

# The Vitality of Evangelical Theology: Celebrating ETF Leuven at 40

EDITED BY

Andreas J. BECK – Jos DE KOCK –  
Steven C. VAN DEN HEUVEL



PEETERS

## 13. “Red in Tooth and Claw”: God’s Love and Animal Suffering

RAYMOND R. HAUSOUL

Nature is full of atrocities. Various documentaries depict how animals cruelly defeat and devour each other. Well-known is Charles Darwin’s example of the parasitic wasp that desposits its larvae into the body of a caterpillar. From there, these larvae feed on the still-living caterpillar, leaving the vital organs intact until all other meat is almost consumed (Darwin 1993, 224). Darwin wrote on July 13, 1856 to the botanist Joseph Hooker, “What a book a Devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horribly cruel works of nature!” (Darwin 1990, 178). Thus, the entire animal kingdom is a kingdom of pain, or, as the English poet Alfred Tennyson put it, “nature, red in tooth and claw.”

For many people, non-human animals attacking and digesting other creatures seems to contradict a Judeo-Christian testimony of a loving God who created everything. After all, Christianity confesses that God’s love is so great that God died in Christ for this creation. That testimony of self-sacrifice stands in direct opposition to the brutal self-preservation of the animal kingdom. How could a loving God create such a violent nature?

Various attempts have been made to answer this question. However, in recent years few in Protestant evangelicalism have paid attention to the subject. Luther, Calvin and other theologians explained cruelty in the animal kingdom as a consequence of human disobedience to God (Madueme 2020, 11–34; Ryken 2013, 273; Calvin 2009, 62–3, 117; Bavinck 2006, 183; Bonhoeffer 2004, 134; Grudem 2000, 494–6; Luther 1958, 204; Cf. Cunningham 2010, 377). Opposite to this is the contemporary idea of an evolutionary view of life, in which non-human creatures suffered pain and died for countless generations before humans existed. This is a challenge for those in Protestant evangelicalism who understand Genesis 1–3 as giving information about God and creation.

This contribution addresses this understanding and demonstrates how God's love and animal suffering can be reconciled. First, it clarifies that animals genuinely experience suffering and that earlier theological-ethical explanations for this phenomenon are inadequate. Next, it substantiates that, from Genesis 1–3, evil and dying occurred before human disobedience. Based on these observations, it argues that God gave creatures freedom to choose between good and evil. Consequently, the conclusions are that non-human animals were the first to endure suffering and that it was only later in history that humans began to likewise suffer. As Ron Michener wrote in chapter 11, one of our aims in systematic theology at ETF is to consider the theological nature of interpretation and the ongoing interpretive nature of theological discourse. Therefore, this research promotes critical engagement with the contemporary philosophies that shape the modern theological landscape and encourages the vitality of evangelical theology.

### The Reality of Animal Suffering

In the past, some followed the Cartesian idea that animals experience no pain. Animal suffering, it was believed, was a projection of human emotions (Trethowan 1954, 41, 92; Raven and Needham 1932, 120). However, recent biology and neuroscience research proves that animals suffer and experience emotional and physical pain (Srokosz and Kolstoe 2016, 3–19; Bekoff 2008, 1–84). This gave rise to a neo-Cartesian approach: animals can feel pain but have little awareness of their suffering (Dougherty 2014; Blocher 2010, 168). Although these are still hotly debated issues, researchers hypothesize that there is a correlation between what human and non-human beings recognize as pain (Srokosz and Kolstoe 2016, 3–19; Moley 2006, 153–8).

Those who recognize that non-human beings feel pain are challenged to reconcile this with God's love. How is it possible that God has allowed such terrible suffering for billions of years? Augustine declared that God had created the world in this way to achieve a higher goal. He explained the presence of evil as a necessary fact for an aesthetic world. People often did not see how admirable “fire, frost, wild beasts, and so forth ... are in their own places, how excellent in their own natures, how beautifully adjusted to the rest of creation” (*City of God* XI.22.1). He considered the dark terrors of creation to be essential, as they make excellence more visible. They serve as contrasts to other aspects on earth that “can contribute to the beauty of the whole” (*City of God* XVI.8). This enables

humans to make a voluntary choice in the face of evil. Suffering is the instrument that guarantees the freedom of life. Without death or war, no one would know what life and peace are. That is why God makes suffering on earth act as a black cloth on which the jewel of his love can be better seen (*Confessions*, VII.22; *Vera Religione* 60.76–7; see also, Sohn 2007, 47–57).

Closely linked to this “aesthetic approach” is the notion that animal suffering serves a higher purpose: to reveal God’s character. In that case, the struggle against death in the animal kingdom reveals the enormous vitality of God’s greatness or the suffering of Christ in salvation history (Murphy and Ellis 2007, 118–22, 174–8; Rolston III 1994, 205–29). Alternatively, another possible interpretation is that it shows God’s providence for other creatures in a circle of life (Hick 2010, 350; Birch and Vischer 1997, 3). Animals that die give nutrients and space to other animals, just as Christ’s sacrifice gives eternal life to creatures. In this context, predators keep livestock grouped in a certain place so that plants in other areas can recover.

Still, all these proposals are met with resistance. No matter how beautiful the metaphor of the dark cloth and the jewel sounds, it ultimately communicates, in the end, that God needs evil to achieve good. For many, this is not easy to accept. When faced with cruel suffering and struggles against death in the animal kingdom, it becomes difficult to say that these are intended to give God glory.

In many cases, animal suffering seems entirely pointless. What is the use of a deer caught up in a forest fire, badly injured and burned, fighting for its life for several days without anyone taking notice of it (Swinburne 2011, 190)? Whoever observes suffering in nature realizes that theological-aesthetic purposes or explanations related to God’s character are challenging to integrate with the God revealed in Christ. In these proposals, non-human animals have almost no value in themselves and instead serve to benefit others. This hardly fits with a Christian testimony of a loving Creator who, through Christ, “was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Col 1:20).

### Death to All through Human Disobedience?

Throughout history, Jews and Christians alike believed in a good original creation in which animal suffering did not belong (cf. 4 Ezra 4:11–12; LAE 10:1–11:3; Philo, *Quaestiones in Genesim*, I.16; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, V.33.4; Louth 2001, 67–6, 94–5). The origin of animal suffering