

Not One Sparrow Is Forgotten: A Biblical-Theological Foundation for Animal Welfare

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Introduction

As this is a paper about animals, it might be appropriate to begin by acknowledging the elephant in the room which may be looming for some readers. It probably goes without saying that animals and their welfare are not typically subjects which a seminary student takes up in a capstone project at a conservative school, or which surface in evangelical theology or reflection in general, at least not that part of it which is taken seriously. Aside from token recognition of their place in creation or the role animals may play in biblical illustration or narrative, or flat assumptions of the purposes they serve for human benefit or development, animals are hardly paid a second thought.

Any undue focus on animals or excessive concern for their good even stands a good chance of being viewed as theologically and ethically misguided, if not outright mistaken, with so many other spiritual and humanitarian needs pressing, and so little priority supposedly given to the status of animals in Scripture. The animal welfare cause on the whole then, to the extent it even crosses our path, can generally be written off as at best the product of a perhaps well-meaning but misdirected sentimentality, and at worst the ideology of rights extremists operating within a thoroughly liberal and godless worldview. Virtually the entire collected front of evangelicalism, diverse as it may be, has been persistently dismissive of animal welfare to the remotest sidelines, in its silence as well as less frequent denunciations of the discussion, largely

due to the categorical precedence which has been understood to belong to human needs and wants in God's economy.

This mentality has filtered down, and perhaps up, through the constituency, but on a more personal level I haven't found it to be quite so rigid. In mentioning the focus of my project and its doctrinal framework to others in my home tradition, lay people as well as fellow students and more established professionals, I haven't always met with the conventional skepticism I often expected. Not that a reserved response hasn't been common, communicating at least an unfamiliarity if not some discomfort with the idea of an evangelical foundation for animal welfare. On some occasions there wasn't much of a response at all, apart from a somewhat strained expression or a polite nod, but at other times the disconnect was expressed in the form of a sincere question such as: "What exactly does an evangelical foundation for animal welfare entail?" or "I didn't know such a thing existed?" One classmate put it well: "That should be an untapped discussion." On the other hand, it seems just as many have been open, and some quite a bit more than I would have expected, to the significance of animal welfare and its biblical rationale. Some recalled the verse about God remembering the sparrows or the righteous man caring for his beast, or intuited on a similar plane that God cares about his nonhuman creatures and our relationship to them. But even those sympathetic to animals and their wellbeing were usually unaware of the extent to which this concern is grounded theologically.

I can relate to both perspectives; less than two years ago I was essentially unfamiliar with and even skeptical of the possibility of a distinctly Christian basis for animal welfare, but found myself increasingly open to animals and affected by their condition. I wondered if this disposition could legitimately be connected to the larger Christian ethos, or whether it was only a private interest I might have freedom to invest in but couldn't expect

others to be concerned with. It's one thing to feel your heart moved in a particular direction, but another to see a concern developed along theologically-faithful lines. As evangelicals we necessarily and principally turn to Scripture to ground reflection on any issue, whether it's a familiar and focal topic on the pages of the canon, or one that seems to receive much less specific or weighted attention.

Animal welfare strikes most of us as falling in the second category. Like some of those I spoke with, we may recall the odd verse which communicates a concern for animals, or sense that the biblical call to compassion should be applied wherever and whenever possible, even to our nonhuman neighbors. We may even long for the new heaven and new earth when pain and death will no longer affect any creature, and believe that some effort should be made at least to prevent and ease animal suffering in the meantime. But even taking these basic sentiments into account, which most if not all of us would acknowledge as rudimentary truths, it's still hard to know exactly where a concern for animals is located on the scale of spiritual significance or practical morality, or if we have enough cause to reasonably construct a theology of animal welfare. It even seems understandable from the total thrust of Scripture that the Christian agenda would relegate animals to the sidelines in deference to evangelism, discipleship and other humanitarian concerns, as the bible is clearly preoccupied with the relationship between the human and the divine and the community of God's people.

Not only that, but it's hard not to pick up on the conventional utilization of animals which pervades both Testaments, for labor and consumption as well as moral and spiritual development. It could even be suggested, as it has been, that the verses which indicate a care for animals are ultimately more concerned with the humans addressed in those same passages, and essentially only serve as illustrations for spiritual growth. While such an

interpretation may seem unnecessarily pigeonholed (or not quite attentive enough to the pigeons), the consistent and unquestioned use of animals in the bible does give the impression that they exist predominantly to serve human ends. Wasn't this the natural order established by God at the beginning? And when has it been challenged since, by the biblical scribes and apostles or for that matter Christ himself, or even two thousand years of subsequent tradition? How can we then give animals and their wellbeing any theological or moral weight which our rule of faith and practice isn't willing to grant?

These are legitimate, and possibly familiar, questions relevant to the prospect of formulating an evangelical foundation for animal welfare, and at first impression they may well seem irresolvable. I've been grateful to find that a compelling framework does exist, however, which not only shows that the charge of Scriptural inattention to animals and their wellbeing is misguided, but discloses a more essential truth about animals than the longstanding subordination to human needs and wants suggests, rooted in the work and will of the Trinity itself with respect to its own creation. The following sections will explore this foundation of theocentrism and the perspective it determines for our consideration and stewardship of animals, a perspective which has often been grossly neglected and violated, but which nonetheless remains close to God's heart and integral to his redemptive intentions.

I should note that relevant biblical passages and theological points will be addressed, but space won't allow for the acknowledgment of every applicable passage or argument, whether supportive or problematic, or every implicated area of human-animal engagement. Rather, my hope is to present a basic model for considering animals and their welfare, one in which mutually beneficial and affirming relations with God's creatures can be encouraged, and blatant abuses censured.

Creation

A theocentric perspective on animals begins, perhaps not unexpectedly, with the Source of creation himself and an account of his handiwork, found in the opening chapters of Scripture and expounded upon in subsequent eulogies. What may be unexpected, however, is how far the implications of this principal doctrine reach. Despite persistent attention to the teaching, a number of creation's major themes have been frequently overlooked or downplayed, if not altogether misunderstood: motifs which are fundamentally consequential to a Christian approach to all of life, and equally indispensable to how we think about animals and their wellbeing. It might go without saying that when we refer to the Creator, we are acknowledging the one, triune God of the Old and New Testaments who made all that exists, *ex nihilo*, and who is also perfect designer, owner, sustainer and Lord of all that he has made. Before looking more closely at the connection which God's lordship establishes between us and other creatures, the significance of his ownership, sustenance and design for the animals in themselves should not be taken for granted. Augustine's query directed at the animal kingdom then receives an appropriate and moving response: "'Tell me something about Him.' And they cried out in a loud voice: 'He made us.'"¹

It cannot be stressed enough that animals belong firstly and ultimately to their Creator, regardless of any other claim that may be made upon them. Asaph writes on God's behalf, "Every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. . . . For the world is mine, and all that is in it" (Ps 50:10-12). Not only does each and every animal belong to God, but the preceding passage intimates that they are individually known by him as well, making explicit what the

¹Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, X:9, quoted in Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, The Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002), 1.

doctrine of omniscience assumes. The Psalm's sentiment is echoed by Jesus in an assertion which represents even the most common, unassuming and disregarded creatures, and which is integral to the heart of this project: that five sparrows may be sold for a couple of pennies, but "not one of them is forgotten by God." We may tend to jump to the following verse in legitimate pursuit of reassurance that God is intimately concerned about us, his human children, and take comfort in the fact that we "are worth more than many sparrows." But in the process we might potentially pass over the necessary truth that God remembers, and cares about, the discounted sparrow as well (Luke 12:6-7).²

A traditional British hymn, which I came to recognize as a boy through the captivating stories of Yorkshire veterinarian James Herriot, eloquently captures the essence of the theocentric perspective we should adopt towards all animals, sparrows and otherwise:

*All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.*

Each little flower that opens,
Each little bird that sings,
He made their glowing colours,
He made their tiny wings.³

We can be assured that God's knowledge of his animal creations is not only absolutely thorough, but, similar to his cognizance of humanity, is an intimate and passionate knowledge as well. There is nothing God knows which he did not make, or retain ownership of. And there is nothing God made which he does not ardently care about, and for. His ownership

²Cf. Matt 10:29, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father."

³Cecil F. Alexander, *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (1848), accessed 24 March 2008; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_things_bright_and_beautiful; internet. James Herriot's earliest and most popular veterinarian accounts are collected in four American edition volumes which are each titled according to one of the lines of the hymn's chorus, beginning with "All Creatures Great and Small" (1972).

and knowledge of each creature painstakingly and individually brought into existence implies his ongoing guardianship over and sustenance of them as well. David announces, “O LORD, you preserve both man and beast” (Ps 36:6); and Psalm 104 describes God’s maintenance of animals’ existence and provision for them in great detail:

He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains.
They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their
thirst.
The birds of the air nest by the waters; they sing among the branches. . . .
He makes grass grow for the cattle, . . .
The high mountains belong to the wild goats; the crags are a refuge for the
coney. . . .

These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time.
When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.
When you hide your face, they are terrified;
when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.
When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the
earth. (vv. 10-12, 14, 18, 27-30)

The second person of the Trinity, “without (whom) nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3), is also identified by Paul as the one “by (whom) all things were created” and who “is before all things, and in (whom) all things hold together” (Col 1:16-17).

God undoubtedly then has a binding interest in his creation, an expression of his nature which is past, present and constant, and an interest which is only made richer by the supreme creativity and ultimate attention to detail which he has invested in it, and each one of its creatures. We may not be directly aware of the countless intricacies and wonders of God’s design, and even prone to failing to notice or taking for granted those we do come in contact with. But even a few moments consideration of one his masterpieces, often just outside the window or under our very noses, can’t help but cultivate a deeper appreciation for God and the consequence of his work.

The countless features of animal composition and personality which inevitably fascinate and astound us are, in actuality, only the external evidence of an underlying core, one which I was somewhat taken aback to uncover. I wasn't so much surprised to realize that it is elementally present in all creatures, as to learn that this basic reality is so specifically defined in Scripture. The first chapter of Genesis establishes through four uses of the term that all animals possess a *nephesh*, which designates them as "living creatures" (vv. 20, 24, or "living ... thing(s)," v. 21) and as having "the breath of life" (v. 30). While it's easy pass over these descriptions as stating the obvious, *nephesh* denotes a vitally significant attribute. Richard Young, N.T. scholar as well as environmental and animal advocate, describes it most simply as an "animating life principle," which is "unquestionably, the biblical criterion for establishing a compassionate ethic toward animals." It is a "special or sacred" property, shared only by humans (Gen 2:7), and indicates that animals possess some form of "thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, and self-awareness."⁴

I couldn't possibly do justice to the scope of evidence which exhibits the miracle of animal existence or the exquisiteness of their being in a few paragraphs, but I can mention the fascination I encountered as a child with the hamsters I kept and the bulge which grew on each side of their mouths as they hoarded their food, and the much-padded nest they tirelessly built for themselves in the little plastic hut I put in the corner of their cage, no matter how many times I cleaned it. I was captivated by these little creatures with very solemn habits, and generally motivated to explore the animal world wherever I could find it: in pet stores, library books or my own backyard. This compulsion diminished significantly as I grew older

⁴Richard Young, *Is God a Vegetarian? Christianity, Vegetarianism, and Animal Rights* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 24-25. Young describes these qualities as "similar to those of humans," but he wouldn't deny the uniqueness of degree to which humans possess them, or the image of God (19). He is, however, very concerned to show the value and quality of life which animals have been granted by God.

and became absorbed in computer games, sports, music and other teenage interests, appended by somewhat matured pursuits in college which came to revolve around responding to the human condition by way of my own precarious situation.

I rarely gave much thought to animals at all anymore, until a providentially-placed neighbor gave me, alone and immensely lonely in my first apartment out of college, my first kitten. A calico stray found wandering outside a country school, I instantly fell in love with this little orange and temperamental ball of life who grew to take on a Halloween-spotted coat with snow white bib and paws, and beautiful golden eyes that could melt your heart like Bambi or stare daggers into you a moment later. “Baby” sat in the window sill until I came home and followed me around the apartment to her various perches, padding closed doors until I let her in, and even waiting to use the bathroom with me in the morning. She loved playing with pens on, or off, my desk more than cat toys, and licked my hair when it was fresh from the shower and within easy access. Everything about this beautiful and endearing feline enthralled me, as with each one that came after her with its own personality and quirks, including most recently an adorable gray who taught herself how to play fetch.

The individual reason for being of these creatures entrusted to my care was unquestionable, even apart from the tremendous gift of their presence. It was inseparable from the inescapable dignity and grandeur of their existence, and relentlessly apparent will to live: each one an entire world to themselves and an priceless contribution to the world at large. Slowly but steadily I realized that the unique significance which was so unmistakable in my own pets must by implication be present in all animals, whether they happen to be acknowledged and cared for by humans or not. Even creatures which on the surface don't seem exceptional or distinct within their species, or those which are identified only by a number or tag as they make

their way through our food production system, are each precious beings designed to be unique testimonies of grace. Human nurturing might draw out more of an animal's potential and personality, but it cannot instill those attributes to begin with, just as *nephesh* is not our gift to confer, or take lightly.

The first chapter of Genesis affirms over and over again that God looked out over what he had made and acknowledged it to be good, in part and in whole. This appraisal is given seven times in all, encompassing every form of animal: “the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind,” along with “livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.” The climactic assessment is given when the author observes that “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (vv. 21, 24, 31). Michael Bullmore, pastor and former TEDS professor, writes in an excellent argument for a biblically-based environmentalism that the “references [to ‘goodness’] are there simply to tell the reader, and rather emphatically, that the creation perfectly *is* what God intended it to be. Each thing stands in its proper relationship to God, and each thing glorifies God by being exactly what God intended it to be.”⁵

All of creation, including each animal, is intended to praise its Creator:

“Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures, . . . wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, . . . Let everything that has breath praise the LORD” (Pss 148, vv. 7, 10; 150:6). And we can be assured that creation fulfills its responsibility: “All you have made will praise you, O LORD” (145: 10). But it is also unquestionable that creation and its creatures

⁵ Michael A. Bullmore, “The Four Most Important Biblical Passages for a Christian Environmentalism,” *Trinity Journal*, 19 (1998), 150-51. For easier reference, this article is also available at: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3803/is_199810/ai_n8817807/pg_1; internet. I should also mention that Michael Bullmore is my uncle, though my usage of his article is based entirely on its own merit.

exist for God's pure delight as well, a purpose which is naturally coterminous with praise but important to note in its own right. Bullmore finds this theme throughout Scripture and significantly in Psalm 104, which references the wide assortment of animals demonstrated above and also the stork, lion and leviathan: "May the LORD rejoice in his works" (v. 31).⁶ Bullmore draws a special connection between the Psalm, which observing "the leviathan, which you formed to frolic (in the sea)" (v. 26), and Job 38-41, which incorporates into God's rejoinder to Job a barrage of boastings regarding the wonders of animals, including the awe-inspiring behemoth and leviathan, and their distinctive behaviors (40:15-41:34). "While God may not be chuckling gleefully as he provides this description [of the behemoth in particular, 40:15-19], it is evident that he is taking great delight in a prize creation."⁷ Stephen Webb, religious philosopher and evangelically-rooted animal welfare advocate, even calls attention to the *New English Bible's* translation of Psalm 104:25-26, which portrays God as playing alongside the mighty leviathan: "Here is the great immeasurable sea, in which move creatures beyond number. Here ships sail to and fro, here is the Leviathan whom thou hast made thy plaything."⁸

But the larger claim which Bullmore makes, and which Young and Webb would second along with other Christian animal welfare proponents, which follows from God's ownership of all that he has created and his enduring sustenance of and sovereignty over the same, is that "all things find their reason for being fundamentally in him."⁹ This is, in a nutshell, the essence of the theocentric perspective with respect to creation and its creatures, a label which

⁶Ibid., 144.

⁷Ibid., 145-46.

⁸Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating*, The Christian Practice of Everyday Life, ed. David S. Cunningham and William T. Cavanaugh (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 80.

⁹Bullmore, "Four Most Important Passages," 143.

Bullmore centrally employs himself.¹⁰ Bullmore's argument is concerned with the broader natural world and environment, which includes commendable attention to "every species" and "every ecosystem."¹¹ But, like the majority of environmental and conservation advocacy both Christian and mainstream, he is not specifically concerned with the welfare of individual animals: "If 'all' of God's works were made with wisdom, then each one has the ability to speak to man of that wisdom. Thus every loss of species is a diminution of man's opportunity to observe the perfection of God."¹² I am convinced, however, that the consideration of individual creatures and their wellbeing is a natural extension of a theocentric view of creation, and a necessary one in fact. God intimately knows and cares not only for the full scope of creation and each of its member groups, but each particular component and being as demonstrated above, and we as his image bearers must work towards appropriating the same extent of awareness and concern, which includes extending ourselves to animals both collectively and one by one.

Stewardship

This is a vital component of the duty which was appointed to Adam and Eve, and through them to all humanity in the Garden. At the apex of creation, Genesis recounts God's declaration, "'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them 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 along the ground'" (Gen 1:26). In the following verses we read that "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the

¹⁰Ibid., 144-45, 147.

¹¹Ibid., 149.

¹²Ibid.

ground” (1:28). But the language of “rule” and “subdue” needs further explanation, as it doesn’t automatically lend itself to a creation-affirming interpretation.

The call to governance has most often been traditionally understood in terms of humanity’s entitlement to rule over creation and its creatures as we see fit, doing with and taking from it what we will so that our own needs, and often desires, are accommodated with unremitting precedence. Because of this flawed and hugely disastrous assumption, God’s elemental intention for our governance has been grossly neglected. His will was, and remains, that we would not be self-focused dominators or oppressors of creation in any respect, but that we would be humble and compassionate stewards of all that he has made and forever retains providence over. I have found, however, that there is an ever-broadening and perhaps nearly unanimous consensus in recent evangelical understanding that the mandates to “rule” and “subdue,” even the traditional “have dominion” (KJV),¹³ need to be understood in terms of stewardship and caring for creation, with the notions of modesty and service, tending and nurturing which this guiding paradigm contributes to our conception of rulership and administration. This is a heartening and long-needed development, even if the ethical and practical implications haven’t always been fleshed out to the degree they might be, and even less so when animal welfare is concerned.

Bullmore sees the model of human stewardship as intrinsic to the theocentric perspective, affirming in his article a confessional statement from Au Sable Institute, the leading evangelically-rooted environmental organization:

. . . Humankind is not the owner of that over which it has authority. Human authority is more that of trustee than owner. The scope of this trust is global. Since all creatures

¹³Gen 1:26, 28, accessed 24 March 2008; available from <http://beta.biblestudytools.com/search/?keyword=dominion&type=bible&translation=kjv>; internet.

depend on the earth for life, health and fulfillment, stewardship is the responsible use and care of creation. This is a clear and repeated testimony of Scripture.¹⁴

Bullmore himself adds that “God gave to mankind the responsibility of mastery over non-human creation, and he commanded him to exercise that mastery toward the preservation of, and fuller realization of, creation’s goodness.”¹⁵ He also reminds that God’s instruction to “be fruitful and increase in number” was issued not to just to humanity but to all creatures (Gen 1:20-25):

The writer takes pains to let us know that God clearly had every “kind” in mind. Unless we want to accuse God of duplicity, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that it is possible for man ... and each animal species to be fruitful and multiply at the same time. One should not negate the other. On the contrary, part of man’s responsibility is precisely to preserve the God-intended fullness of his creation. Historically what has stood in the way of this preservation is man’s wrongful exercise of his dominion.¹⁶

Bullmore further clarifies the character our governance was meant to take by specifically addressing the language of the authority that was granted to us: “While clearly the terms ‘rule’ (*rādā*) and ‘subdue’ (*kābas*) speak of mastery, . . . the call to rule over and subdue creation simply cannot bear the meaning ‘strong, forceful subjugation,’ given the context in which these words are spoken.”¹⁷ Also referenced is O.T. scholar William Dyrness’ observation that the call to dominion is issued “in the context of God’s ordering of the world to be fertile and productive, and his encouragement to man to enjoy that particular goodness” (Bullmore’s wording), along with Dyrness’ analogy to Israelite kingship:

Since the word [“rule”] is that generally used of the rule of a king, I believe the key is to be found in the unique conception of ‘rule’ that is developed in the Old Testament and that is specifically applied to Israel’s kings. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 points out that

¹⁴Cited in Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, ed., *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), vii, quoted in Bullmore, *Four Most Important Passages*, 139-40.

¹⁵Bullmore, *Four Most Important Passages*, 150.

¹⁶Ibid., 152-53.

¹⁷Ibid., 154, quoting E. C. Beisner, “*Imago Dei* and the Population Debate,” *Trinity Journal*, 18 (1997), 184.

Israel's king is to rule as a brother over brothers and sisters, is not to accumulate large amounts of gold, . . . Here is an organic rather than strictly monarchical view of kingship and ruling, . . . The rule that men and women are to exercise over creation, then, is one of servanthood, as a brother or sister 'rules' over others in the family. . . .

If my thesis . . . is valid, then we should expect that the righteous rule of the king would issue in a productive and fruitful environment, both human and nonhuman.¹⁸

John Austin Baker, former Bishop of Salisbury, concurs with the same sentiment:

The 'dominion', therefore, which man is promised in Genesis 1 is poles apart from the kind of right to egotistical exploitation which it suggests to our ears. It is in essence a perfect obedience to the will of God which is rewarded by a divinely ordained harmony and abundance in nature, which recognizes man as the greatest of all God's creatures and pays him homage.¹⁹

Baker's last comment raises an important point with respect to the uniqueness of humanity in relation to animals. Christians have often been concerned, explicitly or implicitly, that granting any substantive moral consideration to animals and their welfare jeopardizes the exclusive position which humanity holds in God's economy. David is humbled to know that God "made [man] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor," and he expressly spells out the accompanying distinction that God "made him ruler over the works of your hands; . . . all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and . . . all that swim the paths of the seas" (Ps 8:4-8). But this is exactly the crux of the matter, that the eminent honor which God bestowed on humanity of bearing his own image and serving as vice rulers over his creation was precisely crafted to be expressed in a stewardship of respectful service, not proud dominance. The person and nature of God, both endlessly loving and just, who longs to be gracious and merciful, is after all the reference point for the image.

Young writes,

¹⁸William Dyrness, "Stewardship of the Earth in the Old Testament," in *Tending the Garden*, ed. Granberg-Michaelson, 53-54, quoted in Bullmore, *Four Most Important Passages*, 155-56.

¹⁹John Austin Baker, "Old Testament Attitudes to Nature," in *Animals and Christianity: A Book of Readings*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Tom Regan (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 15-16; originally published as "Biblical Attitudes to Nature," in *Man and Nature*, ed. Hugh Montefiore (London: Collins, 1975), 87-96.

The image of God would then serve as a pattern for our dominion. The psalmists understand God as exercising dominion over creation with compassion and loving kindness (cf. Ps 72:8-14; 145:8-21). It is a dominion in which the stronger not only helps, nourishes, protects, and cares for the weaker but also shows compassion, kindness, and mercy.²⁰

The model of Christ, the perfect human, should also not be overlooked: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Phil 2:6-7).

It is noteworthy, even more so in light of the recent emphasis which has been placed on the relational dimension of God’s image, that the first specific task which God gave to Adam after placing him in the Garden “to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15) was that of naming all the animals: “He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name” (2:19-20). Baker writes that “to give a name to some other being is to claim and exercise sovereignty over it,” but also that in the biblical ethos “a true name expresses the nature and controls the destiny of its owner By giving the animals the truly appropriate name for each Adam proves that he has insight into their true nature, that he understands them.”²¹ Webb adds, “The act of naming in the Bible ordinarily suggests a close and caring relationship. Today, as in the ancient world, we only name those to whom we are closely related and responsible.”²² J. R. Hyland, staunch proponent of social justice, egalitarianism and animal welfare, even contends that the Hebrew term for naming employed, *shem*, “denotes individuality: the same kind of individuality connoted by a person’s

²⁰Young, *Is God a Vegetarian?*, 19.

²¹Baker, “Old Testament Attitudes to Nature,” 12.

²²Webb, *Good Eating*, 64-65. Webb goes on to say, “Naming is never associated in the Bible with control and domination.” While names intended to be pejorative or indicative of a curse might potentially contradict Webb’s assertion, these were most certainly not the sort of names Adam was giving to ideal creatures in the innocent setting of the Garden of Eden.

name.” Rather than “an impersonal classification of genus or species: It was a personal encounter with individual creatures. It was a recognition that they, like him, were individual beings.”²³

Such a personal encounter brings to mind the commencement of a relationship which certainly implies humanity’s ongoing care and protection, of course tailored to each creature’s specific needs, but also a wonderfully personalized and enduring rapport between each human and animal. This infinitely expressible and enjoyable connection is made possible by God’s gift of *nephesh* to both parties, and modeled by God’s own passionate delight in each of his individual creations, including ourselves. Our stewardship was meant to be one of boundless pleasure, as well as great responsibility. Taking in a puppy or a kitten can’t fail to remind us of this ideal, but I’m continually discovering that virtually any encounter with one of God’s creatures provides a poignant glimpse of what was meant to be.

Fall

But clearly and tragically, the state of creation and of relationships between Creator, creation and creatures, both human and nonhuman, is not as it should be. This is readily apparent, both theologically and empirically. The first two cosmically formative and evocatively idyllic chapters of Genesis are followed by the almost equally momentous calamity of chapter three: the Fall of humanity from perfect grace, and all of creation with them. Along with an account of Adam and Eve’s disobedience and ensuing loss of innocence, we read intimations of an accompanying curse upon all of the natural world and its creatures.²⁴ In God’s admonition of

²³J. R. Hyland, *God’s Covenant with Animals: A Biblical Basis for the Humane Treatment of All Creatures* (New York: Lantern, 2000), 74-75.

²⁴It is important to note that in a theistic evolutionary or old-earth creationist framework, in

the serpent there seems to be a negative point of commonality implied with all animals: “Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals!” (v. 14). We’re also informed of the first animal deaths in God’s fashioning of “garments of skin for Adam and his wife” to cover their nakedness (v. 21); in addition to the blight upon the earth: “Cursed is the ground because of (Adam); . . . It will produce thorns and thistles for you” (v. 17); and the couple’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden (v. 23).

These are of course only initial indications of the effects of the Fall upon animals and our relationship to them, which continued to evidence themselves and frequently escalated, often quite staggeringly, over the course of biblical history. As alluded to above, the use and consumption of animals for dietary sustenance and other human needs, in some cases luxuries, quickly became one of the most omnipresent and sanctioned realities for the Israelites as well as the early Christians, and the various societies in which they participated. The designation of animals for religious sacrifice was correspondingly ubiquitous in the Ancient Near East, and a central component of Israelite law and worship as ordained by God. Literally millions of animals were sacrificed by God’s chosen people, in what must have been an acute and at times overpowering display of death, even if redemptively-oriented. Over one hundred and forty

which animal existence and animal death are understood to predate human existence, the Fall of humanity can’t be understood to be responsible for prior creaturely suffering, unless it might somehow be considered retroactive. C. S. Lewis, an advocate of theistic evolution, hypothesized that Satan (and his own fall from grace) was responsible for animal suffering prior to the human Fall (*The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1996), 119-21 (page citations are to the reprint edition)). This is a theory which Andrew Linzey (see below) entertains (“C. S. Lewis’s Theology of Animals,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 80 (1998): 64, 69-71; I am grateful to Linzey for emphasizing Lewis’ attention to the matter), and others subscribe to including Alvin Plantinga (*ibid.*, 70, n. 25). John C. Munday, Jr. originally pointed me to this issue from an old-earth creationist perspective, though he does not attribute responsibility to Satan, but rather accepts animal pain and death as part of creation (“Creature Mortality: From Creation or the Fall?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 35 (1992): 59; Munday develops on his argument in “Animal Pain: Beyond the Threshold?” in *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, ed. Keith B. Miller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 435-468).

thousand cattle, sheep and goats are recorded to have been sacrificed by Solomon on one occasion alone (1 Kgs 8:63).²⁵

The Law of Moses placed some restrictions on the types of animals and manner in which they could be utilized, killed and consumed, in addition to carefully regulating sacrifices, but without question it did authorize and endorse the widespread use of animals. The authors of both Testaments took this for granted, and Christ was no exception, even as the efficacy of animal sacrifice was prophetically questioned and the Law gave way to the New Covenant. Animals are understood as a focal means of God's holistic provision for his children, and a major contribution to the subsistence of all of humanity, just as many of them participate in food chains for each other's nourishment. And yet it should never be forgotten that this gracious provision for the continuance of life, which necessarily involves the suffering and death of God's prized and beloved creatures, is only made available in the wake of the Fall. Bullmore writes,

By the time the psalmist took up his pen, sin had long since invaded Eden and left its mark upon creation. Of this the psalmist is not unaware. He speaks of prowling lions roaring for their hapless prey [Ps 104:21]. He knows that terror and death are common among man and beast (v. 29). . . . He openly acknowledges the existence of wicked men (v. 35). He sees that nature is, in fact, "red in tooth and claw."²⁶

Even Tennyson's poetically infamous depiction of predation is set in the context of a broader statement about that same reality:

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law-
Though Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shrieked against his creed-²⁷

²⁵Cf. 1 Kgs 8:5, "King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted."

²⁶Bullmore, *Four Most Important Passages*, 148.

²⁷Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, quoted in Jeffrey G. Sobosan, *Bless the Beasts: A Spirituality of Animal Care* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 88-89.

The effects of sin and the realities of predation in no way give humanity free reign to disregard the value of animal life or contribute gratuitously to their suffering. God may have granted humankind certain permissions to use animals in response to our physical and spiritual neediness after the Fall, but the implications of his creatorship and expectations for our stewardship are not suddenly made irrelevant by the advent of sin, as if they were only applicable in a perfectly ideal and innocent setting which we no longer have access to. It is important to note that the opening verses of Scripture were written when the consequences of the Fall were long-established and well-experienced,²⁸ and all three first chapters of Genesis, not just the third, set the tone for God's covenants to follow.

God undoubtedly remains concerned for his animal creations, and the Noahic covenant makes this explicit in Genesis 9, just as Noah and his family have survived the flood along with their invaluable creaturely cargo, which included at least “two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you (6:19-20, 7:2-3).” Young observes that “this included clean and unclean animals, many of which were of no utilitarian value to Noah or his family.”²⁹ Still, the covenant begins quite ominously for animals:

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything (vv. 1-3).

²⁸Young pointed me this in referencing God's establishment of “a vegetarian diet for humans and animals” in Gen 1:29-30 [“Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beast of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground-everything that has the breath of life in it-I give every green plant for food.’ And it was so.”], noting that “the vegetarian passage, . . . was written by those who were anything but vegetarian!” (*Is God a Vegetarian?*, 19).

²⁹Richard A. Young. *Healing the Earth: A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solutions* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 106.

Baker describes the foreboding language of the middle verse as “that normally used of a conqueror slaughtering a routed army or sacking a fallen city. Man has become the enemy of all living things.”³⁰ The third verse also relates the first specific divine permission given for the eating of animal flesh, though this permission is qualified by the following amendment: “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it” (v. 4).

While the consumption of animal flesh was clearly not God’s original ideal (cf. 1:29-30), the prescription against eating meat with “its lifeblood still in it” also demonstrates the high value which God continues to place on animal life, even when it is designated for a legitimate human end. But the covenant continues:

“I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. . . . Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood” (9:9-11).

The repeated attention to all animal life in God’s promise is striking, perhaps even surprising if we tend to think of the covenant in generally human terms. Bullmore eloquently responds, and draws attention to the recurrence of *nephesh* at the same time:

Theologians are wont to refer to this as the Noachian covenant. It would be more aptly designated as the Creation covenant, for in it God makes abundantly clear that his promise is for every living creature. . . . The thing that is emphasized above everything else is that this covenant is made with “all life” (*kōl bāśār*), with “every living creature” (*kōl [nepeś hahayyā]*). Nine times God reiterates this point, and it is clear from the emphasis they receive and the positions these reiterations occupy that God wants the point to be clear. . . .

Clearly God is communicating through this covenant that all creation matters to him and that it is his determination to preserve it without diminution. . . . It also begins to communicate, in an anticipatory way, his intention to redeem creation. Here someone may protest and accuse me of over-interpretation. After all, the covenant merely promises that there will never again be destruction by flood. . . . But the covenant does speak beyond its own explicit promise. At minimum it says that God sees bird and beast as worthy of covenantal protection. He is not reluctant to group them with humans under one covenant. This itself speaks more broadly than the limits of the specific promise

³⁰Baker, “Old Testament Attitudes to Nature,” 16-17.

might at first suggest. But, more than that, it can be legitimately inferred that this covenant is representative of God's long-term intention ultimately and finally to redeem all of creation. . . . Gen 9:8-17 tells us that in God's covenantal economy, the destiny of every living creature is somehow linked with ours.³¹

Before turning our own attention to the essential theme of redemption, it's worth highlighting other biblical indications of God's concern for animals, which are more present than might be expected. Proverbs 12:10 may well be the most well-known: "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel;" and as Young points out, "This literally reads, 'have regard for the life (*nephesh*) of their animals.'"³² The Mosaic covenant is also replete with prohibitions against cruelty and directives for compassion and care: "During the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave"; "Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest"; "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk" (Exod 23:10-11, 12, 19); "When a calf, a lamb, or a goat is born, it is to remain with its mother for seven days. . . . Do not slaughter a cow or a sheep and its young on the same day" (Lev 22:26-28); "If you see your brother's ox or sheep straying, do not ignore it but take it back to him. . . . If you see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it. Help him get to its feet"; "If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or the eggs, do not take the mother with the young"; "Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together"; "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (Deut 22:1-4, 6-7, 10, 25:4).

Additionally, both Nathan and David condemn the rich man who wrongly

³¹Bullmore, *Four Most Important Passages*, 157-59.

³²Young, *Is God a Vegetarian?*, 85.

takes and slaughters a poor man's "one little ewe lamb," which "grew up with him and his children," and "shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him" (2 Sam 12:1-7). Ezekiel also prophesies:

Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. (34:1-6)

God tells Jonah of his concern for the people of Nineveh as well as their cattle (Jonah 4:11), and condemns the Babylonians for their total devastation of lands, cities, people and animals: "The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals will terrify you" (Hab 2:17).

While most of these prescriptions, prohibitions and condemnations have obvious implications for the wellbeing and holiness of God's people, we can't simply pass or gloss over the legitimate concern which they communicate for the welfare of God's creatures. We may typically be more interested in their deeper humanitarian and spiritual connotations, but remember that just as God's attention to the sparrows illustrates our own even greater value to God, the spiritual referent of the analogy which speaks to the human condition doesn't hold up unless the animal reference is true as well.

The New Testament is more sparse when it comes to specific allusions to animal welfare, though this by itself doesn't indicate that the issue was of no relevance or concern to its authors; rather they built off of the foundations established in the Old Testament, which included God's valuing of and care for his creatures. Christian philosopher and ethicist Robert Wennberg also suggests, "That animal needs are not addressed as often in the New

Testament may partly be a product of the urban character of the developing Christian movement. Christians were city dwellers, not rural farmers for whom issues of animal treatment might more naturally arise.”³³ Still, the significance of the truth that “not one [sparrow] is forgotten by God” or “fall(s) to the ground apart from [his] will” (Luke 12:6-7; Matt 10:29-31) should not be underestimated. Jesus further demonstrates God’s foundational concern for animals: “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them”; a concern which he reminds is integrally incorporated into the Law: “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?” (Matt 6:26, 12:11-12).

Matthew Scully, Catholic political conservative and author of perhaps the most literary and compelling work of Christian animal welfare advocacy, wishes honestly that Jesus would have articulated a call to mercy towards animals more directly.³⁴ However, in response to Christ’s cleansing of the temple, he proposes that “everything we know about him tells us that along with his indignation at seeing the holy place defiled, he must have felt some compassion for the creatures being slaughtered and sold by the defilers.”³⁵ He also points to Christ’s choosing of the “humble ass” to carry him into Jerusalem, and “the lamb as a symbol of guiltless suffering,” which, together with his attention to the sparrow, constitute “fairly high honors for all three creatures.”³⁶ Scully notes the animals present at Christ’s birth, and the importance of Christ’s self-identification as “the Lamb” as well as “the Good Shepherd” (John

³³Robert N. Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals: An Invitation to Enlarge Our Moral Universe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 291.

³⁴Scully, *Dominion*, 97-98.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 96.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 95.

10:13-16).³⁷ Jesus does in fact stress that a good shepherd will search for even one sheep that “wanders away” (Matt 18:12-14), and definitively says of that calling: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:11-18).

It is patently disturbing how such a fundamentally simple concept of caring for the animals in one’s guardianship has been so intensely disregarded by the human race, and all the more in recent history. Our potential for the most unimaginable depravity seems limitless: from Descartes’ dissection of living animals along with his contemporaries who “nailed poor animals up on boards by their four paws to vivisect them and see the circulation of the blood”,³⁸ to the Chinese fur manufacturing practice made infamous only a decade ago of roping dogs down while they were “being skinned alive, whimpering for mercy, actually licking the hand of the skinner,” and keeping cats in “little cages, huddled in terror as one after another was strangled to death-literally noosed and hung inside the cage, . . . to avoid bleeding or other damage to the fur”,³⁹ to last year’s indictment of football star Michael Vick for operating a dog fighting ring and overseeing the execution of poorly-performing dogs, by means including electrocution and slamming their bodies into the ground.

And then there is the reality of modern food production, in which around ten billion animals are killed every year in America alone, and 98 percent through the grossly

³⁷Ibid., 96-97. Cf., Hyland, *God’s Covenant with Animals*, 44-45, 53-55.

³⁸Nicholas Fontaine, *Memories pour servir a l’histoire de Port-Royal* (Cologne, 1738), 2: 52-53, quoted in L. Rosenfield, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine: The Theme of Animal Soul in French Letters from Descartes to La Mettrie* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), quoted in Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2d ed. (1990; reprint, New York: Ecco, 2002), 201-2.

³⁹*Dateline*, NBC News (1998), cited in Scully, *Dominion*, 121.

inhumane machinations of factory farming (as of 2002).⁴⁰ To describe just a few of the horrors of this hell-spawn of industrialization and economization: egg-laying hens are kept in cramped and injurious wire mesh cages, after having the tip of their beaks seared off without any form of anesthesia, in which they don't have enough room to spread a wing; chickens and turkeys groomed for the highest possible meat yield "develop painful lameness and suffer from lung collapse, heart failure, and crippling leg conditions"; castration, dehorning and branding of male farm mammals also takes place without anesthesia; dairy cows aren't even allowed to nurse their calves for an entire day, and their male calves are killed or raised for veal, which necessitates being fed a diet so low in iron that their flesh stays ghostly pale and they become "anemic, weak, and prone to infection," and additionally requires being confined in crates which are "so narrow that the calves can't turn around or even lie down comfortably" so that their flesh doesn't toughen through the most basic of activities, and because the veal calves are "denied their natural desires to suckle and play, they often engage in neurotic behaviors such as sucking the boards of crates and tongue-rolling."⁴¹ Scully's description of a North Carolina pig farm is worth recounting as well:

The smallest scraps of human charity—a bit of maternal care, room to roam outdoors, straw to lie on—have long since been taken away as costly luxuries, and so the pigs know the feel only of concrete and metal. They lie covered in their own urine and excrement, with broken legs from trying to escape or just to turn, covered with festering sores, tumors, ulcers, lesions, or what my guide shrugged off as the routine 'pus pockets.'

C.S. Lewis's description of animal pain—"begun by Satan's malice and perpetrated by man's desertion of his post"—has literal truth in our factory farms because they basically run themselves through the wonders of automation, with the owners off in spacious corporate offices reviewing their spreadsheets.⁴²

⁴⁰Stephen R. Kaufman and Nathan Braun, *Good News for All Creation: Vegetarianism as Christian Stewardship* (2002; reprint, Cleveland: Vegetarian Advocates, 2004), 24.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 23-28.

⁴²Matthew Scully, "A Religious Case for Compassion for Animals" (Washington, D.C.: The

Many of these conventional factory farming practices are, ironically and sadly, direct violations of the specific biblical injunctions regarding animal welfare we just reviewed (for instance, compare Scully's account to Ezekiel 34⁴³). More categorically, the entire industry is an unspeakable affront to the makeup of God's animal creations and his concern for their wellbeing, not to mention his expectations for human stewardship, having entrusted his precious creatures to us. The most ordinary and elemental comforts of room, board and care are withheld from these "production units," and the most basic expressions of animal nature and behavior are thwarted. A pig trade magazine went so far as to explicitly recommend: "Forget the pig is an animal. Treat him just like a machine in a factory."⁴⁴

Scully responds indirectly: "To me it has always seemed not only ungenerous and shabby but a kind of supreme snobbery to deal cavalierly with them, as if their little share of the earth's happiness and grief were inconsequential, meaningless, beneath a man's attention, trumped by any and all designs he might have on them."⁴⁵ And he unequivocally condemns the industry which has so comprehensively adopted this mindset of indefensible "snobbery," and acted upon it with the most extensive ramifications, affecting literally billions of creatures:

Confronted with this wholesale disregard and destruction of life, all attempts to justify it strike me as vain talk, miserable excuses that cannot cover the iniquity, the ungodly presumption of it, the scale and sorrow of it. . . .

Factory farming isn't just killing: It is negation, a complete denial of the animal as a living being with his or her own needs and nature.⁴⁶

Humane Society of the United States, *Animals & Religion*, 2007), 13; originally published as an essay in *The American Conservative* (May 23, 2005).

⁴³Scully draws a similar comparison between the "corporate farmer" and the negligent hired hand who deserts the sheep placed in his care when threatened by a wolf (John 10:12-13), *Dominion*, 270.

⁴⁴John Byrnes, *Hog Farm Management* (September 1976), quoted in Kaufman and Braun, *Good News for All Creation*, 22.

⁴⁵Scully, *Dominion*, 9.

Redemption

As children of God and followers of Christ, we are called to confront sin and evil wherever we encounter it, and to promote good wherever possible in life and creation. Scripture consistently advocates for justice, mercy and compassion, all of which are fundamental attributes of the Trinity which we are meant to image: “He has showed you, (humanity), what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). We know that God urgently cares for the defenseless and the abused, and it is unconscionable to exclude from this concern nonhuman creatures. As Anglican theologian and pioneering modern-day Christian animal advocate Andrew Linzey stresses, “To stand for Christ is to stand against the evil of cruelty inflicted on those who are weak, vulnerable, unprotected, undefended, morally innocent, and in that class we must unambiguously include animals.”⁴⁷ Scully adds, “The whole logic of Christianity is one of condescension, of the higher serving the lower, the strong protecting the weak, the last being first, and all out of boundless love and generosity.”⁴⁸

As people of the light, standing for mercy and for compassion unavoidably requires identifying and exposing evil, both personal and corporate, and all the more urgently when it has been buried so deeply in our consciousness. When it comes to factory farming in particular, it’s not that the majority of us commit the more heinous acts ourselves, or even think

⁴⁶Ibid., 288-89.

⁴⁷Quoted in Hyland, *God’s Covenant with Animals*, xv. Cf. Young, “One unmistakable theme of the Hebrew prophets is that God sides with the oppressed. The cross points us in the direction of self-giving loves that takes sides with the suffering, victimized, exploited, and oppressed, whether human or animal. . . . The resurrection of Christ is a message of hope to all who suffer” (*Is God a Vegetarian?*, 154).

⁴⁸Scully, *Dominion*, 97.

of ourselves as supporters of them, but to the extent we're at all aware of what takes place in today's industrial animal farming we habitually push the reality as far from our awareness as possible. We assume there's nothing we can do about this apparently necessary, even if repulsive, byproduct of developed society, and reluctantly take our place in the human economy which requires it. Scully poignantly describes the dissociation:

The truth is that realism doesn't come any harder to swallow, literally, than this. Go into the largest livestock operation, search out the darkest and tiniest stall or pen, single out the filthiest, most forlorn little lamb or pig or calf, and that is one of God's creatures you're looking at, morally indistinguishable from your beloved Fluffy or Frisky. . . . If you could walk all of humanity through one of these places, 90 percent would never touch meat again. We would leave the place retching and gasping for air. We cringe at the thought of it, and that cringe is to our credit. . . . Not *important*, we keep telling ourselves. No, it is only important enough to hide, lock away, bar from filming, forget about, laugh off, deride, belittle, and at all costs avoid discussing in detail.⁴⁹

It is to our shame that we continue to benefit so indiscriminately from business practices we can't sincerely endorse and wouldn't think of participating in ourselves, let alone subject our pets to. Ultimately this is no less a question of conscience than any other issue of self-deception or truth-evasion, and it is our responsibility as a Church to address. Liberal theologian Albert Schweitzer builds persuasively on the same sentiment:

Whenever an animal is in any way forced into the service of man, every one of us must be concerned with the sufferings which for that reason it has to undergo. None of us must allow to take place any suffering for which he himself is not responsible, if he can hinder it in any way. He must not soothe his conscience with the reflection that he would be mixing himself up in something which does not concern him. No one must shut his eyes and regard as non-existent the sufferings of which he spares himself the sight. Let no one regard as light the burden of his responsibility. While so much ill-treatment of animals goes on, while the moans of thirsty animals in railway trucks sound unheard, while so much brutality prevails in our slaughter-houses, while animals have to suffer in our kitchens painful death from unskilled hands, while animals have to endure intolerable treatment from heartless men, or are left to the cruel play of children, we all share the guilt.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Ibid., 26, 128.

Cultivating a reverence for the life all creatures, an important facet of Schweitzer's ethic,⁵¹ is a positive and compelling, even necessary, means for counteracting animal cruelty. It is not viable for someone to be genuinely concerned for animal wellbeing if he or she has no interaction with animals personally, or no appreciation for the individual wonder and nuance of their existence. Such positive exposure may be forgotten or suppressed as a matter of convenience, as those who regularly inflict gross pain on sentient creatures must do, and even those of us who do our best not to think about the plight of the animals we consume. But grounding such exposure in a theocentric understanding of animal significance and human stewardship can't help but influence our treatment of them, or sponsorship of the same. Nor can it help but increase our greater reverence for the Creator. Contemporary liberal theologian and creation advocate Jeffrey Sobosan writes movingly,

We must then sing even louder, a psalmody whose music tells that the Earth is not ours alone but shared, with reverence due all life as reverence is due life's Maker. . . . Reverence is like love; it is not something that falls from the sky free for our taking. It is something we must work at, a spiritual task needing perseverance and vigilance if it is to grow stronger and become expansive, embracing more and more of living things, ever more the living God. Any spirituality of animal care must make this reverence a part of the repertoire of its accomplishments, or at least of its pursuits, needing to nourish it-or just bring it alive-in everyone the spirituality touches.⁵²

Ending animal life takes on a different light in this context of theocentric reverence, not to mention the manner by which such death occurs, a point which the hugely influential neo-Orthodox theologian Karl Barth somewhat surprisingly emphasized:

The killing of animals, in contrast to the harvesting of plants and fruits, is annihilation. This is not a case of participation in the products of a sprouting nexus of life ceaselessly

⁵⁰Albert Schweitzer, "The Ethic of Reverence for Life," in *Animals and Christianity*, ed. Linzey and Regan, 120; originally published as part of *Civilization and Ethics*, ed. and trans. C. T. Campion (Unwin; reprint, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1967), 214-22.

⁵¹Ibid., 118-20.

⁵²Sobosan, *Bless the Beasts*, 134-35.

renewed in different forms, but the removing of a single being, a unique creature existing in an individuality which we cannot fathom but also cannot deny. . . . The killing of animals presupposes that the peace of creation is at least threatened and itself constitutes a continuation of this threat. And the nearness of the animal to man irrevocably means that when man kills a beast he does something which is at least very similar to homicide. We must be very clear about this if we maintain that the lordship of man over animals carries with it the freedom to slaughter them. . . .

If there is a freedom of man to kill animals, this signifies in any case the adoption of a qualified and in some sense enhanced responsibility. . . . He obviously cannot do this except under the pressure of necessity. . . . He must never treat this need for defensive and offensive action against the animal world as a natural one, nor include it as a normal element in his thinking or conduct. He must always shrink from this possibility even when he makes use of it. It always contains the sharp counter-question: Who are you, man, to claim you must venture this to maintain, support, enrich and beautify your own life?⁵³

A helpful framework for engaging animal welfare, both proactively and in response to gross abuses as well as more careful compromises such as described by Barth, is what someone described as the “bookends” of innocence in Scripture. In the first two chapters of Genesis as well accounts of the full establishment of God’s kingdom at the close of history, we see a clear and consistent picture of what God originally intended and ultimately still intends for his creation and creatures: an incorruptible and unending innocence free from the distortions of sin. While we currently live between the first and final manifestations of God’s ideal, it is crucial to keep in front of us God’s enduring purposes for creation as we grow in the apprehension of our own redemption made possible through Christ’s work, a redemption always intended to be shared with the entire natural world.

As an aside, it is important to note the implications of working with a theistic evolutionary model of creation when considering the bookends of innocence, a model which an

⁵³Karl Barth, “Justifiable Killing,” in *Animals and Christianity*, ed. Linzey and Regan, 191-92; originally published as part of “The Doctrine of Creation,” in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, part 4, ed. and trans. A. T. Mackay et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 352-56.

ever-growing number of evangelicals have subscribed to,⁵⁴ and which incorporates into an understanding of the sovereignly guided process of creation the realities of progressive creaturely development and mortality. This necessitates a reconsideration of original innocence, and evangelical philosopher Robin Collins offers a viable response:

The original state described in the Garden story represents an ideal state that was never realized. The idea is that Genesis 2 falls into the category of a “golden age” story. As the prominent anthropologist and historian of religion Mircea Eliade has pointed out, the idea of an ideal golden age was a widespread motif in the ancient world and symbolically represented the ideal for human beings. In light of the way these sorts of golden age stories functioned in many ancient cultures, it is reasonable to suppose that the Genesis story would, among other things, serve as a symbolic story that provides a preliminary and partial sketch of what an ideal relation with God would be like.⁵⁵

Thus, while in one O.T. scholar’s words, “The Bible’s description of the new earth and new heaven uses categories that hark back to the Garden of Eden,”⁵⁶ the creation account itself would actually point forward to the state of innocence which God ultimately will realize.

Turning to the passages which speak of a future innocence for all of creation, Isaiah famously prophecies:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (11:6-9)

Isaiah returns to the same certain hope:

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. . . .

⁵⁴E.g. Keith B. Miller, ed., *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). I’ve personally taken the theistic evolutionary model much more seriously in recent months.

⁵⁵Robin Collins, “Evolution and Original Sin,” in Miller, ed., *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, 470, citing Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 50-51.

⁵⁶Bill T. Arnold, “Vegetarians in Paradise,” *Christianity Today* 48 (2004), 104.

The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD. (65:17, 25)

And Hosea adds, "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. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety" (2:18).

There are legitimate questions related to these passages, concerning how literal they are meant to be taken and what final stage of history they represent (an intermediate Messianic age or the ultimate new earth?) Other prophetic passages even speak to the expulsion of wild and dangerous animals altogether (Lev 26:6; Isa 35:9; Ezek 34:25).⁵⁷ But as Wennberg affirms in response to Isaiah 11 in particular,

Acknowledging the poetic dimension of this passage does not mean that one must deny that there is here being expressed a vision of a peaceable kingdom where there will be no killing and no predation. The writer of these words senses that when all God's creatures live in perfect shalom, there will be no spilling of blood, no agonizing deaths, no painful injuries inflicted by predators upon prey. . . . To yearn for God's perfection *is* to yearn for a day when there will be no predation.⁵⁸

The testimony of Isaiah 11 and 65, along with Hosea 2, is consistent with the opening of Genesis, and with N.T. passages which speak to the final redemption of all of creation.

The Pauline epistles make clear God's unimpedible desire to someday redeem all that he has lovingly made, through the person and work of his son: "And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment-to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph 1:9-10); also,

⁵⁷George L. Frear Jr., "Caring for Animals: Biblical Stimulus for Ethical Reflection," in *Good News for Animals?* ed. Charles Pinches and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 8, quoted in Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals*, 294.

⁵⁸Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals*, 295.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: . . . all things were created by him and for him. . . . For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, . . . by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. . . . This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (Col 1:15-23).

And in Revelation we read in John’s vision not only, “I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that it is in them, singing: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’” (5:13); but also this definitive declaration of Christian hope:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, . . . He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (21:1-5)

But we have skipped over one centrally significant Pauline passage, which warrants special attention in the context of our relationship to animals and their wellbeing:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, 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. (Rom 8:19-22)

No clearer statement could be made regarding the imperative role which humanity plays in creaturely redemption, dependent upon our own acceptance of the redemption made available through Christ and living in the light of that redemption, future and present, “hav[ing] been called according to his purpose” (v. 28). This passage is of crucial importance to Bullmore:

The images Paul uses to speak of this future redemption are powerfully emotive: the removal of an absolutely frustrating encumbrance, liberation from a killing servitude, the successful completion of a seemingly endless travail. But it is in his phrase “glorious freedom” (v. 21) that Paul strikes the most potent chord, for here he speaks of the return

of creation to a state in which it can once again freely and perfectly fulfill God's purpose for it and by so doing participate in the general glory which will one day be revealed, not only in us, but as the controlling characteristic of Christ's eternal kingdom. Creation personified sees its destiny as inextricably linked with ours.⁵⁹

And it is no less consequential to Barth when it comes to the plight of creatures: "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' (*apokaradokia*) of the creature-for what?-for the 'manifestation of the children of God,' and therefore for the liberation of those who now keep them imprisoned and even dispatch them from life to death."⁶⁰

Bullmore reminds of the "consistent witness of the OT prophets" regarding the effects of humanity's ongoing faithlessness upon creation and its creatures: ". . . Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying" (Hos 4:1-3); ". . . I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth" (Zeph 1:2-3); ". . . I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away. I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger" (Jer 4:22-26).⁶¹ Joel also paints a horrible picture: "For the day of the LORD is near; . . . How the cattle moan! The herds mill about because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep are suffering. . . . Even the wild animals pant for you" (1:15-20).⁶²

⁵⁹Bullmore, *Four Most Important Passages*, 159-61.

⁶⁰Barth, "Justifiable Killing," 193.

⁶¹Bullmore, *Four Most Important Passages*, 160.

⁶²Cf. Jer 7:20, "My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast."

But as new creations in Christ we are called to live in the hope of creation's redemption, in the "already" of God's kingdom which has broken into reality, and to foreshadow it in our lives and ethic, even as we struggle against the "not yet" of existence and our own incomplete sanctification. Even now we should take whatever steps we can to bring about what is best for God's cherished creatures, as we anticipate the unspoiled relationship we will one day have with them and witness to their ultimate hope. The model prayer which Christ himself provided for us is a faithful reminder of this vocation: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:9-10). As Young reminds, "Practicing the ethics of the kingdom brings a partial realization of the coming of the future into the present. For example, as we treat all God's creatures with love and justice, we can to a limited extent experience what George Ladd calls 'the presence of the future.'"⁶³ Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann insists more urgently: "Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."⁶⁴ And Bullmore brings the point home to this discussion in claiming the necessity of "a more nuanced understanding of human stewardship which . . . recognizes that to the duty of preserving creation must be added the duty of restoring creation."⁶⁵

When it comes to the welfare of God's nonhuman creatures, we witness to a theocentric appreciation of their existence as well as their ultimate redemption not only by calling for an end to the inexcusable cruelties practiced upon them in today's industries, which

⁶³Young, *Is God a Vegetarian?*, 144. N. T. scholar George E. Ladd's works include *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁶⁴Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 21, quoted in Young, *Is God a Vegetarian?*, 149.

⁶⁵Bullmore, *Four Most Important Passages*, 160 and n. 37.

necessarily includes not contributing to their continuation as much as we can help ourselves, but also by proactively taking steps to protect and care for animals in all contexts. While it is our most pressing responsibility to discontinue the destructive effects which we as humans inflict on animals, a monumental task in itself, we might even consider how we can contribute to the wellbeing of animals in their natural habitats by improving their quality of subsistence, and even working against predation. As theologian T. F. Torrance affirms, it is “man’s task to *save* the natural order through remedial and integrative activity, bringing back order where there is disorder and restoring peace where there is disharmony.”⁶⁶ In this light we might even begin to consider vegetarianism, an ethic often connected to the animal welfare discussion,⁶⁷ remembering that predation of any form was never God’s ideal, and that we will not take it with us into the peaceable kingdom.

If some still hesitate, as I do at times myself, and wonder whether the energy which we might expend on animal welfare causes and concerns shouldn’t be invested in any number of humanitarian or spiritual needs, which are endlessly looming and urgent in and of themselves, Scully’s comments are of some help in processing the dilemma:

It is true that there will always be enough injustice and human suffering in the world to make wrongs done to animals seem small and secondary. The answer is that justice is not a finite commodity, nor are kindness and love. When we find wrongs done to animals, it is no excuse to say that more important wrongs are done to human beings, and let us concentrate on those. A wrong is a wrong, and often the little ones, when they are shrugged off as nothing, spread and do the gravest harm to ourselves and others.⁶⁸

⁶⁶T. F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 130, quoted in Linzey, “Lewis’s Theology of Animals,” 64, Linzey’s emphasis.

⁶⁷This connection is emphasized by most current leading Christian animal welfare advocates as well, including Linzey, Kaufman, Webb and Young (see bibliography).

⁶⁸Scully, *Dominion*, xii.

He alludes to the reality that sin and evil in any area, however negligible we may consider it to be, will inevitably penetrate to other aspects of our existence, personal and corporate, and possibly to a greater extent than we might think proportionate. Our mistreatment and neglect of animals may well have a greater affect on our souls and communities than we realize.

On the other hand, as Young intimates: “If humanity was designed to be part of an ecosystem, an inner sense of wholeness and fulfillment could never be realized without the corresponding renewal of the community and context of which humans are a part.”⁶⁹ And many have made the logical connection articulated here by Aquinas: “It is evident that if a man practises a compassionate affection for animals, he is all the more disposed to feel compassion for his fellowmen.”⁷⁰ A theocentric understanding of animals motivates us to care for them as valuable beings in themselves, regardless of any benefit to ourselves, and yet the benefit we receive is greater, and more multifaceted, than we could hope to expect.

Conclusion

My intention for this project from the beginning was that it would not simply address a question of theological, ethical or even personal curiosity, but that it would provide a meaningful basis for engaging the issue of animal welfare practically. I had hoped to more specifically address the field of animal rights and welfare advocacy as it exists, both past and present, mainstream and Christian, as well as to begin to lay out a basic strategy for stepping into that field from a distinctly evangelical position.⁷¹ But time and space limitations being what they

⁶⁹Young, *Is God a Vegetarian?*, 147.

⁷⁰St. Thomas Aquinas, quoted in E. F. Schumacher, “Animals Are Ends-in-Themselves,” in *Animals and Christianity*, ed. Linzey and Regan, 190; originally published as part of *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Abacus, 1974), 86-90.

⁷¹I understand that the term “evangelical” carries with it many less-than-positive connotations

are, and generally having bitten off more than I could chew, I'll only be able to make a few closing comments regarding these matters which deserve fuller attention. Still, I hope these passing remarks will be conducive to further engagement to come.

The evangelical community is without question in need of a clear and faithful voice for animal welfare concerns. This is vitally needed to build awareness of the issue within the community, and just as importantly legitimacy in the face of potential objections similar to those raised throughout the paper. Wennberg writes,

The biblical and theological challenge of providing adequate support for an ethic of animal concern has not yet been fully taken up. Whereas there are those in the Christian community, like Andrew Linzey, who have addressed these concerns, there is much work yet to be done. It must be recognized that in asking Christians to take up these concerns, we are asking them not only to surmount general cultural insensitivity to animal welfare but to overcome the resistance peculiar to the Christian tradition as well. . . . It is true that ecology, concern with species survival, and environmentalism have begun to receive attention, but there has been no comparable effort to embrace or even to explore the concerns of animal advocacy.⁷²

There is much more to be commended in the work of Christian animal welfare advocates than Wennberg's comment would seem to indicate, and the majority of what I have read is commensurate with a theocentric and even an evangelical perspective.⁷³ I would strongly recommend especially *Good News for All Creation* by Stephen Kaufman and Nathan Braun, *Dominion* by Matthew Scully, *Good Eating* by Stephen Webb, *God, Humans, and Animals* by Robert Wennberg and *Is God a Vegetarian?* by Richard Young, to anyone interested in the issue, whether on the fence or deeply invested. But Wennberg is right in that there is still a huge

with it, some of them warranted and others less so. I've struggled with self-identifying with the label myself, but with Roger E. Olson, I don't know that there is a better descriptive available. Also, with Olson, I like to think of evangelicalism at its best, most dynamic and most generous (*How to Be Evangelical Without Being Conservative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 18, 23-24).

⁷²Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals*, 285-86.

⁷³As with any book, on any issue, some discernment is recommended when considering isolated arguments, implications and hermeneutical issues. Not all recommended authors are self-identified evangelicals, and even that label embraces a wide range of doctrinal convictions.

mountain of reservation for evangelicals and other Christians to climb when it comes to appropriating the animal welfare concern, and even burgeoning ecological interests have generally not contributed as they might have, and may yet. As noted, this is my only reservation regarding Bullmore's immensely helpful and foundational article.

While the above-mentioned reading material is available to Christians looking to understand animal welfare and specific related issues better, it is no secret that in this modern digital age the majority of information is taken in through other media, and increasingly via the internet. But there is very little of substance for evangelicals to reference on the web when it comes to animal welfare. Leading secular organizations, the most prominent being People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), have extensive web presences and other impactful publicity efforts. PETA, though massively influential, is notorious for questionable ideology and shock value tactics, which are immediate turn-offs to many people, Christians included; and while the HSUS takes a much more balanced approach, and is even making a concerted effort to reach out ecumenically to religious communities through their Animals & Religion program, the program's own director acknowledges that they have substantial difficulty connecting with the evangelical community.⁷⁴ My suspicion is that this largely has to do with the fringe reputation of the issue combined with our skepticism of many ecumenically- and pluralistically-cooperative efforts. On the specifically Christian end, the only two American organizations of any prominence, online or otherwise, are the Christian Vegetarian Association (CVA) and All-Creatures.org: the CVA, headed by Stephen Kaufman, is a good resource but doesn't necessarily lead with the animal welfare concern, and I have other reservations about their relevance to the evangelical community; the latter, which

⁷⁴Personal conversation with Christine Gutleben, January 18-19, 2008.

hosts the CVA online, is a rather ineffective hodgepodge of content and ecumenism, though I admire the heart and passion of those behind it.⁷⁵

There is a significant need for an evangelical voice for animal welfare to develop and promote an educational, accessible and non-threatening presence online, and to further build awareness of this issue through other means of community outreach, such as tabling at conferences, schools and churches. Not only do we need to engage animals and their wellbeing as a key element in participating in the building of God's kingdom and redemption intentions, but the larger animal advocacy community needs our witness as well. We stand the potential to positively impact the lives of many, many individual creatures, but perhaps many people as well through a testimony of persistent compassion grounded in a theocentrically Christian understanding of all of life. I hope to respond personally to this need, under the moniker Not One Sparrow (www.NotOneSparrow.com).

⁷⁵The websites of these organizations are: <http://www.peta.org> (PETA), <http://www.hsus.org> (HSUS), <http://www.all-creatures.org/cva> (CVA) and <http://www.all-creatures.org> (All-Creatures.org).

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