

# Cruelty, God, and Dharma

by Rajan P. Parrikar

The ichneumon wasp epitomises nature's implacable indifference. In his essay *Nonmoral Nature*, Stephen Jay Gould laid bare its ghastly existence in vivid detail: the wasp injects its eggs into the living body of a caterpillar, leaving the larva to consume its host from within, ruthlessly devouring its organs in a sequence that keeps the host alive as long as possible. It stands as one of nature's most grotesque phenomena—a process as methodical as it is macabre.

I quote Gould here, for his rendering of this nightmarish spectacle represents writing of rare literary finesse.

[Quote]

*"The free-flying females locate an appropriate [caterpillar] host and then convert it into a food factory for their own young...adult females pierce the host with their ovipositor and deposit eggs within. Usually, the host is not otherwise inconvenienced for the moment, at least until the eggs hatch and the ichneumon larvae begin their grim work of interior excavation...the caterpillar lies, alive but immobile, with the agent of its future destruction secure on its belly. The egg hatches, the helpless caterpillar twitches, the wasp larvae pierces and begins its grisly feast.*

*Since a dead and decaying caterpillar will do the wasp larvae no good, it eats in a pattern that cannot help but*

*recall, in our inappropriate anthropocentric interpretation, the ancient English penalty for treason - drawing and quartering, with its explicit object of extracting as much torment as possible by keeping the victim alive and sentient. As the king's executioner drew out and burned his client's entrails, so does the ichneumon larvae eat fat bodies and digestive organs first, keeping the caterpillar alive by preserving intact the essential heart and central nervous system. Finally, the larvae completes its work and kills its victim, leaving behind the caterpillar's empty shell. Is it any wonder that ichneumons, not snakes or lions, stood as the paramount challenge to God's benevolence during the heyday of natural theology?"*  
[Unquote]

In the 18th century, such phenomena posed thorny dilemmas for Christian theologians. William Paley, known for his "Watchmaker analogy" advocating an intelligent designer, wrestled with reconciling nature's brutality with the attributes of a benevolent, omnipotent God. How could a divinely ordered Creation accommodate such grisly savagery?

Charles Darwin's response to this question marked a pivotal shift. Disquieted by the ichneumon wasp, he abandoned theological rationales in favour of natural selection as the prism through which life's workings must be understood. Writing to a friend, Darwin confessed, "*I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars...*" This insight laid the groundwork

for evolutionary theory to supplant divine design as a conceptual basis. He concluded that this spectacle exemplified the wasp's triumph over the caterpillar in evolution's unforgiving theatre.

In sharp relief, Hindu cosmology - along with Buddhist and Jain philosophical traditions - encounters no challenge in accepting the existence of creatures like the ichneumon wasp. These traditions refrain from imposing human morality upon the natural world. The wasp's actions, however unsettling to human sensibilities, lie beyond the ambit of *karma*, the moral calculus that governs human conduct. Instead, the ichneumon adheres to its *svabhava* - its inherent nature - which guides its behaviour without moral consequence.

Ancient Indian sages envisioned the universe as a symphony of opposing forces, where creation and destruction, joy and suffering, are threads in a grand cosmic tapestry. There is no expectation that nature should conform to human sentiments of compassion or cruelty. Each being, from the smallest insect to the greatest beast, moves according to its *svadharma* - its duty within the cosmic order - shaped by its *svabhava*.

For the ichneumon wasp, its parasitic lifecycle is a testament to its nature. It moves within the warp and woof of existence, devoid of moral valuation. Human beings, in contrast, navigate the intricate weave of *karma*, where actions carry ethical implications extending across lifetimes. Their suffering may stem from past deeds, though its precise origins often lie shrouded in obscurity.

The wasp, however, like other non-human entities, operates free from *karmic* entanglement; it is a cog in the cosmic machinery, fulfilling its role dictated by its intrinsic nature.

In Dharmic philosophy, the inconceivable cruelty of the ichneumon wasp is seen not as an aberration but as a reflection of the natural order's complexity, where creation and destruction converge, unmoved by human morality. What mortals perceive as cruelty is, through this lens, the dispassionate unfolding of cosmic law, impervious to human moral judgements.

This fundamental divergence between Abrahamic and Dharmic worldviews underscores an essential truth: any cosmology that estranges God from Creation will inevitably grapple with reconciling divine benevolence and nature's inherent savagery.

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