

Comment

Tutuism and the Moral Universe. Comment on Gasser (2021). Animal Suffering, God and Lessons from the Book of Job. *Religions* 12: 1047

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Abstract: Georg Gasser has recently attempted a new explanation to the problem of animal suffering, i.e., how can a morally perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent God allow the gratuitous suffering of animals? His argument can be interpreted in two ways: (i) creation is amoral and therefore there is no problem of animal suffering; (ii) God's morality is beyond us and not responsive to humans. In both cases, the problem of animal suffering is, according to Gasser, explained. Grounded on the thought of Desmond Tutu, I contend, however, that both (i) and (ii) imply that God would be immoral, which is an unacceptable implication for Christians. Therefore, Gasser's explanation fails to solve the problem of suffering. Further, I uphold that if God exists He is necessarily a moral agent and if one wishes to give up such property, then also needs to give up His omnipotence. On top of this, I challenge the idea that there is a naturalistic fallacy in holding a Tutuist conception of God.

Keywords: the problem of evil; African Philosophy of Religion; Desmond Tutu; animal suffering; naturalistic fallacy; amorality; concepts of God; Georg Gasser; gratuitous evil; moral status



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1. Introduction

In a recent article in *Religions*, Georg Gasser (Gasser 2021) attempts a new explanation of the problem of animal suffering: how can a morally perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent God allow the gratuitous suffering of animals? This is a challenge to God's existence because a God with such characteristics would presumably not allow such gratuitous suffering. Gasser's answer is slightly ambiguous, and it can have two possible interpretations: (i) animal suffering does not challenge the existence of God because creation is amoral and He does not rule the universe according to moral laws; alternatively, Gasser may be arguing that (ii) the moral laws of God are non-humancentric and thereby not only are not responsive to humans but also beyond human understanding. Hence, animal suffering does have a moral justification but just not one that humans expect or can understand. I believe that Gasser argues for (i), but because there are elements in his text that suggest (ii), I will address both in this comment to his article. Inspired by the thought of Desmond Tutu, I contend that both (i) and (ii) would imply that God is immoral rather than amoral. More precisely, God's failure to stop evil He is able to stop at a low cost is immoral because it violates social harmony and, thereby, neglects the moral status of some of His creation. Additionally, I contend that Gasser's argument removes the possibility of attributing moral blame or praise to human action, which is not only a questionable moral implication but also an idea at odds with Christian values. As this is an unacceptable implication for Christians, I argue that Gasser's theory fails to solve the problem of animal suffering. Further, I contend that these criticisms I raise do not fall in the naturalistic fallacy.

As a starting point, I treat the problem of evil as fundamentally a moral question (Sterba 2019); further, I share the intuition of philosophers like Eleonor Stump and Marilyn McCord Adams, that to be sound, a theodicy needs to be grounded in Christian values (Adams 2000; Stump 1985). Note also that my goal is not to challenge the existence of God

as I do not carry out an extensive analysis of different theodicies, but simply to challenge Gasser's argument.

2. Creation as Amoral

The first possible interpretation of Gasser's argument is that animal suffering can be explained if God is conceived of in less personalistic terms. Gasser suggests a God inspired by Classical Theism, where God is a non-personal being. Thus, God is primarily the creator and sustainer of everything. So, for Gasser, God is not a guarantor of moral rules and there are no moral principles in creation. In Gasser's words: 'God directly [is] a sublime power in nature who does not rule the world in accordance with a moral order.' (Gasser 2021, p. 10). Thus, if creation is amoral because God is not concerned about morality, then animal suffering is to be understood as a mere fact of creation without needing further moral explanations for why it occurs. Gasser thereby concludes that 'the idea is that creation is not ordered according to any principles of justice and therefore it makes no sense to demand them' (Gasser 2021, p. 11).

Inspired by the thought of Tutu, I wish to show that Gasser's argument would lead to an implication that Gasser and most Christians are not willing to accept; that is, if it is true that evil occurs gratuitously and God is able to stop it, but because He does nothing, God is not simply amoral as Gasser suggests. Instead, if this were the case, God would be *immoral*. To understand this, it is important to start by pointing out that for Tutu, we live in a moral universe with a personalistic God. Indeed, he states that 'This is a moral universe (. . .) God is a God who cares about right and wrong. God cares about justice and injustice' (Tutu 2011, pp. 2–3).

During Apartheid, Tutu wrote to P. W. Botha (who was President of South Africa at the time) telling him that the anti-Apartheid activists have already won because they were on the side of justice and God will ultimately bring fairness to the world (Tutu 1988). Underlying this idea that the world is moral is also a Tutuist moral theory. From a Tutuist perspective, the highest good is the promotion of social harmony: 'Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the summum bonum—the greatest good' (Tutu 2000, p. 35). This is an endorsement of the Afro-communitarian idea of Ubuntu, a concept that means 'I am because you are and prescribes engaging in socially harmonious/positive communal relationships'.

Tutu's quote is often interpreted as implying the idea that individuals ought to act in ways that promote the goods of others and, particularly, their welfare and virtue (Metz 2007). The prescription implies some duties. Individuals are under a duty to promote the welfare and virtue of others, to the extent that it is reasonable, and it does not bring them great cost. Moreover, if one is somehow responsible for other individuals' goodness, refraining from aiding others may be a violation of the prescribed ethic (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2021). For example, if I have a duty to take care of my children, refraining from promoting their welfare and virtue means that I fail to fulfill my duties. Let us say that I refrain from taking my children to school, then I am violating a duty to promote their well-being. In the African philosophical context, this duty to promote everyone's well-being and virtue is something that all individuals are understood to have; but this universal rule does not have to be accepted for the purpose of this comment. Instead, it is sufficient to accept that individuals have *special duties towards significant others* (Molefe 2016). Parents, in particular, are in a unique relationship with their children and thereby may be the only ones realistically in a position to promote their welfare and virtue.

Why do we have duties towards some beings? Tutu's own work has little to offer about normative ethics. He routinely uses the concept of 'human dignity' to explain what is morally wrong with the Apartheid and racism (Tutu 2000, 2011; Tutu and Allen 2011; Allen 2012). Nonetheless, he not only never defines the concept, but the question at stake here is regarding non-human animal suffering, a topic which Tutu himself does not address. Fortunately, several Tutuists have developed a Tutuist-inspired concept of moral status that can bring light to this question. Grounded on Tutu's idea that social harmony is the highest

good, some Tutuist philosophers have argued that what makes beings morally worthy is the fact that they can either be the object or subject of communion. That is, their capacity to either engage in social harmony or be a recipient of social harmony is what makes individuals deserve moral consideration (Metz 2012; Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ewuoso 2021). Taking this on board, the most fundamental moral wrong involved in neglecting the welfare and virtue of animals is to fail to provide them what they are entitled to in virtue of their moral status (Metz 2017). A violation of dignity (human or not) is precisely a failure to treat individuals as they deserve (Metz 2010).¹

According to this Tutuist understanding of the world, if Gasser were right that God does not rule the world according to moral rules, then God is not simply being amoral, He is being immoral. For if the ethic prescribes that we are duty-bound to promote the welfare and virtue of others (especially significant others) when it is reasonable to do so, then a God who watches His creation suffer gratuitously without doing anything is like a father who neglects to take care of the welfare of his children. In virtue of their moral status, animals are at the very minimum entitled to not be placed in situations where they suffer gratuitously. For example, imagine an animal unknowingly drinks a poison I placed in front of him, and I happen to have the antidote in my pocket. I can easily stop him from taking it or give him the antidote, but I just stand still watching the animal slowly dying. My action is wrong in at least two ways. I am guilty of misplacing the poison and should take responsibility; even if I were not guilty of it, it would be easy for me to stop it and I did not. In both cases, it is clearly wrong for me to neglect the welfare of the animal. The most fundamental reason underlying it is that in both cases I neglect that the animal has sufficient moral value to require any intervention and, thereby, neglect my duty towards the animal. God, in the face of a situation which is not costly for Him and that He created, is duty-bound to address that evil, otherwise He is immoral. Just like I could have avoided the suffering of the animal, so can God avoid gratuitous suffering and, to the extent that He does not, then He is being immoral. The question becomes more pressing if I have special duties towards the suffering being. Note that God as the creator is also the father of all existing beings and therefore has stronger duties towards them. In other words, if God just watches an animal (which is His creation) suffering gratuitously when He could avoid it at a low cost, then He is disrespecting the moral status of this animal; God owes respect to the animal due to the animal's moral status and has a special duty to honor this moral status because He is the father.

Gasser could object that this Tutuist theory does not have universal appeal and I need to make a stronger point with an example that is convincing not just to Tutuists but also other ethicists. Hence, to understand the generally shared moral intuition underlying my argument, take another thought experiment which I contend to have wide appeal to individuals who hold different ethical views. Peter Singer imagined a situation where a child has fallen into a pond and is drowning. Someone passes by and sees that it would be fairly easy to pull the child out and the only cost to this person would be turning up late to work. In such a situation, most would agree that there is an obligation to rescue the child because it is relatively easy to do this at a low cost without a significant burden (Singer 2015). Singer is a utilitarian, and he uses this argument to ground some utilitarian arguments about aid. Nonetheless, the core point of Singer by formulating this thought experiment is not to show that utilitarianism is true. Instead, his goal is to show that there is something *most of us* immediately recognize as morally wrong when confronted with this example. Not aiding the child when the cost is so low is intuitively morally wrong, independently of one being a deontologist or a utilitarian. The point I wish to make therefore is independent of what moral theory one prefers: without regard to whether one holds Tutuist ethics or a consequentialist perspective like Singer, one recognizes that the action is morally wrong.

In Gasser's theory, God's actions are analogous to the one of the person who lets the child die. Given that God is omnipotent, it does not seem that God would endure great costs in avoiding animal suffering and it is Gasser's burden to prove otherwise. Note that

the point here is not that the existence of animal suffering in itself poses a challenge to God's existence. The problem is that Gasser accepts it as *gratuitous*. In other theodicies and defenses where animal suffering is explained as not gratuitous, but rather as instrumental for a greater good, this problem is not posed (although other complications may come up) (Murray 2008; Swinburne 1998; Dougherty 2014). Gasser may object that this problem does not apply to his theory because he is referring only to the natural (animal) world and to natural evil. Nonetheless, if this is the case, his account cannot explain why some animals suffer at the hands of humans and animals who are capable of moral agency (e.g., great apes).

Gasser could object to my argument that I missed the most fundamental point that he is making; namely, he could be contending that what he has demonstrated is that addressing the problem of evil using moral tools falls in the naturalistic fallacy. The term 'naturalistic fallacy' was coined by George Edward Moore, but most scholars track the problem back to David Hume (Frankena 1939; Ridge 2019). The supposed fallacy is to mistakenly infer a moral proposition from a proposition about nature. An example of such a fallacy could be if someone contends that smoking is unhealthy and from this premise concludes that one ought not to smoke.² However, the premise about the natural fact of health is insufficient to conclude how one ought to act. In fact, there are many things which are unhealthy, but that does not imply they are immoral (like eating white bread). As Moore pointed out, conclusions about value require at least one evaluative premise rather than factual premises regarding the naturalistic features of things. Put differently, moral claims can only be inferred from moral premises or a combination of moral premises with other premises. A syllogism that contains only premises about nature and not morality cannot validly lead to a moral claim (Moore 2012). Moore's thesis, if true, does, indeed, pose a problem to Christian ethics because Christian ethics is routinely grounded on metaphysical questions. If the theory were true, then what God is like, how God is related to the world, what He did, what Jesus was like, and so forth seems to entail nothing regarding morality. According to the naturalistic fallacy argument, there is no single value judgement entailed by these (Miller 2018; Stearns 1972).

Nonetheless, I reject that this objection can challenge my argument. As W.K. Frankena and Bernard Williams pointed out, even if one assumes that there is some kind of fallacy in the kind of reasoning that Moore is criticizing, it seems that Moore is being uncharitable towards most of his opponents (Frankena 1939; Williams 2011). The principle of charity requires that one's statements are understood in the most reasonable or rational way possible (Blackburn 2008; Quine 2013). Hence, when someone is stating, say, 'X is pleasant, therefore X is good' the most charitable interpretation of this is that this is an enthymeme where there is a suppressed premise 'whatever is pleasant is good' (Ridge 2019). Moore is guilty of uncharitably neglecting that there is a hidden premise (Frankena 1939; Williams 2011). To show that I do not fall into a naturalistic fallacy, I wish to make explicit the chain of reasoning that led to my criticism. The detailed reasoning of the current criticism is as follows:

Syllogism 1

- Social harmony is the highest moral good. (p)
- Moral status is given in virtue of the capacity for engaging in social harmony either as a subject or an object. (p)
- Morality prescribes (especially towards significant others) that one acts according to moral goods and that being's moral status is respected. (p)
- Therefore, morality prescribes one acts in socially harmonious ways and respects beings' moral status (especially that of significant others). (c)

Syllogism 2

- To respect a being's moral status means to treat them with social harmony. (p)
- Social Harmony is defined as the combination of solidarity and identification. (p)
- Solidarity requires one to avoid evil and aid others when this is not unreasonably costly to do so. (p)

- Therefore, one ought to avoid evil and aid others when this is not unreasonably costly. (c)
Syllogism 3
- God does not avoid evils or aid others that He can reasonably avoid or aid those He can easily aid. (p)
- Those who allow evils that can be reasonably avoided or who do not aid those they can easily aid are acting immorally. (p)
- God is acting immorally. (c)

None of the premises above derives a moral proposition or a moral property from a natural proposition. Instead, it looks at the situation and infers that there is an immoral act. The inference from a specific situation is not a ‘naturalistic fallacy’. The naturalistic fallacy is not that one cannot apply ethical principles to real circumstances (Feldman 2018). Instead, it is that conclusions about value are inferred from premises about nature (rather than value statements).

Gasser could further challenge my contention on two grounds. Firstly, Gasser could object that I am assuming God is a moral agent when the question being discussed is whether He really is a moral agent or not. In other words, I am committing a *petitio principii* fallacy as I am assuming to be true without warrant what is to be proved, i.e., that God is a moral agent. Secondly, Gasser can challenge my argument by contending that moral realism is false, and it is not verifiable. Following an Ayerian line of thought, Gasser can uphold that there is nothing out there like ‘moral facts’ which can be observed. According to this view, only those things that are empirically verifiable can be proved to be true. Nevertheless, there is no such thing in the world that corresponds to a ‘moral fact’ (Ayer and Rogers 2001). Given that my theory seems to assume that there are moral facts out there, then my theory is false. Having into consideration that this moral view of the world is incoherent, then the best alternative would be to uphold an amoral perspective of nature as Gasser does.)

To answer the first objection, it is important to clarify what to be a moral agent means. To be a moral agent is to *have the capacity* to discern right from wrong and thereby to be held accountable for one’s actions (Haksar 2016). Is God a moral agent? He is *necessarily* so. If He is omnipotent, He must be a moral agent as if he were not, this would imply that he is not capable of understanding right and wrong and this is a contradiction in terms. Put differently, the concept of ‘omnipotence’ necessarily entails that one *is capable of exercising moral agency*. The same cannot be affirmed for immorality and amorality. These refer to the *absence of a capability* to be moral or to a situation where morality is not a relevant factor (e.g., whether to drink jasmine or green tea) (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2021). Thus, unless Gasser is willing to give up omnipotence, he cannot contend that God is not a moral agent.

Regarding the second objection, the first reply is that if this strong verificationist theory were true, this would render most universal propositions false. For example, this would mean that propositions such as ‘all flamingos are pink’ or ‘all men are mortal’ are false because there is no possible way to verify all the cases. Due to the fact that this theory is too demanding, generally speaking, philosophers consider today that it should be abandoned (Swinburne 2016). Instead, a better approach is to find theories that have a strong explanatory power. Moreover, the fact that we have imperfect knowledge of moral facts does not stand as an argument against moral realism. Natural sciences also revise their arguments and have imperfect knowledge and routinely revise their theories according to new paradigms (Kuhn 2012). We do not conclude from this that there are no natural facts and there is no reason to infer differently regarding moral facts.

3. Non-Anthropocentric Moral Principles

A second possible interpretation of Gasser’s argument is that it is not that the world is amoral but that divine and human moral principles are distinct. This interpretation is suggested in the following passages:

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. (Gasser 2021, p. 7)

And:

God is responsive to values, but these values may not make an exclusive reference to us. (Gasser 2021, p. 12)

According to this view, creation is moral but not human-driven. So, according to this interpretation, it is not that God is amoral like in the previous case. Instead, His moral code is different and not responsive to humans; thereby He cannot be judged by such standards. In this second interpretation, Gasser is not concerned about the naturalistic fallacy given that he himself seems to admit that God is the ultimate source of morality, which is precisely the kind of problem that proponents of the naturalistic fallacy are at odds with.

The first problem with this view is that it collapses into one of the interpretations of the Book of Job that Gasser finds incomplete and unconvincing. If the view that moral standards do not apply to God is true, in the face of such horrendous injustices as Job seems to suffer, we can only conclude that God's moral rules are beyond human understanding and that Job should simply accept his destiny and humbly submit to God in the face of His greatness. But if there is an inscrutable moral code for humans, then this has several negative implications which seem not only to be at odds with Christian morality but also to be morally questionable more generally. If this theory were true, this would mean that humans can never be held accountable for moral wrongs. Just like a baby who cannot understand what is right and wrong and should not be held morally responsible for her actions, humans likewise should not, in this view, be held responsible for not following a rule which is impossible to understand: their relationship to God's moral code is analogous to the one of babies vis à vis the moral code of adults.

Gasser may reply that there is a human moral code given by God which humans should humbly follow, and therefore they should be held accountable for not following it even if they do not understand it. Nonetheless, the existence of a general moral code which is simply repeated rather than understood brings further problems. No general moral code can be of any use for particular situations unless it is understood and, thereby, applied in particular cases. In fact, a salient Christian idea is that the Bible needs to be understood as a whole so that its values are honoured. According to this view, without such understanding, it is not possible to find moral guidance in the Bible (Augustine 2008).

Furthermore, it seems that a necessary requirement for one to be a moral person is that one understands and, thereby, can reasonably predict the consequences of one's actions. Without knowing these, one's actions are simply random acts or repeated meaningless forms of behaviour (Swinburne 1998). There is little or nothing praiseworthy about a robot mechanically repeating an action (e.g., a traffic sign changing colours to regulate the traffic). What is praiseworthy is that a certain person knows she is doing something that can achieve a greater good or that honours a certain value. Even if there is some value in repeating a morally right action, it is surely better to do something understanding it is morally right than to simply blindly and mechanically do it. Again, this coheres with the salient Augustinian Christian tradition of thought where moral actions are better if they are understood (Augustine 2012).

More intriguingly, if God does not provide an understandable moral code for humans, then He would be acting immorally. As explained in the previous section, under Tutuist ethics, everyone (including God) is duty-bound to help individuals acquire virtue. But an omnipotent being not creating an understandable moral code means basically to create/allow unnecessary confusion amongst humans who will misunderstand His moral code and, thereby, cause evil. If this were true, then God would be responsible for the moral evils in the world because He had provided misleading guidance to humans. For example,

in a war situation, a general may be responsible for a war crime committed by her soldiers if she has deliberately misled them to believe, say, that innocent civilians were soldiers and this led her soldiers to kill innocents. To put it in a syllogism:

- Social harmony requires one to help others to act morally if costs to oneself are not unreasonable. (p)
- When one fails to aid others to be morally better or causes others to be worse, one is acting immorally. (p)
- There are occasions where God both fails to aid individuals and leads individuals to act immorally. (p)
- Therefore, God is immoral. (c)

Note that the point is not that God should reveal Himself. As Swinburne suggests, there may be plausible reasons for God to not be obviously present as a stimulation for humans to do good (Swinburne 1998, 2016). Instead, the point is that if it is impossible for humans to know God, then Him not revealing moral norms cannot be explained as a method for stimulating humans to do good, but as undermining the possibility of doing good.

4. Conclusions

In this piece, I evaluated Gasser's argument for the problem of animal suffering considering Tutu's thought. I argued that Gasser's view has unacceptable implications for Christian doctrine, i.e., that God is immoral. Hence, Gasser's theory, if one starts from a Christian viewpoint, cannot be true. Moreover, I argued that Gasser's views also imply that humans can neither be praised nor blamed for their moral choices and actions. Finally, I contended that holding this moral perspective about God does not imply the naturalistic fallacy. Nonetheless, this does not disprove the existence of God because not only are there other theodicies which do not face the same problem, but also there are other concepts of God outside Christianity that do not understand God as morally perfect. Further research should explore a Tutuist explanation of the problem of animal suffering.

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Notes

- ¹ Note that neither Tutu nor Metz seem to attribute dignity to humans. Hence, using the concept of moral status is much more helpful and consensual when referring to normative questions about animals.
- ² There are at least two more interpretations of the naturalistic fallacy, but I do not address them here as they are irrelevant for the current discussion. See Feldman (2018).

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