The Place of Animals in the Purposes of God

Rob Cook, PhD, MTh, BA (Hons), BA (Hons) and Head of Theology at Redcliffe College

Introduction

My recent interest in creaturely theology stems from three events: being adopted by a neighbouring cat called Leonora and spending meditative hours with her on my lap as we both mused over the slow drama of the garden, reflecting again on the problem of innocent suffering as I taught another generation of philosophy students, and reading the illuminating book, Second Nature: the inner lives of animals¹. Questions bubbled up in my mind such as: where do animals fit into God's purposes and what is our responsibility to them? What is a cat’s worldview? Is God happy when our cat brings in her offering of a dead mouse or are cats another fallen race and, if so, when did they and other predators fall? Given that this baby mouse never developed into a flourishing creature, for God to be good must we assume that animals too are given the gift of immortality and what could mutual flourishing be like for predator and prey? So I scurried into the literature and was surprised to find that creaturely theology is a burgeoning discipline. Some see it where feminist theology was thirty years ago. Creaturely theology tends to view us on a continuum with animals, or perhaps one should say, other animals. Together we constitute the ‘all flesh’ which God repeatedly addresses in Scripture. In fact, this is a much more common phrase than ‘the image of God’ which is the unique designation of us humans and this term probably refers to our role as God’s delegated ‘gardeners’ of the planet rather than any singular constitution we might possess as a species. Further, it is of significance that we are created on the same day as the land animals, we don’t even get a day to ourselves. Science confirms this continuum; evidently our genes are closer to those of the primates than a dolphin’s is to a porpoise or a horse’s to a zebra.

Historical theology

A look into historical theology is disappointing. The Reformers, following Aquinas who in turn leant on Aristotle, contended that animals lacked a rational soul and therefore have no rights. Their main purpose is to accommodate us, either as beasts of burden or as tasty food (the latter became known as the gastrocentric view!). Later, Descartes even doubted whether they we truly conscious. Watching cats covering their litter, he observed that they often missed, leaving their excrement exposed and concluded that it seemed that they were just acting from instinct, just going through the motions rather like a mechanical clock. He also noted that when parrots are taught to speak, they have nothing interesting to say although he had so many philosophical questions to ask them!

Insights from science

Science has changed our perceptions radically. Pace Descartes, we are now becoming aware of the subtle ways animals communicate. It has been discovered that prairie dogs, for example, have at least twenty different calls describing predators and, using modifiers, this number is increased to about a hundred ‘words’. They even have a term for a gun carrying human! We are also coming to realize that many animals have a rich inner life. Some

¹ J. Balcombe (Basingstoke: Macmillan [Palgrave]; 2010)
species experience not just a series of disconnected events but a continuum of awareness with memories, phobias due to past traumas and possibly projects for the future; they are not just alive but they have a life and a biography.

They are not only more like us than we thought but we are more like them. In fact, the Darwinian revolution has revealed that, in a sense, they are our ancestors. When observing chimpanzees in the wild, Jane Goodall was at first convinced that these animals were peaceable, sociable herbivores but then she discovered that they hunted colobus monkeys for meat and to her dismay, it transpired that after a while the troop divided into two with one group moving away into the forest only to return sometime later to wreak violent murder on the males of the original group. Is this the legacy we still carry within us? We who, like the mafia, tend to be kind and attentive to those we consider our family but deeply prejudicial to the outsider, sometimes resulting in violent behaviour.

The virtual universal acceptance of Darwinian natural selection strengthened by genetic research has raised many difficult issues for the theologian. OT scholars tell us that the genre of the early chapters of Genesis is something like myth written to correct neighbouring myths rather than scientific description, so that is not a problem. The main challenge is that the survival of the fittest mechanism seems so contrary to the nature of the 'servant King' creator. However one understands Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God, or the Kindom of God as feminist theologians prefer, it cannot be interpreted as the form of fascism apparently preferred by animal life! This struggle for existence has had to pay a terrible price. It is estimated that about 98% of the species that have ever evolved are now extinct. We will return to this puzzle later.

Biblical Perspectives

When we turn to Scripture we get a mixed picture. On the one hand there seems to be rather a negative attitude to animals: some are considered unclean, animal sacrifice is commended and they are even victims of divinely ordained genocide. They don't feature strongly in the NT but we find Jesus sending demons into pigs. Jesus himself ate fish and almost certainly lamb at the Passover and he may well have brought animals to sacrifice at the Temple (or was he undermining the whole system when he cleansed the Temple?).

But on the other hand, the Edenic state is described as vegetarian and there seems to be no place for predation in the New Earth where the lion will lay down with the lamb. What is more, Jesus taught that God is even attentive to the fall of a lowly sparrow (Lk.12.6) which is in keeping with his compassion for the vulnerable. In fact there is a tantalizing Coptic fragment about Jesus' encounter with an abused pack-mule. It reads as follows,

It happened that the Lord left the city and walked with his disciples over the mountains. And they came to a mountain, and the road which led up it was steep. There they found a man with a pack-mule. But the animal had fallen, because the man had loaded it too heavily, and now he beat it, so that it was bleeding. And Jesus came to him and said, 'Man, why do you beat your animal? Do you not see that it is too weak for its burden, and do you not know that it suffers pains?' But the man answered and said, 'What is that to you? I may beat it as much as I please, since it is my property, and I bought it for a good sum of money. Ask those who are with you, for they know me and they know about this.' And some of the disciples said, 'Yes, Lord, it is as he says. We have seen how he bought it.' But the Lord said, 'Do you then not see how it bleeds, and do you not hear how it groans and cries out?' But they answered and said, 'No, Lord, that it groans and cries out, we do not hear.' But Jesus was sad and exclaimed, 'Woe to you, that you do not
hear how it complains to the Creator in heaven and cries out for mercy. But threefold woes to him about whom it cries out and complains in its pain.’ And he came up and touched the animal. And it stood up and its wounds were healed. But Jesus said to the man, ‘Now carry on and from now on do not beat it any more, so that you too may find mercy.’

This fragment is of unknown date but some feel that it could be based on early material as it seems in accord with the Jesus one meets in the gospels. It is thought possible that it did not find its way into the canon because it was so contrary to first century instrumental attitudes to animals.

As one would expect, Scripture offers valuable insights into the question, ‘why are there animals and what are they for? Firstly, as the supreme artist and the source of all beauty God simply delights in the unique grandeur of his created creatures as for instance, Job 39-41 eloquently describes. God joyfully meditates on their incomparable being, their ‘thusness’, or to use Hopkins’ term, their ‘inscape’ and so should we, free of sentimentality and projection. Hopkins reaches towards this unique self expression very effectively in his poetry,

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw fláme;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

In a sense, therefore, it is as absurd to ask what animals are for as to ask what a great symphony is for; their very being and self-expression adds great value to the universe.

Secondly, because they have an inner life, God’s creatures are able to share in his delight and reflect it back in something analogous to worship (Ps.148.7-10). Most wildlife programmes give us a false picture of animals constantly either chasing or running away in a life and death struggle but in fact the majority of their time is spent in sleeping, browsing, having sex and even, according to the latest brain research amongst primates, musing contentedly in a semi-meditative state.

Thirdly, they are there to teach us important lessons, for example the diligence of the ants (Prov.6.6ff) and even facets of the being of their Creator. D.S. Cunningham expresses it well, ‘The birds are like God in their ease of movement; the bees are like God in their simultaneous unity and multiplicity; the penguins in their constancy; and the cats, as T S Eliot

2 http://www.all-creatures.org/articles/an-tpr-jesusand.html
3 http://www.bartleby.com/122/34.html
reminds us, in their mystery possessed, as each one is, of a “Deep and inscrutable singular Name”⁴.

Finally, we are all creatures of God and together comprise the ‘all flesh’ for which our Creator provides food (Ps.136.25). Consequently there should be mutual respect and cooperation. As H. Beston has said, ‘We need another and wiser and perhaps more mystical concept of animals. They are not our brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth’⁵.

**An animal Fall?**

But again we must beware of sentimentality. How can this world rife with predation be the handiwork of a good God? Has something gone wrong and if so when? There are three possibilities.

The first was espoused by Augustine and has been influential ever since, not least in evangelical circles. It is the view that the world was perfect until Adam and Eve sinned resulting in animal death and predation. Scientific discoveries have made this an impossible position however. We now know that death is at the heart of the universe’s development. For example, in their death throes some stars produce heavy elements such as carbon which then seed the universe as the stars explode as super novae; our very bodies are made of the dust of dead stars. We also have dinosaur fossils which show the teeth marks of predators and the following picture shows two fossils: on the right is a velociraptor which has grasped the head and is kicking the belly of an herbivore creature which in turn has grabbed the arm of the predator in its strong beak:

![Picture Credit: Polish Academy of Sciences - blog.everythingdinosaur.co.uk/blog_archives/2010/4/8/4500946.html](blog.everythingdinosaur.co.uk/blog_archives/2010/4/8/4500946.html)

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We also have examples of fossils exhibiting diseased bones such as in the following picture which shows the result of a catastrophic jaw infection on a 275 million year old reptile which has lost its teeth and much of its jaw bone:

![Fossil Picture](http://earthsky.org/biodiversity/the-pain-of-evolution-a-big-toothache-for-reptiles)

And, of course, the fossils themselves were formed by dead bodies. Dinosaurs died out about 66 million years ago and our species goes back barely 2 million years. Our earliest ancestors cannot be blamed.

The second possibility held by some is that Satan caused the primordial fall which resulted in animal predation and death long before humans came onto the earth. The main problem with this hypothesis is that it is a textless doctrine. The reading of reputable commentators reveal that the adduced texts are not about this at all. For example, the fallen Lucifer is clearly the king of Babylon in the hyperbolic taunt song of Isaiah 14 and when Jesus says 'I saw Satan fall like lightning' (Lk.10.18) he is probably referring to his insight into the contemporary spiritual dimension of the victory of the seventy two disciples over the demonized. What is more, given that death and destruction are ubiquitous in the universe (including the collision of galaxies!) to blame Satan would entail that he has almost Godlike, virtually omnipotent powers.

The third possibility which best accords with science is that entropy is a basic scientific law and death and struggle are intrinsic to this universe. Animal pain and death is an inevitable aspect of biological evolution which is consequently able to be creative and developmental. This is also true of species. It was the extinction of the dinosaurs that gave space for the evolution of mammals and ultimately – us. God is the genius who, in the words of Polkinghorne, ‘brings about a Creation that can make itself’. Process theology has worked hardest in making sense of this picture. It portrays a God who exercises infinite love rather than infinite power and this involves giving space and autonomy to every level of creation. God empowers but does not overpower. He empowers by lending existence to everything, he ‘let’s be’, and also by encouraging everything to maximize its potential through his lure of love. The results are often disappointing causing divine pain and since all creation is ‘in God’, he suffers empathetically with each birth and dying because for all life ‘there is a time to live and a time to die’ (Eccles.3.2). Divine vulnerability is as old as the universe. He is ‘the lamb
that was slain before the foundation of the world’ (Rev.13.8) and so he remains in the glory (Rev.5.6).

Animal suffering and the goodness of God

So it looks like there never has been a cosmic Edenic golden age. It may well make sense to speak of a human fall but the universe has always known death and biological life has too. The ‘young lions roar to God for their food’ (Ps.104.21). What can it mean, therefore, to insist that God is good?

Some theologians of creaturely theology try to drop moral goodness from the divine attributes. They see him rather as an inexhaustible creative force without moral scruples. He has the awesome grandeur of the rain forest seen from afar, its mysterious beauty containing on closer inspection the travail of myriads of life forms as they struggle with life and death. But this is a form of neo-paganism rather than Christianity and is inimical to the portrait of God that we find in the gospels.

Another way of defusing the problem is to insist that either animals are not conscious and therefore only appear to suffer, rather like an electric organ which shrieks when someone sits on the keys, or that their suffering is minimal compared to ours. But we now know through observation of behaviour and brain scanning that animals can think and feel, and some are even self-aware. An ingenious test for this is to put a sticker on an animal’s face and then place a mirror in front of it. Does it recognize itself and realize that the sticker it sees in the mirror is on its own face so that it endeavors to take it off? The answer is ‘yes’ for great apes, dolphins, elephants and, astonishingly according to a recent discovery – magpies! Regarding the severity of pain, on the one hand it may be true that we are unique in anticipating our own death but on the other hand many animals have far more sensitive sensory awareness which probably results in more acute pain when damaged. Most vertebrates also show fear responses such as cringing, fleeing, freezing or threatening and it has been observed that grief hormones are released, for example, in a baboon who has lost her infant. Elephants return to their family graves year after year.

Like humans, rogue animals usually have dysfunctional backgrounds, such as elephants who have survived a family cull. We must conclude that suffering, both physical and psychological, is common to all flesh.
A way of mitigating the theodicy problem is to acknowledge that animal life is by no means all bleak. Animals apparently experience delight when they play and some engage in helpful cooperation such as sharing food and assisting in birth. Help is even apparent between species. The leader of a herd of elephants was observed to move a young goat out of the way as the herd lumbered towards a water-hole. Within a group, dangerous fights are rare and primates handicap themselves when sparring with their young and are found to be longsuffering with the handicapped. Obesity amongst predators is virtually unknown and it is estimated that the predation rate of savannah antelopes is only 6-10%. Therefore, on the whole, animal life is by no means nasty, brutish and short.

A traditional plank in the advocacy of divine goodness associated with the thought of Irenaeus is the idea that this universe of pain and travail is a sort of gymnasium for the free development of virtue in humans. It is a dangerous world which affords us the opportunity of developing courage, patience, and compassion for those adversely affected by this danger. In principle some animals might also grow in this way. What is more, this same good earth sustains the evolutionary development of life and thus species themselves can develop various excellencies which add value to the cosmos. If all life were herbivore there would no need to develop splendid horns, speed, finely tuned eyesight and hearing, quick wittedness and beautiful camouflage. In the memorable words of Rolston, ‘The cougar’s fang has carved the limbs of the fleet-footed deer and vice versa’. Predation is also a practical necessity in a world with limited resources. Without the wolf to cull the deer herd the latter would overrun their habitat and starve. Other life-forms would also suffer, including the plants they browse upon which other species also depend upon. And without predation we would all be overrun by insects!

Another important point to re-emphasize is that God empathises with all since he himself became flesh – ‘in all their afflictions, he was afflicted’ (Is.63.9) as well as the fact that all creation is ‘in him’. Thus the world, in all its freedoms, from quantum indeterminacy to human choice, ‘befalls God’; he lets the world happen to him in all its grandeur and tragedy. But most importantly, he is also the world’s redeemer and so this travail is not futile, it is in fact birth-pangs with God as midwife (Rom.8.22). But will the glorified earth include animals? Indeed ‘who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?’ (Eccles.3.21).

Animal immortality?

Various attempts have been made to answer this question in the affirmative. Those following the Process path recognize that one day this universe will terminate in heat-death but suppose that all entities that have existed, including animals, will be immortalized in the memory of God. Or if it is rather thought that God is outside time, they will constantly exist in his eternal awareness. However, biblical redemption is about transformation rather than fixity and an element of this even seems to be divine amnesia: ‘Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind’ (Is.65.17)!

A second option draws an analogy from alchemical theory which contended that base metals such as lead were in fact ‘frustrated gold’; they found their fulfillment in becoming gold. Similarly the evolutionary tree leads up to us and is indeed recapitulated in us (the human

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Embryo mirrors its evolutionary past as it develops in the womb, at one stage, for example, exhibiting gills technically known as visceral arches). Therefore all life is redeemed within our resurrected life and ‘the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed’ (Rom.8.19).

A third rather attenuated view is found in Rilke. Animals are not transformed into our resurrection bodies but into our consciousness. The expert at doing this is the poet who can immortalize them and beautify them within his own sensibility:

they look to us for deliverance, we, the most transient of all.  
Will us to change them completely, in our invisible hearts,  
into – oh, endlessly, into us! Whoever, in the end, we are.

Earth, is it not this that you want: to rise  
invisibly in us? – Is that not your dream,  
to be invisible, one day? – Earth! Invisible!  
What is your urgent command if not transformation?  
Earth, beloved, I will.7

With the vast numbers in question, some have hypothesized that there is no hope for individual animals but the species will be represented in glory where praise is offered by ‘every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them’ (Rev.5.13) understood to mean ‘every type’.

All of the above posit what we might call objective immortality for the animals but what of their individual subjectivity? Is there no hope for our cat Leonora? There is a lineage of theologians including Wesley, Tillich and more recently Keith Ward who think there might well be. But are we talking about all life forms including amoebae and cockroaches? Most would answer in the negative, omitting invertebrates which almost certainly lack conscious experience. The rest have the potential to experience pain and a good God would want to give those who have not had the opportunity to flourish in this life a future opportunity for they too have been reconciled to God by Jesus (Col.1.20).

Some would restrict immortal species further to those with self-consciousness which is necessary for the realization that this glorified existence is, in fact, a continuation of one’s earthly life. This would include mostly mammals, particularly those with a rich social life since it is through interaction with others that we develop a sense of self and particularly perhaps, as C.S. Lewis believed, through a loving relationship with humans. Hope for Leonora at last! But perhaps this heavenly potential is particularly clear in those animals that possess a primitive moral life. Those that show sympathy for the maimed such as elephants who attempt to hold up injured comrades. But particularly those few, such as the higher primates who punish through social distancing, shaming or ridiculing those fellows who are stingy, who thieve, who bully or commit incest, while rewarding those who demonstrate cooperative behaviour. Perhaps these creatures share the sort of moral awareness that young children enjoy and perhaps they even need divine forgiveness when they fail to respond to the divine lure to curtail their selfish tendencies preferring rather, in the words of Fiddes, the ‘no of self-preservation, or the hoarding of space’8.

There are many variations on the above. Perhaps lower animals will be represented by types and the higher by individuals. Perhaps all individuals or perhaps those who lacked earthly flourishing and again, maybe if the latter, they would enjoy a period of fulfillment and then

8 Quoted in C. Southgate op cit. p.68.
‘rest with their ancestors’. What is clear is that Scripture implies there will be animal life on the new earth, for humans to fully flourish it seems that we need to be in an environment with other species and a successful theodicy may well require some kind of animal afterlife.

But a final major problem remains to be considered, what could a mutually enriching environment be like for both predator and prey?! A poem by James Dickey called *The Heaven of Animals* bravely takes this on:

Here they are. The soft eyes open.  
If they have lived in a wood  
It is a wood.  
If they have lived on plains  
It is grass rolling  
Under their feet forever.

Having no souls, they have come,  
Anyway, beyond their knowing.  
Their instincts wholly bloom  
And they rise.  
The soft eyes open.

To match them, the landscape flowers,  
Outdoing, desperately  
Outdoing what is required:  
The richest wood,  
The deepest field.

For some of these,  
It could not be the place  
It is, without blood.  
These hunt, as they have done,  
But with claws and teeth grown perfect,

More deadly than they can believe.  
They stalk more silently,  
And crouch on the limbs of trees,  
And their descent  
Upon the bright backs of their prey

May take years  
In a sovereign floating of joy.  
And those that are hunted  
Know this as their life,  
Their reward: to walk

Under such trees in full knowledge  
Of what is in glory above them,  
And to feel no fear,  
But acceptance, compliance.  
Fulfilling themselves without pain

At the cycle’s center,  
They tremble, they walk  
Under the tree,
They fall, they are torn,  
They rise, they walk again.⁹

But the Bible offers a more radical prediction. ‘The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat. They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain’ (Is.11.6, 9). But can this constitute the flourishing of the species which Dickey seeks to capture, rather than their suppression and inhibition? Two points need to be made here. First, it is futile to speculate or attempt to imagine what and how the new earth will be – what language will we be speaking, divine Esperanto? Will our glorified stomachs need glorified bacteria to aid digestion? And so forth. Better to just wait and see. But second, let us not forget that we ourselves are a part of ‘all flesh’ and we ourselves are the most efficient and ruthless predators on the planet! For example, the dreaded shark kills fewer than ten people per year whereas we slaughter between 26 and 73 million of them every year. Many just have their fins hacked off for soup and then are thrown back into the sea. Yet Jesus has shown us that fulfilled personhood can be both peaceable and noble and so shall it be for all flesh.

Our responsibility

God has appointed us his stewards and priests of creation. We are his gardeners to care for his world. For sure we must avoid sentimentality (‘bambi theology’) and the extremism of say, Jainism which advocates covering one’s mouth to avoid inadvertently breathing in an insect and sweeping the floor in front of one to avoid treading on insects. Nevertheless, animals have ‘theos rights’ to be treated with respect and dignity, and the Jesus way is to sacrifice the higher for the lower, not vice versa. Our responsibility is well expressed by Hefner, ‘Human beings are God’s created co-creators whose purpose is to be the agency, acting in freedom, to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us’.¹⁰

There is not the space to enjoin the ethical discussion of, for instance, whether (unlike Jesus) Christians should be vegetarians and indeed most relevant ethical issues regarding animals are more complicated than they look, such as whether endangered species should be transported to new locations. So I will simply end these lectures with some challenging images of what we are doing to God’s creatures with the prayer that the Spirit of God will use these to prompt our consciences and to show us a better way.

Animal cruelty through neglect:

⁹ http://www.poetryoutloud.org/poems/poem.html?id=171425  
¹⁰ Quoted in C. Southgate op cit. p.104-5.
Hunting for sport:


Poaching:

Picture Sources: http://bushwarriors.wordpress.com/tag/dawie-groenewald/

Cosmetic testing:

Picture Source: http://arkforanimals.blogspot.com/2011/05/lreals-animal-testing-practice-is.html
Genetic manipulation for spare parts:

![Image]


Imprisonment in zoos:

![Image]


Battery farming:

![Image]

*Photo Sources: [http://www.greenfootsteps.com/battery-farming.html](http://www.greenfootsteps.com/battery-farming.html)*
Disrespect of animals:

The provocation of extinction through e.g. deforestation:

Mass extinctions through global warming (unless there is restriction of green-house gasses, climate change could rise by 3% resulting in the loss of 25-60% of mammals):
‘The wild, cruel beast is not behind bars of the cage, he is in front of it’ (A. Munthe\textsuperscript{11})

Let us pray:

We praise you for the creation of the world and all the living creatures in the earth, sky and sea.

\textit{We are thankful, O God.}

For the gentle eyes of the deer, the friendship of the dogs, the purr of cats, the strength of bears, the beauty of a hippo, the humour of chimps, the intelligence of gorillas, the grace of dolphins, and the magnificence of whales. Help us to keep them safe.

\textit{We are thankful, O God.}

Give us a voice to speak in protest when any of your beloved creatures are treated cruelly. Help us to be advocates for those innocents who cannot speak for themselves.

\textit{Give us speech, O God.}

Give us ears to hear the cries of those creatures tortured in the name of science, skinned in the name of fashion, and neglected in the name of economy.

\textit{Let us hear their cries, O God.}

Give us eyes to see our responsibilities, not just to the human community, but to the community of all living creatures. Let us be mindful of the Rabbinic injunction that, ‘The way a person treats an animal is an index to his soul’.

\textit{Help us to see, O God.}

\textit{Amen.}

\textsuperscript{11} Quoted in J. Balcombe \textit{op cit.} p.163.