

ANIMAL RIGHTS AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY¹

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Our Task: To build a case for the importance of wise Christian stewardship of the non-human animal kingdom, and to demonstrate, in light of this case, that eating is a morally and spiritually significant act that has far-reaching implications for the integrity of creation as a whole (in its human, animal, and environmental aspects).

The Challenge: The Christian tradition does not have a particularly impressive track record on this front. Contemporary Christians especially have an ingrained tendency to overlook or devalue animal suffering, and to emphasize, instead, the special status of human beings as creatures created in the image of God and given dominion over the rest of creation. Is it possible for Christians to cultivate a more compassionate sensitivity to the value of non-human animals as fellow creatures, while avoiding the tendency to devalue the special status of human beings and remaining wholeheartedly committed to a Christian vision of the world?

The Guiding Insight: In attempting better to understand what our “special status” requires of us regarding stewardship of the animal kingdom, the insight that will guide our efforts is this: “to whom much is given, much is expected.” We will seek to interpret the special status of human beings in the order of creation as simultaneously a privilege AND an obligation. Like any “special status”, that of being made in the image of God comes with responsibilities and expectations that our behavior will benefit our station. The guiding insight is that being made in the image of God comes with the responsibility of striving to be the best stewards of God’s non-human creatures that we can be.

The Strategy: (I) Shed some light on what is meant by “animal rights”; (II) Survey what the scriptures have to say about the standing of non-human animals in relation to human beings; (III) Consider the discrepancy between the Biblical mandate to be good stewards of creation and the contemporary methods by which “food” animals come to our tables.

I. COMPASSION FOR ANIMALS: ANIMAL RIGHTS? HUMAN OBLIGATIONS?

For the purposes of this discussion, the question of whether animals have rights can be boiled down to the question of whether there are limits to what it is morally permissible to do to animals. Is it morally permissible, for example, to torture and kill animals for pleasure? To deny them the ability to exercise their instincts? To kill them for no good reason?

There are a number of ways that philosophers have attempted to establish these limits (of which these are just a few):

The “Unnecessary Suffering is Bad” Approach (Peter Singer)—Inflicting unnecessary pain and suffering is morally wrong. Farm animals are capable of experiencing pain and suffering. Contemporary methods of raising “food” animals inflict unnecessary pain and suffering on animals. Thus, contemporary methods of raising animals for food are morally wrong.

The “Animals are Subjects-of-a-Life” Approach (Tom Regan)—Farm animals are subjects-of-a-life; that is, they are psychological centers of consciousness who are aware of the world around them, who have likes and dislikes, instincts and abilities, and the capacity to appreciate when their lives are going better or worse (regardless of whether anyone else cares about them). Beings who are subjects-of-a-life are “ends in themselves” and therefore should not be treated by human beings merely as a “means” to some self-serving end.

The “Creation Care” Approach (Andrew Linzey)—All animals are God’s creatures. God created animals, God called animals “good”, and God’s plan for redeeming the fallen world includes provisions for alleviating the suffering and death of ALL of God’s creatures. God calls human beings to be wise stewards of the animal kingdom—to help God carry out God’s redemptive purposes for the flourishing of creation as a whole.

¹ Sources for this presentation include Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*, Tom Regan’s *Empty Cages: Facing the Challenge of Animal Rights*, Stephen Webb’s *Good Eating and On God and Dogs*, Andrew Linzey’s *Animal Theology*, and *Animal Gospel*, and notes from and conversations with various friends and colleagues, including Nathan Nobis and Jonathan Ellsworth.

II. CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE: ARE WE READING CAREFULLY ENOUGH?

Understanding never takes place in a vacuum; it always depends on what we've already learned. Most Christians these days have inherited the view that Judeo-Christian scripture place little emphasis on the value and importance of non-human animals. When the importance of non-human animals is not on the radar, the probability decreases that we will come to see the many ways in which the welfare of animals is connected to the welfare of human beings and creation in general. To motivate concern for these issues, then, we'll need to learn to see old information in a new light.

Some problems to which we are prone:

- “Anthropocentric” understanding of the “image of God”
- Selective, self-serving reading of the scriptures
- The word of God and *fallen interpretation* of the word of God are NOT the same thing, so we must be on the lookout for messages that we have not fully understood to this point.

Christian theologian Andrew Linzey describes the situation as follows:

“Far too often, Christians have accepted the common secular view that we are the masters of animals, their rulers or owner—utterly forgetting that the dominion promised to humanity is a deputized dominion, in which we are to stand before creation as God’s vice-regents, putting into effect not our own egotistical wants but God’s own law of love and mercy. And yet, when one begins to challenge our despotic treatment of animals...again and again, one has to face this humanistic dogma: If it benefits humanity it must be right.” (*Animal Gospel*, 12)

But what do the scriptures really tell us?

- Our “special status” doesn’t mean we are the lords of the universe; it means that we are endowed with the privilege of serving God’s will for the renewal of God’s creation.
- We must read the scriptures in view of the special role that God is calling us to play in helping to serve the flourishing of ALL of God’s creation (not just our own selfish interests). This overarching theme of God’s interest in renewing all things must be the frame through which we read the scriptures.

According to Linzey:

“If animals are God’s creatures, we have no absolute rights over them, only the duty to look after them as God would look after them. To stand with Jesus is to...

- reject our view of ourselves as gods and lords of creation. We are to honor life for the sake of the Lord of life;
- stand for active compassion for the weak, against the principle that might makes right...and to put on the garments that suit God’s chosen people: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience;
- stand for the Christ-like innocence of animals against the intrinsic evil of cruelty;
- stand for a ministry of reconciliation to the whole of creation, against the powers of darkness represented, at least in part, by the destructiveness of human technology;
- stand for God’s justice and the final release of all creation from bondage to decay, against the moral hopelessness and despair that characterize our time.” (*Animal Gospel*, 12-15)

As creatures of God, human beings and animals have a surprising amount in common:

- Animals & humans both possess *nephesh*, Hebrew for ‘the breath of life.’ In Gen. 2:7 God breathed into Adam the breath of life and Adam became a ‘living being’ [*nephesh*].
- Animals possess ψυχη (*psyche*) the N.T. counterpart to *nephesh* (Rev. 8:9, 16:3)
- Animals have an affinity for God (Ps 148:7-10; 150: 6)
- Animals will be present in the eternal state (Isa 65:25; Rev. 5:13-14)
- Animals await glorification as do the children of God (Rom. 8:18-21)
- The redeeming purposes of God include the entire created realm, including animals (Eph 1:10; Col 1:20). The psalmist praises God: “You save humans and animals alike, O Lord” (Ps 36:6) See also Jonah 4:11.

The Hebrew Bible (or “Old Testament”)

Christian theologian Stephen Webb describes the general context of the Hebrew Bible as follows:

“The covenant between God and the Hebrews tries to restore the world to God’s inclusive intention by spelling out the obligations involved in the basic kinship of all creatures... To fulfill the covenant meant to care for nature; to violate it moved the Hebrews further away from the garden and closer to chaos. The land and its inhabitants could prosper only if order was maintained. The Prophet Hosea is clear that one of the dire consequences of immorality is the languishing of the land and the animals, the birds, and the fish (Hosea 4:1-3). God warns the Hebrews through Zephaniah that their actions can unmake creation, leading to the destruction of both humans and animals.” (Webb, *On God and Dogs*, 21)

But is there scriptural evidence for thinking that animals matter to God? Indeed there is.

- **Animals have intrinsic moral worth**—God creates the animal kingdom and declares it pleasing in his sight before human beings were created. This fact suggests that animals are good and pleasing to God *in themselves*, apart from any uses that human beings may subsequently find for them.
- **Eden is a vegetarian paradise, as is the coming Kingdom**—Killing and consuming animals is not associated with the highest state of humanity and creation: not in the beginning (Gen. 1:30) but only after the “Fall”; nor in the prophets’ call to God’s people (Isa. 11:6-9; 51:3; Ezekiel 36:35; consider too Daniel 1:12-16) nor in the time to come (Rev. 21-22). In all places where we get a glimpse of God’s perfect will for creation, the vision does not include the killing of animals for human use.
- **Dominion is NOT domination**—“Dominion” (Gen. 1:26-28) does not mean: license to kill and consume (Gen. 1:29-30), but rather: to care for creation in accordance with the divine image—without exploitation, violence, and oppression. The image of God would serve as a pattern for our “dominion.” This dominion would entail protection, not domination. (consider Psalm 72: 1-14; 145: 8-21)
- **God saves animals from destruction**—Noah’s rescue mission demonstrates God’s care for the animals and clearly demonstrates that God’s covenant extends to all living things. God’s concession to allow Noah to kill and eat animals is a result of the fall, and is not in keeping with God’s original intention for there to be harmony, rather than enmity and fear, between human beings and animals. See also Jonah 4:11.
- **Ideal Hebrew diet**—When Deuteronomy 8:7-10 describes the ideal land and diet for the Hebrews, for example, meat is excluded: “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity... you shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God...” (See also similar descriptions in Jeremiah 29:5, Amos 9:14, Hosea 2:22).
- **Prophetic Rebukes of Animal Sacrifice**—The prophets speak out against animal sacrifice, telling God’s people that God wants to see human repentance instead of the shedding of innocent animal blood (Consider Psalm 50, Isaiah 1:10-17, Hosea, etc.)

The New Testament

According to Stephen Webb, the New Testament continues the Hebrew tradition of animal compassion: it favors peaceful animals to predators—“not the lion but the lamb, not the eagle, but the dove, animals (like the lowly ass) that do not prey but instead are defenseless and in need of human protection and care.” Moreover,

- God descends twice as a dove, Jesus is portrayed as the lamb of God.
- As in the creation account, where animals are created first, Jesus was born in a place that first sheltered animals, and animals gather to witness and rejoice in the birth of Jesus, and shepherds (caretakers of animals) were the first to hear of his birth.
- Jesus declares his father’s love for the sparrows (Luke 12:6, Matthew 10:29)
- Jesus compares himself to a hen gather together her young under her wings (Matthew 23:37), and he is often described as a lover of animals.
- Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness among the wild beasts, “perhaps signifying his ability to restore nature to creation’s original harmony” (Mark 1:12-13)
- Jesus allows people to save suffering animals even on the Sabbath (Luke 14:5)
- Jesus’ death and resurrection eliminates the need for ritual animal sacrifices.

Some Potential Obstacles: (1) Noah and meat-eating; (2) Animal Sacrifices; (3) Paul’s comments about vegetarianism (I Cor 7-10; Rm 14, 1 Tim 4:1-5) (4) Peter’s vision in Acts 10. On my view, there are cogent ways to remove all of these obstacles (we can discuss them if you like)

Whatever one concludes about vegetarianism, none of these observations amounts to a legitimate challenge to the evidence, across both testaments, that God cares about God’s non-human creatures and entrusts them to our compassionate stewardship.

III. WHY CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS HAVE CAUSE FOR URGENT CONCERN

Now more than ever, there is an urgent need for Christians to take seriously their duties as stewards of the animal kingdom.

- There is an increasing amount of scientific evidence that suggests that animals are intelligent, emotional beings who are capable of acute physical and psychological suffering.
- The methods through which animals are farmed are increasingly cruel and inhumane. In addition to merciless animal suffering, these “factory farms” are linked to many serious social and environmental problems.

Factory Farming Violates Christian Principles: Here are five principles that Christians will be inclined to accept, followed by seven reasons that—given these principles—Christians who have access to healthful, affordable alternatives should boycott factory farmed animal products:

The Sacredness of Life Principle (SL): Life is sacred and we should strive to preserve its dignity and integrity; the taking of life prematurely or unnaturally is wrong except in cases where there is some weighty moral justification for doing so.

The Mercy Principle (M): God hates the unnecessary suffering of innocents and calls us to protect the interests of the “least of these” against the indifference and domination of the powerful; in cases where suffering is unavoidable, we are called to mitigate it as much as possible.

The Stewardship Principle (S): The world belongs to God; God created it, God cares about it, and God calls us to be good stewards of the world and everything in it, including the financial resources at our disposal.

The Personal Responsibility Principle (PR): God calls us to seek what is right and good for our physical, intellectual, and spiritual wellbeing as individuals.

The Social Responsibility Principle (SR): God calls us to love our neighbors (indeed, even our enemies!) as ourselves and to seek a just and sustainable social order.

Seven Reasons to Think Compassionate Eating is a Discipleship Issue*

*Assuming that one has both adequate resources and ready access to healthful alternatives, these reasons motivate (at least) Conditional Moral Vegetarianism (abstention from factory farmed animal products including meat, eggs, and dairy). Other options include Moral Vegetarianism (abstention from all meat, eggs, and dairy) and Veganism (abstention, inasmuch as possible, from all animal products and byproducts including all of the above plus leather, wool, animal tested consumer products and the like).

(1) Animal Suffering: Non-human animals used for food, clothing, entertainment, and commercial research are sentient beings who are fully capable of feeling pain and experiencing psychological trauma; the conditions under which they are raised subject them to merciless suffering and untimely and often painful deaths. Since medical research has discredited the popular claim that animal products are indispensable for good nutrition (quite the contrary!), this suffering and death is entirely unnecessary in the overwhelming majority of cases, unless one is prepared to interpret mere aesthetic enjoyment on the part of human beings as a necessity. Support: SL, M, S, PR, SR

(2) Poor Environmental Stewardship: Animal husbandry, especially in its modern industrial form, has devastating consequences for the environment: it requires wasteful allocation of land to grow grain to feed animals (when it could be feeding people); it requires astronomical amounts of water, and fossil fuels for herbicides, pesticides, and

transportation; it generates massive amounts of waste (manure) and greenhouse gasses (cow flatulence produces almost 20% of the methane), and animal and chemical waste runoff causes air and water pollution. Support: S, SR

(3) Exploitation of the Disenfranchised: Factory farms and slaughterhouses are among the most dangerous and degrading places to work (not to mention to live): the stench is unbearable, the work environment is filthy and full of peril (physically and psychologically), the acts of cruelty that workers must perform are horrific, and these operations prey on illegal aliens and other disenfranchised persons who have limited employment options. Support: SL, M, SR

(4) Global Injustice: International companies exploit arable land in the developing world (which could be used to grow food for the undernourished people who live there) in order to grow grain to feed animals that only the richest countries in the world can afford to eat. More importantly, in order to keep grain prices low, the government pays billions of dollars per year in subsidies which harm the global poor (i.e., the 20% of people in the world who live off of less than what a \$1/day would buy in the USA, and the 50% that live off of less than \$2). *The Economist, The Lancet* and other publications have estimated that discontinuing the subsidies and reallocating these resources more responsibly could save millions of people a year from unnecessary suffering and death. Support: S, PR, SR

(5) Local Injustice: Industrial agriculture has destroyed rural communities, putting family farmers either out of business or into servitude to large, unscrupulous corporations who take virtually all of the profits and none of the risks; the result is that land which, when wisely stewarded, can support the growth of hundreds of species of plants (a practice that has a regenerative effect on the soil) is now used to grow genetically modified corn and soybeans to feed factory farmed animals. Support: S, PR, SR

(6) Poor Stewardship of Personal Health: The most current scientific and nutritional findings provide substantive evidence that eating animal products is a direct cause of “diseases of affluence” such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, breast and intestinal cancers, Alzheimers, and many others; meanwhile, the same studies show that the consumption of a whole foods, plant based diet not only reduces one’s risk of getting these illnesses, but can mitigate and even reverse them when they’ve already taken hold. Support: SL, PR, SR

(7) Poor Stewardship of Public Resources: Personal health crises lead to public health crises, and this is proving true in the United States, where we spend hundreds of billions of dollars annually on medication and invasive surgical procedures to treat “diseases of affluence” that can be prevented by the more responsible consumption of a whole foods, plant based diet. Support: SL, M, S, PR, SR

THE MORAL OF THE STORY: Far from being a trivial matter of personal preference, the question of how we choose to eat cuts to the very heart of our calling to be good stewards of God’s creation. If it is the renewal of creation (rather than its unmaking) that we profess to serve, we Christians must address ourselves with more honesty and conviction to the ethics of eating.