

Animals and Moral Theology (2)

By Eric Turnbull

In the many problems that challenge human conduct today we need guidance, guidance which gives a grounding that is authoritative and yet not authoritarian, for the principles being applied. Such guidance must be based on a radical treatment which displays the roots of the problem at issue, seeking a course between rigid legalism on the one hand and woolly-thinking individualism on the other.

In the past this has rarely been the approach of moral theologians to animal rights. One illustration may help. A few years ago a former Regius Professor of Moral Theology at Oxford defended the practice of fox hunting "because of the high place in the hierarchy of being accorded to man." Whereas, if one accepts the early chapters of Genesis on their face value it appears that the Creator, possibly in a moment of absentmindedness, gave man a position of superiority on earth, it does not follow *ipso facto* that man has a blank cheque to do whatever he likes with creation! Genesis is neither trying to describe an hierarchical structure resulting from a completed creative act nor attempting to give us a lesson in biology. The impact of textual research and biological discovery alone should drive us away from such an uncritical position.

Genesis provides us with two sets of facts. First about God; that his activity in creation continues as long as creation lasts: that he is not bound or limited by creation but rather works in it, and through it uses the universe to tell us about himself. The second set of facts is about man: that he is a creature intended to have communion with the Creator and, given a distinctive role in God's creative purpose, a stewardship. The verses in Genesis about man's dominion have so often been wrested out of context. *Before* we confess our belief in man, Genesis says first affirm our trust in God: *this alone is the context of man's dominion*, which rests on our ability to participate in the continuous act of creation.

These two sets of facts at the beginning of the Old Testament are but the first strokes of the brush in our search for moral guidelines to motivate man in his relationship with his fellow creatures.

From the start we turn to the prophets. Hosea, who was clearly familiar with the Genesis narrative, is the first to envisage the outcome of God's plan for the whole of redeemed nature. "I will make a covenant on behalf of Israel with the wild beasts, the birds of the air and the things that creep on the earth" (2:15)—a passage which concludes with the promise that a time will come when war will be no more. Hosea hands on the torch to the first Isaiah who in the familiar passage (11:6-9) describes the golden age when there is complete mutual trust between all God's creatures.

When we look at the Gospels in the New Testament a benevolent attitude is assumed—e.g., the story of the Good Shepherd. We can hardly expect detailed moral directives from the narrative because this was not the way of Christ. To quote briefly from Bishop Gore's book *Jesus of Nazareth*:

"Our Lord's refusal to give plain answers to plain questions—his constant habit of dealing with one question by asking another—was, we should gather, part of a general refusal to teach explicitly and dogmatically, lest

he should thereby stunt a man's capacity for finding his own answers to his own questions by the light given within him."

Gore suggests that Jesus recognised a society where there was an hierarchy of orders, although he was so deeply opposed to the exploitation of the weak and the helpless.

There is of course one incident in the Gospel narrative that some find embarrassing—the destruction of the herd of pigs at Gadara. However, the precise determination of what happened in this incident simply cannot be established. It is possible to rationalise the story, as some do, by suggesting that the pigs were terrified by the noise and gestures of the demented man, and that it was the crowd who later concluded that the demons entered the pigs. New Testament scholars are agreed that (a) it is by no means certain that the incident of the pigs is part of the original story, or (b) that Jesus did not necessarily share the Jewish prejudice about unclean animals.

It is in St. Paul, especially in Romans 8:19ff, that we find positive guidance for our attitude and behaviour to fellow creatures. There is no systematic code: Christians must still do their own homework in working out the implications of those insights which he gives us. Paul says that the whole natural order is to be rescued from the sufferings with which it is surrounded. He is thinking as one commentator puts it "of the sufferings, overwhelming, inexplicable useless sufferings with which it is surrounded; of the exploitation and sufferings of animals, the weak devoured by the strong, the ruthless destruction of plant life, of natural catastrophes of all kinds." St. Paul pictures in that passage the whole creation groaning together, waiting eagerly for their rescuer, Christ.

Now how much of this is poetic license? It is easy to say everything will come out all right in the end, but is there any evidence to support such a claim? Yes, for Paul is really dealing with the consequences of the Incarnation whereby we believe God became one with creation and the consequences of the life and death of Christ. Here are *FACTS*, facts which can focus hope on our anguish as we consider some of those subjects on the programme of this Symposium. For the apostle the last word does not lie with suffering, evil and waste. Paul regards the situation as full of hope because he sees life on earth neither as something to run away from with dreams of pie-in-the-sky nor yet as a slough of pessimism; the apostle tells his fellow Christians that they themselves have a vital role in redeeming creation and this is part of their stewardship. Christ through his death and resurrection has restored to us and our fellow creatures the hope of fulfillment "to enter upon the liberty and splendour of the sons of God."

Nothing less than Paul's vision should guide our thinking on animal rights, and this is why I say that in the past animal rights have been poorly served by moral theologians. Of course, we are dealing with different species, but it has been scientifically established in the words of Professor Thorpe "that most of the differences seem to be of degree rather than kind." ("Man's Place in Nature," *Theology*, Feb. 1969) What is one to reply, armed with Paul's vision, to those scholars who claim that moral theology is only concerned with what is distinctively human and deny rights to animals because they are not free self-

conscious beings capable of voluntary action and moral choice? It would seem that any animal's pleasure in life is in the exercise of inherited behaviour patterns. Where these are denied them animals are in danger of a deprivation that is equivalent to mental or physical cruelty. When in a large number of domestic animals and mammals we observe signs of a clear developing personality, an independent intelligence capable of elements of reasoning, we are perhaps only beginning to explore the depths of an animal's inherent behaviour patterns. Is not this the first stirring of the redemption of creation itself_a feature of traditional prophecy throughout the Judaic-Christian tradition?

There is still a gap between animal powers and those of a normal human being. As Christians we believe that God moves and inspires our wills. Animal symbolism, so prominent in Christianity and not unknown in Judaism, sees the drama and mystery of the divine embodied in the activity of animals. One feels compelled to ask if our fellow creatures have a share in our God-given free will?

My belief is that we should see animals from a theological perspective. Such an approach is not unlike that of the modern scientist who believes that there is a pattern to be discovered. If there were no order or pattern it would be impossible to establish any general principles; it would be impossible to discover any laws of nature. When we observe animals living and working in close contact with their fellow creatures, men, we plainly see that trust, mutual respect and affection can positively banish frontiers between species; we know then that is unquestionably something more than "an automatic response to an outside stimulus" (Waddams).