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Do We Need a Plant Theodicy?*

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Abstract. In recent decades, philosophers and theologians have become increasingly aware of the extent of animal pain and suffering, both past and present, and of the challenge this poses to God's goodness and justice. As a result, a great deal of effort has been devoted to the discussion and development of animal theodicies, that is, theodicies that aim to offer morally sufficient reasons for animal pain and suffering that are in fact God's reasons. In this paper, I ask whether there is a need to go even further than this, by considering whether effort should be made to extend theodicy to include plants as well. Drawing upon ideas found in some recent animal theodicies as well as in the work of some environmental ethicists, I offer three arguments for supposing that plants should indeed fall within the purview of theodicy: (1) the argument from non-flourishing as evil, (2) the argument from moral considerability, and (3) the argument from intrinsic value. I also consider a possible objection to each of these arguments. Having outlined and defended the aforementioned arguments for broadening theodicy to include plants as well as humans and animals, I conclude by considering what a plant theodicy might look like.

Keywords: Theodicy; evil; plants; animals; God

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Introduction

In recent decades, philosophers and theologians have become increasingly aware of the extent of animal pain and suffering, both past and present, and of the challenge this poses to God's goodness and justice. As a result, a great deal of effort has been devoted to the discussion and development of animal theodicies, that is, theodicies that aim to offer morally sufficient reasons for animal pain and suffering that are in fact God's reasons.[1] In this paper, I ask whether there is a need to go even further than this, by considering whether effort should be made to extend theodicy to include plants as well. At first glance, the idea no doubt sounds ridiculous, as there is no plausible evidence that plants feel pain. Plato (1997, 1277), of course, supposed that plants are capable of sensation, "pleasant and painful," but few since have been prepared to follow him in this. From time to time one does come across suggestions that plants can feel pain, but these tend to be made on websites of dubious repute rather than in the scientific literature. According to a leading plant biologist,[2] any suggestion that plants do feel pain is a question of plant subjectivity that the biologist can neither ask nor answer. Because of this, and because the philosopher is in no position to say anything more definitive on the matter, it makes sense to concede at the outset that a case for a plant theodicy cannot realistically be based on the pain that plants may or may not feel. Nevertheless, we can identify three reasons for supposing that

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1 In seeking to identify God's *actual* morally sufficient reasons, these theodicies go further than mere defences, which seek only to identify his *possible* morally sufficient reasons in order to show that there is no logical incompatibility between the existence of evil and the existence of God. A defence is thus a story in which the existence of both God and evil are logically compatible, without any further commitment as to whether this story is true. Most attempts to explain and justify animal pain and suffering have been presented as theodicies, though I am aware of one defence, which is briefly discussed below in note 9.

2 Anthony Trewavas, Professor Emeritus at the Institute of Molecular Plant Science, University of Edinburgh, in private communication.

plants should fall within the purview of theodicy, and outlining these will form the heart of this paper.

The paper will be structured as follows: In section 2, I will offer a brief overview of how the project of theodicy came to be expanded to include animals as well as humans, and I will then outline the key claims of three recent animal theodicies. In sections 3, 4, and 5, I will put forward three arguments for supposing that plants should be the subject of theodicies also; these arguments will draw upon ideas found in these recent animal theodicies as well as in the work of some environmental ethicists. To each of these arguments I shall also consider a possible objection. Lastly, in section 6, I will conclude with a brief consideration of what a plant theodicy might look like. Let us begin with the place of animals in theodicy.

1. A Short History of Animals in Theodicy

Since Leibniz coined the term "theodicy" in the mid-1690s,[3] the vast majority of theodicies have been very anthropocentric in their focus, concerned only with the pain and suffering of humans.[4] Leibniz himself acknowledged animal pain but routinely downplayed it, insisting that as animals lack self-consciousness, their pains lack the intensity of those experienced by humans, which are often accompanied by grief and mental torment. Having concluded that animals' pain is not great enough to constitute true suffering or misery, Leibniz (2016, 265) declared that there is no question of God having acted unjustly in allowing them to feel the pain that they do.[5] An even more hard-line approach was taken by some Cartesians, who simply denied outright that animals are capable of feeling pain, let alone capable of suffering (see for example Lamy 1698, 547–48). The

[3] In a short draft piece dated 1695–97: Leibniz 1948, 370. English translation available here: http://www.leibniz-translations.com/theodicaea.htm

[4] This was also the case with those who engaged in theodicy *avant la lettre*. Aquinas, for example, acknowledged that animals feel pain but considered this to be morally insignificant and so not a problem for God's justice. See Wiertel 2017, 663–67.

[5] That Leibniz did not take animal pain as a serious threat to divine justice has been noted before. See for example Phemister 2016, 173–77.

most famous proponent of this position was Nicolas Malebranche (1684, 13, 16, and 1997, 323, 495), who devised a suite of arguments to show that animals lacked a soul.[6] And by claiming that a soul was a prerequisite for feeling pain, or suffering, he concluded that animals were capable of neither. As such, they were of no concern to God's justice.

From the seventeenth century onwards, theodicists have followed the broad paths trodden by Leibniz and Malebranche, with some denying that animals feel any pain at all, and others insisting that while animals do feel pain, whatever pain they experience does not constitute suffering and therefore does not qualify as evil. Even in recent decades, many of those who have discussed animals in connection with theodicy have endorsed one or other of these positions. In so doing, they have kept the focus of their theodicies squarely on human beings.[7]

But in the last twenty or thirty years or so, and especially in the last decade, we have also seen an increasing number of theodicists take a deep interest in the ordeals of animals, to the point where there are now a number of fully worked-out animal theodicies. The motivation for the development of these theodicies is the recognition that certain animals are capable not just of feeling pain but also of true suffering. This recognition appears to owe a debt to the animal rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which placed great emphasis on the sentience of certain animals and the need for us humans to accord those animals moral consideration on account of the fact that they are capable of suffering. Animal theodicists have taken the further step of supposing that sentient animals are the objects of God's moral concern as well as ours. Many animal theodicists consider animal suffering to be not just very real but also just as great a threat to God's justice as human pain and suffering, and in some cases even more so, given that the traditional ways of explaining human

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6 For details, see Strickland 2013.

7 For example, Peter Harrison (1989 and 1996) and Andrea Aguti (2017) have sided with the Malebranchian view which denies animal pain. Meanwhile, John Hick (1977, 313–14, 316) has endorsed a position similar to Leibniz's, allowing that animals experience "momentary pangs" of pain but otherwise have a "happy blindness" to their ultimate fate, being therefore "immune to the distinctively human forms of suffering."

suffering are not available to explain animal suffering.[8] Although a full survey of animal theodicies is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth sketching the contours of three in particular, namely those by Christopher Southgate, Trent Dougherty, and Bethany Sollereder. All three suppose that God's decision to allow life to evolve through natural selection is responsible for the development for the capacities for pain and suffering that some animals have, as well as for the selfishness, violence, and predator-prey relationships that cause much of the pain and suffering that animals experience. The most interesting differences between the three theodicies occur in their respective eschatologies.

We shall start with Southgate (2008, 40), who construes the problem of evil to be the problem that, for many organisms, life is all suffering and no flourishing. According to Southgate (2008, 42), the only way to make sense of such blighted lives is if "there is some ultimate good that will actually *redeem* the individuals ... concerned." Although he does not specify what he understands by "redemption," he appears to mean being present in the eschaton, namely the time at which creation is renewed as the final culmination of God's plan.[9] But according to Southgate, not every animal will live again at the eschaton. His concern is with "the eschatological fulfilment of creatures that have known no flourishing in this life" (2008, 16, cf. 87), which suggests that every animal that has suffered and failed to flourish will be redeemed, and this as compensation for their suffering and non-flourishing in this life. But as for other creatures, Southgate (2008, 84) says little except that what he terms "simple organisms" (that is, those which have "little sentience") may well be represented only as types rather than tokens; that is, a handful of individuals from the spe-

[8] For example, it seems implausible to claim that animal suffering is punishment for sin, since animals are generally not regarded as moral beings. Similarly, it seems implausible to claim that animal suffering is due to free will, since animals are generally thought not to have free will. Note, however, that at least one thinker (Moritz 2014) has put forward a defence in which it is suggested that (some) animals do in fact have free will, and that prior to the fall of Adam and Eve some of these animals staged a rebellion against God, this constituting a prehuman fall which resulted in animal suffering.

[9] The idea is based on scriptural passages such as Colossians 1.20 and Ephesians 1.10.

cies will be present in the eschaton in order to represent the species as a whole.[10]

Our second animal theodicy was developed by Trent Dougherty, who similarly construes the problem of evil as a problem of the suffering and non-flourishing of sentient animals, by which he means mammals, some birds, and "possibly" some other non-mammalian vertebrates (2014, 78). In crafting his theodicy, Dougherty (2014, 134) too draws on the notion of redemption, albeit "refracted through the lens of sainthood." In other words, the aforementioned animals (along with humans) are ultimately redeemed by becoming saints, a process in which they thoroughly defeat the evils they have experienced by not wishing them away, by accepting that their ultimate fate makes the evils they experienced worthwhile (2014, 114). This will require God granting resurrected animals new cognitive capacities that will ensure they "have ample opportunity in the afterlife to develop in the requisite ways, to form a perspective on their earthly careers" (2014, 142).

Our final animal theodicy, that of Bethany Sollereder, also leans heavily on the theological doctrine of redemption. She construes this not merely in terms of renewal but in terms of a transformation of individuals into something far greater than they were in this life.[11] Although she does not go as far as Dougherty and envisage animals becoming saints, she does imagine that the skills and instincts of predators may, in the redeemed world, be perfected but put to a different use, bringing about no fear, bloodshed or death (Sollereder 2016, 275). She sees the desire for redemp-

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[10] The idea is drawn from John Polkinghorne (2002, 122–23), who argues that non-human creatures "must have their share in cosmic hope" but that there is no reason to think "that every dinosaur that ever lived, let alone all of the vast multitude of bacteria that have constituted so large a fraction of biomass throughout the history of terrestrial life, will each have its own individual eschatological future." He thus supposes that God accords significance to the type rather than the token, such that there will be lions in the world to come but not every lion that has ever lived.

[11] "The nature of redemption is not simply the renewal of individuals to their former nature, but the transformation of individuals into something far greater than they ever were." Sollereder 2016, 275.

tion as rooted in God's love, which extends to all animals:[12] "If redemption is the work of God, and emerges out of the motivation of God's universal love, then we should expect redemption's scope to be as far-reaching as that love. Redemption, for all animals, is not just freedom from suffering, but the embrace of a new capacity for union with God" (2016, 275). While Sollereder (2016, 276) allows that redemption will heal the suffering of animals, she does not consider it as mere compensation for this suffering, but rather as the fullest expression of God's love, in which individual animals will be able to enjoy God.

2. The argument from non-flourishing as evil

I now turn to the arguments in favour of extending theodicies to include plants. The first argument, which seeks to show that any creature's failure to flourish qualifies as evil, is inspired by claims found in some of the aforementioned animal theodicies. Southgate (2008, 63) certainly suggests that non-flourishing is an evil, inasmuch as it involves a creature failing to conform to the pattern of life God intended, by which is meant its failure to live in the way that members of its species were intended to live. Although Southgate does not specify what he means by flourishing, or give concrete examples of it, it is possible he may be using the term in the way that other contemporary philosophers have, to refer to well-being (see Belshaw 2001, 128-9) or being healthy (see Kraut 2007, 90). Alternatively, Southgate may have in mind nothing more than the everyday "folk" meaning of the term, whereby an organism flourishes if it grows or develops in a normal, healthy way, and fails to flourish if this is not the case. Either way, it seems that what is intended is flourishing or non-flourishing *in a biological sense*, as opposed to any other, such as intellectual or economic flourishing, which are scarcely relevant when it comes to animals, being perhaps the preserve of humans alone. Accordingly, being diseased, or dying early in life (whether through predation, disease,

[12] In another passage, Sollereder (2016, 276) insists that "all non-human creatures will be raised, fulfilled, and exalted" rather than merely "all animals." The focus of her paper, however, is on animals that suffer.

accident or any other cause), would qualify as uncontroversial cases of non-flourishing in the biological sense. Now, as already noted, Southgate considers a failure to flourish to be evil only in the case of sentient creatures. Since he does not indicate why the non-flourishing of non-sentient creatures should not qualify as evil also, and since there seems to be nothing in the notion of non-flourishing that would restrict it to sentient beings, it would allow us to suppose there is nothing to prevent any case of non-flourishing, whether of human, animal, or plant, from qualifying as evil, which would bring all instances of non-flourishing, even that of plants, within the purview of theodicy.

A more roundabout route of establishing that non-flourishing qualifies as evil is taken by Dougherty, who expands the notion of *suffering* to include a failure to flourish. He writes: "Suffering will include both physical pain and mental pain as well as other forms of distress and failure to flourish" (Dougherty 2014, 26).[13] Dougherty broadens the notion of suffering in this way ostensibly because it enables him to sidestep the thorny debates surrounding the distribution and phenomenology of consciousness in animals, debates that are commonly rehearsed in the literature on animal theodicy because of the widely-held view that suffering requires consciousness. Needless to say, the supposition that suffering includes the failure to flourish is tantamount to identifying non-flourishing as evil, for since suffering is evil, non-flourishing would likewise qualify as evil. As we have seen, however, Dougherty does not think that every failure to flourish qualifies as evil, only the failure to flourish of mammals, birds, and perhaps some invertebrates. Yet as Dustin Crummett has correctly noted, Dougherty offers no reason for restricting his notion of suffering-as-failure-to-flourish to such creatures. Crummett (2017, 73n2) argues that Dougherty's broadened notion of suffering "would seem to open the door to discussing the suffering of creeping things" such as insects, spiders, millipedes, mites etc. After all, his thinking goes, such creatures can fail to flourish, and if a failure to flourish constitutes suffering, which in turn qualifies as evil, then this would bring them within

[13] Eleonore Stump (2010, 8) also supposes that suffering includes a failure to flourish, although only in relation to human beings.

the purview of theodicy. Accordingly, Crummett insists that the suffering of creeping things is a problem for the theodicist.

Crummett is correct as far as he goes, but he does not go far enough. For if the notion of suffering is broadened to include failure to flourish, then clearly any instance of a plant failing to flourish would qualify as suffering too. That plants can fail to flourish seems obvious enough, as plants can be diseased, be stunted by environmental factors, and be killed long before their lives would naturally end, all of which squarely qualify as a failure to flourish, irrespective of whether we understand flourishing in terms of health, well-being, or normal growth or development.[14] We might even avail ourselves of more detailed criteria or conditions that enable us to identify when it is and is not correct to attribute flourishing to plants. For example, Kallhoff (2014, 687) claims that a plant can be said to flourish if:

a) it is viable throughout its life, so that it is capable of reacting to external stress without endangering its overall performance which sustains its life;
b) it is capable of accomplishing its typical life-cycle (juvenile phases and adult phases which end with proliferation);
c) it succeeds in expressing the typical characteristics both of a plant which has a specific life-form and of a more specific organism, generally fitting its species description.

By all accounts, then, plants can fail to flourish just as much as can humans and animals, something routinely confirmed by environmental thinkers.[15] And if failure to flourish is evil, as some animal theodicists

[14] An anonymous referee here objects that human beings can "enrich" their flourishing in ways that plants cannot, for example by becoming wiser with age. The point, I take it, is that while plants can flourish only biologically, human beings can flourish in other ways too, e.g. intellectually, economically, athletically etc. But even if it is correct to say that, compared to plants, human beings have more ways to flourish and to fail to flourish, it remains the case that plants, like animals and humans, can fail to flourish biologically, which is the crucial issue here.

[15] For example, Rolston (1988, 109): "below the threshold of subjectivity life remains. It can yet flourish or be harmed." And O' Neill (2001, 168): "A living thing can be said to

have suggested, then plants' failure to flourish qualifies as evil, which would in turn bring them within the scope of God's justice and therefore make them a proper object of theodicy, along with humans and animals.

An obvious objection to this argument is that it utilises a notion of evil (non-flourishing) that differs dramatically from those often found in discussions on the problem of evil. After all, many philosophers construe evil as pain and suffering, by which is usually meant conscious suffering.[16] The non-flourishing of plants clearly would not qualify as evil on that definition. However, defining evil in that way seems overly restrictive in that it does not enable us to capture all the things we would want to consider as evil; for example, we would presumably want to consider it an evil for a human being to spend a lifetime in a coma, even if we suppose that in this state she is entirely unconscious and experiences no pain or (conscious) suffering whatsoever. Yet we could not consider this as an evil if evil were defined as pain and (conscious) suffering. Interestingly, in this example, it looks to be the non-flourishing – understood again in a biological sense – that makes the situation evil. Accordingly, there are perhaps grounds for a foundational definition of evil as non-flourishing, under which would fall pain and suffering as merely particular ways in which flourishing might happen to be impeded.[17] However, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

In any case, if one is concerned by the idea of taking non-flourishing as evil, it is worth noting that it would seem to qualify as such according to some of the other notions of evil accepted by contemporary philosophers of religion. Peter van Inwagen (2006, 4), for example, claims that "The word 'evil' when it occurs in phrases like 'the argument from evil'

flourish if it develops those characteristics which are normal to the species to which it belongs in the normal conditions for that species."

16 For two contemporary adherents of this understanding of evil, see Howard-Snyder (1999, 82) and Odell-Hein (2017, 41).

17 In a similar vein, John Bishop (2018, 42) has argued for a "unified notion of evil" where evil is taken to be "obstacles to human fulfilment," with pain and suffering qualifying as evil only when they prevent such fulfilment. However, Bishop does not extend his notion of evil to non-humans on the grounds that they are not aware of the obstacles to their fulfilment.

or 'the problem of evil' means 'bad things'." And Michael Hickson (2013, 3) defines evil as "all bad things," and indicates that "most contemporary philosophers" construe evil this way. With these definitions in mind, we need only note that non-flourishing clearly qualifies as a "bad thing" for the creature concerned, irrespective of whether it is human, animal, or plant. As Dougherty (2014, 140) remarks, all creatures, whether they are capable of suffering or not, "have conditions of flourishing, and many do not flourish. This is bad." Moreover, the non-flourishing of plants would also qualify as evil on the Thomistic understanding of evil as privation, since any failure to flourish will be due to a lack of some good that is proper to each specific plant, with any such lack qualifying as evil.[18] Ultimately, then, it seems defensible to consider non-flourishing as evil, either as the foundational definition of evil or as derivable from other, popular definitions.

3. The argument from moral considerability

Let us now turn to the second argument in favour of a plant theodicy. This argument, which seeks to show that God will have moral consideration for every creature, plants included, is again inspired by the work of animal theodicists and also that of some environmental ethicists.

According to many of those who have developed animal theodicies, God has a moral concern for animals that suffer simply *because* they suffer. On this view, the property that confers moral status on animals is sentience, or the ability to enjoy and suffer, which is considered to be both necessary and sufficient for moral status. The idea that moral status is conferred by sentience will be familiar to any student of environmental ethics. Peter Singer famously argued this way in 1974,[19] and others fol-

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[18] See Aquinas 1947, I, Q48, A3: "the absence of good, taken in a privative sense, is an evil; as, for instance, the privation of sight is called blindness."

[19] Singer 1974, 108: "If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account. This is why the limit of sentience (using the term as a convenient, if not strictly accurate, shorthand for the capacity to suffer or experience enjoyment or happiness) is the only defensible boundary of

lowed suit.[20] However, the idea that moral status is determined by sentience was quickly attacked by other environmental ethicists, who sought to develop a more inclusive ethic in its place. It is worth briefly outlining the thrust of the attack as well as the more inclusive ethic developed therefrom, as our second argument in favour of a plant theodicy will draw upon both.

In the late 1970s, in a direct response to claims by Singer, Kenneth E. Goodpaster (1978) argued that it makes little sense to focus on the capacity to suffer when determining moral considerability. He claimed that, once we realise what this capacity is for, namely the preservation and flourishing of life, and that there are various other capacities and mechanisms that contribute to that as well, we should accept that what really matters when determining moral considerability is being alive. According to Goodpaster (1978, 320), living things are morally considerable because, by virtue of being alive, they have needs and interests, and can be benefited and harmed, unlike non-living things. To Singer's claim that for non-sentient beings like plants there could be no interests as there was nothing to take into account, Goodpaster (1978, 319) responded that plants do have an interest, namely "in remaining alive." Needless to say, on the surface such a claim may appear peculiar, if not perverse, accustomed as we are to construe interests in terms of (conscious) desires, wants, or preferences, all of which are lacking in the case of plants. Goodpaster, however, makes clear that by "interests" he means not "desires" but "needs," thus anticipating the distinction found explicitly in some later philosophers between "interests as desires" and "interests as needs," with the latter understood as what would be conducive to the good or well-being of the creature in question.[21] While it would be inappropriate to say that plants

concern for the interests of others." Singer was certainly not the first to argue in this way; Jeremy Bentham (1789, 309n) is often considered to be the first to base ethics on sentience, though arguably André-Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval (2018, 231–6) beat him to it by more than three decades, in his 1756 essay "On the state of simple sensation."

20 See for example Frankena 1979, especially 11.

21 See for example Frey 1980, 78–9; Johnson 1993, 77. Note that while both utilise the distinction between the two kinds of needs, Frey rejects the idea that plants have any

have interests as desires, it does seem appropriate to attribute them with interests as needs, and indeed to identify "remaining alive" as one such, given that remaining alive is a necessary condition for the achievement of their good or well-being. If one accepts this analysis then one may look sympathetically upon Goodpaster's assertion that it is life, rather than sentience, that is a necessary and sufficient condition for moral considerability.

Needless to say, as an environmental ethicist, Goodpaster's concern was secular rather than theological. That is, he sought to develop a new, inclusive environmental ethic that would guide us humans in our dealings with the rest of the natural world. Nevertheless, his insights are of clear relevance to theodicists. For if it makes little sense for us humans to focus on sentience when determining moral considerability, it would make little sense for God to do so either, and for the same reason, namely that sentience is merely one capacity among several for the preservation and flourishing of life. So whereas animal theodicists typically hold that God will have moral consideration for creatures with sentience, one could instead suggest that God will follow a biocentric or life-centred ethic, which sees all living things – plants included – as worthy of moral consideration.

Of course, even if one supposes that God would have moral consideration for all living things, including plants, it does not necessarily follow that God has the same level of concern for all living things. After all, a clear distinction can be made between moral *considerability* and moral *significance*.[22] That is, while it may be that all living things are worthy of moral consideration, this does not necessarily make them all equally morally significant, as there may be degrees of moral significance, such that humans may have or enjoy greater moral significance than sentient animals, which in turn may have or enjoy greater moral significance than plants. But even if we suppose this is correct, it would not affect the conclusion of our second argument, because the moral significance of plants

interests as needs but Johnson does not, arguing instead that plants carry some moral weight on account of their interests.

22 The distinction is Goodpaster's; see Goodpaster 1978, 323.

– even if lower than that of humans and animals – would still be positive. Therefore God would have some moral consideration for plants. (As for what that might mean in practical terms, see section 6.)

A potential objection to this argument is that it seems to be undercut by the creation narrative, where God instructs humans and animals to eat plants (Genesis 1.29–30). Specifically, immediately after creation is complete, God tells humans that they are to eat every seed-bearing plant and the fruits of trees, and he tells animals that they are to eat every green plant. This might suggest that God does not regard plants as morally considerable at all, given his apparent lack of concern for their welfare or for their lack of flourishing.[23] And of course, if God is not concerned with the welfare and flourishing of plants, then theodicists would not need to concern themselves with it either, at least in the context of theodicy. To this I respond by noting that, in scripture, God not only allows harm to come to those for whom he has moral concern (such as Abel in Genesis 4.4–8), but also actively *brings harm* upon some of them, as is clear from the story of Job. Consequently, it would be problematic to conclude that God has no moral concern for plants from his command that they be the diet of humans and animals.[24] There is of course the broader problem of why God allows and even brings harm upon those for whom he has moral concern, but this is, strictly speaking, the problem of theodicy itself, and is not a problem specific to plants or other non-human creatures.

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[23] One might also suppose that God's instruction to Noah to take one or seven pairs of every kind of land animal into the ark (see Genesis 7.1–3) also implies a disregard for the welfare of plants, inasmuch as he did not want to spare them the deluge. However, it ought to be noted that there is no indication in scripture that plants were actually harmed by the flood or that God had to populate the land with plants again after the waters had receded.

[24] One could also respond to the first problem by noting that it is quite possible for humans and (some) animals to follow a plant-based diet without killing plants, and perhaps even without preventing them from flourishing, for example, by not eating so many of a plant's leaves that it cannot recover, and by supplementing with fruits and seeds. Because of this, it does not follow from God's command to humans and animals to follow a plant-based diet that he has no concern for plants.

4. The argument from intrinsic value

We turn now to our third argument in favour of extending theodicy to plants. This can be seen as the argument from moral considerability recast in terms of *intrinsic value*, a term that has enjoyed great currency in environmental ethics. In their efforts to push our moral boundaries outwards to include non-humans, environmental ethicists have often argued that certain parts of the non-human world – such as sentient creatures, or all living things, or ecosystems – possess intrinsic value. The thinking goes that successfully demonstrating that these parts of the non-human world possess intrinsic value has the result of bringing them within the sphere of human moral consideration. While the notion of intrinsic value has been most commonly used in environmental ethics for the purposes just described, some animal theodicists, such as Southgate and Dougherty, have availed themselves of it also, albeit in passing. Dougherty (2014, 139), for example, claims that sentient animals, by virtue of being alive and sentient, "resemble God to some degree and are therefore to some degree made in his image and thus bear intrinsic value."[25] His aim in employing the language of intrinsic value should be clear enough: if creatures other than humans do indeed possess intrinsic value then God will recognize it and treat these creatures accordingly, by acting morally towards them.

Now while Southgate and Dougherty suppose that only some living creatures possess intrinsic value, there is no shortage of environmental philosophers who have argued that all living creatures do so.[26] Most fa-

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[25] Consider also Southgate's (2008, 61) claim that "organisms are ... valued by God in their nature." Note that the notion of intrinsic value has been understood in various ways. Environmental ethicists have typically understood intrinsic value as non-instrumental value, i.e. as belonging to those parts of the non-human world that are ends in themselves. See O' Neill 2003, 120–21. Dougherty does not explain what he means by intrinsic value (nor does Southgate explain what is meant by God valuing organisms in their nature), but it is reasonable to think he understands it in a stronger sense, as objective value, that is, as value that exists independently of human valuers.

[26] A more direct route, taken by some ecotheologians, is to argue that certain scriptural passages imply that all parts of the natural world have intrinsic value. In this vein, see Arthur Walker Jones' (2001, 94) discussion of Psalm 104, with its lengthy praise

mously, Albert Schweitzer (2009, 159) asserted that his ethical principle, reverence for life, "says of no instance of life, "This has no value,"" and accordingly, he claimed (1987, 57) that all life was "something possessing value in itself." While an exposition of Schweitzer's ethics is beyond the scope of this paper, we can boil down his argument for the intrinsic value of all life to this: all living things possess the same will-to-live, that is, the same striving to maintain life and to thrive or flourish, and as we recognize this as valuable in our case then by extension it should be recognized as valuable in every case. Notoriously, Schweitzer (1969, 115) himself often portrayed the will-to-live in terms of conscious desires and intentions, such as when he insisted that beetles are capable of rejoicing in the sun and knowing fear and pain, and that every living creature "longs for fullness and development as deeply as I do myself" (Schweitzer 2009, 158).[27] Others have pointed out the obviously problematic anthropomorphic overtones of such claims, implying as they do that all living things have conscious desires and intentions.[28] Yet one does not need to construe the will-to-live in such anthropomorphic terms. John Kleinig (1991, 50), for example, claims that we

> can capture the central thrust of his [Schweitzer's] position by speaking instead of the telē of living organisms–the patterns of development and activity they are structured or disposed to manifest and in terms of which they can be said to flourish or languish. Each living organism has its own telos or pattern of development–whether limited, as in the case of plants, or relatively open-ended, as in the case of humans–and will-to-live may be interpreted as the somewhat anthropomorphized expression of this telic dimension.

In a similar vein, Paul Taylor and Holmes Rolston have both located the value of all living things in the conation they share, all having built-in

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of God's handiwork in the whole of creation, and David G. Horrell's (2010, 129–30) discussion of Genesis 1.31, which reports that God saw the entirety of his creation as very good.

27 Consider also Schweitzer's (2009, 173) claim that all living creatures "crave happiness, know the meaning of fear and suffering, and dread annihilation."

28 See for example Martin 2007, 34.

teloi that give them a good of their own and thus making them ends-in-themselves. Both Taylor (1986, 99–168) and Rolston (1988, 94–125) urge that since we attach value to ourselves as ends-in-ourselves, on pain of inconsistency we should attach value to all other ends-in-themselves. If we were to transplant this claim into a theological framework,[29] we would envisage God – like us – recognizing the value of all living things on account of their conation and status as ends-in-themselves.

An alternative way of interpreting Schweitzer, found in the work of Ara Paul Barsam, opens up a second path to defending the intrinsic value of all living things. According to Barsam, the will-to-live obtains its value from its source, namely the infinite will-to-live, or God. Thus Barsam (2008, 29) suggests that Schweitzer should be read as claiming that "Value comes not from human estimation, but from the view that the human will-to-live (and all wills-to-live) are of a shared source in the infinite Will-to-Live. Both human and nonhuman beings have the same ontological basis in God." This of course recalls the old (neoPlatonic) idea that in the act of creation God imparts to creatures some of his essence and thereby a degree of perfection.[30] To adopt this line of thinking leads us to a position not dissimilar to that affirmed by Dougherty (2014, 139), at least of sentient animals, which he claims (as we have seen) by virtue of being alive and sentient "resemble God to some degree and are therefore to some degree made in his image and thus bear intrinsic value."

Thus we have two ways of construing Schweitzer's argument, both of which lead to the conclusion that all living things have intrinsic value.[31]

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[29] Arguably, Schweitzer's doctrine of reverence for life was in fact developed within a (Christian) theological framework, even if it was not always presented that way. While some have denied this, such as Martin (2007, 2, 8–11), more careful readers, such as Barsam (2008, chapter 1), have shown how deep are the theological roots of Schweitzer's ethic.

[30] A position endorsed by the late eco-theologian Denis Edwards (2004, 135), who asserts: "From the perspective of theology, each individual creature has its own independent value within an interrelated universe springing from its relationship with the indwelling Creator Spirit." For the classic discussion of this idea, see Lovejoy 1936.

[31] Another way of reaching the conclusion that all living things have intrinsic value is to argue, as Scott A. Davison (2012) has done, that all *existing* things have it. In a theistic

And to complete the argument, we would note that since the possession of intrinsic value is necessary and sufficient for moral status, it follows that all living things will have moral status. God, being perfectly good, would therefore seek to treat them morally.[32] This does not necessarily mean, however, that God will treat all living things equally. After all, it could be that some creatures possess more intrinsic value than others, for example, humans more than animals, and animals more than plants.[33] Indeed, this is the position of Holmes Rolston (1988, 120), who takes intrinsic value to be distributed thus: "highest in humans, descending across animal life in rough proportion to phylogenetic or neural complexity, lower in plant life, and least in microbes." Yet Rolston insists that the intrinsic value of living things never reaches zero, so there would never be a living creature that would be of no concern whatsoever to moral beings. Thus even if we allow that plants have less intrinsic value than humans and animals, we can still hold that they have some, and this is sufficient to bring plants within the scope of God's love and justice, and therefore make them a proper object of theodicy, along with humans and animals.

It would probably not be courting controversy to say that the conclusion of this argument – and indeed that of the previous two – does not accord with the intuitions held by the vast majority of philosophers. Indeed,

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context, Davison's conclusion raises the question of whether theodicy needs to be extended to all existing things, animate or otherwise, though this is not a matter he considers.

[32] And this would be the case irrespective of whether one holds that things are intrinsically valuable because God values them for their own sake or that God values things for their own sake because they are intrinsically valuable.

[33] While acknowledging the inherent value of all life, Schweitzer (1965, 47) himself explicitly refused to acknowledge a value hierarchy among life forms, insisting "The ethics of reverence for life makes no distinction between higher and lower, more precious and less precious lives." He did sometimes claim that all living things were of equal value, for example, "When I think about life, I feel obliged to respect all the will to life around me and to feel in it a mysterious value that is the equal of my own" (Schweitzer 2009, 174). However, in practice he typically placed the interests of humans above that of animals and plants (see Brabazon 2000, 281–82). Paul Taylor (1986, 134), on the other hand, insisted that all living things are of *equal* intrinsic value (or "inherent worth").

one might reasonably suppose that many philosophers do not have an intuition that plants possess intrinsic value, or that the non-flourishing of plants is an evil (the conclusion of our first argument) or that plants are morally considerable (the conclusion of our second argument). The fact that the intuitions of many philosophers do not dovetail with the conclusions of our arguments might be thought problematic for the case we have sought to build, for although the lack of intuitional support would not constitute a knock-down refutation of any of our arguments, it is troublesome nonetheless, given that philosophers are more inclined to believe propositions they find intuitive and withhold belief from those they do not (on which, see Climenhaga 2018). To what extent should this concern us?

Very little, I should think. Although it is not possible to enter into the sprawling debates about intuitions and whether they should serve as evidence for or against a belief, I think it sufficient to note that rational arguments such as those we have offered are intended to defeat or override any intuitions that pull in a different direction. Accordingly, we might suppose that it was precisely because the idea of all living things having intrinsic value does not accord with the intuitions of many in the west that Schweitzer and others felt the need to argue for it. Indeed, we can construe their arguments as rational attempts to show the errors of common intuitions regarding the intrinsic value of non-human creatures and to defeat these intuitions. The mere fact that many philosophers do not have these intuitions is not, in itself, an objection to the conclusions of any of our arguments, then, but rather shows why these arguments were needed in the first place. And as a final point, if a philosopher finds that the conclusions of our arguments are at odds with her intuitions, we might reasonably hope that she, qua philosopher, would not automatically give precedence to her intuitions over our conclusions but rather take this discordance as an opportunity to question the reliability of her intuitions on these matters and investigate further.

Conclusion

Now we have considered three arguments for broadening theodicy to include plants as well as humans and animals, by way of a conclusion it is useful to ask: what might a plant theodicy look like? Perhaps the best way to answer this is not to sketch out a plant theodicy from scratch but simply to adjust the animal theodicies we have already seen so that they include plants. On the basis of the sketches given of the theodicies of Southgate, Dougherty, and Sollereder in section 2, two adjustments would need to be made: first, to explain why plants (as well as humans and animals) should fail to flourish at all in a universe under God's providential care, and second, to understand how God will put this right, or rather how God will redeem it. Accordingly, the required adjustments to the aforementioned theodicies will concern their treatments of evolution and eschatology respectively. The first adjustment is straightforward. Just as our animal theodicists appeal to God's decision to allow life to evolve through natural selection in order to explain animals' failure to flourish (or their pain and suffering), one may make the same appeal in order to explain plants' failure to flourish. After all, if God has opted to fashion a world operating according to the laws of natural selection, whereby certain organisms evolve to eat others or to be parasitic on others etc., this would explain why failure to flourish is commonplace among plants as it is among other creatures. As for the second adjustment, concerning God's redemption of the evils of this life, here we have seen the theodicies of Southgate, Dougherty, and Sollereder all look to the eschaton, and the ways in which they do so can be revised so as to cover plants as well as animals. For example, Southgate's theodicy could be revised to claim that all creatures – plants included – will be redeemed, not in the type but in the token. That is, that all creatures that have ever lived will feature in the eschaton, where they will flourish as compensation for their lack of flourishing in this life. And Dougherty's "saint-making" theodicy could be revised to claim that, in the afterlife, plants, like animals, will be deified after being given the powers necessary to look back on their earthly lives and embrace them in their entirety, good and bad aspects alike. And Sollereder's

theodicy could be revised in such a way as to suppose that God will redeem all individual creatures rather than just those with sentience.[34]

I should stress that my aim here is simply to get a sense of what a plant theodicy might look like. I say nothing about the plausibility of these models, either in their original forms or in the modified forms just outlined. I will, however, note that if one is prepared to extend redemption to (some or all) animals in order to salvage God's justice, then it seems a relatively small step to extend it still further to include plants and indeed all living things. To those unconvinced by the idea of plants being redeemed, it is worth pointing out that the eschatological models of a number of contemporary theologies have also sought to extend redemption to all living things;[35] In recent years, the idea of a maximally inclusive eschaton, featuring all of the creatures that have ever lived, has been defended by Jürgen Moltmann (1996, 69-70, 132), Elizabeth Johnson (2014, 181-210), David Bentley Hart (2015, 71-72), and Bethany Sollereder (2019). The idea itself is not new, however, and there are various precedents in the early modern age, for example in the work of the seventeenth century Bishop of Galloway, William Cowper (1623, 116), and the Leveller Richard

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[34] Note that in a recent book, Sollereder (2019, 163, 166–67) herself has developed her model in precisely this way, claiming that redemption will apply to all creatures: "The scope of redemption is universal because a universal redemption is required by the ubiquitous love of God... Each creature that died will have a new, personally experienced life restored to it in a new body, in community with a whole new creation. It is the general resurrection on a cosmic scale." However, Sollereder (2019, 10, cf. 3) now insists that her model is an exercise in theology rather than theodicy; her aim is "not to defend or justify God against attacks, but to paint a picture of God and the world that incorporates the suffering and the joy, the death and the life, the loss and the redemption that is revealed through investigation of the natural world and the Christian story."

[35] In response to a concern raised by one of the referees, I should note that acknowledging recent attempts to extend redemption to all living things is not itself an argument for extending redemption to all living things, nor is it intended to be. I mention such attempts simply to show that the idea of extending redemption to all living things, plants included, has some theological pedigree and is therefore not an ad hoc innovation to address the theodicy problem in relation to plants.

Overton (1643),[36] as well as even earlier, for example in the work of the sixteenth century thinker Paracelsus.[37] Thus if it were to turn out that a successful plant theodicy required the redemption of all creatures that have ever lived, it is surely a boon to know that the idea is not as theologically extravagant as might initially appear.[38]

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[36] While philosophers may be becoming accustomed to seeing redemption extended to animals and other creatures as a result of work in theodicy, it is notable that the vast majority of those who have been prepared to extend redemption to all creatures have done so for theological rather than philosophical reasons. That is, most models of universal redemption are shaped by scripture (in particular passages such as Romans 8.21 and Colossians 1.20) rather than by the concerns of theodicy. This is true also for many of those who conceive redemption as extending to humans and animals (or sentient animals) but no further; see for example McDaniel, (1989, 41–7); Webb (1998, 172–76); Willey (1998); Cobb Jr. (1998); Polkinghorne (2002, 122–23); Edwards (2009). None of these thinkers considers their models of redemption as a theodicy.

[37] Paracelsus (1657, 39): "That flowers should not be eternall is clean contrary to Philosophy; which though they wither and perish, yet at last they shall appear in the generall meeting together of all things."

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