the cross”.

However, applying this as a solution to our problem might prove inappropriate. “The question remains whether the message of redemption is aimed primarily at the injustices that result from human sin, or at the suffering embedded in God’s creation.” (Conradie (2017, 7). Let us read the following answer in Ratzinger 1986, 73 (about original sin): “When the network of human relationships is damaged from the very beginning, then every human being enters into a world that is marked by relational damage”. In the same line, Edwards (1999, 26) asserts: “Kenosis is not an aim in itself; it has meaning only in order to restore broken relationships”.

- iv. Given the inadequacy of those responses, most theodicy authors end up applying to animals the same answer that Christian theology gives to human suffering. That is, they abandon “the usual tactic of brushing aside nonhuman creatures in eschatology” (Sollereder 2018: 731). In ‘the new Creation’, all sentient beings will be able to flourish without suffering or death. (Cf. ‘pelican heaven’, McDaniel 1989, which refers to the reserve chick that every pelican lays and then routinely discards.). Peters, always so attentive to the idea that eschatological consummation will retroactively define what has been, extends this vision to animals as well (2018: 705). According to Griffiths 2018, nonhuman animals and inanimate creatures could participate in the new creation because their presence contributes to God’s glory, and the happiness of redeemed sinners: Thus, the participation of animals in the new creation might also have other reasons than a condoning of current suffering.

However, this solution –the new Creation– does not completely convince me. Heaven is the sharing of God’s life, the full realization of our condition as children of God and participants in the divine nature. Animals, in their earthly lives, cannot rise to human height. Why, then, would they become capable of entering God’s eternity? Certainly, a text from Isaiah is sometimes taken as support for this

solution. There, we find a scene of harmony, where “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.” Yet I would point out that, at that time, war had become a far greater threat than the declining presence of ferocious animals. If, nevertheless, the prophet mentions them, it is probably because, in doing so, he underscores the magnitude of the transformation that will take place when human beings live together in peace and harmony, a transformation that, tragically, must be considered almost as radical as the idea of a vegetarian lion.

- v. Finally, in some of these theodicy works, reference is made to the presence among animals of infanticide, theft, and the abuse of power by the strong over the weak. Thus, Deane-Drummond (2018: 799) rightly draws attention to “tendencies towards viciousness that are present in animal communities even prior to the kind of deliberative cruelty that is such a distinctive characteristic of our kind”, relating them to original sin. Certainly, in some species one observes close cooperation among group members. But this benefits the group in dominating or exterminating others. Therefore, one must conclude that selfishness and the abuse of the weak by the strong are constant in nature. Domning & Hellwig (2006: 105) underline in a concrete way that “murder, theft, deceit, et cetera, are not uniquely the property of humans”. The idea that animals can sin has been elaborated by 2014: I will comment on this in the next section.

However, animals cannot be regarded as sinners. Thus, it is not possible to invoke divine justice as the direct cause of animal suffering. Rolston 1992: 258: “That would be category mistake”. Likewise, Conradie 2017, in conversation and in agreement with de Waal, states: “Sin is an exclusively human trait”. (But I think that de Waal really denies the human uniqueness of the genuine moral capacity, since he conflates this capacity –which, whether directed outside or inside the clan/family, is always perceived as costly by the subject– with spontaneous altruism – which the subject never perceives as costly.)

3. Pleasure and Pain, Animal Behavior and Holiness

In this section and the next, I will argue that there is another possible solution. I begin with the idea that God created the universe in such a way that human beings would eventually emerge with their specific nature. But by this, I am by no means advocating a linear ‘scala naturae’. Evolution is far more complex and astonishing. We now know that our traits derive from a variety of species. The learning of song dialects by some songbirds (Marler 1991), as well as the sounds used by groups of dolphins to refer to individual members (King & Janik 2013), represent precursors to our own vocal learning. Similarly, while our type of intelligence and brain structure originated with the great apes, Sehner & Burkart 2023 propose that there is a “second legacy underpinning human traits, [...] we, like marmosets, engage in ‘allomaternal care’ (Hrdy 2009)”. And allomaternal care, especially when combined, as in humans, with ‘a slower pace of motor development relative to cognitive development’ (Kliesch 2025), is crucial to our social constitution. More in general, Andrews & Monsó 2025 offer a picture of animal capacities that strongly emphasizes the nonlinearity of evolution.

After that clarification, I resume the thread. In Genesis, God calls only the humans “very good,” whereas the other elements of creation are merely “good.” This privilege must be understood in connection with the successive covenants that God establishes with humankind, culminating in Jesus Christ, the perfect model to be imitated. In short, Revelation tells us that God’s desire is for the humans to attain a holiness akin to that of Christ.

In my view, the current focus on hominids and Neanderthals opens a new door for us which was undreamt of for previous philosophers and scholars. We can no longer speak of a soul that, foreign to evolution, would be added to the body like a cherry on top of a baked cake. Indeed, to keep invoking that kind of soul would amount to ignoring the marvelous work of evolution (i.e., of Creation, for the believer). As I will try to show in this Section, this new view does not deny the most spiritual qualities of the human being. (Nor does it deny the promise of eternal life. Bejarano 2022,

97: “Let us think that God’s time, unlike our poor ‘mental time travel’, is the real simultaneity of all time. Thus, any past life, to the extent to which it was somehow connected to God, is –we can suggest– within that simultaneity, in the company of all the past and future righteous”.)

From that evolutionary view of the human being in its entirety, I propose that for holiness to emerge, and for human beings to partake in the divine nature –for this still unimaginable unfolding of Life to occur– humans must possess a double evolutionary inheritance. On the one hand, they inherit from the enormously long animal evolution the pleasure/pain pair. On the other hand, they acquired, in their immediate evolutionary past, some exclusively human abilities that can serve, however weakly and imperfectly, as the basis for the most demanding moral capacity. This capacity coincides with holiness (even if, as several passages of the New Testament might suggest, the person making those demanding decisions does not rely on explicit religious beliefs).

What do those exclusively human abilities consist of? Let us begin by noting that great apes (typically with a view to competitive goals, though at times resulting in instances of spontaneous altruism) can, if they know the terrain well, estimate the visual expectations associated with the location of a conspecific, even when they do not at that moment share the conspecific’s visual field. These special expectations are called vicarious. It is very probable (see Bejarano 2025, 3.2) that all expectations, including vicarious ones, are merely empty profiles constructed within the subject –innate or learned empty profiles that are nevertheless capable of finally recognizing a situation when it arises. By contrast, human beings additionally grasp others’ full mental states –others’ mental contents– that can not be apprehended by relying solely on vicarious expectations.

When did the vicarious expectations that had previously been so useful cease to suffice? Let us consider, for example, how, when you are focused on looking at me, I can grasp your mental state about me. Certainly, today we possess a well-developed capacity to view ourselves eccentrically. However, at its origin this required a great shift. There is no vicarious expectation in my organism into which such a mental state could fit, since it is tied to a position that I can never occupy. Thus, apprehending such a state requires the capacity to entertain, beyond mere (empty) vicarious

expectations, the (full) mental contents of others—or, in other words, a double mental line—Bejarano 2025, especially §3.2.3. (The ‘first’ content, of course, is the subject’s own mental content in a specific moment, even if they are dreaming.)

What has just been proposed concerns only the evolutionary origin of the capacity to entertain “second mental contents.” Gradually, we acquired other kinds of second contents—related to the past, the future, the possible, and the impossible—that no longer originate in those dialogic interactions (dialogical, yes, even if they are prelinguistic). We will turn our attention to these new types later; for now, we will focus solely on the grasping of others’ mental contents.

This type of ‘second mental contents’ sometimes—specifically, when it includes the needs of another—displays a unique, exclusive feature (Bejarano 2022). It, for the first time in evolution, constitutes a kind of perception in which the two fundamental aims of perception fail to coincide. That is, although it informs the subject about the environment, it does not serve the subject’s own interests. (The grasping of others’ mental contents can be called ‘perception’. This enrichment of the concept of ‘perception’ is a strong current trend. Osvath & Johansson 2024, 7: “Perceptual and memory systems are so intertwined that their labels become metaphors rather than real cognitive entities”. See also Bai et al. 2025).

Another point worth emphasizing: Such perception is usually truthful. We are not speaking here of the truth of norms, which has supposedly been ‘debunked’ as “a ‘belief pill’ for certain moral beliefs about cooperation” (Joyce 2007, 181–82). What we are dealing with is instead auditory and visual perceptions that most of the time provide true information about the interiority of other human beings.

Nonetheless, this truth can become imprisoned by the injustice—or lack of humility—of refusing to see one’s own interiority and that of the other as fundamentally alike. In fact, this truth will never escape such imprisonment unless—first (on the natural, human level)—language, with its high efficiency and low cost, is employed, either audibly or preferably internally, by the subject to speak to himself and thus achieve stronger self-control; and unless—second and more importantly—the grace of God

comes to the subject's aid, supporting his/her weak and imperfect 'most demanding moral capacity'. Yet, in conjunction with these enhancers, the capacity to apprehend the mental contents of another sustains the capacity for holiness.

Here lies what appears to be a *paradox*. Both the apprehension of others' mental contents and, later, the increase in self-directed speech that can support greater self-control —both traits— emerged at some stage of evolution (or, more precisely, coevolution genes/culture), because each is immensely adaptive. Probably these two traits gave rise to what we recognize as human. Let's take a little time to flesh out this statement.

The first trait made syntactic language possible, since such language became necessary only when the speaker sought to correct the addressee's belief —or, more precisely, the addressee's prior holophrastic message (e.g., requesting something that was unavailable or calling someone who was absent), which allowed the speaker to grasp that belief (Bejarano 2011, Chapters 13–16, or Bejarano 2014). Probably after the expansion of the social network beyond the family clan, this first trait also produced self-conscious emotions. Linking back to an idea presented in this same section, we can say: My self-conscious emotions arise because I estimate your mental contents when you are looking at me, especially if you accompany your gaze with a gesture of pleasant or unpleasant surprise. (Such surprises, it should be noted, are likely to have originally arisen during friendly contacts between one clan and another, rather than within a clan, where everyone already knows one another well.) And these emotions had highly adaptive consequences. Thus, shame —which protects one's own reputation and consequently the probability of being "recruited in mutually advantageous cooperative interactions" (Baumard et al. 2013)— could be described as producing a merely superficial 'morality' and making human social cooperation possible. Likewise, the pleasant self-conscious emotion —pride— sustains (see Bejarano 2025, 5.1) the 'deliberate practice' that is necessary to achieve any kind of cultural expertise.

Those forms of self-control, which in fact were selfish and entirely determined by emotions, were later reinforced by the second trait, namely self-directed speech. In its final stage of development —that is, once it has

already become inner speech— that speech can plausibly dispense with the sequential structure of any articulatory-phonetic pattern that forms part of our linguistic code. As a result, it becomes much faster, and, although the emergence of this transformation would originally have required more demanding conditions, once established it requires far less energy. (See Bejarano 2022, section 4, about its beginning and its progressive transformation into ‘inner speech’). But, above all, we must consider that self-directed speech undoubtedly helps with attention control, and that this control has been greatly reevaluated (see Lee & Engle 2026). Here we are especially interested in the fact that attending –that is, approaching physically or mentally– to a perceived or imagined scene can increase the weight that such a scene has on the subject’s decisions of any kind. Likewise, let us remember that in the infant, attention control originates in “the contingent response of a caregiver who guides and validates the infant’s attention” –Phaniraj et al. 2025–, that is, in the linguistic and gestural communication that the infant receives. The intrapersonalization and internalization that, over the years, occur in the function of guiding attention are immensely important. In my view, they make possible the control that the adult can exercise over their own attention, and, consequently, over their decisions. (A comment derivable from this: Our Theory-of-Mind, despite providing us with the mental content of others, never has real influence over our genuinely moral decisions unless we have focused our attention on that content. Thus, whether such decisions arise or fail to arise does not usually depend on differences – as has sometimes been suggested – in the degree of effectiveness of Theory of Mind.)

In short, these two traits are the keys to human success. Paradoxically, however, the convergence of these two immensely adaptive traits gave rise to a new capacity that is not adaptive, namely the possibility of holiness. When will holiness become widespread enough to be advantageous even in this world? So far, this has very frequently not been the case, as was already observed in Psalm 73 (72).

For this reason, I find unacceptable Moritz’s proposal (2014) of “progressive moral freedom across animal species”. If holiness is non-adaptive, then moral freedom –that is, the capacity that makes it possible–

could not have gradually increased through evolution. In other words, while I agree with Darwin that “the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind”, I cannot accept the same claim for moral freedom once evolution, in an almost paradoxical process, had already constituted it as such –that is, as the possibility of holiness. Evolution (or, more precisely, the coevolution between genes and culture) will not progressively strengthen the option for holiness, because this lacks adaptive advantage. Note, please, that it is precisely in this way that holiness can preserve itself as the manifestation of genuine freedom.

Let us return to the convergence of the two extremely adaptive traits (which probably occurred at a late stage of intraspecific genetic–cultural coevolution in *Homo sapiens*), and to its apparently surprising outcome. That process must be understood considering what was said earlier against the linearity of evolution and about its astonishing complexity. In the specific case of the convergence under discussion, this complexity becomes even more intense, to the point of appearing paradoxical. (Yet this case follows the logic of evolution: the convergence of ‘the apprehension of others’ mental contents’ and ‘great self-control’ was far too adaptively advantageous. It should also be recalled that the capacity for speech entails a greater risk of fatal choking.)

But –and here I arrive at the second part of the proposal– for human holiness to be possible, it is not enough to possess these two uniquely human traits together with the grace of God. These traits must at times –mainly, when the subject has apprehended the needs of another– prevail over what we have inherited from non-human animals (“Who will rescue me from this body of death?”, Romans 7,24). This heritage (i.e., the adaptive regulation of behavior by pleasure and pain) provides animals and humans with an essential, crucial service, but at times it clouds the knowledge that we, unlike non-human animals, possess of another person’s inner contents.

At this point, I would like to add that, among the many moral benefits that are often attributed to pain, I accept as a necessary consequence of pain only the one proposed here: namely, that pleasure and pain are necessary for the emergence of a genuine moral dilemma. Thus, I agree

with Oviedo (2024, 95), who rejects the excess of optimism regarding the moral benefits of pain for character formation and similar outcomes.

Let us look at a narrower, but essential issue. Sollereder 2018 addressing the question (which had been raised by other authors) “why did God not just create heaven?”, writes: “If angels exist and are in any sense ‘creaturely selves,’ then there must be a way to create creaturely selves apart from evolution. However, there may not be any alternative to evolution to create the sorts of biological creatures that God values”.

Koszkało & Koszkało 2021 are also interested in “the history of angels present in classical theism.” However, their purpose is different from that guiding Sollereder. They point out that, since “angels are individuals who operate outside of any evolutionary context, and whose ontic constitution excludes the possession of emotions”, we must conclude that “morality in its essence cannot be defined in biological and evolutionary terms.” I concede to these authors that a genuine moral capacity might arise from non-material, purely spiritual agents. (I too, like these authors, reject the theories of de Waal 2010 and of Baumard et al. 2013 about the genesis of moral capacity.) But that does not in any way prevent our type of moral capacity—whose model is not given by angels but by Jesus Christ—from being bound up with the biological body and with its heritage: It is pleasure and pain that we must sometimes strip of their power over us, so that costly decisions to help others, and to forgive their offenses even knowing that forgiveness might make their repetition easier, and to rejoice in their enviable successes—all these decisions—may emerge.

4. Our Ignorance About How Animals Experience Pain

4.1) Recent theodicy frequently describes animal suffering as “horrendous”, echoing’s expression “horridly cruel”, which Dawkins later popularized. But can we really know how horrendous it is for animals?

I wrote in Bejarano (1997, 89): “Do animals suffer? Then natural selection, which pivots on the failure of the weakest, would be pivoting on suffering (...) But attributing experiential sensitivity to animals

does not entail claiming equivalence between animal and human suffering.” I cited one of Marion Stump Dawkins’s experiments: “Chickens prefer the floor of their coop to be covered with straw. But when they had to ‘work’ (travel a small distance) to reach the straw-covered one, they remained in the non-preferred one”. That is, animals necessarily pursue the satisfaction of their crucial needs, but not additional comfort. Humans, by contrast, have always striven to obtain increasingly elaborate garments (shoes, containers, ornaments). Certainly, this is consequence of our technological capacity. Yet it also requires physical effort not sustained by crucial needs, but rather by imagined possibilities. This difference between humans and non-humans, observed here in relation to pleasure, might also apply to pain.

The 1997 paragraphs were purely speculative exploration. Certainly, today I articulate more precisely the difference between ‘expectation’—something proper to all sentient animals—, ‘vicarious expectation’, which great apes can activate, and the exclusively human ‘second content’. Yet the situation remains largely the same. In any case, I will now try to challenge the excessive confidence with which some today speak about the “horrendous suffering of animals”.

In moments of pain, both animals and humans are focused on the goal of escaping. More specifically, everyone uses all the energy their body, helped by the release of cortisol, can muster to flee predation. It is important to emphasize that this –this responding by focusing on the immediate future as determined by the goal of escaping mortal danger– represents the sole adaptive animal behavior in such situations.

Certainly, we share that adaptive behaviour. However, we, unlike animals, possess capacities that are often useful for creative problem-solving –namely, the capacity to think about the past, about a possible non-immediate future, or about situations that we recognize as impossible. Therefore, we contrast this late type of ‘second mental contents’ with the dangerous situation. (Thus, for example, we become aware that there is no solution –that the arrival at safety is already impossible.) Because of the intervention of those

‘second mental contents’, human pain, even when pain is primarily physical, carries an added bitterness not found in animals. Humans can think in terms of full mental states beyond the here and now, and these contents profoundly alter the experience of the present moment.

- 4.2) Is crying one of the ways of expending energy when we realize that nothing can be done? Perhaps, in moments of crying, we focus on imagined situations while at the same time knowing that they cannot become real. This hypothesis about crying could also explain why some people cry so much at fiction. Obviously, in the fictional world we cannot, by definition, do anything.

Certainly, there is a marked difference between these two cases. On the one hand, emotional engagement with fictional protagonists does not entail suffering, but rather a pleasure for which people willingly pay the price of a ticket or a book. (This is because, first, those tears are triggered by vicarious, not one’s own expectations, and second, because there is absolutely no possibility of helping the protagonist at a cost.) On the other hand, when a human being realizes that they can do nothing to escape their own pain, suffering intensifies. Yet both cases share something important: Energy cannot be discharged through action and thus may be released in tears.

I am not denying another function of crying—namely, that of unintentionally or intentionally seeking help when one cannot provide it oneself (Sznycer et al. 2025). This interpersonal function is very likely the original one: Infants require much more care than the offspring of other primates. However, this does not exclude my suggestion. Infants, tears shed in response to fiction, and the realization that no solution is possible—the three situations—share a common feature: the crying subject is unable to act to modify the situation.

- 4.3) Returning to the general idea of this Section: We cannot claim to understand an animal’s inner experience of suffering. Certainly, no one claims that we do. For example, Southgate (2008: 4) acknowledges that “we do not know what the experience of other creatures is like, what it is like to be a cat, or indeed a bat”. However, throughout his

book he takes too many assumptions for granted regarding what he calls ‘horrendous’ animal suffering.

We must be very humble with respect to how we understand animal interiority. Nevertheless, there has been some progress. Fleming & Michel 2025 propose a broad gradation of consciousness not only across species—from fish and their reflexive movements to mammals and their capacity for planning and monitoring reality—, but also among the various situations in which a mammal may find itself. These types or ‘levels’ of consciousness – see, e.g., Veit et al. 2025– nowadays are not linked as exclusively as they were in Tulving’s time to different types of memory, although this important connection continues to be investigated – see LeDoux 2025. For my part, I would emphasize the early achievement of perceiving space as external, even in dreams. (Regarding the state prior to such an achievement, there are some clues: See Humphrey 2025, as always attentive to ‘blindsight’, or Gainotti, preprint: “Visual information is conveyed to the human right amygdala not only from the primary visual system, but also, more rapidly, via a subcortical route”.) These different types of consciousness may perhaps be reflected in different painful sensations.

Baron et al. 2025, who had previously published several works on anesthesia, argue that consciousness originally arose right at the same time as the primitive, subcortical sensation of pain. Certainly, what is now predominantly the focus is not the origin of consciousness but the different levels of consciousness. However, I agree with those authors: The sensation of pain is extremely important for the survival of animals, since they, unlike plants, can attempt to flee from what can harm them.

As should now be clear, I do not adopt Descartes’ point of view, nor do I take comfort in the “black box” invoked by behaviorism to distinguish animal behavior from plant tropisms. Thus, I cannot be accused of proposing “the neo-Cartesian view that people who think animals feel pain are anthropomorphizing because they love their pets” (Madueme 2021, 486). What I am proposing is only that animal pleasure and pain differ from ours—or, more concretely, that animals’ suffering, which remains within the limits of what is adaptive for them, is far less horrendous than what humans would experience in the same situation.

At this point, it is convenient to mention Horvat 2023. After arguing that a sharp separation between pain and suffering is a relic of now-unacceptable mind/body dualism, he surveys a wide body of literature on animal pain. Unfortunately, this literature presents mutually conflicting views and yields no firm conclusions.

In conclusion, I will continue to be concerned with human pain, which I know firsthand, and will disregard the fate of animals devoured by predators, or of the reserve pelican-chick. It is true that such pain is not fictional. Yet it is very likely that our simulation of the inner experience of those animals is not accurate, but rather excessively anthropomorphic.

5. Recapitulating the proposal

After this plausible deflation of the horror attributed to animal suffering, let us return to the entire proposal or, more concretely, to its successive points.

*In the eyes of God, the existence of even a single holy human being is an incomparable manifestation of Life (a manifestation not even comparable to the marvelous values of beauty and diversity produced by animal evolution).

*Human holiness consists in a subject freeing their conduct from selfish motivations of pleasure and pain, and instead becoming guided by the truth of the resemblance between their own inner life and that of others. Therefore, the true moral capacity must rely not only on uniquely human capacities but also on the pleasure/pain pair, which humans inherit from nonhuman animals, even though they greatly amplify this inheritance. Certainly, I fully accept that observing another's pain (or even animals' pain: remember Aquinas's claim) can awaken compassion in the observer and thus prompt a genuine moral decision. Indeed, I wholeheartedly endorse the way Herce and Lumbreras (2024) describe this process: "The general human principle of caring for the weak" is caused above all by "the ability to see oneself eccentrically and to judge one's own actions within a historical–narrative hierarchy capable of perceiving the whole of one's life." However, to this, my proposal adds that one's own pain and

pleasure are necessary for the emergence of one's moral decision, or, in other words, for one's own victory over that pair.

*The double movement of my proposal —downgrading animal pain while elevating the role of pain to the point of making it necessary for holiness— may be relevant to discussions of sub-optimal divine design.

*Finally, the triumph in the arduous task of placing truth above one's own pain and pleasure —that is, above the great work of the previous evolution— is (we might say) what bestows upon Creation its intrinsic goodness. Only this triumph —achieved by Jesus Christ and by the saints— brings relief to the whole of creation, “which has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Romans 8:22).

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