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Animals and God's Plan for the World

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This article offers a veterinary practitioner's view of contested issues around proper care of animals. It considers the significance of the Genesis mandate to rule and subdue the earth and addresses further biblical themes in conversation with non-Christian voices both ancient and modern. The author suggests that, in both word and deed, Christianity has more to contribute to the question of animal welfare than is often assumed.

Introduction

'The saints are exceedingly loving and gentle to mankind, and even to brute beasts ... Surely we ought to show them [animals] great kindness and gentleness for many reasons, but, above all, because they are of the same origin as ourselves.' So wrote St John Chrysostom (347-407AD).[1] Yet somewhere that caring association with animals and nature was lost, so that Ian McHarg could state that 'Judaism and Christianity have long been concerned with justice and compassion for the acts of man to man, but they have traditionally assumed nature to be a mere backdrop for the human play.'[2] Can we find a Biblical perspective on this relationship between animals and man? Genesis 1 seems a good place to start. How does God's creation of man in his own image to rule over the animals of his creation fit in with our use and abuse of animals today? Perhaps we should look forward not back? What about basing our behaviour towards animals now on the relationship between animals and man in the New Heavens and New Earth? 'The lion lies down with the lamb and eats straw like the ox. The child plays at the entrance to the viper's burrow'. How could or should these images from Isaiah impact on animal use today?

A biblical perspective

'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows' (Matthew 10:29). A single sparrow falling to the ground – or captured in a cage as Bauckham suggests – is cared for by the creator God. Take the vexed issue of whether we should use laboratory mice to develop a cure for childhood cancer. If we produce transgenic mice with the gene defect that causes the cancer in order to test potential therapies we are causing them harm. But if we don't use them we are harming human patients that could otherwise be treated and cured. We seem to be in a no win situation. Looking at the situation in Eden or the New Heavens and New Earth might not be particularly helpful today – how do these views of a perfect world impact on difficult decisions in the imperfect world here and now? Maybe there are other perspectives that might at first seem less obvious.

'For God so loved *mankind* that he sent his only begotten son that whosoever believes on him should not die but have everlasting life'? No – God so loved the *world* - 'κόσμος'. The word appears 78 times in John's gospel with meanings as diverse as the realm below – everything created here as distinct from heaven, humanity at large, or more specifically the opponents of Jesus. So one might suggest that

κόσμος in John 3:16 represents more that mere humanity. Richard Bauckham sees the beginning and end of Christ's ministry as involving interactions with animals. In the wilderness he was with the wild animals and angels attended him.[3] At the end of Jesus' ministry, he enters Jerusalem on the back of an unridden donkey. Here is an animal needing subduing and controlling by man, normally needing bridle and whip. But here the true man, the ultimate human, seems to have a perfect interaction with the animal in its natural state. God so loves the world – the κόσμος – that he gave his only begotten son to rule over it in the very way he intended man to in the first place. In Colossians 1, it is in, through and for Christ all things – τὰ πάντα were created and were reconciled through him also. Note that Paul uses the past tense of ἀποκαταλλάσσω – reconcile – here, something that has happened, presumably on the cross, rather than something to look forward to in the future. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and in Romans 8 Paul describes the creation waiting in eager expectation. As Tom Wright puts it, 'the whole creation is on tiptoe with excitement, waiting for God's children to be revealed as who they really are. Suddenly we have turned a corner. Whereas up until now it might have been possible to think that Paul was talking about God's salvation in relation to human beings, from here on it is clear that he has the entire cosmos in view.'[4] Moreover God declared to Abraham that he should be heir of κόσμος, of the world (Romans 4:13). God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants was to bring blessing for the whole world.

Consider God's covenant with Noah in Genesis chapter 9 – a covenant with all living creatures, renewed in Hosea: 'In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. I will abolish bow and sword and battle from the land so that all may lie down in safety.' (Hosea 2:18) Such a passage corrects an incorrect domineering interpretation of Genesis 1:28: 'fill the earth and *subdue* it. *Rule* over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth and over all the creatures that move over the ground."' *Kabash* (subdue) and *rada* (rule) – are used of subjugating a conquered peoples and even of rape in the book of Esther. But in Genesis 1 they describe a people made in the image of God, reflecting his righteous rule over his creation. 'Subdue' and 'rule' are royal words used of a king having authority over his subjects. So Solomon in 1 Kings 4 'rules over all the kingdoms west of the river and has peace on all sides'. Man is put in the garden to *abad* and *shamar* (Genesis 2) – to work and take care of it – to exercise dominion but not in a domineering way. Similarly, the righteous man cares for the needs of his animal (Proverbs 12:10) and Psalm 23 gives a wonderful picture of the shepherd caring for the needs of his flock amidst the valley of the shadow of death – sheep are for meat as well as wool.

A modern perspective

How might these reflections bear upon our contemporary situation? In 1964 Ruth Harrison's *Animal Machines* shook the international agricultural world. Its portrayal of the horrors of intensive agriculture led to the Brambell committee and eventually the five freedoms for acceptable farming – freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain and injury, freedom from fear and distress, freedom to display natural behaviours.

Psalm 23 shows that the psalmist had the concept of optimal husbandry thousands of years before the Brambell committee or the Farm Animal Welfare Council tried to codify them. Indeed it is not surprising that he did – here was a culture that was agrarian, dependent on livestock and characterised by what Bernard Rollin, the famous animal ethics philosopher, has called the Ancient Contract.[5] Modern contractarians have distanced themselves from ethical dealings with animals, arguing that one cannot make a contract with an unreasoning beast. 'I think therefore I am' said Descartes; what does that say about how an animal should be regarded if one considers it doesn't think, as indeed did Descartes? But anyone who has had a dog as a pet knows that they can indeed think, feel and obey. Modern ethology tells us that different animal species are sentient, if not rational in the Cartesian sense. The more we look into communication between animals the more we find complexity and structure in their interactions.

By contrast, Jeremy Bentham argued that whether or not animals can speak or reason is not the decisive thing, but whether they can suffer.[6] As the father of hedonistic utilitarianism it is the pain-pleasure continuum that most concerned him, not whether animals can communicate with us in a defined language, or whether we can concoct a contract with the animals. Rawls' 'veil of ignorance' in which those participating in an ethical framework do not know in what place they stand with regard to wealth or social status, should quite reasonably extend to animals quite as much as disadvantaged humans. His difference principle allows inequalities only when they work to the advantage of the worst off. Such an ethical theory applied to animals should function to elevate non-human species considerably in our ethical thinking.

And yet animals do not feature in Rawls' work, nor in the thinking of many religious ethicists. An exception is Andrew Linzey whose emphasis on the moral priority of the weak, in his *Animal Gospel*,[7] gives an important perspective on the perilous state of many animals in areas from intensive agriculture to medical research. Linzey argues that because God has created and cares for animals, they have an inherent and unalienable right to life which supersedes ours. We can leave to one side whether or not rights language makes the best sense of the biblical witness. Paul tells us that 'being in very nature God, [Christ] did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. But made himself nothing.' (Philippians 2:6-7) Accordingly, our attitude should be the same towards one another. But as a veterinary surgeon I have given an oath to make animal welfare my prime concern. Although we are not to be the servants of animals, we must address the mindset which puts mankind on top in patterns of domination.

An unnatural hierarchy?

This hierarchy that has humans at the top, animals lower down and the rest of the world lower still, comes originally from Greek thought. Aristotle devised the *scala natura* – thought and language defined the difference between 'us' and 'them'. Even then, Aristotle's amanuensis Theophrastus was much more concerned about animals. Pythagoras was a vegetarian, but not necessarily because of a care for animals. He was concerned that his friend's soul may have transmigrated into a dog he saw crying out when being kicked. Even today the idea that we have souls and animals do not – a feature of later Greek thought – is an important delineating factor for many.

But where does the idea of a soul in humans alone come from? Not from the Bible. Genesis chapter 1 describes both animals and man as *nefesh chyah*. In the King James Bible *nefesh chyah*, when referring to the animals Adam names in Genesis 2:19, is translated as 'living creatures', while when the phrase refers to Adam himself in 2:7 it is translated as 'living soul'. The NIV is better in translating the two as 'living being' and 'living creature' but still using different English terms. The New American Standard translates 2:7 as 'living being' and 'creature' but with a footnote to the former that it is literally 'soul'.

So perhaps animals are after all neighbours in God's sight. Consider the poor man's lamb described in Nathan's rebuke to David. The man had bought the ewe lamb, had raised it and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept with him. It was like a daughter to him. David burns with anger against the rich man who requires the lamb to be slaughtered. But what of the thousands, tens, hundreds of thousands, probably millions of sheep and cattle slaughtered from Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 onwards to the destruction of the temple nearly two thousand years later? These are sacrifices that were decried by later prophets. Christian vegetarians suggest that this shows God's revulsion of animal death, yet in Amos God despises religious feasts and offerings whether of animals or grain. It is the failure to back up sacrifice with a righteous life that is the problem, not the sacrifice *per se*. Does this negative perspective on animal sacrifice have a bearing on the use of animals as food? Jesus used loaves and fishes to feed the five thousand and very likely ate the paschal lamb at Passover. The resurrected Jesus guided his disciples to a momentous catch of fish and then cooked them the fish he had already caught himself. The overcoming of the Jew-Gentile divide is marked by Peter being shown a flying carpet with mammals, reptiles

and birds and being told 'kill and eat' (Acts 10:13). Noah and his descendants were allowed to eat meat in Genesis 9, but only meat with the lifeblood removed. But there is a tension here too. God saves the animals through Noah and makes his covenant with them, yet allows their use for food. God protects them through lifeblood regulations but enjoys the pleasing aroma of the burnt offerings Noah makes of the very animals he has saved.

Conclusion

Albert Schweitzer illustrates this tension from a theological and philosophical perspective and yet also suggests a resolution in an intensely practical manner.[8] As a child he tells of being horrified by friends throwing stones at birds, and in his work as theologian and philosopher he promulgated a 'reverence for all life'. As a doctor in what is now the Gabon his hospital treated not only human patients but sick and injured animals also. Schweitzer's intellectual and academic outpouring manifested itself not only in lectures and books but also, perhaps most especially, in his actions. Surely that must be the same for all of us too. It is impossible completely to resolve that tension between caring for animals and using them to care for humans, whether as companion animals, food items or as research tools. But we should always see them not primarily as our companions, food or tools, but as God's creation, seeking their welfare alongside our own. As Psalm 50 says, 'The cattle on a thousand hills are mine, says the Lord' (Psalm 50:10).

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2. McHarg, I., 'The place of nature in the city of man' in Barbour, I., *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, Reading Mass., Addison-Wesley, 1973 p.175.
3. Bauckham, R., in Linzey A & Yamamoto, D., *Animals on the Agenda*, SCM Press, St Albans, 1998.
4. Wright, N.T., *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, p.596, in The New Interpreter's Bible, Leander, E.K. (ed.), Nashville: Abingdon, 2002.
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6. Bentham, J., *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1823, chapter 17, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1907.
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8. Schweitzer, A., Reverence for Life, SPCK, London, 1975.

For further reading:

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- Williams, D.L., *Animal Rights Human Responsibilities?*, Grove Books, Cambridge 2008.

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