

N Hoggard-Creegan

Animal suffering and the problem of evil

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Reviewed by Murray Hogg

Nicola Hoggard-Creegan's *Animal suffering and the problem of evil* is an intriguing book which challenges the anthropocentrism of much contemporary Christian theology. Taking animal suffering as her primary theme, Hoggard-Creegan inquires after the theological and ethical consequences which arise in light of what we know about animals.

Although primarily an exploration of theology and ethics, Hoggard-Creegan takes into account contemporary scientific understandings of evolution and animal psychology, even when these raise difficult questions for traditional theological approaches. In particular she draws from evolutionary theory the fact that death and suffering predate the rise of humans beings, as well as recent reflection upon the place of such notions as convergence and cooperation which bring into question the idea of evolution as a thoroughly ruthless or unpredictable process. She also draws upon findings from animal psychology regarding the inner life of animals which, although not as rich as that of humans, still proves worthy of theological and ethical reflection.

Perhaps the primary lesson that Hoggard-Creegan draws from these scientific understandings is that there is a closeness between humans and animals which challenges strong notions of human uniqueness. Indeed, given the extent to which most human capabilities find precursors amongst animals, it is suggested that animals may even be seen to carry the *imago dei* to some limited extent. Hoggard-Creegan does not, however, proceed from here to decry or deny human responsibility. Rather, she asks how such insights might inform our theology (particularly strongly anthropocentric theories of redemption) and ethics (particularly our treatment of animals).

There are implications also for our reading of scripture. Hoggard-Creegan is particularly critical of readings of Genesis which speak as though there were anything like a historical fall. As animal death and suffering predated humans, it is clearly wrong to ascribe death and suffering to human action and so Hoggard-Creegan speaks bluntly about the failure of the 'Adamic theodicy' (paradise to fall to redemption model) and questions those theologies which depend upon it. This is not to dismiss the theological value of Genesis which 'is such richly deep material that it knows almost no bounds of interpretation' (p. 38). It is to acknowledge that modern science renders void those readings which see the text as primarily historical in intent.

In place of the 'Adamic theodicy' Hoggard-Creegan draws upon Jesus' metaphor of 'wheat and tares' (Matthew 13:24–30) which allows us to recognise both the good (divine) and evil aspects of the universe, including the good and bad in both humans and animals. Hoggard-Creegan does not explore the origin of evil and this is perhaps a weakness in her approach. Certainly it leaves one important question wide open. Yet rather than speaking to the origin of evil (as the Genesis text does) and so addressing why God allows evil, or how it comes to be, she places emphasis upon the insistence that God will ultimately put all things right. The focus of her theodicy is eschatological rather than ontological.

Continuing this future focused perspective, Hoggard-Creegan moves to a discussion of human response to animal suffering. Here she points to the Biblical theme of human dominion pointing out that 'in every way...humans alter the *umwelt* (life world) of the animal for better or for worse'. Consequently, she encourages us to ask how Christians might alter that world for the better as befits those who seek to be participants in God's desire to redeem all of creation. As she points out:

Because the eschatological hope is one of peace between humans and animals and between all levels and types of life, humans have a role to play in bringing this kingdom of God to earth, of announcing a new way of being in the world in which nature matters and animals are companions along the way.

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Animal suffering and the problem of evil is a very fine discussion of the overlooked, but enormously important, place of animals in God's creative and redemptive plan.

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