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IS “ANIMAL RIGHTS” A BIBLICAL CONCERN? A Christian Response to the Modern Animal Rights Movement

by Dan Story

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SYNOPSIS

During the past forty years, radical animal rights activists have elevated the value of animals to the moral equivalency of humans. They uncompromisingly insist that medical research on live animals, factory farming, and other practices that cause animals intense suffering and death should be legally forbidden. Christians, on the other hand, generally agree that God created animals primarily for human consumption, commercial benefits, and entertainment. As such, they believe humans are free to use animals in practically any manner we choose with little or no concern for their welfare. While the ranks of radical animal rights activists escalate, the church remains largely indifferent (or ignorant of) the pain and suffering of both wild and domesticated animals. Is the general Christian position God-honoring, or is the modern animal rights movement more on track with biblical revelation? Is promoting animal rights a legitimate and just cause? The Bible answers these questions. It reveals that God enjoys and watches over the animals He created, and they have value to Him independent of their benefits to humanity. Furthermore, the Bible reveals that God has instructed the human race to be His caretakers over nonhuman life, and it provides ethical guidelines for how to achieve this.

For most of its history the Christian tradition has not thought that God cares much—if at all—for other creatures. The result is unsurprising: Christians have not cared much either....But how likely is it that a God who creates millions, if not billions, of species only cares for one of them.¹

The above quote, by well-known Christian animal rights advocate Professor Andrew Linzey, reminds me of a comment I heard on a nationally broadcasted radio talk show. The popular host, a person with special knowledge of the Old Testament, asserted that there would be no reason for animals to exist unless God created people. At one level, I suppose he's correct. The Bible does say that God had the human race in mind when He created the Earth (Ps. 115:16). But does it follow that the only reason God created

animal life is to serve humanity? If so, why did He create so many millions of animals that contribute nothing to human welfare? And why did God create so many animals that He knew would become a nuisance, or even a danger, to the human race?

The fact is that nowhere in the Bible does it say that God created animals solely for human consumption and commercial benefits, or that we can do what we wish with animals without any consideration for *their* well-being. In this article, I'm going to provide what I believe is a reasonable and coherent biblical argument that God had more in mind than profiting humanity when He designed and created the myriad diverse, beautiful, and often mysterious animals that share our amazing planet. My goal is to provide insight into what constitutes a biblical perspective of "animal rights," and the ethical responsibilities we humans have in our relationship with both wild and domesticated animals.

IN THE BEGINNING

The animal rights movement began in the nineteenth century and parallels the emergence of the "humanitarian movement" of the same era, which sought, among other things, to end slavery and the oppression of children. It has since become one of the largest social movements in Western culture. It may surprise readers that the founding fathers of the movement were often Christians. William Wilberforce, usually associated with his long struggle to abolish slavery in the British Empire, along with Anglican priest Arthur Broome, founded the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1824. The RSPCA is the oldest and largest animal welfare organization in the world. The founders considered the Society "a specifically Christian enterprise based on Christian principles."² Following RSPCA's lead, numerous other groups quickly emerged, including the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, established in 1866. The primary goal of these organizations was to make slaughtering practices more humane and to enforce laws for the humane treatment of farm animals.

It's worth noting that early on the animal rights movement also recognized the importance of the humane treatment and preservation of wildlife. It wasn't until the last half of the twentieth century, however, that animal rights activists began to focus on the worldwide plight of wild animals, and for good reason. Hundreds of species of animals have become extinct due to human activities, and countless more are threatened with extinction.

The Controversy

During the 1970s, segments of the animal rights movement began to embrace a more radical moral philosophy than their predecessors, one that went far beyond preventing cruelty to animals. It eventually spawned People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and other aggressive animal rights organizations. The writings of bioethics professor Peter Singer and American philosopher Tom Regan, along with a host of other likeminded activists, elevated the value of animals to the moral equivalency of humans. They insisted that animals have an intrinsic right to live independent and free

from human intervention. They should not be considered property; they should receive the same protection under law as people, and rarely, if ever, should they suffer pain on behalf of human welfare. Those on the extremist fringe even argue that animals should be awarded the status of personhood, and, in some cases, are of greater value than humans: “The life of a [disabled] newborn,” writes Singer, “is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee.”³ People who disagree with this are accused of “speciesism” — prejudice and discrimination against animals on par with racism and sexism.

In light of the escalating acceptance of this radical form of animal rights, Christians *must* ask themselves three questions and seek biblical guidance as we respond to them—if we are to bring Christian principles and values back into the movement. First, do animal rights advocates have a just cause? Second, do animals have value to God beyond their usefulness to people? And third, do humans have a moral responsibility to nonhuman life?

These are difficult questions to answer because they can be considered on various levels. For example, according to ethologist Marc Bekoff, laboratory experiments on animals in 2001 included “690,800 guinea pigs, rabbits, and hamsters, in addition to 161,700 farm animals, 70,000 dogs, 49,400 primates, 22,800 cats, and 80 million mice and rats.”⁴ In most cases, animals used in laboratory experiments suffer horrendous pain and are usually killed. Scientists agree that such research is vital in order to develop effective treatments for diseases, but should live animals be used to develop cosmetics and in psychological experiments, which also inflict pain and often result in death? People need affordable, nutritious food, but should veal calves be confined to tiny crates, where they can scarcely move their entire short lives? Is it morally justified for chickens, minks, rabbits, and chinchillas to be crammed into battery cages to facilitate the egg-laying capacity of chickens and to provide expensive fur coats for wealthy people (called “factory farming”)? These are not small issues—nor can they be ignored in any consideration of biblical ethics.

DO ANIMAL RIGHTS ADVOCATES HAVE A JUST CAUSE?

Animal rights advocates justify their cause on the grounds that sentient animals have emotional and cognitive characteristics similar—if much less complex—to humans. They not only feel pain but also stress, fear, anxiety, grief, loneliness, despair, and other humanlike characteristics. These attributes have been well documented by numerous studies in animal behavior during the past few decades.⁵ It’s undebatable that animals are more than mindless biological machines without feeling and emotions. This is reason enough for us to reconsider how we treat and care for nonhuman life.

Although Christians must reject any ideology that elevates animals to human status, the question of what constitutes justifiable animal rights is a legitimate issue, and one that Christians must seriously grapple with from a biblical perspective. I believe the animal rights issue is a moral issue and therefore a legitimate cause. And because Christians are obligated to treat animals according to divine precepts, it is also a

theological issue. So the starting point for developing a biblical concept of animal rights is to explore God's perspective on wild and domesticated animals.

Do Animals Have Value to God beyond Their Usefulness to Humans?

The typical attitude most Christians harbor toward animals is essentially utilitarian and pragmatic. They believe God created animals primarily as a human resource: food, clothing, labor, experimentation, entertainment, and sport. As a result, animal rights has more or less been a nonissue in the church, and little effort has been exerted to develop a biblical understanding of human/animal relationships. Despite the worrisome fact that the animal rights movement continues to grow and become increasingly radicalized, the church has remained mostly indifferent—or outspokenly critical.

The Bible plainly teaches that animals are available for human consumption (Gen. 9:3) and other purposes. From a biblical perspective, we are not being cruel to raise animals for food, to hunt them in order to control overpopulation, and to use them for necessary medical research. But the Bible also teaches that *all* animal life belongs to God, not to humans: “For 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 (Ps. 50:10-22; cf. Ps. 24:1; Col. 1:16).⁶ Nowhere does the Bible condone the horrendous abuses and exploitation inflicted on animals by the human race simply because it benefits or amuses us. A survey of God's perspective on nonhuman life will drive this point home.

Psalms 36:6 tells us that God provides for both humans and animals, and numerous passages teach that God has made provisions for animals to survive and propagate. Job 38 and 39 and Psalm 104, the longest passages in the Bible that deal almost exclusively with nonhuman life, reveal that God provides specific habitats with water, food, and shelter for wildlife. Job reminds us that most events in nature take place beyond human habitats and awareness; only God observes and enjoys all that occurs in the lives of animals. In a series of rhetorical questions, God asks Job, “Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn...? I gave [the wild donkey] the wasteland as his home.... Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high?” (Job 39:1, 6, 27). The self-evident answer to these questions is that only God is present to observe these events.

After the worldwide flood, God issued a covenant with the human race that included animals (Gen. 9:8-11), and centuries later the prophet Hosea spoke of another covenant that would occur in the eschatological future. It includes “the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground” (2:18). God instructed the Israelites that every seven years they were not to sow or harvest their fields, vineyards, and olive groves so that poor people and *wild animals* may eat what is left (Exod. 23:10-11).

Similar humane treatment is required for domesticated animals. Proverbs 12:10 points out that “a righteous man cares for the needs of his animals.” Jewish law includes provisions for the humane treatment of domesticated animals. On the Sabbath day, God instructed the Jews to allow their work animals to rest (Exod. 23:12), and not

to “muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” (Deut. 25:4).⁷ Even the Ten Commandments have a provision to care for domesticated animals (Exod. 20:9-11).

Although Jesus and the New Testament authors say little about animal life, references to animal welfare are not absent in the text. Jesus admired the birds of the air and pointed out that God cares for and protects them (Matt. 6:26; Luke 12:6, 24), and wild animals accompanied Jesus during His temptation in the wilderness (Mark 1:13). The real argument demonstrating Jesus’ love and concern for animals, however, is theological. By virtue of the fact that Jesus and the Father (along with the Holy Spirit) are one in essence in the triune Godhead, it would have been impossible for Christ not to love and care for wild and domesticated animals the same as does the Father.

All together, these and many other passages reveal that God did not create animals solely for human consumption, comfort, and entertainment. The attention and care God gives to animals refutes the notion that they have value only to the degree they serve human needs and desires. The biblical fact is animals have value to God *independent* of the human race. This doesn’t mean God values animals as much as He does people or that they deserve the same ethical considerations as do humans. Only people are created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26). We are the crown of creation (Ps. 8:4-8), and God values us far more than animal life (Matt. 10:29-31). But this doesn’t diminish the fact that God values nonhuman life and desires that animals fulfill the purposes for which He created them. For this reason, the animal rights movement is a legitimate cause—assuming it’s carried out within a biblical moral framework. Does the Bible provide such an ethical basis for animal rights? I believe it does, and it includes instructions for how the human race is to relate to other created life.

Do Humans Have Moral Responsibilities over Nonhuman Life?

According to Ecclesiastes 3:19-20, people are no different than animals on a purely *physical* level. Humans and land-bound animals were created on day six; we all depend on God’s gracious provisions for food and shelter; and we will all eventually die. But the Bible also teaches that there are two fundamental and distinct differences between humans and animals. First, only humans are created in God’s image. As such we enjoy a unique spiritual connectedness with God that animals don’t have. But with this position comes responsibility. Because we *are* created in God’s image, we should reflect the same attitude and care toward nonhuman life that He does. This leads to the second distinction. God instructed the human race, beginning with Adam, to be stewards of animal life as part of our overall responsibilities as His designated caretakers in creation.

When Adam was told to name the animals God created and brought to him (Gen. 2:19-20), it showed that God was giving Adam authority over them. This is not unlike when we name our pets, or when zookeepers name the animals under their care. In doing so, we are acknowledging our responsibility to care for, and watch over, them.

This helps us to understand what God meant in Genesis 1:28 when He told Adam and Eve to have “dominion” (KJV) over the Earth’s newly created animal life. Space prevents an analysis of what dominion means when examined within its full

biblical context, but most theologians agree that dominion (“rule” in modern translations) means *stewardship*.⁸ It denotes mankind’s caretaker role in creation; it doesn’t give people a license to use animals any way they please. Look at it like this: at the end of the creation week, God looked upon all He had made and pronounced it “very good” (Gen. 1:31). It doesn’t make sense that He would then turn around and give the Earth’s animals to the human race to abuse and exploit.

This brings us to the matter of ethics. Does the Bible provide moral principles to guide our stewardship activities— and by which we can establish realistic and humane “rights” for animals? I believe it does. Since God instructed the human race to be His caretakers over all of nature, we can be certain that the Bible will contain moral principles to guide this responsibility. In particular, since Jesus is the source and substance of New Testament ethics, we should be able to extrapolate His teachings to embrace nonhuman life. I believe Jesus taught three foundational ethical principles that will guide us as we seek to identify and establish practical, God-honoring rights for animals.

SERVANTHOOD

Christians are told numerous times to be like Jesus (Rom. 13:14; Phil. 2:5; Col. 3:10). When He came to Earth, Jesus took on “the very nature of a servant” (Phil. 2:7), and He expects His followers to be servants also (John 13:15-17). It is not a theological stretch to say that just as Jesus loves us and became our Savior, so too should we not only love other people as Christ loves us but also to consider the outflow of our servanthood to include being “saviors” (protectors) of nonhuman life— as the dominion mandate requires.

Unconditional Love

In the New Testament, the Greek word used to describe God’s love for people is *agape*. It’s a love that denotes a willful choice. It’s the love that God bestows on people, not because we deserve it, but because He chooses to love us despite our sin and rebellion. It’s unconditional love. This kind of love involves God doing what is best for us, not necessarily what we desire. In a similar way, as God’s caretakers in creation, we make stewardship decisions that may not be in our best interest, but will be in the best interest of threatened and endangered animals and that promote humane treatment for domesticated animals. Thus, we should set aside habitats to ensure the survival of wildlife and, perhaps, be willing to pay a dollar more to purchase eggs from free-range chickens. In other words, we will make choices that advance our stewardship role as protectors of nonhuman life.

The Golden Rule

God’s desire for human relationships is summarized in a beloved passage Christians call the Golden Rule: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12). Although this rule is directed to people, the principle behind it could logically and theologically be inclusive

to all the life God created and values. Animals provide numerous services and pleasures for humans. They provide us with food and clothing. We can use them for legitimate medical testing in order to develop life-saving drugs. They are companions and aids to the handicapped. Wild animals provide tremendous joy and excitement when we walk through wild country. It seems only reasonable and just that we provide animals with the attention and care that God provides them.

If we apply just these three ethical principles to our relationship with wild and domesticated animals, we will not only treat these creatures fairly and humanely but also fulfill God's command to be *His* stewards in creation.

A Hope for the Future

It's been said that the church has often been on the wrong side of moral issues, such as condoning slavery and the oppression of women, children, and minorities. Of course, with the passage of time, the church recognized the immorality of slavery as well as the equality of men and women and the rights of children and minorities. But the fact that some Christians have endorsed such behavior demonstrates that, at times, Christians have failed miserably to discern divine principles for godly living correctly. I'm concerned that this is also true of our God-given responsibilities to nonhuman life. My hope is that more Christians will begin to take seriously our responsibility as God's designated caretakers in creation, and thereby have a greater willingness to care and manage domesticated and wild animals as humanely as possible. We *can* do this without compromising human health and well-being. We *should* do this because the Bible clearly reveals that animals are valuable to God by virtue of their creation, not just because they serve humanity.

Dan Story has an MA in Christian apologetics and is the author of many apologetic books, booklets, and articles, including a book and more than thirty articles on wildlife. Dan explores the biblical perspective on nature and wildlife in his book *Should Christians Be Environmentalists?* (Kregel, 2012).

NOTES

- 1 Andrew Linzey, *Creatures of the Same God: Explorations in Animal Theology* (New York: Lantern Books, 2009), 12–13.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 3 Quoted in Scott Klusendorf, "Death with a Happy Face: Peter Singer's Bold Defense of Infanticide," *Christian Research Journal* 23, 3 (2001): 25.
- 4 Marc Bekoff, *The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy—and Why They Matter* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2007), 138.
- 5 See Marc Bekoff, *Animal Passions and Beastly Virtues: Reflections on Redecorating Nature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).
- 6 All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.
- 7 In 1 Corinthians 9:9–10, Paul appears to reinterpret the intent of Deuteronomy 25:4. However, Paul is merely drawing an additional application from this passage by giving a spiritual (and practical) principle: If we allow domesticated animals to benefit from their labor, even more so should the apostles, who are laboring for the Gospel, be supported by the church. Paul is not contradicting what is a clear instruction in Deuteronomy, nor is

he suggesting that God does not care about oxen. It is not unusual for New Testament writers to find New Covenant applications in Old Covenant instructions.

- 8 I provide an in-depth analysis of “subdue” and “dominion” (rule) in my book, *Should Christians Be Environmentalists?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2012), chap. 8.