



Readings II in Faith & Science

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Animal Research

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Dr. White, in a 1988 article, "The Facts about Animal Research," touches on issues important to the research community and to the Church. In noting the need for animal research he says: "there is virtually no major treatment or surgical procedure that could have been developed without animal research." He treats the efforts of "a radical element within the animal-rights movement, spearheaded by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and other anti-vivisection groups, whose leaders insist that all research involving animals must cease."

We must understand what is happening, especially the growing bureaucratic tangle of restrictions on and regulation of animal studies as well as the vandalizing of experimental facilities by militant fringe groups of the animal-rights movement. One should worry about the effects of such activity on medical research. Catholics should be concerned on a theological level. The animal-rights movement raises deep issues on an ecclesial/theological level. It is an example of a profound revolt against the traditional understanding of creation and of the role and destiny of human beings. It is important to put the animal-rights movement into a broad perspective of what is occurring in the world.

I assume that those doing medical research on animals have a serious obligation to care for them, that researchers are aware of that obligation and carry it out faithfully. I assume that a few will be negligent through indifference, mischief and, very rarely, malice. Living organisms deserve respect and care, especially when they are used for experimentation for human benefit. In the Old Testament, God told the Israelites not to harm fruit trees when they were besieging a town: "eat their fruit but do not cut them down. Is the tree in the fields human that you should besiege it too?" (Dt. 20:19).

We are obliged not to abuse animals, not to inflict arbitrary or senseless pain on them, not to be complacent about the pain we inflict, even for good reasons. But do animals have rights? Doesn't "rights" language turn our tradition of rights and obligations on its ear? What can and does "animal-rights" mean?

Some years ago a leading theoretician of the "Christian environmental movement" stated:

A prominent person at the United Nations asked me to draw up a paper to examine the notion that our idea of nation should include species other than the human. It should include the bird nation, the fish nation . . . [T]hat is where the future is. We need more than the United Nations. We need an extension that we might call the 'United Species'. . . This has begun to take shape in this document (Draft World Charter for Nature) of the United Nations itself. It recognizes that the human nation is a part of the united nations of the living world. No forms . . . shall be compromised, population levels shall be exercised, all forms are to have their habitats.

Fundamental concepts of the human's place in creation are involved in this rhetoric. What do the animal-rights people mean by animal rights? Michael Fox, one of the leading proponents of the rights of animals, talks about the inherent rights of animals and yet in many places says that we, the supreme or dominant controlling species, are the givers and protectors of these rights. If inherent means "something innate, inborn, an inseparable quality, a characteristic," it is impossible to see ourselves as the "givers and protectors." If we are the givers and protectors, it is contradictory to say animal rights are inherent. In *Returning to Eden*, Fox states:

We must learn to love all our neighbors, not just people, but trees, lakes, buzzards and all, for each creation has its own intrinsic worth and "rights" (his quotation marks) quite distinct from our own human-centered needs and "rights." While it can be argued that animals and other creations can't have rights because they are not members of the human community, such an argument negates the fact that we are a part of the community of earth, and being so, we have obligations to all nonhuman life, which in turn has rights, as we also have.

The animal-rights literature indicates that the movement's leaders have committed themselves to "rights" vocabulary and must go through mental gymnastics to maintain its propriety. Fox later asserts:

Respect for the rights of other people is not only ethically desirable but an essential part of being human. A logical extension of this is the inclusion of a bill of rights for all living things. A society upholding such rights will foster the development of a more mature and responsible state of consciousness in the populace to the ultimate benefit of mankind and biosphere alike. Racism and "speciesism" divide and destroy both society and the biosphere when the rights of others -- people, animals, and plants -- have a lower priority than the rights of the power elite.

In this last citation we find the nub of animal (and plant) rights, an issue obscured by "rights" vocabulary. All concerned with the problems involved in the relationship of human and nonhuman creation (even here the distinction of human and non-human is jarring) can agree on the essential issue. Rights vocabulary hides the basic agreement that all things that exist in creation have a claim on all other things. That claim, however, is not univocal. Certainly animals have a greater claim on us than rocks. But this claim must be reciprocal. We also have a claim on all that is created. Our claim is greater because we realize we have a claim. On the other hand, because we have this realization and because of our superior ability to understand the creation and our power to alter it, our obligations to creation are correspondingly greater. Living creation has claims on us *because* we are the dominant species.

There is a tendency in the animal rights movement to see "salvation" in the eastern religious tradition and to see a pernicious anthropocentrism in Genesis' command to "subdue and conquer the world."

Most scientists are sensitive to the claims research animals have on them. There may be a few scientists who do not care about the suffering imposed on such animals. We should correct the actions of the few rather than eliminate the progress that can and does come from most medical research.

We must seriously consider these issues. The animal rights groups have pointed out a deficiency in Christian theology. We can agree that nonhuman creatures make claims on us. Whether these claims can be called "rights" obscures the real issue. We must understand theologically the nature of these claims without the romantic sentimentalism pervading the argument.

We must better articulate our basic Christian belief that all creation is groaning waiting to be set free from decay in Christ. Humans, St. Paul states in Romans 8, are not the only part of creation to share in the liberation from sin and death that the Lord brings. We profess this but it has not been a significant part of our theology. It is a vital part of our need to develop a doctrinal understanding of bodiedness. Every major issue agitating the Church today has its roots in the understanding of our bodied being.

Any serious attempt to reflect on our bodiedness carries with it our bodied context; namely, the physical creation

we occupy with other bodied creatures. Scientific and technological advance has unveiled a wondrous truth: a detailed understanding that all living systems are built from the same four amino acids. There is a basic unity in living systems. This unity is expressed in a multiplicity of forms, none accidental if we believe in God's Providence. The same amino acids are found in amoebae and whales, in mosquitoes and professors. What a hauntingly beautiful echo of the Trinity's unity-in-multiplicity! The web of life (rich, even prodigal) is based on this unity. We must take this diversity-in-unity soberly in cosmology/anthropology.

We are not alone in sharing the divine love. We do not all share in that love in the same way. We do not know what God has in store for us in the final kingdom, nor do we know what he plans for nonhuman creation beyond it being freed from decay to "enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God."

We cannot reject the commandment of Genesis to subdue and conquer the earth and all it contains. St. Paul's remarks about the destiny of all of creation is a specification of that original mandate. Perhaps the connection between these two notions (liberation and control) is found in the 13th chapter of John's Gospel. There Jesus states: "You call me Lord and Master, and rightly for so I am." Then he says that as Lord and Master he is washing their feet. At last we get a definition of "subdue and conquer." The subduers and conquerors of creation are its servants. So great is God's confidence in his power and in the effectiveness of his grace that he can allow that service, that preparation for liberating all of creation, to rest with us.

The scriptural description of our adventure with God opens in the Garden. There, God enters into a covenant with human beings. Scripture does not end with a return to the Garden but with the description of the New Jerusalem, the City of God. It takes little imagination to say that there is some kind of a divinely inspired and guided "urbanization project" occurring. We are the responsible agents of that process.

We have not done enough theological reflection on such issues to have a ready answer to all the issues that the animal rights people have properly raised. We have to take them seriously enough to begin to peer into the riches of our tradition to search for answers. This is especially true in the face of the biotechnological capabilities opening up before us. These powers will affect the animal and plant world at least as much as they will affect us. We need some theological understanding of what it means to be human, of God's will for all his creation and what its liberation means. We need to ponder doctrinally the bodied nature of our existence and our relationship to other bodied natures in the context of our God-given authority over them - as servants, not as plunderers.

I suggest that we make overtures to those who are concerned with the environment and with animal "rights." With their prodding, we can learn much about God's will for us and, with us, for all of creation.

Questions

What are rights? Can rights exist without corresponding obligations?

What would it mean to say that animal "have rights" in the strict sense of the word? Do they have obligations? Can we say they have moral obligations towards us? If so, what are these obligations?

Can we say that human beings have an obligation to treat animals in a non-arbitrary way? But can we say that we "owe" animals any special type of treatment?

How about the use of biotechnology on animals to make them "more efficient" either for food or for labor? How about our treatment of plants? If animals 'have rights,' what about plants?

Are we getting too sentimental in our treatment of animals? Is a healthy animal more valuable than a sick human? What does Peter Singer of Princeton University say in this regard?

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