

Understanding animal research in the light of Christian animal ethics

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Introduction

Christian spirituality, Matthew Scully argues, is *inherently* concerned with animal ethics: I know that they [animals] do not have reason comparable with ours. I know that their lives and place and purpose in the world are different from ours. I know that theirs is an often violent world. [...] But I also know that whatever their place and purpose among us might be, it is a mysterious one beyond any man's power to know. Whatever measure of happiness their Creator intended for them, it is not something to be taken lightly by us, not to be withdrawn from them wantonly or capriciously. (Scully 2002: 2)

Scully's intriguing analysis resonates with the way the Bible variously characterizes animals: for instance, animals are presented as models of wisdom (Prov. 6:6-8; 30:24-28; Job 12:7-10; Jer. 8:7); as deeply connected both with God and with humans (Job 38-39; and Patton 2000: 408); and, yes, as distinct (Gen 1:24-28; 2:18-20) but not in opposition to humans. Indeed, in the Bible animals are created as *helpers and companions* for human beings (Gen 2:18-19; Kemmerer 2007: 12); and, as C. W. Hume has suggested, humans and animals "are thought of as constituting a single community under God" (Hume 1980: 7). The point is that the very fact that animal reason and animal lives are markedly different from human lives is not a matter of better or worse. From a Christian perspective humans are not to decrease their compassion on the basis of these differences but, rather, to take seriously the conditions of animals' earthly lives in the light of their heterogeneity. Although a number of theological points in regard to Christian animal ethics could be discussed at this point, one thing is unambiguous: not caring for the earthly well-being of animals is a sinful attitude. As the book of Proverbs states, "The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel" (Prov. 12:10). The reason, as we will see later, is that human *dominion* over the whole creation entails considerate *stewardship* and does not confer the right to exploit (De Bendetti 1999: 20-

21; Thomas 1984: 154).

Historically, Christian ethics has never forgotten this point. In fact, “while the Church itself has not been immune from anthropocentrism, there have also been traditions going back to the earliest days which are more in tune with the biblical respect for God’s creatures” (Jones 2010: 18; cf. Waddell 1995). From the Desert Fathers (e.g. St. Macarius and St. Pachome) to the Celtic saints (e.g. St. Ciaran and St. Kevin); from the saints of the Middle Ages (e.g. St. Francis and St. Anthony) to those of the Modern and the Contemporary eras (e.g. St. Martin de Porres and St. John Bosco), Christians have always been influenced by exemplars who, in recovering their relationship with God, were able to restore a harmonious relationship with humans and animals too.

In spite of these longstanding traditions, contemporary animal ethics have considered Christianity to be at the root of the anthropocentrism that has led the Western world to exploit other animals, and to think of them as mere resources. Similar to the way the famous American historian Lynn White, Jr. accused Christianity of being at the root of the contemporary ecological crisis (White 1967: 1203-1207), so too animal ethicists have often considered the mistreatment of animals to be a consequence of the western monotheistic tradition (Thomas 1984: 152). Therefore, not surprisingly, attention to animal well-being has been regarded as the domain of non-religious thought. It is only in recent years that a different approach has led to the rediscovery of several Christian authors who argued for respect towards non-human animals (Thomas 1984: 152-165; Rod Preece 2002: 62-90; Clough and Deane-Drummond (eds.) 2009), and a special case has been made among Christian scholars regarding the use of animals in biomedical research (Yarri 2005).

How Christianity could accept the instrumentalization of God’s creations?

Despite the number of studies devoted to proving the futility of using animals in biomedical research (Birke et al.: 46-49; LaFollette-Shanks 1996), their usefulness will be taken for granted in this paper. As the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science (AALAS) has asserted, during the last three centuries, “scientists have solved

medical problems, cured diseases, and developed vaccines – all by using animals in biomedical research”¹. But what really do we mean by the expression “biomedical research”?

Looking at the breakdown of the terms, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, we find “bio” meaning “connected with life or living things”, “medical” meaning “related to the treatment of illness and injuries”, and “research” meaning “a detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover (new) information or reach a (new) understanding”.

In simplified terms, we can understand from these definitions that biomedical research is the search for ways to heal living organisms such as humans and other animals. This definition orients the policy implied by biomedical research: that is, in order to heal “some” living organisms – humans and all those animals humans have an interest in, such as pets or farm animals – it is permissible to use “other” living organisms, i.e., those animals who do not live inside the human emotional and domestic environment (Birke et al. 2007: 18-33 and 77-92).

From this definition it follows that there is a genuine but at the same time equivocal chasm between different animals. On the one side, some would benefit, at least in theory, from animal experimentation while others would be the object of this activity. On the other side, it is not clear where to draw the line between these two kinds of animals, since their different status does not depend on the species to which they belong, and is, therefore, scientifically unpredictable since it depends on the value humans give to a particular individual animal. A dog, for instance, could be a perfect model for biomedical research but, at the same time, it could also be an ideal pet; it all depends on where he or she has been born, that is, a farm lab or a private home. Therefore, the same individual animal could be subject to different regulations related to these two different conditions and be a subject or an object. This partition is so entrenched in our moral system that it is even part of our legal framework (Directive 2010/63).

¹ https://www.aalasfoundation.org/outreach/About-Animal-Research/benefits_to_people_and_animals - last accessed December 10th, 2019.

To sum it up, humans use animals in biomedical research to improve their own health and the health of those animals they have a specific interest in. But, as we have seen, the criterion for choosing which animals to sacrifice is arbitrary. And if this can look unsatisfactory from a secular point of view, what does the Judeo-Christian tradition say about this issue? Looking at the accounts of Creation, the Fall, and the Flood (Gen. 1-9), as presented in the Old Testament, in the light of the messianic promise (Isaiah 11, Ezekiel 34:25, and the New Testament), it is possible, at least, to shed some light on Christian conceptualizations of animals.

The animals in the Holy Scriptures

In the last decades several scholars have started to systematically investigate the role attributed to animals within the Holy Scriptures. In particular, the first chapter of Scriptures (Genesis 1) offers a specific cosmology on which to build a particular worldview and thereby understand who is meant by God, humans and animals.

The status of humans is summarized by the expression “in the image and likeness” of God. As Paolo De Benedetti has suggested, “image and likeness” does not describe a definitive condition of the human creature before the sin, but rather, and more compellingly, a task to carry out which is the ultimate aim of every human being (Gelmini-Giuliani 2005: 12-16). From this point of view, being the image of God is not a static but a dynamic attribute, it is an end point, the goal humans need to achieve while living on this earth. Not surprisingly, the treatment of animals is part of this process of becoming “in the image and likeness”. Animals, as God's creation, are part of the project of the development of human inner being and ultimate purpose.

In the same chapter, humans are said to be endowed with dominion over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:28). As recent interpretations of the Scriptures have suggested, the verb dominate does not imply human privilege or the right to exploit, but rather the duty to act as a vice-regent of God towards creation (De Benedetti 1999: 16-18; Kemmerer 2007: 6-8). The same can be said about the first alimentary precept of Gen 1. To humans is

assigned *every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it* (Gen. 1:29), while to animals *every green plant* (Gen. 1:30). This seems to imply that harmony in the Garden is expressed not just in the perfect cooperation among living beings, but also in their diet (De Benedetti 1999: 13).

However, even if human dominion is to be understood as stewardship, human mastery over nature and animals is complete, and for better or worse, it works. For this reason, the whole creation is involved in the punishment of human sin, being subjected to death and suffering (Gen. 3:1-24).

As Scully has pointed out, the narrations of the Fall and the Flood present “a view of the creatures as individual beings also known by Him [God], sharing with man not only in the earth’s bounties but also – a still more intimate bond – in its punishment and suffering. For the first time animals are not only significant in themselves, belonging to Him and not to us; they are players, however lowly, in the story of our own moral development” (Scully 2002: 92). The involvement of animals in the chastisement of humans suggests once again their close fellowship with humans and justifies their active participation in the eschatological history of the world (Webb 1998: 20).

In fact, although the Old Testament deals within the horizon of a collapsed world, often describing a history of violence and abuse perpetuated against both humans and animals, it also contains the eschatological and messianic promise of a return to the original peace and fullness of the Garden. The whole creation is said to be involved in the salvation process: a new paradise awaits both humans and animals, where “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid and the calf and the lion and the fatling together. And a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6). In this time a new alliance will be established between God and all living beings (Hos. 2:20 and Ezek. 34:25).

The restoration begins with the advent of Jesus and is waiting to be completed with his second coming (Revelation 1-6). His advent prepares the conditions to restore definitively the primeval union and harmony of the whole creation (Rom. 8:19-22). In Jesus, the new

Adam who spent forty days in the desert with the wild animals (Mk. 1:13; cf. Bauckham 2009: 1-10), humans can return to an intimate relationship with God and, thus, with animals. Here, Jesus is the Lamb of God, whose blood washes the sins of humanity away (John 1:29); this is the ultimate and universal sacrifice which brings reconciliation between humans and God, and, therefore, with the whole creation – no more blood sacrifices are required (Hebrew 9:11-14, cf. Webb 1998: 137).

Waiting for the second advent of Jesus, when harmony will be fully restored, humans can choose to experience the reign of God, that is, a reign of Love (John 13:34) already on this earth. And one could interpret the lives of the so-called saints throughout Christian history through this lens. Being close to God through meditation, the “saints of all ages have modelled kindness, and are famous for their love of all creatures [...] Christian saints remind the faithful that to be in relationship with God is to have amicable relations with animals”, even with wild animals (Hume 1980: 26-27).

For the present argument, the point is not whether or not these stories are true but rather, as Ryder suggests when referring to medieval hagiography, that they were representing “kindness to nonhumans” as a “saintly virtue”, thereby serving as a model for people throughout the centuries (Ryder 2000: 32). From this point of view, one can affirm that saints are those individuals who have taken seriously the call to be “in the image and likeness” of God and in so doing have developed a careful relationship with non-human living beings.

So now the question is, where do humans derive the right to use animals in biomedical research?

The justification of human exploitation of animals

In order to understand the striking discord between the Christian consideration of animals outlined above and the one held in contemporary scientific thought in general, and in biomedical research in particular, it is necessary to look at the history of vivisection in modern Europe. As previously mentioned, at the popular level, during the first fifteen

centuries of Christian history, animals were mostly perceived as being close to humans, with whom they share their origins, as indicated by the experiences of saints and revealed by the medieval tradition of the animal trials (Ryder 2000: 34-35. Cf. Exod. 21:28). As Richard Ryder has pointed out, during this period animals “were at least accorded the dignity of being treated, to some degree, as ‘people’ and not as things”. The “medieval mind”, he adds, “saw nonhumans as being very much like humans”. Animals, therefore, were “regarded as part of a wider class system, and the relationship between a peasant and his lord was considered similar in kind to that between an animal and his master” (2000: 35).

It is with the Renaissance and its renewed anthropocentrism that the ancient Greek and Roman practice of vivisection was revived (Yarri 2005: 5-6). The diffusion of this practice throughout Europe led at the beginning of the modern era to the vast debate on animal souls and the problem of theodicy with respect to animal suffering. It is from within this discussion, which has been a feature of European thought since the sixteenth century, that Descartes’ theory of the animal-machine emerged. Descartes suggested that animals were *automata* without mind and souls and were therefore unable to feel pleasure and pain, thus safeguarding God as both good and almighty (Thomas 1984: 33-36).

Whether or not Descartes developed his theory in order to justify an existing and widely diffused practice, it has been noted that the French philosopher “only pushed the European emphasis on the gulf between man and beast to its logical conclusion” (Thomas 1984: 34-35). Descartes’ thought, in fact, had been heavily affected by those Christian authors, such as Origen, Augustine and Aquinas, who, influenced by Greek philosophy, considered rationality to be the cornerstone of morality. These authors, in contrast with the popular understanding of the human-animal relationship (Turner 1992: 24-25), accepted “that there is a firm boundary between human and animal, and they, and others, began insisting upon our irreconcilable differences” (Hobgood-Oster 2010: 157-159).

The great success of Cartesianism was based on the justification it offered for the practice of dissecting living animals, and was “appealing [...] to materialists, anatomists, and revealed-religionists, influencing their own views or repelling them by real or fancied

danger” (Harwood 2002: 101). Descartes’ followers – M. Des Fournelles, M. de Malebranche, and the Port Royal scientists – took forward the idea of the animal machine, completing the objectification of animals. The consequences were dramatic, even in those countries, such as England, where Descartes’ thought had not spread widely (Harwood 2002: 106-107 and 109; Thomas 1984: 35). Vivisection, in fact, found a solid justification in Cartesian theory and became an increasingly common practice, to the point that during the seventeenth century it was not unusual to engage in public experimentation so that people could attend the performance (Harwood 2002: 107-120).

Even if “the fashion for dissection and vivisection began in a praiseworthy desire to know” that is peculiar to the modern era (Harwood 2002: 107), it has inexorably led to a crucial misunderstanding about animals, who gradually became objects rather subjects with a life, possessing merely instrumental value (Thomas 1984: 36-40). The desire to study animal bodies has become a kind of obsession, and the animal machine theory represented a perfect advocate for this practice, which thus became widely accepted among scientists.

It is worth noting that the animal machine theory and the practice of vivisection found opponents among Descartes’ contemporaries in both the religious and the philosophical spheres: Henry More of Christ’s, John Locke, Pierre Gassendi and Pierre Bayle, to mention a few (Harwood 2002: 107-120). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a number of works were published in the Christian and non-Christian domain to oppose this theory, and eventually these critiques led to a real moral crusade in the 1860s and 1870s (Turner 1992: 200-218). This resulted in England (1876) in the first regulation for vivisection, the so-called Cruelty to Animals Act (Turner 1992: 209). However, the animal machine model with its justification of vivisection has deeply affected science to the point that today, even if animal sentience and emotional lives are widely recognised, it still informs lab practices.

Conclusions

As previously suggested, the contemporary interest in animals within Christian culture has given rise to a new way to conceive humanity and its role on planet Earth. This new conceptualization, embedded within a broader sense of respect for God's whole creation, is fully represented in Christian animal ethics and its values.

In place of the relativism that deprives both animals and humans of their intrinsic value, the Christian animal ethics encourages humans to fully answer their calling to be in the image and likeness of God, that is to behave as vice-regents of God. This new attitude therefore represents a dilemma for the current practice of biomedical research. In fact, if science can be considered value-free, human beings cannot.

The Scriptures present the treatment of animals as part of the process of human development; in this sense animals themselves contribute to the development of humans' inner being and ultimate purpose. From this point of view, every use of animals for scientific purposes has a specific moral and theological impact and needs to be seriously reconsidered in the light of Christian animal ethics.

In this sense, contemporary biomedical research appears as a practice that is antithetical to the role attributed to humans in Christianity, namely to be the image of God, not the end user of creation.

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Online resources

American Association for Laboratory Animal Science Foundation (AALAS Foundation): https://www.aalasfoundation.org/outreach/About-Animal-Research/benefits_to_people_and_animals (last accessed December 10th, 2019)

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