What kind of God would create trillions of animals and permit a great many of them to die painful deaths? Should we worship such a God?

The thought process behind this question is fundamentally entwined with a famous point of theological controversy—the Darwinian problem of evil. This well-known conundrum, a subset of the problem of evil, draws attention to the cognitive dissonance produced when the propositioned existence of a theistic God—simultaneously omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent—is faced with the iniquity inherent in the mass death and suffering of animals (commonly referred to as wild animal suffering).[1] Whilst Darwin himself primarily used this argument in support of atheism, the given question seems to operate on the veracity of Creationism, instead using the apparent contradiction to discredit the proposed nature of the creator and, by extension, the reason for which He is worshipped. Hence, this essay will deconstruct the logic behind the given question in an attempt to reconcile the praiseworthy nature of God with His permittance of wild animal suffering.

To avoid an overly semantic argumentative process, this essay will adhere to the following working definition of the word 'worship': Worship is the veneration of a being or idea as definitively greater than oneself. Since the characteristics of omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence generally constitute religious transcendence from the human perspective, God possessing such qualities would sufficiently justify His exaltation. Conversely, the argument by which the given question threatens to refute the proposed theistic nature of God and discourage said exaltation is as follows:

(1) (a) An omnibenevolent God would eradicate all evil that He is able to; (b) an omniscient God would be cognizant of all evil; (c) an omnipotent God would be able to stop all evil.
(2) If God was simultaneously omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent, there would be no evil in the world.
(3) Wild animal suffering is evidence of evil in the world.
(4) God is not simultaneously omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent.

[1] Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 32.

(5) Only the conjunction of omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence can practically justify God as being worthy of worship.
(6) God is not worthy of worship.

In order to tackle this argument, this essay will first contend with each part of claim (1) individually. At face value, claim (1) part (a) appears to operate on relatively sound logic. If a benevolent God were to create a world, what reason would He have for permitting the existence of evil? The problem with this thinking is that it neglects to consider the potential for inevitable evil. For example, imagine if God was watching a pride of starving lions hunt a herd of impalas. Suppose that in this case, God has two options which both result in wild animal suffering: either condone the starvation of the lions by allowing the impalas to escape, or let the herd be devoured for the pride's survival. In such a case, an omnibenevolent being would be forced into permitting the fruition of one instance of evil when choosing whichever outcome is decidedly less cruel. Although this example is an oversimplification (which will be subsequently addressed), it is clear that the decision-making process of an omnibenevolent being cannot be properly encapsulated by claim (1) part (a). Hence, it is presumptuous to claim that an omnibenevolent being would stop *every* instance of evil it is able to, since there could be morally sufficient reasons for it to allow for some. These reasons could either be that the instance is necessary for some greater good or preventive of some greater evil. Therefore, the existence of *any* form of evil alone is insufficient to reject the omnibenevolence of God. Instead, it would take the presence of gratuitous evil to definitively call His benevolence into question. This development necessitates that premises 1 through 3 of the argument are altered as such:

(1') (a') An omnibenevolent God would eradicate all gratuitous evil that He is able to; (b) an omniscient God would be cognizant of all evil; (c) an omnipotent God would be able to stop all evil.
(2') If God was simultaneously omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent, there would be no gratuitous evil in the world.
(3') Wild animal suffering is evidence of gratuitous evil in the world.

To contend with this revised argument, this essay must disprove the authenticity of claim (3') by deconstructing the concept of gratuitous evil in the light of wild animal suffering. For any instance of wild animal suffering to constitute gratuitous evil, it must be evident that there are no morally sufficient reasons for its occurrence. However, proving this is problematic, since understanding these causal relationships requires a certain completeness of knowledge that cannot be feasibly attained within the constraints of human cognitive limitations. The significance of this complication is buttressed by the butterfly effect: the idea that the smallest of actions can dramatically alter future circumstances.[2] This suggests that discounting the moral justifiability of any instance of wild animal suffering is unrealistic. Early theologians faced with the Darwinian problem of evil understood this concept, and countered the notion of gratuitous evil in the immense death and suffering of animals by claiming that wild animal suffering as a whole may have constituted the mechanism of natural variation and selection with which God established the ultimate good of human origin.[3] Regardless of the authenticity of this explanation, it is apparent that establishing any specific instance of wild animal suffering as gratuitous evil is a futile venture for non-omniscient beings.

Perhaps a more worthwhile approach of proving the existence of gratuitous evil would be to consider the implications of part (b) and (c) of the first claim as well. The combination of all three claims naturally results in the assertion that *any* evil at all would be gratuitous for an omniscient, omnipotent God. After all, why would an all-powerful God have to make a moral concession to achieve His aims? The preceding arguments functioned on the tacit assumption that certain evils are inevitable in the world as made so by God, which is a perspective that held fast to His proposed nature whilst also explaining His inability to prevent all evil. However, it would be remiss for this essay not to explain why an omnibenevolent and all-powerful God would not simply create a world in which evils of any sort were not prevalent, or even possible.

[2] "The Butterfly Effect," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chaos/ (accessed Apr. 29, 2019).
[3] Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 57.

Though this consideration initially seems disastrous for the theistic perspective, it can be addressed by the further consideration of human cognitive limitations, as best seen in the following example. Theists and atheists alike generally agree that if God were to create a world, His most meaningful or good course of action would be to populate it with creatures that have the capacity for morally significant free choice. This is because the ability to independently make good or evil choices would enable the creation of authentic moral goodness in the world. However, since such creatures would consequently be capable of evil, this means that the potential for evil is a necessary trait of a good world. Could a good world be created with less evil than that of the existing one? Do certain evils indeed qualify as gratuitous due to imperfections in God's creative process? Unfortunately, the inherently nebulous nature of the cosmos prevents the establishment of any such axiomatic truths. Still, the significance of this counterargument lies in the very existence of this incomprehensibility, as it demonstrates the implausibility of evidencing *any* sense of gratuitousness on behalf of an omniscient and omnipotent being. In this essay, this means that the instances of wild animal suffering that are caused by the actions of free creatures can be justified as an inevitable byproduct of the establishment of free will, thereby vindicating God's tolerance of it. Such instances range from when humans cause direct harm through means like poaching to when their culpability is more indirect, like with the effects of climate change. This example serves as an explanation for God's allowance of what philosophers call 'moral evil',[4] in this case referring to when any free creature is culpable for any particular instance of wild animal suffering. Consequently, this essay still has to reconcile the proposed nature of God with the existence of what is known as 'natural evil' in this area.

Natural evil is most easily understood as evil that is not a direct consequence of free will—appearing to have materialised independently of the actions of free creatures.[5] Such instances of wild animal suffering seem to be solely induced by elements that are directly controlled by God. For example, nature dictates that animals have pain receptors,[6] meaning that when they are caught in natural disasters or disease outbreaks, they suffer immensely. In

[4] Michael Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 37.
[5] Ibid, 38.
[6] "The Surprisingly Humanlike Ways Animals Feel Pain," *National Geographic*, https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/12/animals-science-medical-pain/ (accessed Jul. 10, 2019).

order to reconcile this natural evil, the mechanism by which it is realised must be understood. This mechanism has been understood by certain theologians as 'nomic regularity'.[7] In theory, nomic regularity is the adherence of the world to a set of rules or systems, such as the natural laws that result in the aforementioned instances of natural evil. This quality is important for the creation of organic moral good as it preserves a level of practical coherence relating to free will, in the sense that choices can be made in the context of their expected results. Essentially, in a world where God arbitrarily determines the outcome of any particular event, people cannot be expected to shoulder the moral responsibility for their decisions, since they would not have sufficient control over their relevant consequences. As such, God would appear to be somewhat limited in terms of how much He can influence the outcome of naturally occurring events, lest there be a world where free will fails to function as a means of permitting the manifestation of organic moral good. In context, this means that this variation of wild animal suffering may indeed be an inevitable consequence of the establishment of a world in which genuine moral goodness can authentically transpire.

However, nomic regularity is insufficient to dismiss the potential gratuitousness of these natural evils in totality. Take for example the foregoing illustration regarding animals' ability to experience pain. A world that possesses nomic regularity does not appear to be logically incompatible with a world in which all animals have no pain receptors and hence cannot suffer. The reason that nomic regularity appears insufficient to function as an independent theodicy for natural evil is that it is only intended to serve as a part of one. This specific theodicy, the Irenaean theodicy, posits that the existing world is the 'best of all possible worlds',[8] meaning that its qualities and natural laws are ideal for the moral development of humanity. Nomic regularity fits into this framework because it asserts that natural evils are an unavoidable consequence of instituting certain natural laws that allow for moral development. For instance, if God made it such that animals could not suffer, the moral goodness in animal rights activism would not be possible. Admittedly, this theodicy is not irrefutable evidence for the veracity of the theistic perspective, since its accuracy is contingent on the unverifiable premise that the existing world is *ideal* for human moral

[7] Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw*, 18.
[8] "Essay–Irenaeus' theodicy," *Philosophy PushMe Press*, http://philosophy.pushmepress.com/?extracts=iranaeus-theodicy (accessed Jul. 15, 2019).

development. Nevertheless, it serves as a plausible explanation for the logical compatibility between theism and natural evil in the form of wild animal suffering.

In sum, the best rebuttal to the given question is the establishment of a constant logical thread connecting the horrors of wild animal suffering to the existence of an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God. Despite the outward disjuncture between these two ideas, they have proven to be more logically compatible than was initially apparent. This is because of the fact that every form of wild animal suffering can be reasonably recognised as the actions of theistic God whose attributes lead Him to empower the development of moral goodness in humanity by any means necessary. As such, when the presupposition of God's existence is made (as directed by the given question), His possession of the qualities of omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence appears convincingly coherent with reality, at least in the context of the given question. It is in the light of this indication of God's transcendental nature that Man's reverence of Him is born.

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