

Theodicy and Animal Welfare A. RICHARD KINGSTON

Or rather, “Theodicy and Animal Neglect”, for with a few noble exceptions theologians have done far more to discourage than to stimulate a concern for the lower creatures. As Westermarck reminded us, “No creed in Christendom teaches kindness to animals as a dogma of religion. . . . Nor is there any such allusion in most treatises on ethics which base their teachings upon distinctly Christian tenets.”¹ W. R. Inge conceded that “it is unhappily true that (in the words of A. Jameson in 1854) ‘the primitive Christians by laying so much stress upon a future life, and placing the lower creatures out of the pale of hope, placed them at the same time out of the pale of sympathy, and thus laid the foundation for an utter disregard of animals.’”² Whether or not we agree with Inge’s diagnosis of the cause of the trouble, we can hardly disagree with the historical fact that, to quote Lecky, “the inculcation of humanity to animals on a wide scale is the work of a recent and a secular age”;³ or as Aldous Huxley puts it more pointedly, “It was not until the nineteenth century, when orthodox Christianity had lost much of its power over European minds, that the idea that it might be a good thing to behave humanely towards animals began to make headway”.⁴

We are thus faced with a two-fold problem, first to account for the apparent callousness of Christian theology in this respect, and secondly to enquire on what theological foundation a positive ethic of reverence for animal life should rest. This present article, however, must be confined to the former question, and indeed to one neglected aspect of it – theodicy, which I suggest may be as much to blame for the situation as the traditionally harsh interpretation of the doctrine of man’s dominion over nature (with almost exclusive emphasis on Gen. 9: 2–3, and 1 Cor. 9: 9), or the theory that animals have no reason or “rational soul” and therefore no rights, on which *non sequitur* writers like Joseph Rickaby concluded that “we have . . . no duties of charity, nor duties of any kind, to the lower animals, as neither to stocks and stones. . . . Much more in all that conduces to the sustenance of man may we give pain to brutes, as also in the pursuit of science. Nor are we bound to any anxious care to make this pain as little as may be.”⁵ Mercy is only recommended on the ground that cruelty to animals could dispose one to be cruel to human beings.

The charge that theodicy has also condoned cruelty to animals is based

¹ E. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, Vol. 2, London, 1912, pp. 506–7.

² W. R. Inge, *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*, London, 1930, p. 278.

³ W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, Vol. 2, London, 1905, p. 177.

⁴ A. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, Fontana edition, 1958, p. 203.

⁵ J. Rickaby SJ, *Moral Philosophy*, London, 1908, pp. 249–50.

on two simple observations, first, that most theodicy fails lamentably to portray God as One whose “compassion is over all that he has made” (Ps. 145: 9, RSV), and secondly and more seriously, that many Christians in their anxiety to vindicate the love of God in the face of animal suffering have done so by simply denying animal pain or else by treating it as insignificant – a solution which incredibly still finds its advocates.

I

As illustrative of the former defect we turn first to various “Fall” theodicies. Traditional Christian thought firmly linked the disharmony and apparent dysteleology of the animal world with the fall of man, because of which the whole of creation was cursed and nature became red in tooth and claw. As theodicy, needless to say, this is no longer tenable. The evidence for the existence of carnivora long before the emergence of man is indisputable. But what concerns us more particularly here is that the theory also fails the moral test. Few will dispute that “the notion that the animals were deliberately subjected by God to ‘vanity’, to pain, disease and cruel maltreatment by man *because of man’s initial sin* can hardly be reconciled with justice; still less can it be harmonised with what our Lord says about God’s care for the birds. . . .”¹ Such divine indifference to the lower creatures would clearly be a deterrent to the cause of animal welfare. Rickaby and others would have the highest precedent for regarding them as little more than “stocks and stones”. And yet, paradoxically, some who fully accepted the biblical myth as being historically true were able to weave it into a larger plan of salvation, based on an exegesis of Romans 8: 21, from which they reached the opposite conclusion. Wesley, for instance, expounded the words “the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” as implying, amongst other things, that “the whole brute creation will then, undoubtedly, be restored, As a recompense for what they once suffered, while under the ‘bondage of corruption,’ . . . they shall enjoy happiness suited to their state, without alloy, without interruption, and without end.”² Wesley then asserts that some important results follow from this, e.g. it furnishes us with “a full answer to a plausible objection against the justice of God, in suffering numberless creatures that never had sinned to be so severely punished”, and further it serves a “more excellent end” in that it “may encourage us to imitate Him whose mercy is over all his works”. It “may soften our hearts towards the meaner creatures, knowing that the Lord careth for them”.³ Much as we may wish to retain this example of theodicy providing a supernatural sanction for kindness to animals we must admit that it is extremely doubtful if the Pauline text (especially in view of what he says in 1 Cor. 9: 9) will

¹ O. F. Clarke, *God and Suffering*, Derby, 1964, p. 132.

² Wesley’s *Works*, Vol. 6, London, 1872, pp. 249–50.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

bear the weight Wesley puts upon it; nor is it at all clear that a future paradise for animals would really vindicate the Creator for having caused them so much undeserved suffering in this life.

It is presumably the inadequacy of the fall of man explanation which has led several recent writers to base their theodicy, somewhat tentatively, on the ancient idea of a pre-mundane fall of the angels, suggesting a link between this alleged angelic rebellion and the disorder of nature. "One of the results, we may suppose", writes Dom Illyd Trethowan "was a disorganisation of the material universe, over which, according to a reasonable theory, the angels had charge."¹ Or take C. S. Lewis who argues in terms of one fallen being – Satan: "It seems to me . . . a reasonable supposition, that some mighty created power had already been at work for ill on the material universe . . . before ever man came on the scene. . . . If there is such a power, as I myself believe, it may well have corrupted the animal creation before man appeared."² He adds that "It may have been one of man's functions to restore peace to the animal world".³

Despite this insight, and despite the advantage of acquitting God of having directly created a dysteleological universe, the theory is still hard to credit – especially in an age in which we tend to demythologize the devil and all his works. With John Hick I must agree that the rebellion of finitely perfect beings enjoying full fellowship with God seems incomprehensible. "The basic and inevitable criticism", he writes, "is that the idea of an unqualifiedly good creature committing sin is self-contradictory and unintelligible."⁴ Quite apart from this we must point out that if God entrusted to fallible (even if "perfect") angelic beings such absolute control over creation that it was within their power to "brutalize" the animal kingdom for all time, then he cannot be exonerated from all culpability for what allegedly happened. Must we not go further and say that such action would indicate either incompetence or the fact that the sufferings of the lower creatures are unimportant in the eyes of the Creator! The fall of the angels, in brief, provides neither a sound theodicy nor a stimulus to animal welfare. It might be added here that a third fall theory, that of a World-Soul or Life-Force, by which N. P. Williams sought to account for "the cruelty that ravages the animal world" fares no better, being open to precisely the same objection as that brought against the corruption of perfect angels.

Christians have also adopted more philosophical types of theodicy, of which we note just two examples used by St Augustine. First, there is the view that when seen from the true, the divine, perspective, the universe is wholly good and beautiful. With specific reference to animals devouring one another he writes: "Since, then, . . . some perish to make way for

¹ Dom I. Trethowan, *An Essay in Christian Philosophy*, London, 1954, p. 128.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Fontana edition, 1957, pp. 122–23.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁴ J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, London, 1966, pp. 68–69.

others that are born in their room, and the less succumb to the greater . . . this is the appointed order of things transitory. Of this order the beauty does not strike us, because by our mortal frailty we are so involved in a part of it, that we cannot perceive the whole, in which these fragments that offend us are harmonized with the most accurate fitness and beauty."¹ That many a problem disappears when seen from a higher perspective is of course unquestionable, yet reason and conscience alike insist that it is not just short-sightedness which creates a problem out of animal suffering. It is the maturity, not the deficiency of man's moral sense and spirituality that makes him disturbed about this issue. A more serious criticism is that the theory not only fails to account for pain, it tends to perpetuate it. If animal, or for that matter human, suffering is but a part of a perfect portrait then there is not much incentive to spoil it by humanitarian interference.

Augustine also employed the Platonic principle of plenitude – the idea that all possible forms of existence have to be realized before creation can be complete. Hence “there are some things better than others; and for this purpose are they unequal, in order that they might all exist”.² As theodicy this has obvious limitations. It may help to account for the variety of forms of existence, why God did not only create archangels, but the notion of a predetermined fixed number of species, apart from the problem of the verifiability or falsifiability of the idea, does not seem to square with reality. From the standpoint of our present enquiry we must also comment that whilst a charity which overflows in the bestowal of life on every type of creature is most praiseworthy, this does not hold when they include parasites, viruses, etc. The stress on creative love seems more than cancelled by the content of creation.

Since, then, the ethical implications of these (and other) types of theodicy are not conducive to a concern for animal welfare, we may be relieved rather than regret their inherent defectiveness.

II

Most people associate the theory of animal automatism with Descartes, but in fact it was Malebranche, not Descartes, who said that animals eat without pleasure and cry without pain. Descartes himself, whilst holding that animal bodies function mechanically, did not deny them feeling. His followers, however, took the theory of automatism to its limits, using it as an excuse for their tortures. “They kicked about their dogs and dissected their cats without mercy, laughing at any compassion for them, and calling their screams the noise of breaking machinery.”³ And to their shame there were theologians who embraced the same philosophy, regarding it as an indispensable safeguard of man's spirituality, of original sin, etc., and not

¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, xii, 4.

² *Ibid.*, xi, 22.

³ J. P. Mahaffy, *Descartes*, London, 1901, p. 181.

least of theodicy. Bayle complained that “’Tis pity that the Opinion of *Descartes* should be so hard to Maintain, and so far from Likelyhood; for it is otherwise very Advantageous to Religion, and this is the only reason which hinders some People from quitting it”.¹ Elaborating on this he records that “Father *Poisson* of the Oratory has profoundly Treated the Argument, which is grounded upon this Principle of St *Augustin*, *That God being just, Misery is a necessary Proof of Sin*; from whence it follows, That Beasts not having sinned are not subject to Misery: But they would be subjected to it, if they had any feeling; therefore they have none.”² The moral consequences of such thinking become evident a few lines later. “Is this the part of a wise Agent? The Souls of Beasts never sinned, and yet they are subject to Pain and Misery, and to all the Irregular Desires of Creatures, which have sinned. How do we treat Beasts? We make them tear one another in pieces for our Diversion; we Kill them for our Nourishment, and Ransack their Bowels during their Lives, to satisfy our Curiosity: and we do all this by vertue of the Dominion that God has given us over them. What a disorder is it, That an Innocent Creature should be subject to the Caprices of a Criminal one? There’s no Casuist that believes that there is any sin in baiting of Bulls, or in hunting or fishing, to destroy Animals, or in killing of Flies, as *Domitian* did. Is it not Cruelty and Injustice to subject an Innocent Soul to so many Miseries? The Opinion of *Cartesius* frees us from all these Difficulties.”

It would be gratifying to be able to record that this kind of teaching has long since been discarded by Christian writers, but unfortunately this is not the case. In the chapter on theodicy in his latest book Canon F. Van Steenberghen suggests that we are “the victims of a serious illusion” when we interpret animal cries as an expression of pain. “It appears to me that an examination of instinctive animal behaviour reveals a very interesting and, indeed, very mysterious, psychism, but one that is *devoid of consciousness of any kind* and, for that reason, of free will. If this is indeed the case, the problem of animal ‘suffering’ is an empty one, as ‘unconscious suffering’ is a contradiction in terms.”³ To buttress this denial of animal consciousness he prefaces his argument with the testimony that “with the entire body of traditional philosophers, I believe that being conscious implies being spiritual. . . . It implies, therefore, being a *person*. . . .” and he contends that all who disagree with him must treat animals as persons. We must surely reply that sensitivity cannot be equated with personality, in any human sense, nor can it be determined by mere dogma. Its reality is only too evident from animal behaviour and from the structure of their nervous systems. Some excellent studies have in fact been published by the Universities’ Federation for Animal Welfare on the extent of animal consciousness of pain.

¹ *Bayle’s Dictionary*, Vol. 4, London, 1710, pp. 2604–5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2605a.

³ F. Van Steenberghen, *Hidden God*, Trans. by T. Crowley, Louvain, 1966, p. 252.

British theodicy, although not formally denying animal suffering, has often virtually done so by reducing its intensity almost to zero. It is of course true that their suffering cannot always be estimated by human standards. The lower mammals certainly seem to have less capacity for feeling pain than we have, nor, we presume, does imagination add to their agony with dread anticipation of further pain or the fear of disablement, insecurity or death. And yet when we find a certain passage from an article by Theodore Wood, about a crab calmly continuing its meal on a smaller crab whilst itself being leisurely devoured by a larger one, being quoted by writer after writer, we begin to feel uneasy about the limits of this reductionist procedure. The innuendo is that the crab is typical of all the lower creatures; but who can imagine a lion calmly. . . . Some, indeed, explicitly state that animal pain is insignificant. C. E. Raven, having cited the crab incident, writes a little later that "it may be doubted whether there is any real pain without a frontal cortex, a fore-plan in mind, and a love which can put itself in the place of another; and these are attributes of humanity."¹ More recently Dom Iltyd Trethowan, having rejected the possibility of accounting for animal suffering in terms of a "fall", concludes: "So it looks as though we should have to fall back on the suggestion thrown out in an earlier chapter – that the brutes do not suffer as we do; we know too little about their psychology for it to present us with any real problem."² The truth is that veterinary scientists are by no means as ignorant of animal pain as he supposes, nor can we evade the problem so easily. In general we must note that in practical terms it makes very little difference whether we say that animal pain is insignificant or non-existent; the net result of this method of vindicating God against the charge of creating a cruel world is by implication to make the world more cruel for his creatures. By explaining away the fact of animal suffering we directly or indirectly deepen it. Perhaps there is room in Christian thought for what Buddha would have called a "noble silence".

III

Having indicated how theodicy has helped to make Christianity harsh towards animals (if not the "hell of animals" as some non-Christians have labelled it), I must end by stressing that there are, of course, several writers on the problem of evil who are fully aware that no theodicy is tenable which fails to show God's mercy over all his works. Ideally it should entail caring for his creatures; it should lead to the conclusion that "when our compassion moves us to relieve animal suffering, we are being used by the compassion of God".³ I only wish that this statement by Austin Farrer were not so unconvincingly supported. His argument is a paradox rather than a proof: "it is only because God allots pain that there

¹ C. E. Raven, *The Creator Spirit*, London, 1927, p. 120.

² Dom I. Trethowan, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

³ A. Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, Fontana edition, 1966, pp. 103–4.

is any object for his compassion.” “Every pain God assigns is a call to us to remove the cause of it.” “It must never be forgotten that God is the God of hawks no less than of sparrows, of microbes no less than of men.”¹

Our search clearly must continue for a theodicy which really does justice both to the Creator and to all his creatures, which points to a God of love and pinpoints our duty to love.

Mapping the Ministry

The Sacred Ministry: 2

BASIL S. MOSS

On all sides, it seems, there is a demand for succinct and authoritative statements or restatements of the nature and role of the ordained ministry. What are clergymen for? What is the job of the priest? of the bishop? What precisely is their standing and authority? What is the meaning of ordination?

To give a few obvious examples, in the Church of Rome one of the fruits of the second Vatican Council is the short decree *De Presbyterorum Ministerio et Vita*, which is being followed by fresh discussion as the dearth of vocations is debated.² Short statements about the ministry are a common feature of the growing literature of proposed schemes of Church union from all over the world.³ Ecumenical explorations are exemplified by the continuing and as yet largely unpublished exchanges in the Faith and Order Department of the WCC.⁴ The British Council of Churches has published *The Shape of the Ministry*,⁵ a report which has not yet received the attention it deserves, and the Scottish Churches Council has just produced *The Ordained Ministry and Training for it: the basis of a study document*.⁶ Within the Church of England, the new constitution of ACCM (April 1966) has set up a Ministry Committee charged with “keeping under review different forms of ministry by men and women, ordained and lay”, and with “promoting discussion within the Church, so far as this may be practical, about the adaptation of its ministry to meet the changing pastoral situation”. One of its working parties is briefed to produce a short statement of “the Nature and Role of the Ordained Ministry”.⁷ Similar “domestic” groups are at work in the Methodist and

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5.

² “Decree on the Priestly Ministry and Life,” CTS, 1966.

³ E.g. sect. 4 of *Towards Reconciliation* (Anglican–Methodist Unity Commission, 1967, SPCK).

⁴ e.g. Concept X, November, 1965.

⁵ First issued 1965, reprinted 1967, by the BCC.

⁶ Obtainable from Scottish Churches House, Dunblane, Perthshire, and shortly to be published by the BCC.

⁷ Cf. also “Further Thinking about the Ministry” (ACCM, March 1966).