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Medicine, animals and theology

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Medicine, animals and theology¹

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AMONGST THE RISING TIDE OF VOICES who currently speak out about the abominable ways our society treats animals, the voice of theology has remained largely silent. The purpose of this paper is to begin to redress this sin of omission. What follows is a presentation of a theological vision of how Christians should think about and act with regard to God's non-human creatures. Towards this we will consider the Christian story of creation, that from which we have come, and the Christian story about the kingdom of God, that towards which we are going.

Though these remarks will be applicable to general ecological and vegetarian questions, the paper has been written with the question of vivisection in mind.² This is undoubtedly one of the most contentious elements in the general movement for a reconsideration of human relationships with other animals, if for no other reason than that it calls into question one of the most admirable and revered institutions of our society, the medical profession. As one can never separate one's history from one's reflection, I might then add that I come from a medical family. My father was a cardiologist, my mother is an obstetrician and gynaecologist and my sister is presently a medical resident. I say this not to claim that I have any great understanding of medicine, because I do not, but simply to emphasise that the reader will not find this author impugning the character of the medical profession.

Before we begin a formulation of a vision for our relationships with animals, it is important that I present a bit more of my own background. Seven years or so ago, when I was studying in England, I picked up a couple of books by a Christian philosopher named Stephen Clark on the status of animals. At the time I remember joking with a couple of friends that I was avoiding reading them, because I was afraid they might turn me into a vegetarian.

Well, the next year back at the University of Toronto I took a course on the ethics of experimentation. Seeing that one of the classes was to be devoted to experimentation on animals, I thought that this would be a good opportunity to read those books by Stephen Clark, and so I volunteered to do the presentation on animal experimentation. A foolish move on my part. In preparing my report I was astonished at the kinds of things humans did to other animals. In trying to convey this to my fellow students and generate some consensus on regulating this research at least to projects where there was *some* real benefit, I was surprised how little sympathy I got from my

fellow students. I was amazed that my concern for rabbits in the Draize test (a test done by cosmetics companies where hundreds of thousands of rabbits have almost every conceivable chemical put in their eyes in order to see how much damage is done) was greeted with jokes, and at the end of the presentation I was challenged to become a vegetarian if I was so concerned about animals. So I did.

Looking back, I shouldn't have been surprised at the reaction. For the seminar participants were equally shocked by my objections to experimentation on prisoners. The attitude was that prisoners owed a debt to society and this was a good way for them to pay it. Even experimenting on children was considered justifiable if the potential benefits for others were sufficiently great.

The most prevalent modern conception of animals that must be challenged and decisively rejected is a broadly Cartesian one, where my cat is seen as a furry machine, where pigs are seen as locomotive meals.

In presenting this personal history, my primary purpose has not been to offer a psychological explanation of how a traumatic classroom experience could lead the author to become an 'animal lover'. Nor has it been to dispel the mystery of how an otherwise relatively normal person could be converted to show such a concern for animals. Rather, I am trying to make a very important point regarding the question of experimenting on animals. The point is this; *those of us who object to animal experimentation must never argue against vivisection simply on the grounds that it has not been shown that there are sufficiently useful benefits. For once those who are concerned for animals argue in this way, they concede that vivisection is automatically acceptable if the benefits are shown to be great enough.*

This consequentialist form of reasoning has been critiqued eloquently by C.S. Lewis.³ When either side argues from con-

sequences alone, be it in terms of pain, pity or some other abstracted concept, the arguments always 'bite back', they can be applied equally well by the other side. Attempts to resolve the issue of vivisection using consequentialist arguments only show that this form of reasoning is inevitably intractable. Not only are consequentialist arguments (i.e. that one may do evil in order to gain a proportional good) impotent, but they are also roundly denounced in the New Testament. Not only does St Paul state clearly not to do evil that good may come, but recall Caiaphas the High Priest's words regarding Jesus, that it would be good that one die for the benefit of the people (John 18:14).

I suspect that consequentialist reasoning is so popular, even among Christians, because we have no articulated vision of the world which will provide us with an alternative to concepts like pain and pleasure as the basis for our ethics. As intuitively helpful as these concepts are, they must be subordinated to the vision for the world Christians most certainly have. Having rejected the consequentialist form of reasoning that justifies evils on account of greater goods, I must now show why it is evil to simply manipulate animals for human ends with no thought of their own. This requires a theological account of nature and the world and God's creation of both, and more particularly what it means for humans to have dominion over creation.

I first wish to articulate some of my basic moral and theological convictions. I am not a supporter of 'animal rights'. This will no doubt disappoint some and hearten others. I do not advocate 'animal rights' because I am not very interested in 'rights' *in general*. For the language of rights presupposes a world ultimately ruled by conflict, with appeals to 'rights' invoked as trumps against what would otherwise amount to a purely 'survival of the fittest' ethic. So although the language of 'rights' has pragmatic value in Western liberal societies, it also embodies presuppositions that are incompatible with the Christian vision of God's goodness expressed in creation.⁴

Christians have far richer resources for addressing the question of how humans should relate to other animals; any appeal to 'rights' pales in comparison with the peace and love of Christ to which Christians are called. So rather than being an advocate of a substantive appeal to rights, I am an advocate of a substantive appeal to theology. For instance, I believe that we live in God's world, that this world is not ours to do with whatever we want. I believe we should live our lives in terms of theological categories, with a theological vision, and not live according to the categories of power politics of the United States and other nation states. Nor do I believe Duke University Medical Center (or any other medical centre) should operate autonomously from theological categories, at least to the extent that Christians have some say as to what goes on there.

So how does theology make a difference when we discuss other animals? First, it means that we as Christians challenge

certain unfaithful conceptions of animals. The most prevalent modern conception of animals that must be challenged and decisively rejected is a broadly Cartesian one, where my cat is seen as a furry machine, where pigs are seen as locomotive meals. History is full of contemptuous attitudes towards animals.

The victory of vivisection marks a great advance in the triumph of ruthless, non-moral utilitarianism over the old world of ethical law.

Secondly, it means that we as Christians should be about the business of living the way God would have us live, we should be about the business of caring for our fellow humans and other creatures in the way of God. For us to be able to do this, we need to know God's story about our world, and more specifically what is meant by 'dominion'.

Typically, when fellow Christians tell me that they are justified in eating animals or experimenting on them because God has given us dominion over them, my joking reply is to ask whether that means that a king or queen who has dominion over their subjects may eat the subjects over which they rule. Though my response usually has the rhetorical force necessary to dispense with such claims, my reply equally misunderstands what the first chapter of Genesis is about.

For both sides assume that the world of the opening chapters of Genesis is like our world. But it is not. The pictures we are given in Genesis chapters one and two of *nature* and of *the world* are very different from that which we have today. In these texts we are told not only that God created humans and all other creatures, but also that God gives humans seed-bearing plants and fruits for food and that the other animals are *also given plants* for food. In the world of Genesis 1 and 2, not only do humans live in peace with animals, but animals also live in peace with each other. This situation is 'the peace of creation'. Northrop Frye goes so far as to claim that in this picture of the world animals are seen as pets to whom humans are to give names.⁵

This is all a very nice picture, but it has little to do with the situation today. Is it then irrelevant? For Christians it cannot be. Here we need to make a distinction between 'creation' and 'nature'. The original vision of the peace of creation, of Adam and Eve at peace with animals is no more. We live in a fallen world. It is after the fall that we see the loss of this peace, where God announces that there will no longer be the

peace had before with animals, but that the animals will now live in fear and dread of humans, that they are now given to humans as food.

Humans have fallen from the peace of creation into an alienated nature. They are no longer at peace with the animals, they are no longer at peace with each other (as the Cain and Abel story makes clear), and they are no longer at peace with their environment, but have to work to make it produce food for them.

Although humans are now in this alienated state, they are not completely divorced from this old world. Northrop Frye captures this beautifully when he says:

But there is an element in work, we say, that is an image of the world man has lost and has still to regain. He will never really gain it until he knows thoroughly what hell is, and realizes that the pleasure gained by dominating and exploiting, whether of his fellow man or of nature itself, is a part of that hell-world. Once we separate ourselves completely from that world, the natural order takes on a very different appearance.⁶

Frye goes on to quote from Isaiah 11:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Is. 11:6, 9)

This, obviously, is not the world we are living in, but it is most definitely the real world, the world we live for. It is the

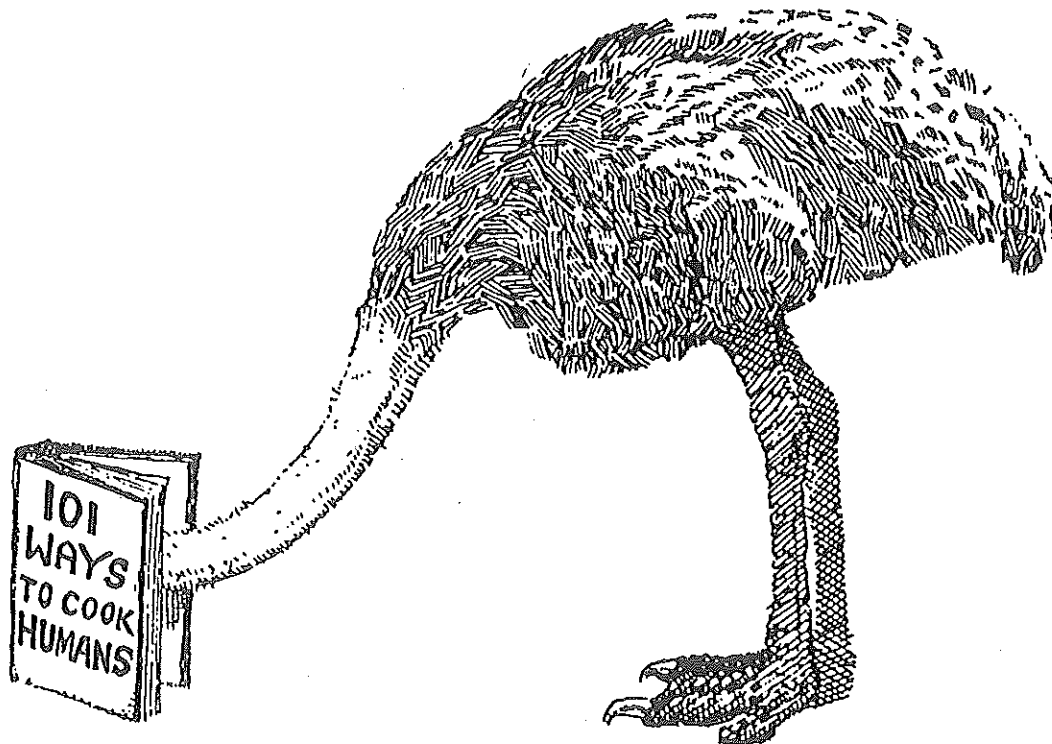
world that God desires for us. The prophet Hosea prophesies of a time to come when Israel will be faithful to her God. In that future time of joy, Hosea proclaims

In that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'my husband', you will no longer call me 'my master' . . . And in that day I will make a covenant for them *with* the beasts of the field, and with the birds of the heavens, and with the creatures that move along the ground: and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely. (Hosea 2:18)

Jesus calls us to acknowledge the advent of this kingdom of God and embody it in our lives. The call to peace with fellow humans, to lay down the sword, is also a call to peace with animals, to lay down the bow.

This cry for a new order in heaven and on earth is not limited to the Old Testament. In St Paul's letter to the Romans we are told that although we live in fallen nature, we as Christians should groan in expectation of a new order, of a new creation. For Paul connects our very salvation with the redemption of nature. Paul tells us that:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed . . . in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay, and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only [does the creation groan], but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adop-



tion as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. (Romans 8:19-23)

If we wish God to hear and heed our groanings, we must hear and heed the groanings of creation.

So what are the implications of this for our relations with animals? Lewis tells us that:

The victory of vivisection marks a great advance in the triumph of ruthless, non-moral utilitarianism over the old world of ethical law; a triumph in which we, as well as animals, are already the victims, and of which Dachau and Hiroshima mark the more recent achievements.⁷

With C. S. Lewis saying that, it hardly calls on me to say more. But I will add that I am under no illusions. The killing of animals is not about to cease. We live in a world that killed the Lord of glory, that performs holocaust and drops nuclear bombs on people. Animals are not going to stop dying. Furthermore, it is likely true that in some parts of the world it is simply not possible for humans to survive without the sacrifice of animals as 'daily bread'. But if we are a people of peace, a people committed to trying to bring nearer the advent of the kingdom of God, then we will be a people not eager to shed the blood of our fellow creatures.

Here we might draw an analogy between 'just war' thinking and our slaughtering of animals. The just war tradition in Christian thought has always been understood as a set of exceptions to the normative tradition of peaceableness. Any practice of war had to be justified following criteria of 'just cause', 'right intention' and 'last resort' among others.⁸ Any practice of vivisection must be similarly justified. All serious Christian would-be vivisectors must ask themselves at least two questions. First, are the reasons for performing these experiments compelling in the light of the fact that these animals have been created not primarily for human use, but to reflect God's glory? In answering this question one must remember that humans have a penchant for describing 'wants' as 'needs'. Second, have all other avenues for sources of this knowledge been exhaustively searched? In answering this question one must remember that necessity is the mother of invention.

Having said this, there seem to me to be two guidelines to be followed by vivisectors who wish to show by their character that they take theological convictions seriously. First, vivisectors need to display their seriousness by being vegetarian. Though there may be some compelling reason, possibly, to allow some experimentation, this necessity does not exist with regards to eating animals. Affluent western Christians have no need to eat meat, and should display in their concrete eating practices that they wish to embody the peaceable kingdom of God in their lives by not eating animals. This would seem to be the case especially with would-be vivisectors. Secondly, the onus should be with the vivisector in terms of demonstrating that all alternatives to experimentation on animals have been exhausted. If these two practices were

embodied by serious Christians, it would revolutionize how our society understands the relationship between God and non-human creatures.

Humans have fallen from the peace of creation into an alienated nature. They are no longer at peace with the animals, they are no longer at peace with each other and they are no longer at peace with their environment.

I am under no illusion that all my readers are going readily to accept my account of what constitutes 'theological seriousness'. But perhaps the reader will be more receptive to the arguments of Karl Barth, who thinks the killing of animals can be legitimated, but only within a thoroughly theological context. Barth tells us that:

The killing of animals in obedience is possible only as a deeply reverential act of repentance, gratitude and praise on the part of the forgiven sinner in face of the One who is the Creator and Lord of man and beast. The killing of animals, when performed with the permission of God and by His command, is a priestly act of eschatological character. It can be accomplished with a good conscience *only* as we glance backward to creation and forward to the consummation as the boundaries of the sphere in which alone there can be any question of its necessity.⁹

In other words, we may kill animals only in the profound theological recognition that this is not the way things are supposed to be, that this is a deeply tragic situation. Barth also has practical advice for the vivisector and the hunter:

Wherever man exercises his lordship over the animal, and especially across every hunting lodge, abattoir and vivisection chamber, there should be written in letters of fire the words of St Paul in Rom. 8:18f . . . concerning the 'earnest expectation' of the creature—for what?—for the 'manifestation of the children of god', and therefore for the liberation of those [humans] who now keep [animals] imprisoned and even dispatch them from life to death.

The creature . . . too, is determined for liberation from the [slavery to destruction] together with the liberation of the children of God, so that for the moment, it groans and cries with us in the birthpangs of the new aeon.¹⁰

While wanting to maintain on one hand that our using and killing of animals can be legitimated, Barth realizes this can only be maintained 'momentarily'. For animals and humans

together cry out for liberation from this slavery to predation and manipulation. Barth realizes this, and so (somewhat mut- edly) adds:

Yet it is not *only* understandable but *necessary* that the affirmation of this whole possibility [of our using animals in these ways] should always have been accompanied by a radical protest against it. It may well be objected against a vegetarianism which presses in this direction that it represents a *wanton anticipation* of what is described by Is. 11 and Rom. 8 as existence in the new aeon for which we hope . . . But for all its weaknesses we must be careful not to put ourselves in the wrong in face of it by our own thoughtlessness and hardness of heart.¹¹

To Barth and to the reader, I can only say that I am a firm believer in such wanton anticipation of the kingdom of God.

References

1. Originally read at a session entitled 'On Having Dominion', one in a series entitled *The Ends of Medicine: Christian Dialogues on Biomedical Dilemmas*, Duke University, Feb. 26, 1990. Thanks to Michael Baxter, Stanley Hauerwas, David Matzco and Steven Long for helpful criticism and/or support.
 2. The paper may be seen as an extended comment upon C.S. Lewis' article 'Vivisection', first published as a pamphlet by the New England Anti-vivisection Society, 1947. 'Vivisection' was reprinted in *God in the Dock*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1970.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. This claim may be confusing to those who think of 'creation' and 'nature' as synonymous, for it often appears that nature is also at war with itself. In the next part of the paper I argue that 'creation' must be understood as something both radically different from and more widely encompassing than 'nature'.
 5. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1981, p. 75.
 6. *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 76.
 7. C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, p. 228.
 8. For an excellent summary of just war criteria, see U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, Washington, 1983, pp. 36-48.
 9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 4, T. & T. Clark, p. 355.
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 355-356 (my italics).
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- Continued from page 26*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
 17. *Ibid.*, pp. 115f.
 18. Stanton, Anthony and Gage, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 51; Hole and Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
 19. Hole and Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
 20. Anderson and Zinsser, *op. cit.*, p. 361.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 362.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
 23. Lord Cromer, leading English anti-suffragist, declared in 1910: 'The German man is manly, and the German woman is womanly. Can we hope to compete with such a nation as this, if we war against nature, and endeavour to invert the natural roles of the sexes?' Cited in Brian Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 34. There is dispute among historians about how far the First World War changed the situation—see Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge; British Society and the First World War*, New York, 1965, pp. 95-104.
 24. Ruth Teale, 'Women outside the home', *Colonial Eve, Sources on Women in Australia 1788-1914*, Ruth Teale (ed), Melbourne, 1978, pp. 253-256; Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda, Women and Identity in Australia 1788 to the Present*, revised edition, Ringwood, Vic., 1984, *passim*.
 25. Sheila Fletcher, *Maude Royden, A Life*, Oxford, 1989, *passim*. See also Brian Heeney, *The Women's Movement in the Church of England, 1850-1930*, Oxford, 1988.
 26. *Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion*, London, 1920; *Lambeth Conference 1930*, SPCK, London.
 27. *Concerning the Ordination of Women*, WCC, Geneva, 1964.
 28. Hole and Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-114.
 29. Harrison, *op. cit.*, *passim*; Diocese of Melbourne, *Year Book 1927*.
 30. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *The New Crusade*, London, n.d. (1907?) pp. 4-5.
 31. Michael Gilchrist, *The Destabilisation of the Anglican Church, Women Priests and the Feminist Campaign to Replace Christianity*, Melbourne, 1991, *passim*.