

Animal Welfare and Christian Stewardship

Thomas D. Williams, L.C.

Concern for animal welfare as an ethical category is a very recent phenomenon. Except for a smattering of occasional, isolated expressions of compassion toward animals, historically, the well-being of animals has occupied such a low position on humanity's scale of ethical interests as to be virtually non-existent.

All of this came to a rather abrupt reversal in the mid-1970s with the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, a 1973 article expanded into a full-length book published in 1975, which has become known as the animal rights "bible." The appearance of Singer's book coincided with a heightened interest in environment issues generally. The year 1970 saw the first celebration of "Earth Day," one of the many blooms of the hippie movement with its back-to-nature tendencies. Worries about pollution, the depletion of natural resources, global warming (or a new ice age, depending on whose theories hold sway), and animal welfare merged into a growing movement of environmental concern with many ramifications and sub-plots.

Where does a Scripturally-based, Christian morality fit into this matrix of concern? How should Catholics view animal rights movements and environmental ethics? This essay proposes first to briefly describe the contemporary panorama of currents and cross-currents regarding animal welfare, and then to sketch a Christian response to these issues.

Fins, Fur, and Feathers

The animal welfare movement began in the nineteenth century as a response to overt cruelty to animals in circuses, in side-shows, on farms, and especially in the streets. Cabbies who starved their horses or flogged them in public provoked a campaign of protest resulting in the Cruelty to Animals Acts, passed in 1856 in England. This law was followed by further legislation against cruelty to animals in Great Britain and the United States, as well as the establishment of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals. Most existing laws today continue to be framed in terms of anti-cruelty. California State Law, for example, stipulates that "every person who overdrives, overloads, drives when overloaded, overworks, tortures, torments, deprives of necessary sustenance, drink, or shelter, cruelly beats, mutilates, or cruelly kills any animal" shall be subject to corresponding fines or other punishments.

With the appearance of *Animal Liberation* debate regarding the practical prevention of human cruelty to animals began to be enriched by studies of the underlying ethical principles involved. In recent decades, efforts have been made by philosophers and even theologians to explain what sort of duties human beings have towards animals and why. Moreover, disagreements among thinkers and activists have led to splits along ideological lines, and the resulting panorama is more complex than most people realize.

The first split occurred between those concerned with environmental ethics and those whose emphasis was on animal welfare. "Environmental ethics," a name coined with the appearance of a philosophical journal by the same name in 1979, adopts a cosmo-centric,

holistic approach and advocates concern for eco-systems, species, animal habitat, natural resources, and the atmosphere. Adherents to this brand of “green” ethics tend to reject an anthropocentric view of the world, and in more radical strains go so far as to spurn man and human civilization as the enemy of nature. Animals, especially wild animals, clearly fall within the realm of environmentalists’ interests, but no more so than rain forests, rivers and other natural resources.

The animal welfare movement, on the other hand, sees animals as occupying a special place in the overall environmental scheme. Drawing on the Darwinian claim that animals differ from human beings only in degree, and not in kind, members of this movement stress animals’ genetic similarity to man, and therefore their ethical relevance. Unlike the environmental ethicists, animal welfare supporters pay little attention to animals in the wild, but instead focus on man’s treatment of domestic animals, especially factory farming, scientific experimentation on animals, and the use of animals for food and clothing. Here sentience—the ability to feel pleasure and pain—plays a key role and is seen as a determining factor in ethics.

Within the animal welfare movement itself, however, ideological differences led to a further split into what is now known as the animal liberation movement, following the theories of Peter Singer, and the animal rights movement, whose chief philosophical exponent has been Professor Tom Regan, now Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at North Carolina State University. Initially there was no distinction between the two positions, and Regan and Singer jointly edited *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* in 1976. They began debating each other only in the early 1980s, which culminated in Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights*, published in 1983.

Singer’s animal liberation position places the animal cause in a historical context of the great liberation movements. As racism and sexism were overcome by the civil rights movement and the feminist movement, so, says Singer, will this remaining form of unjust discrimination, “speciesism,” be overcome through animal liberation. This form of animal welfare finds its philosophical point of reference in Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism, whereby the fundamental ethical norm enjoins us to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Hence the importance of sentience. “The question is not,” wrote Bentham, “‘Can they reason?’ nor ‘Can they talk’ but ‘Can they suffer?’” The calculus of pain and pleasure allots to each individual equal weight, whereby Singer can assert: “All the arguments to prove man’s superiority cannot shatter this hard fact: in suffering, the animals are our equals.”

Tom Regan and his followers adopt a different tack altogether. Discarding Bentham’s utilitarianism, they argue for the rights of higher animals, a position Peter Singer initially espoused but has since come to reject. Animal rights advocates would expand the notion of rights-holders to include nonhuman animals with “inherent value,” those capable of being “the subject of a life.” In practice, this includes only mammals, and no other life forms. Regan has criticized the protection of species and eco-systems instead of individual mammals as “environmental fascism,” on the basis that other forms of life are not morally considerable. He also dismisses concern for endangered species, since the individual members of these species are of no more or less moral concern than individuals of non-endangered species.

Though clear ideological lines have been drawn to delineate these different movements, they often join forces to campaign for particular causes. Supporters of

vegetarianism, for example, do not hesitate to propose arguments from a vast variety of sources, from the utilitarian logic of pain reduction to the animal rights argument of inherent worth to theological proposals based on Scripture. Some assert, for example, that God only allows man to eat the flesh of animals after the flood (Genesis 9), a concession not allowed “in the beginning,” when man was given only plants and fruit for food (Genesis 1).

Responsible Stewardship

So where does all this leave a Christian? Due in part to the radicality of many animal welfare proponents, many are tempted to simply dismiss the entire matter out of hand as so much environmental gibberish. Many animal rights activists, for example, simultaneously argue in favor of abortion, which rightly strikes Christians as incoherence and hypocrisy. Some emphasize the fact that animal welfare ethics is a luxury of rich, western countries, who can choose what to eat and what to wear, whereas in poorer nations the continued use of animals is a matter of life and death, and therefore these debates are unknown. Still others argue that any form of environmental ethics simply distracts us from far more pressing moral issues involving human beings.

Despite the fact that many of the arguments adopted by animal welfare spokespersons are unacceptable to Christians, the Church has offered some invaluable guidelines to help us chart a steady path in these turbulent waters. As in so many other matters, Pope John Paul II has shown admirable prudence and balance in his own remarks and teachings on the subject. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to summarize the Catholic position on the animal welfare question.

In the first place, the Church locates the animal welfare question in the ethical category of responsible stewardship. At creation, man was indeed given “dominion” over the entire world, including the animals (see Genesis 1:26), yet this dominion carries with it the duty to watch over creation with care and respect. Man is the ambassador of God’s providence in the world, and not a vandal with an absolute license to trash the garden he was commissioned to till and cultivate.

At the same time, animals cannot be equated with man, since they lack his spiritual nature and transcendence. The Genesis account of creation and the theology that flows from it is unabashedly anthropocentric: man is indeed the pinnacle of creation, fruit of a singular loving design on the part of the Creator. Drawing on insights from Christian personalism, the Second Vatican Council affirmed that man “is the only creature on earth that God willed for its own sake” (*Gaudium et Spes* 24). Only the human person is made in the image and likeness of God and destined to participate in his divine life. Therefore Darwin’s assertion that man differs from other animals only in degree and not in kind is incompatible with a Christian anthropology and theology of creation. Only the human person is to be loved as an end, for his own sake, whereas all other beings are created for man’s use.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides a helpful synopsis of the Church’s understanding of man’s ethical responsibilities towards animals and the environment in general. The seventh commandment of the Decalogue (Thou shalt not steal) “enjoins respect for the integrity of creation” (2415). Man’s dominion over creation is not

absolute, but must take place with respect for moral imperatives. Yet these imperatives do not involve treating creation as an end in itself, but in relation to human beings—present and future generations. The Catechism likewise reaffirms the moral legitimacy of using animals for food and clothing, for leisure, for work, and for scientific and medical experimentation (2417).

Finally, the Catechism also asserts that causing animals to suffer or die needlessly is “contrary to human dignity” (2418) or, in other words, a misuse of our freedom and stewardship. Christians are reminded that in the allocation of resources, money should not be spent on animals that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery. One can love animals, the Catechism teaches, but not in the way one loves persons. This statement is reminiscent of Saint Thomas Aquinas’ conclusion that irrational animals cannot be loved out of charity (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.25.3).

Conclusion

In short, an increased sensitivity to the plight of animals mirrors the ambiguity of our times. Inasmuch as this sensitivity reflects a greater sense of responsibility for the world that God has entrusted to our care as well as a greater concern for others, it is undoubtedly a good thing. It is to be hoped that interest in the welfare of animals is coupled with a still more intense interest in the well-being of one’s fellow human beings. Inasmuch as this sensitivity represents a blurring of the fundamental difference between irrational animals and the human person, however, or a prevalence of a utilitarian ethics that sees all good and evil reduced to physical pleasure and pain, it can only be viewed as a moral regression.

Our times cry out for moral clarity on a multitude of issues, which grow day by day more complex and subtle. Thankfully the papal Magisterium has proved up to the task of offering just such clarity. Animal welfare is by no means the most important ethical issue of our day, but it does represent an area of social debate and as such Christians, especially the Church’s pastors, must be ready to offer a truly Christian analysis of the principles in play for the orientation of the faithful. Knowing the basic lines of the debate and the pertinent moral tenets furnishes a necessary base for such orientation.

Father Thomas D. Williams, LC, an American moral theologian, is the dean of theology at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical University in Rome.