

**The alchemy of suffering in the laboratory of the world: Vedāntic Hindu engagements with
the affliction of animals**

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Abstract

Traditionally, the problem of evil, in its various formulations, has been one of the strongest objections against perfect being theism. In the voluminous literature on this problem, the motif of evil has usually been discussed with respect to human flourishing. In recent decades more focused attention has been paid to animal suffering and the philosophical problems that such suffering poses for perfect being theists. However, this growing body of literature, in Anglo-American philosophical milieus, is largely aimed at sketching a specifically Christian or Christianity-inflected theodicy that would reconcile animal suffering with the existence of an omni-God. In contrast, there are few, if any, systematic attempts to put forth a Hindu theodicy that aims to offer morally justifiable reasons that God has for allowing animal suffering. In this paper, we address this scholarly lacuna by illustrating how a Hindu perfect being theist might respond to the problem of animal suffering.

Keywords: Animal Suffering, Theodicy, Hinduism, Karma, Problem of Evil

Introduction

In this article we will sketch a Hindu theodicy that addresses the theme of animal suffering in a theistic universe. While this theme has recently received some scholarly attention in Anglo-American philosophical circles (Ferré 1986; Harrison 1989; Swinburne 1994; van Inwagen 2006; Murray 2008; Creegan 2013; Dougherty 2014; Sollereder 2018; Keltz 2019; Schneider 2020), it has not been systematically explored through Hindu theological prisms. We address this scholarly lacuna by illustrating how a Vedāntic Hindu perfect being theist might respond to the problem of animal suffering. The qualifier “Vedāntic” refers to the styles of philosophical theology that have been developed by some influential exegetes from sometime around 800 CE to the present day – we will draw on some of their central motifs relating to the nature of reality, the substantial self, and moral causation.

We begin by highlighting the specific argument relating to animal suffering that we engage with in this article. There are various ways that one can formulate an argument that points to the existence of suffering to challenge or undermine the epistemic credentials of belief in an omni-God. Three well-known examples are Williams Rowe’s evidential argument from evil, Paul Draper’s argument in defense of the Hypothesis of Indifference (Draper 1989), and Michael Tooley’s argument against skeptical theism (Tooley 2019a). A common motif in these argumentative patterns is that instead of seeking to demonstrate some straightforward logical contradiction in an argument that moves from the existence of evil as a premise to the non-existence of God as a conclusion, they offer various types of empirical data and everyday considerations to support the claim that the existence of God is implausible or unlikely.

One can formulate an argument from animal suffering that would reflect the logical form of any of these three arguments. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address all such

possible formulations. We will develop an evidential argument from animal suffering that follows the structure of Rowe's evidential argument from evil. This argument (henceforth, EAAS – the evidential argument from animal suffering) can be laid out as follows:

1. There exist instances of intense animal suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense animal suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Therefore,

Conclusion: There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

The EAAS mirrors Rowe's evidential argument (1979, 336), except that we have replaced "suffering" with "*animal* suffering." Thus, as in the case of Rowe's argument, the premise that is debatable in the EAAS is premise 1. Our strategy for denying premise 1 is to formulate a Hindu theodicy that argues that God could *not* have prevented animal suffering without losing some greater good.

The Question of Animal Affliction

Before delineating our theodicy, we outline in this section four central questions that a theodicy must address in engaging with the EAAS.

The first question (Q1) is: does God's allowing of animal suffering produce a greater measure of overall good in the world, and if so, *how*? An omni-God would not allow suffering unless the goods that obtained, concurrently or subsequently, on account of such suffering

outweigh the suffering itself. For instance, God would not allow a deer to undergo excruciating pain in a forest fire unless this state of affairs somehow qualitatively improved the overall well-being of the world. If there are indeed instances of suffering that are not connected to some greater good, then there is gratuitous suffering, which an omni-God would not allow.

A second, related question (Q2) is: assuming that animal suffering brings about a greater good, *why* is such suffering an *effective* means to bring about this good? For instance, let us say that a quantum of animal suffering (S) is equivalent to the experience of ten units of pain. Moreover, through the pathway of S, the animal subsequently obtains a greater good which is the experience of fifteen units of happiness, and this experiential state outweighs the earlier ten units of pain. Now, it is conceivable that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would enable the animal to obtain this greater good without first undergoing S, hence increasing the goodness in the world through a less painful pathway. Thus, there is an onus on the theodist to offer some reasons as to why animal suffering, and not some other process, effectively brings about the good or goods that it does.

A third question is directed particularly at the proponents of a soul-making theodicy. They argue that suffering serves a greater good because it enables individuals to develop positive moral character. However, soul-making theodists must answer the question (Q3): *how* can animals participate in such a propaedeutic soul-making process? This question poses a serious challenge to soul-making theodicies. For instance, it has been pointed out that John Hick, the most well-known proponent of soul-making theodicy, has not provided a compelling response to this question (Tooley 2019b; see also Hick 1977, 309-317).¹

A fourth question (Q4) applies to those who deny the following thesis:

Assembly Origin Essentialism (AOE): “If the materials from which a creature originated were assembled by a process that was too different, then that creature would not have existed” (Hill 2021).²

Deniers of AOE maintain that a particular self (X) can be embodied as a human being or as any type of animal. For instance, those who argue that an individual’s identity is rooted in an immaterial soul and not in a physical body, such as Richard Swinburne (2013), can be included among the deniers of AOE. This denial of AOE entails that there is a possible world W* in which X is embodied as a human, and a possible world W** in which X is embodied as an animal.

Now, the question that deniers of AOE must answer is: why does God, seemingly arbitrarily, put certain selves in situations where they suffer as animals, when they could have been placed in fortunate circumstances such as those of a certain human being or a certain animal enjoying a greater degree of well-being? If X is embodied as an animal and suffers specifically on account of such embodiment, rather than as a human being with a qualitatively better life or as another type of animal with a qualitatively better life, then one can charge God with partiality and arbitrarily choosing to allow X to suffer *qua* animal, while enabling another self to prosper *qua* human or *qua* more fortunate animal.

Sketching A Vedāntic Vision

Having illustrated the four central questions that a theodist must address when accounting for animal suffering, we formulate in this section a Vedāntic Hindu theodicy that provides a response to them. This theodicy is not intended to be an exegesis of a specific Hindu scriptural text, or an exposition of the arguments of a particular Hindu philosopher or theologian.

Nevertheless, the theodicy we present is a rational reconstruction of certain motifs from major Hindu scriptural texts such as the *Bhagavad-gītā* (c.500 BCE–200 CE) and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (c. 9th century CE) (henceforth *BhP*).

First, this theodicy is shaped by a doctrine of reincarnation. Our notion of reincarnation adopts the Sāṃkhya cosmological categories outlined in the *BhP* (*BhP* 3.26-27; Tagare and Shastri 1950, 366-384). Each living being is a spiritual self (*jīva*, *ātman*) that is contingently associated, in a particular lifetime, with a physical body as well as with a “subtle body” (*liṅga-śarīra*). This subtle body is a noetic complex that is composed of the mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), and egotism (*ahaṃkāra*). While the subtle body roughly corresponds to the “mind” in some western contexts, there are some crucial differences: in our Sāṃkhya-shaped framework, *manas* is constituted of extremely refined material elements, whereas in a Cartesian worldview, the mind is *immaterial*.³ In other words, in the account that we are sketching, the true centre of gravity of the living being and the bearer of consciousness is not the perishable psychosomatic continuum but the imperishable non-material self.

Second, according to this theodicy, the highest good for spiritual selves is to gradually develop, across these multiple lifetimes, a loving relationship with God, who is conceptualised in the *BhP* as an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving perfect being (Gupta 2020). This love reaches its highest stage of perfection when selves become unswervingly devoted to the omni-God with one-pointed attention and are freed from worldly vices such as anger, lust, greed, envy, and so on. Upon attaining this wholehearted devotion to God, selves would reside with God in a supramundane realm beyond this world (*BhP* 2.9.9-12; 3.15.14-20; Tagare and Shastri 1950, 205; 305). We will call the development of such singular devotion soteriological perfection.

In other words, a living being's personal identity is grounded ultimately in the self (*ātman*). At death, the physical body dissolves but the subtle body remains associated with the self on its migration towards a new physical body. That is, reincarnation is the process of the self acquiring and relinquishing physical bodies. However, upon attaining soteriological perfection, both the physical body and the subtle body, which are temporarily associated with the *ātman* during its sojourn in the physical world, would dissolve. In short, a living being would move through several lifetimes within the physical world, until it brings an end to the process of reincarnation through attaining soteriological perfection.

Four interrelated concepts that are central to our discussion are dispositional tendencies (*saṃskāras*), *karmic* mechanisms, the soul-making telos of suffering, and libertarian free will. This conceptual constellation will help us to situate, in the next section, animal affliction on a cosmological horizon that is oriented towards spiritual perfection which is to be attained through various forms of embodiment.

We hold that every experience or action leaves behind an impression or a trace (*saṃskāra*) on a self's subtle body.⁴ For instance, if one goes skydiving, crashes painfully to the ground after the parachute undergoes a malfunction, and somehow survives with several broken bones, this experience would register a strong *saṃskāra* on the subtle body. For the remainder of one's life, one would be unlikely to go skydiving cheerfully again, due to the lingering strength of this impression. By continually acquiring such types of *saṃskāras* in worldly experiences, a self's subtle body can be repeatedly reconfigured. In our framework, each self's behavior is heavily influenced or shaped by its subtle body which can be regarded as the psychosomatic envelope of the self. So, the acquisition of new *saṃskāras* would transform one's psychic dispositions, habitual expectations, concrete modes of behavior, and so on.

Next, our theodicy posits the existence of *karmic* mechanisms as the moral motor which drives the processes of reincarnation. Crucially, these mechanisms are continually sustained and supervised by God. This motif is supported by the *BhP*. For instance, *BhP* 2.5.21⁵ states, “desiring to expand himself, God, the controller of *māyā*, by his own will, accepted things obtained in the self, i.e. time, *karman*, and one’s own nature, by God’s own *māyā*.” This verse indicates God’s voluntary acceptance of the processes of *karman* and thus illustrates God’s command over them. Furthermore, *BhP* 2.5.14⁶ states that *karman* is not something other than or beyond God. Lastly, *BhP* 2.10.12⁷ states that the *karmic* mechanisms exist because of God’s support (*yad-anugrahata*) also asserts that the *karmic* mechanisms would cease to exist if God were to abandon (*yad-upekṣā*) them, thus illustrating that they require God’s constant ontological support.

Through God’s divine governance, *karmic* mechanisms administer consequences to individuals in proportion to the moral quality of their actions. So, good deeds will be met with good rewards, and bad deeds will be met with bad rewards. Crucially, the *karmic* consequences may not be administered in the same life in which one performed the actions that generated to them – one can receive the consequences in a subsequent life. These motifs are supported by an important verse *BhP* 6.1.45,⁸ which states, “indeed, a person who undertakes righteousness (*dharma*) or unrighteousness (*adharmā*) experiences the fruit of that [action] in the same degree and in the same manner as it was performed, in the life to come.” As we will discuss shortly, there are alternative readings of this verse that do not maintain that *karmic* consequences must be administered in the same manner as their associated actions. For now, we highlight that this verse suggests that all happiness or suffering is merited through selves’ free choices, since all such instances of happiness or suffering are *karmic* consequences that are proportionately meted

out in response to particular actions. Although this view is not explicitly declared in the *BhP*, we uphold it on the basis of God’s omnibenevolence – if there were instances of undeserved suffering or undeserved enjoyment, God would either allow gratuitous evil (in the case of those selves that undergo undeserved suffering) or be partial (in the case that only certain selves, and not other selves, experience unmerited pleasure).

Such *karmic* merits and demerits, we maintain, are accrued only in a human embodiment. The exercise of moral agency requires certain forms of self-reflexivity which are expressed through various acts of deliberation, judgement, and so on. Humans have the developed capacities for self-appraisal, self-scrutiny, and self-reorientation which are needed not only for navigating their routes through a physical environment but also for developing fine-grained conceptual analyses of the significance of moral existence. However, this is not to suggest a “speciesist” chasm between humans and animals on a moral landscape – indeed, in our framework, it would be more accurate to say that in animal embodiment moral capacities are held in abeyance than to say that they are utterly non-existent. Various empirical studies suggest that the rich mental lives of animals are characterised by forms of instrumental reasoning, quite sophisticated navigational capacities, predictive behaviour, prosocial capacities, and so on (Andrews and Beck 2017). From our theodical perspective, the imperishable *ātman* is not eclipsed in an animal, and so it contains rudimentary potentialities for engaging in moral behaviour which are activated once the *ātman* is enveloped by a suitable subtle body in a human embodiment.

These considerations lead us to our next crucial point – in our theodicy, *karmic* mechanisms serve a soul-making function and enable selves to learn soteriologically beneficial lessons. How *karmic* mechanisms can serve a soul-making function is as follows. In the case that

individuals can recall the experience of suffering that occurred through *karmic* mechanisms, such mechanisms can lead selves to become more sensitive to the pain of others by reference to their own pain. For instance, let us consider the case of Joe punching Harry in the face. Some days later, Joe gets punched in the face by someone else, and this is a *karmic* consequence of having punched Harry in the face, regardless of whether or not Joe affirms the reality of *karmic* mechanisms. Joe experiences a quantum of pain, due to which Joe may introspectively acquire a deep, experientially-rooted acquaintance with the feeling of pain. Even if Joe does not envision any causal relation between his hurtful behavior in the past and the punch in the present, he can become more mindful of his actions and, through a sympathetic identification with the suffering of Harry, he can restrain himself from harming others.

In the above example, the *karmic* consequence (Joe getting punched) was administered in the same manner as the action that led to this consequence (Joe punching Harry). Yet, we argue that *karmic* consequences do not always need to be administered in exactly the same way as their associated actions, though we also maintain that the quantum of pain or pleasure that individuals experience is still proportionate to the moral quality of this action even in these cases. This point is supported by an alternative reading of *BhP* 6.1.45, such as that of the contemporary Vedāntic theologian A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, who translates this verse as “in proportion to the extent of one’s religious or irreligious actions in this life, one must enjoy or suffer the corresponding reactions of his karma in the next” (Prabhupāda 1998b, 74). Here, notably, Prabhupāda holds that *karmic* consequences do not have to be administered in the *same manner* as their associated actions, although he does indicate that the severity of *karmic* consequences is *proportionate* to their corresponding actions.

So, we maintain that the process of undergoing suffering through receiving *karmic* consequences can be instructive, even when such consequences are not similar to their associated actions. For instance, soul-making theodicies are a common type of theodicy, and yet most of these do not require belief in *karmic* mechanisms – which suggests that suffering in itself is instructive, even when individuals who suffer do not perceive that their suffering is being administered to them in a manner similar to a previous action of theirs.

In this context, there is some empirical evidence that suggests that suffering can cause individuals to become more empathic (Hemberg 2017, 14). A thought experiment can too illustrate how suffering may generate in an individual, who reflects on their own experiences of suffering, greater phenomenological sensitivity to the suffering of others. Consider a rich lady, Susy, who rapidly walks past John, a homeless person on the street. Susy has no immediate experience of destitution, and she is unable to empathise with John in his impoverishment. Now, let us imagine that Dorothy, who is today just as rich as Susy but was once homeless herself, walks by John. While homeless, Dorothy came to understand, from a first-person standpoint, the hardships of the homeless life and how difficult it is to escape it. So, it is plausible that Dorothy's reaction to John will be qualitatively quite different. Her first-hand experience has led her to be more sensitive to the everyday pain of homeless people, and she compassionately gives some money to John.

We argue that this thought experiment sketches a plausible scenario. In real-world circumstances too, we often observe that individuals who undergo great hardship develop their moral character in meaningful and positive ways (see Burley 2016, 149-150). So, it is reasonable to maintain that *karmic* mechanisms – which undergird the distribution of rewards and punishments in milieus of spiritual amelioration – can lead selves to develop their moral

character in the direction of non-egocentricity and the generation of other-regarding virtues. This development can make them more compassionate, patient, empathic, and considerate, and enable them to develop the purity of character that is needed for the attainment of soteriological perfection.

Additionally, these *karmic* mechanisms are conducive for soteriological perfection because they can motivate individuals to free themselves from the harshness of this world and develop a dispassionate outlook toward it. For instance, within the context of caring science, Jessica Hemberg notes that individuals who have undergone suffering “no longer prioritise superficial things such as money or status” (Hemberg 2017, 12). Through the development of such a dispassionate outlook, individuals can curb their acquisitive and materialistic tendencies, and consequently, they may be able to turn toward God with a deeper sincerity.

Furthermore, we maintain that *karmic* consequences can serve a soul-making purpose even when individuals are unable to recall their experiences. Since the suffering generated by *karmic* consequences leaves an impression on a self’s subtle body, such suffering can serve a soul-making purpose by moulding this subtle body in a soteriologically beneficial manner, even in cases where this self has forgotten this suffering. To illustrate how this may be the case, we propose this analogy: we unreflectively receive in our childhood various *saṃskāras* which often affect or structure our behavior later on in adolescence, even though as adults, we are unable to recall the experiences that generated these *saṃskāras*. In a similar way, we argue that a self’s experiences in one lifetime can leave *saṃskāras* that mould their subtle body so that when they transmigrate and acquire a new physical body, the effect of these *saṃskāras* persists and manifests itself through this moulded subtle body. Thus, the *saṃskāras* continue to influence the behavior of this self in their most recent physical embodiment.

At the same time, it is worth clarifying that we do not hold that suffering is the only way for selves to learn soul-making lessons. However, we do maintain that it is a highly effective means for selves to learn such lessons. Hence, a world in which individuals experience suffering in response to their misdeeds is, on the whole, more effective in enabling selves to attain soteriological perfection than a world in which selves do not experience suffering in response to their misdeeds. In short, for many, if not most, selves, the most effective means to develop a relationship with God is that they do experience suffering in response to their misdeeds so that they receive a precise quantum of punishment that is aimed at addressing the specific moral defects that led them to act immorally.

Finally, we maintain that selves possess libertarian free will. Through such libertarian free choices, certain selves become embodied as animals due to the *karmic* merits and demerits that are generated by those choices. The underlying reason for this connection between past deeds and present embodiment is that animal life provides one effective means for a self's *karmic* consequences to be administered. Because animals are heavily conditioned by their bestial nature and cannot make self-reflexive judgements in a space of reasoning, we argue that they do not bear moral responsibility for their actions. For this reason, we maintain that they do not accrue additional *karmic* merits and demerits for their actions. Instead, they exhaust their *karmic* merits and demerits through experiencing *karmic* consequences. In this way, selves who become embodied as animals will eventually obtain another human birth and are not determined to remain as animals forever. So, a prolonged period of animal existence can be viewed as a transitory stage on an individual's soteriological journey, and multiple periods of animal existence may be required throughout one's entire sojourn within the physical world.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to launch into an extensive discussion about the metaphysics of free will, we will briefly outline why we argue that God sustains selves' agency in such a manner that they have libertarian free will. If God sustained selves' agency in such a manner that they were causally determined to devote themselves to God, selves would not be ultimately responsible for their choices. Consequently, the choices that they would make, including their choice to devote themselves wholeheartedly to God, would be less meaningful. For this reason, we argue that a world where selves have libertarian free will when they choose to devote themselves unswervingly to God is, on the whole, better than a world where selves lack such freedom, even though the possession of libertarian free will opens up the possibility of suffering while in worldly existence.

In our account of libertarian free will, which resembles that of Frederick Choo and Esther Goh (2019), if an agent, through their own libertarian free choices, comes to acquire *saṃskāras* that cause them to form a malevolent moral character, their wicked actions are free despite being influenced by these *saṃskāras*, since this agent is ultimately responsible for generating these *saṃskāras* and this moral character through their own libertarian free choices (a similar statement can be made in the case where an individual acquires *saṃskāras* that cause them to form a morally righteous character).

In this connection, one may object that this view of freedom could lead to fatalism – individuals with a wicked mentality may continue to act unrighteously and never improve their moral character. While addressing this issue in depth is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning that due to the soul-making features of *karmic* mechanisms, individuals who act wickedly would, through their suffering which is the *karmic* consequence of their actions, receive *saṃskāras* that can gradually rectify their behavior. So, it is difficult for individuals to

maintain a wicked disposition perpetually, since they would constantly be learning soul-making lessons across lifetimes. Furthermore, *karmic* mechanisms do not determine individuals' future actions. These mechanisms place individuals in particular circumstances, but how individuals decide to act while they are in these situations depends on how they exercise their libertarian free will.

Articulating The Details

Having outlined the contours of our theodicy, we will now illustrate how it can address the four questions that were raised in connection with the EAAS.

An answer to Q1 and to Q2, which is informed by our theodicy, is as follows. Animals, like humans, are immaterial selves (*ātman*) in specific types of physical embodiment. The reason that some selves are presently embodied as animals, and not as humans, is because of their prior *karmic* merits and demerits they had acquired in a human embodiment. Because the *karmic* mechanisms are supervised by a God of maximal goodness, in the God's-eye view of the world, there is no gratuitous suffering. These mechanisms serve a soul-making purpose, for the reasons that we previously described, and so they are teleologically oriented to the highest good, namely, God, since they enable all selves to progress toward soteriological perfection, including those selves that are presently embodied as animals. In this way, the world can be viewed as a cosmic laboratory in which the *ātman* is gradually becoming purified, in the sense of attaining progressively deeper God-attunement, through a spiritual alchemy across multiple forms of embodiment.

Now, the question may be raised: if suffering is not necessary for soul-making, why could God not just enable selves to learn soul-making lessons through other means and thus save

them from undergoing suffering as animals? Our response begins by noting that if a self wants God not to intervene in their life, then God cannot intervene in this way without violating this self's libertarian free will.⁹ So, in the case of selves who do not wish to have a relationship with God (such as those selves who are presently embodied as animals), God cannot interfere with their lives and compel them to learn soul-making lessons through a means of God's own devising. Under the circumstances, what God can do is to structure the world so that selves learn soul-making lessons in a manner that does not violate selves' libertarian free will. We argue that *karmic* mechanisms are the best means to do just this – when selves undergo suffering in an animal embodiment, it is not due to God, but rather, due to their own free actions, and so, no suffering is forced upon selves by God because selves are ultimately responsible for it. Moreover, when selves suffer, their suffering is in response to a particular misdeed, and the *karmic* consequences they receive are aimed at targeting the very specific moral defects that led to them.

In turn, this response leads us to Q3. Recall that selves which are undergoing worldly processes of reincarnation possess both a physical body and a subtle body. Although each self is associated with a specific physical body for only one lifetime, its connection to a subtle body – with a developing array of dispositions – persists across lifetimes, and this subtle body is largely responsible for an individual's psychic attitudes, tendencies, and inclinations. For instance, in an embodiment in an animal or a human form, the subtle body is characterised by particular *saṃskāras* that shape that particular embodiment. So, consider a self X that is presently living the life of a human H₁. In their next life, they become embodied as an animal and receive various *saṃskāras* that mould their subtle body. Then, in the subsequent life, they become embodied as a human H₂. Due to receiving impressions during the intermediate embodiment as an animal, X's

subtle body in H₂ is different than X's subtle body in H₁. Let us assume that the *saṃskāras* X received in their animal embodiment from the local environment moulded their subtle body in such a manner that X as H₂ is more empathic to fellow human beings than X as H₁.

At this point, one may object: how can these soul-making lessons be learned when selves are embodied as animals and cannot reflect on their suffering in the manner that humans can? As we have argued previously, a self's experiences in one lifetime leave *saṃskāras* that mould their subtle body and these *saṃskāras* thus persist and manifest in that self's future lifetimes through this continually moulded subtle body.

So, in a similar manner, we argue that certain *saṃskāras* which are latent in the subtle body associated with X as an animal can subsequently become expressed in the conscious life of X as H₂. Even if animals may not possess the metacognitive capacities needed for the exercise of moral agency, various studies indicate that they have forms of subjectivity directed by sympathy, kindness, and patience (Monsó, Benz-Schwarzburg, and Bremhorst 2018). These capacities can be concretely developed in the human embodiment of H₂ and further refined here so that there are no gaps in the trajectory of X's moral development.

In other words, in animal embodiment, selves can receive *saṃskāras* that mould their subtle bodies so that they become more a) sensitive to the pain of others and b) dispassionate towards the world. While a self may not undergo any substantial behavioral changes in the course of their embodiment as an animal, which is a result of their *karmic* consequences, such changes could manifest when this self later becomes embodied as a human. This process is similar to how a child receives *saṃskāras* and only begins to manifest the behavioral changes brought about by such *saṃskāras* in adolescence – even when this self does not consciously recall the experiences that generated these childhood *saṃskāras*.

Nevertheless, one can raise the question: how can *karmic* mechanisms be soteriologically effective whilst selves are unaware of them, either as animals or as humans? We respond that we should distinguish between a metaphysical claim and an epistemic claim – the efficacy of *karmic* causality is not dependent on our knowledge of its existence, any more than gravity did not operate in the times of the ancient Romans who could not articulate the concept of gravitational attraction. The analogy with gravity raises, of course, the vexed question as to whether reincarnation is a real process that can be experientially verified or whether reincarnation is only a theoretical postulate that explains some present-day circumstances (Pasricha 1990; Chadha and Trakakis 2007). However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this question (for an extended discussion of this point, see Barua 2015).

One may also ask: why does God not prevent selves from making choices that lead to painful *karmic* consequences? As mentioned previously, we maintain that God supports the libertarian free will of selves, so when human agents use their libertarian free will to make choices that cause them to suffer as animals as a *karmic* consequence of these choices, God cannot directly intervene in their lives to prevent them from making such choices, unless they themselves will for God to do so. If certain selves were to choose courses of action that lead them to experience great suffering, God cannot control their actions without overriding their agential capacities. However, God constructs this physical world as a moral stage in which there is a system of moral causality that administers rewards and punishments to individuals in proportion to the moral quality of their actions. Therefore, they can gradually learn soul-making lessons from their libertarian free actions.

Still, one may ask: why does God not reduce the experienced severity of *karmic* consequences so that selves receive, for instance, half the quantum of pain and twice the

quantum of pleasure? For instance, why is the *karmic* desert of Joe's harmful action an excruciatingly painful dog bite and not a mosquito bite? Our response is that the most effective means for selves to learn soul-making lessons through the experience of *karmic* consequences requires that such consequences are administered in direct proportion to the moral quality of their actions. If selves experienced lesser pain than what they caused others, they would not truly apprehend, through first-hand experience, the phenomenological intensity of that pain. Conversely, if selves experienced greater pain than what they caused others, they would experience pain in excess of what is required for them to understand what it is like to experience the pain that they have caused others.

Granted, there are certain instances of evil that are so horrendous that they call into doubt the very claim that all suffering and pleasure are *karmic* consequences that are administered in proportion to the moral quality of the actions that generated these consequences. In addressing this objection, we note that certain instances of suffering seem to be disproportionate when these are viewed from the vantage point of our finite epistemic perspectives. However, if one accepts that there is deep moral structure in the world on account of *karmic* mechanisms and the process of reincarnation, one may also trust that such suffering, while it is intense, is never disproportionate.

Finally, our theodicy supplies an answer to Q4. In our theodicy, selves acquire their specific bodies on account of their *karmic* merits and demerits, which are themselves accrued on account of their libertarian free actions. Therefore, they do not receive their specific embodiments in any arbitrary manner.

At this stage, we may summarise our responses. Our Vedāntic Hindu theodicy is animated by a cosmological optimism that the world is morally structured in such a way that

there are no breakages in the trajectory of a self's progression. This teleological vector, that moves through the vales of soul-making towards God, operates across animal and human forms of embodiment. However, a particular human or animal embodiment may not be able to perspicaciously trace the relevant connections between past actions and present consequences. Nevertheless, we maintain that *karmic* mechanisms serve a soul-making function: as noted earlier, the spiritual lessons selves may learn through *karmic* consequences do not require conscious recollection of the acts that generated them.

In Appendix 1, we sketch a plausible scenario that demonstrates how animal suffering can lead to a greater good.

Addressing Objections

We will now consider some objections to our theodicy. At the outset, we should note that there are too many objections to consider in the short compass of this paper. For instance, questions of personal identity, mind-body causal interaction, objections against libertarian free will, and metaphysical and moral objections to a *karman* theory, though pertinent, cannot be addressed in its limited space. For this reason, we will only address the objections that directly pertain to our theodicy.

The first objection relates to Q4. We have argued that in our theodicy, God does not arbitrarily choose some selves to suffer more than others on account of their particular embodiments. Rather, selves acquire their specific embodiment due to their *karmic* merits and demerits. However, this response opens itself up to the charge of an infinite regress. If the circumstances that we are presently in are determined by prior *karmic* consequences, and the

circumstances that we once were in when we performed the actions that led to our current situation were also determined by prior *karmic* consequences, then we can keep pushing back the causal chain of actions and consequences *ad infinitum*. So, unless there is an initial action that actuates a chain of *karmic* causality, we may conclude that this chain extends infinitely into the past and involves an infinite regress. Some philosophers like Whitley Kaufman (2005, 22) find this problematic.

There are two ways that one can defend the coherence of a *karman* doctrine against this charge of an infinite regress. One way might be to affirm that an actual infinite causal chain obtains. Śāṅkara (c.9th century CE) and Rāmānuja (c.11th century CE), for example, maintain that *karmic* causality is beginningless and so accept, in effect, an actual infinite causal chain (Herman 1971). Indeed, the acceptance of an actual infinite causal chain has been employed as a strategy to refute cosmological arguments for God’s existence (Morrison 2010), so it can be argued that an actual infinite causal chain is not as problematic as Kaufman suggests. This response is not without a theoretical cost however, for it becomes difficult for the adherent of a *karman* doctrine to employ cosmological arguments. However, the adherents of a *karman* doctrine could simply bite the bullet and accept this cost, since cosmological arguments are not essential to a *karman* doctrine, though they may serve to rationally support God’s existence.

Another response is to maintain that there *is* a first action that initiates a self’s *karmic* causal history. While *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.35 (c.300 BCE–300 CE) states that *karmic* consequentiality is beginningless (*anādi*) (Herman 1971, 276), Prabhupāda interprets the crucial term *anādi* to mean “since time immemorial” (Prabhupāda 1998b, 319). Prabhupāda states that selves were once in a supramundane realm with God and then some of them chose to exercise their volition to come to the physical world (Prabhupāda 1998a, 782). Once they reached this

world, they would initiate a first action, which would mark the beginning of their *karmic* causal history. It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend this particular view, but we mention it to indicate that there are contemporary responses to the charge of an infinite regress which are different to those proposed by premodern exegetes such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja.

A second objection concerns the Pauline principle, according to which, “one should never do evil so that good may come.” In other words, even if God’s actions produce a greater good, God should refrain from performing them, if such acts are evil in themselves. However, in our theodicy, God is not directly responsible for causing suffering. Rather, God structures the world so that individuals reap the fruit of their actions and do not experience any suffering that they did not merit through their own actions. For this reason, we argue that God does not do evil, and so God does not violate the Pauline principle.

Nevertheless, one may argue that while God is not responsible for *directly causing* animal suffering, God is indeed responsible for *failing to prevent* animal suffering. Suppose that selves who are embodied as animals desire that God does not intervene in their lives (or suppose that in a previous life as a human, such selves did not desire for God to intervene in their lives and that this desire is present in a latent form when these selves are embodied as humans). We have argued that in such cases God cannot be held responsible, for if God were to intervene and prevent suffering, either continually or episodically, God would violate selves’ agency and negate their free will by overriding their desire for God to not interfere in their lives. One could argue that God should intervene only when God can prevent instances of particularly horrendous suffering. However, if God did so, once again selves’ free will would be restricted, and so their choice to devote themselves to God would be less meaningful. This is because selves would lack the libertarian freedom to live their lives without God’s involvement and would merely possess

“backyard freedom” – the type of limited freedom enjoyed by a child whose parents tell them that they can leave the house, so long as they do not venture beyond the confines of the backyard. In other words, if God monitored selves’ actions and intervened anytime something horrendous were to happen to them, selves would never truly be able to live a life apart from God, in a similar manner to how a child confined to the backyard cannot not live without parental supervision.

Still, one may raise the objection: why does God not produce this world so that selves do not have to suffer for their actions? Our response is that if God produced this world in this way, selves would not learn soul-making lessons through suffering, and so they would reside in this world for a longer duration of time, thus causing them to experience less happiness because they would miss out on the superior standard of happiness that they could experience in the supramundane realm (see Appendix 1 for a further elaboration of this point).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have put forth a theodicy that we argue reconciles the existence of animal suffering with an omni-God. We have specifically addressed the EAAS, and our response to it is as follows. Selves possess libertarian free will and the possession of such free will is beneficial because it makes selves’ relationship with God deeply meaningful. However, one consequence of possessing such free will is that selves can misuse it. Because the physical world is structured by long-range *karmic* mechanisms, when selves act malevolently, they accrue *karmic* demerits, on account of which they suffer. This suffering can be meted out whilst selves, who are immaterial beings that reincarnate into various contingent forms of physical embodiment, are

embodied as animals. Such suffering is ultimately beneficial, however, because it enables selves to learn soul-making lessons that further their journey toward soteriological perfection, which is the highest good. For this reason, in our theodicy, the existence of animal suffering does not conflict with the existence of God.¹⁰

Appendix 1

In this appendix, we illustrate a plausible scenario in which a self that is embodied as a fawn suffers for its *karmic* consequences and yet enjoys a greater measure of happiness than a self that does not suffer such consequences. First, imagine two scenarios. In the first scenario, a self, who we can call F_1 , is embodied as a fawn and suffers due to being immolated in a forest fire. This suffering, which is the consequence of F_1 's *karmic* consequences, leaves an impression on F_1 's subtle body, because of which, F_1 's subtle body becomes moulded in such a manner that F_1 becomes more sympathetic to pain and more dispassionate toward the world. Consequently, F_1 attains soteriological perfection earlier. In the second scenario, the self, who we can call F_2 , does not suffer *karmic* consequences and does not develop the sensitivity or dispassion that F_1 does.

Now, in the first scenario, let S represent the suffering that F_1 experiences by burning in the fire. Let us also say that F_1 , due to the existence of *karmic* mechanisms, experiences an average happiness of A quanta of happiness in each life in the physical world. We can measure this happiness according to the unit *rāma*. Suppose that F_1 lives in the physical realm for T amount of lifetimes and that they will live for R amount of time in the supramundane realm. F_1 in the supramundane realm also experiences an average of C *rāmas* in each span of time that is equivalent to a lifetime. The amount of overall happiness F_1 experiences can be written out as: $[S + AT] + [C(R-T)]$ *rāmas*. The first bracket contains the quanta of happiness F_1 experiences in the

physical world, and the second bracket contains the quanta of happiness F_1 experiences in the supramundane realm.

In the second scenario, let us say that F_2 experiences an average happiness of B *rāmās* in each lifetime and that they stay in the physical realm for X lifetimes. F_2 , after re-entering the supramundane realm, also experiences C happiness in each span of time equivalent to a lifetime. The amount of overall happiness F_2 experiences can be written out as: $[BX] + [C(R-X)]$ *rāmās*. Here, again, the first bracket corresponds to the amount of happiness F_2 experiences in the physical realm, and the second bracket represents the amount of happiness F_2 experiences in the supramundane realm.

The happiness of the F_1 is greater than that of F_2 if $[S + AT] + [C(R-T)] > [BX] + [C(R-X)]$. This can be expanded as follows: $[S + AT] + [CR - CT] > [BX] + [CR - CX]$. By subtracting CR from each side, this can be simplified to $S + AT - CT > BX - CX$.

We now offer a hypothetical scenario that illustrates how the happiness of F_1 can exceed that of F_2 . Let us assign a value of 5 *rāmās* to A , a value of 100 *rāmās* to B , a value of 1,000 *rāmās* to C , a value of -50,000 *rāmās* to S , a value of 10,000,000 lifetimes to X , and a value of 10,000 lifetimes to T . With these values set, $S + AT - CT = -10,000,000$ and $BX - CX = -9,000,000,000$ (these numbers are negative because we subtracted CR). With these values, F_1 does indeed experience a greater measure of happiness than F_2 . Of course, we realise that the above values can be manipulated in a manner that can demonstrate either scenario to lead to a maximization of happiness. So, we will defend our choice of the particular numerical values that we assign to the various variables in the above equations.

We hold that a self who is not constrained by *karmic* mechanisms will enjoy a greater standard of happiness in each lifetime than the self who is constrained by these mechanisms.

Thus, we have assigned a value of 100 *rāmās* to B, whereas we have only assigned 5 *rāmās* to A. Moreover, we have charitably assumed that this particular evil of immolation is so horrendous for the self that it reduces its happiness by 50,000 *rāmās* (which is the amount of overall happiness F_1 experiences throughout the rest of its sojourn in the physical world). Moreover, we have taken a conservative estimate for C by assigning it a value of 1,000 *rāmās* (this is conservative because the happiness in the supramundane realm is regarded to be immensely greater than any other happiness obtainable within this physical realm). We have assigned a value of 10,000,000 lifetimes to X, though there is no reason to believe that this number could not be greater if the self was unrestrained by *karmic* consequences and lived in, say, a hedonistic paradise. Moreover, we have assigned a value of 10,000 lifetimes to T, which is a long period of time, but still much smaller in comparison to Y.

Given these values (or similar values), animal suffering can indeed lead to a greater good.

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¹ It is worth pointing out that Trent Dougherty has recently argued that selves *can* participate in the soul-making process (Dougherty 2014).

² A recent proponent of AOE is Vince Vitale, whose theodicy is based on this view (Vitale 2020).

³ The distinction between the view outlined here and Cartesian substance dualism is important to note. Tooley has objected to a theodicy based on *karmic* mechanisms and reincarnation because he argues that reincarnation requires substance dualism, against which he raises several objections (Tooley 2019a, 12-15). While it is beyond the scope of

this paper to address these objections, it can be pointed out that they are targeted at a particular type of substance dualism that we do not endorse here.

⁴ The *BhP* upholds the notion of impressions. For instance, *BhP* 5.25.8 uses the term *vāsanā*, which is another word for impression (Śāstrī 1965-1975, Book 5, 540).

⁵ *kālaṃ karma svabhāvaṃ ca māyeṣo māyayā svayā / ātman yadṛcchayā prāptam vibubhūṣur upādade //* (Śāstrī 1965-1975, Book 2, p.189).

⁶ *dravyaṃ karma ca kālaś ca svabhāvo jīva eva ca / vāsudevāt paro brahman na cānyo 'rtho 'sti tattvataḥ //* (Śāstrī 1965-1975, Book 2, 2, p.177).

⁷ *dravyaṃ karma ca kālaś ca svabhāvo jīva eva ca / yad-anugrahataḥ santi na santi yad-upekṣayā //* (Śāstrī 1965-1975, Book 2, 2, p.472).

⁸ *yena yāvān yathādharmo dharmo veva samīhitaḥ / sa eva tat-phalaṃ bhunkte tathā tāvad amutra vai //* (Śāstrī 1965-1975, Book 6, 35).

⁹ At this point, one could ask the question – what if a self *does* want God to intervene in their life. Answering this question leads us to additional questions pertaining to God’s supervision over *karmic* mechanisms and the extent to which God could destroy an individual’s *karmic* merits and demerits. Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, and since this paper is primarily aimed at animal suffering, it suffices to say that when selves are embodied as animals, they lack the cognitive abilities to desire God’s involvement in their life, and so this question is not as relevant as it is in the case of humans.

¹⁰ Much of the substantive work on this article was done by Akshay Gupta. Some of the arguments were reinforced or reformulated by Ankur Barua. This article has also been improved thanks to the comments of two helpful anonymous reviewers.